

Archaeological Work Completed on Litchford Cemetery Site

Upper Arlington Schools is continuing to work with descendants of Pleasant Litchford to determine appropriate next steps following the discovery of human remains during a planned investigation of the Litchford family cemetery site adjacent to the current Upper Arlington High School.

In late August, an archaeological team found one fully intact grave with a complete set of remains, along with two partially exhumed graves and three fully exhumed graves. The archaeological team carefully removed the remains, which are being safely held in its lab while the district works with descendants of the Litchford family and families who may have had ancestors buried at the site to determine how to properly honor those individuals and to commemorate the site.

This represents a significant step in a collaborative effort to bring more awareness to the story of Pleasant Litchford and the importance of his contributions and those of other people of color to the community that would become Upper Arlington.

Pleasant Litchford was a master blacksmith who had been enslaved in Virginia. After buying his own freedom and settling in the area that is now Upper Arlington, he built a successful business and purchased the land that is now home to the high school as well as Northam Park and Tremont Elementary School. His family was active in the Underground Railroad, working cooperatively with the Depp family living in the area that is now Dublin. Among Mr. Litchford's many other contributions to the area were establishing a school for African-American children and being a founding member of the historic Second Baptist Church, which provided an important voice in the anti-slavery movement.

Following his death in 1879, Mr. Litchford's land was divided up between his heirs. Decades later, in the 1950s, the school district acquired the piece of land



that was home to the cemetery in order to build a high school. Approximately 30 bodies were exhumed and moved to other cemeteries in the area.

While the Litchford family's story remains well-known in the history of central Ohio's Black community, it had long ago been left out of Upper Arlington's history in our schools and community. When local authors Diane Kelly Runyon and Kim Shoemaker Starr released their book, *Secrets Under the Parking Lot*, in early 2017, many residents were unaware of the Litchfords and their contributions to the area.

The book raised concerns that some of those laid to rest in the Litchford cemetery may have been left behind. The goal of the archaeological investigation in July and August of this year was to identify if any graves still remained and if any artifacts, such as headstones, from this important time in our history could be found.

The work began in late July, with the crew pulling back the asphalt and top

layers of soil in an area of the parking lot adjacent to the existing building. That search turned up only remnants from decades-old construction projects at the current high school. In late August, the archaeological team returned to the site to excavate an adjacent area and located the remains.

A memorial near the site of the cemetery is just one of the projects planned. There will also be historical displays in the new high school, which is under construction north of the cemetery site, on the corner of Ridgeview and Zollinger roads. In addition, the district has worked with the authors and a team of volunteers to create historical timelines to support an expanded history curriculum.

"This is an important part of our community's history, but it wasn't being taught in our schools. That has to change," said Superintendent Paul Imhoff, Ed.D. "Our students deserve to learn the full history of our community."