

# GENEALOGY

## Exploring Martin County's African-American Roots With The Genealogical Society

Two projects – the Gomez Cemetery Project and the MOSES Project – are underway in Martin County to investigate and preserve its rich African-American history dating back to the late 19th century. The area today known as Hobe Sound was preceded by two African-American communities: Gomez and Banner Lake. Lloyd Jones, Katie Higgins and Hart Inlow are leading these projects, and on Feb. 15 they presented their work at the Martin County



*One of the headstones in Hobe Sound's Gomez Cemetery*

Genealogical Society's (MCGS) monthly meeting in Stuart. Jones, a retired Martin County Sheriff's Department captain who grew up in Hobe Sound, is spearheading the effort to restore the Gomez Cemetery which had fallen into disrepair over the years. Higgins, a Stuart native whose master's thesis at Florida Atlantic University is about African-American cemeteries, is the archaeologist for the MOSES Project which has a broader focus on all seven of Martin County's African-American cemeteries. Higgins also works for the Florida Public Archeological Network and serves as vice president of the Southeast Florida Archaeology Society. Inlow, a Martin County resident, chairs the MCGS's Cemetery Committee which is interested in cemeteries because they hold important clues for tracing and

documenting ancestry. The three history sleuths are working with several organizations, including the Florida African American Heritage Preservation Society and the Florida Public Archaeology Network to identify graves, preserve headstones, connect family members and restore cemetery grounds.

The Gomez Cemetery is one of the links to the county's African-American roots. The church associated with the cemetery was founded in 1911 but burned down in 1992 as the result of arson. All the cemetery records were destroyed, the congregation disbanded and the cemetery was left unattended for nearly 20 years.

"There is so much history in Gomez Cemetery," said Jones, who has a personal interest in the site. When he was a boy, his father, Isaiah Jones, died in the Korean War and was buried in the cemetery in 1957. As an adult, Jones wanted to learn more about his father's side of the family, and he eventually discovered that five other family members, including his grandmother, are buried there. "They each have a story to tell," Jones said. One of the ways the team discovers those stories is by conducting oral histories with Martin County residents who are still alive. As Inlow said, "By identifying who's buried there and talking to family members and friends, we're able to unlock history and document the past."

As archaeologist for the MOSES Project, Higgins is developing a plan that can be used to renew any neglected cemetery. The acronym MOSES stands for maintenance, orderliness, security, environment and service.

"After years of neglect, the Gomez Cemetery was completely overgrown with weeds, bushes and even trees," Higgins said. "By clearing the grounds, we uncovered headstones as well as graves that had no markers." As part of the restoration, a survey was conducted to plat the grounds, and the team used technology to identify unmarked graves. The project also includes cleaning headstones and recording



*Lloyd Jones, Katie Higgins and Hart Inlow*

the information found on them. Ultimately, the cemetery will be fenced in to secure the site and protect the graves.

As their work continues, Jones, Higgins and Inlow are discovering important aspects of Martin County's rich heritage and its African-American roots. But, as Jones said, "This isn't just African-American history or black history – this is American history."

In the spirit of St. Patrick's Day, the topic of the MCGS's March meeting is "Searching for Your Irish Ancestry" presented by Miles Meyer, director of the Vero Beach Family History Center. The meeting is from 1 to 3 p.m., March 15 at the Robert Morgrade Library in Stuart. Meetings are free and open to the public, and light refreshments are served. In addition to its monthly meetings – where local and national experts speak about how to explore your family roots – the society offers a variety of services at the Genealogy Room in the Blake Library. For more information about MCGS membership, activities and services go to [mcgsfl.org](http://mcgsfl.org), visit the Genealogy Room at Blake Library or call Lisa Tompson, MCGS president, (772) 888-2422.