

CLARKSVILLE, Tenn. - Daniel Holmes has been visiting Clarksville's Mount Olive Cemetery each year for nearly 50 years.

Last week, he stood with about 100 others and celebrated a poignant success: the cemetery's official dedication.

"I feel really great at this historical moment," said the man whose three relatives - a grandfather, grandmother and uncle - are buried beneath the towering trees. "I'm just overjoyed that all the elements could get together on this momentous occasion. It's a long time coming, and I'm glad to see it."

Holmes is one of many volunteers who nearly two years ago committed to reviving the abandoned and overgrown seven-acre cemetery on Rollins Drive where more than 1,000 graves rest.

Members of the Mount Olive Historical Preservation Society - including Holmes - along with elected officials, military officials and citizen historians, have since worked toward the day people could stroll along the main path of the cemetery.

It is home to some of the area's earliest black war veterans, elected officials and former slaves.

The 101st Airborne Division Band played at the Thursday ceremony, designed to honor veterans and others buried there. Lennie Street stirred the crowd - many veterans themselves - as she sang the national anthem a cappella.

"Today we honor heroes," said Mike Dunn, the event's master of ceremonies and a professor at Austin Peay State University. "We honor those whose spirit lives on.

"Today, maybe the definition of hero is no farther than the mirror."

Thomas Wilson, an Army veteran, believes his grandfather and grandmother are buried at Mount Olive. "It was 40-plus years ago, my father and I were going by. He said, 'Your grandparents are buried there. He just pointed out that way,'" Wilson said, gesturing toward the cemetery.

Army veteran Vaughn Rushing remembers a 1953 funeral for a soldier who had been killed in a car wreck.

"I was a little bitty boy," he said. "They had a gun salute at his grave."

Rushing, who shares a property line with the cemetery, said the land has been overgrown for as long as he can recall, and he's happy about the improvements.

"It's a long time coming," he said. "I'm glad to see it."

Some with relatives buried on the property have said Mount Olive Cemetery was originally known only as the old African cemetery. Foston Funeral Home director Larry Meriwether, who attended the dedication, has said it was once called the slave cemetery. Citizen historians say they have found grave markers there of veterans of the Civil War and World War II.

Howard Winn, professor emeritus of history at APSU and a member of the preservation society, said soldiers with several U.S. Colored Infantry units - which existed during the Civil War - are thought buried at the site. He praised citizen preservationists, including former land owner Robert Davis and board member Geneva Bell, as well as those in attendance, crediting the great strides the group has made to the diligence of local residents.

"We have two citizens here - one black and one white - who have largely made this day possible," Winn told

the crowd. "This gathering here is a recognition that the preservation of this site is necessary for our community.

"This ceremony will, I hope, remind each of us gathered at this site to reflect upon our responsibility as citizens."

The ceremony closed with the unveiling of the sign, the playing of taps and a gun salute. Many then toured the site with preservation society guides.

Holmes said he likely will visit many more times - especially now that the main cemetery path is clear and the area is accessible.

"I'll be coming out quite often," he said.

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