

ONE STEP AT A TIME

by Sarah Kohrs

Star of Bethlehem is a perennial bulb, with lily-like flowers on a slender stem that reaches no more than 12 inches high. Over time, they cluster and have been noted as an invasive in riparian



Illustration 1: Star of Bethlehem at Sam Moore Slave Cemetery.
Sarah Kohrs 2015

buffers, where Star of Bethlehem victoriously compete with native fauna. By 1940, it was found as far as Indiana, swept along water systems, where it thrived in the moist riverbanks. But its venture into North America took a far longer journey. *Ornithogalum umbellatum* derives from the Mediterranean region and is native to northern Africa. Similarly, its name derives from ancient Greek and Latin. Ὀρνίθων γάλα means “pigeon's milk,” which is an ancient proverb meaning “any marvelous good-fortune” (Liddell & Scott, 1996:499). Umbellatum is derived from the Latin word, umbella, a feminine first declension noun that means “sunshade, parasol, or umbrella” (Lewis, 1996:886). It is convenient to note that this bulb likes both shade (consider the closely related word *umbra* or “shade” in Latin) and moisture (consider, too, *umeo* or “to be wet” in Latin). So, finding Star of Bethlehem in full bloom one mid-May day on the top of a knoll at the edge of a woods seems like marvelous good-fortune to me.

On May 16, 2015, five Northern Shenandoah Valley Master Gardeners and about 20 community members, which also included representation from the Stonewall Jackson High School History Club and a men's retreat at Corhaven, worked together to clear brush, fallen logs, and new growth that had invaded a slave cemetery in Shenandoah County. Sam Moore Slave Cemetery, identified first in 1984 by local historians (Borden, 1986:96), contains more-than-likely antebellum burials in the form of depressions, some with head and foot stones (indicated by fieldstones), two with likely post Civil War manufactured bases, whose headstones are either missing entirely or missing any inscribed portions, and others with barely any traces to note their presence. The site matches descriptions of slave cemeteries as defined by Lynn Rainville's paramount publication, *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*. These features include: a high elevation, a ring of larger trees, an old fence line (with T.V. Allis Buckthorn barbed wire patented in 1881 at our site), and water nearby (Holman's Creek, to be exact).



Illustration 2: Clearing fence and brush on May 16.
Sharon Bradshaw 2015.

The owners of Corhaven, Bill & Tara Haley, are working with members of the community to preserve the cemetery as a place for honoring those buried there, who were not honored in their own lifetimes, and for bringing healing to those living after the scars of slavery in American history. This first clear date was one step toward that goal. Master Gardeners working at the site have already identified Star of Bethlehem and Bird's Foot Violet, which we believe were transplanted from the surrounding groves nearer the creek and intentionally planted beside headstones or near the cemetery in a similar fashion. And, we're working on landscape planning, which may include an appeal to other Master Gardeners for plant donations.



Illustration 3: Some of the Master Gardeners that have helped at Sam Moore Slave Cemetery. Abigail Hull 2015.

There are many other steps to take, but as we continue to work on the Sam Moore Slave Cemetery site, we will have opportunity to educate members of the community about best practices in landscaping within a riparian buffer, identifying and reintroducing native species of plants into the area, and doing something that is greater than any one of us. As Dr. Rainville states, “A cemetery is often the only record we have of the lost community it memorializes” (2014:11). Our hard work on this project contributes to what it means to share in the commonality of human dignity and compassion.

If you are interested in helping with the Sam Moore Slave Cemetery project, please contact Sarah Kohrs (kohrs@shentel.net or (540) 477-3257). You are also welcome to read more about the project on Corhaven's website: <http://inthecoracle.org/2015/05/clearing-sacred-space-by-sarah-kohrs/>.

RESOURCES:

Borden, D. (1986), *Tomb Inscriptions of Shenandoah County and Bordering Counties*, Vol. 8.

Lewis, (1996). *Elementary Latin Dictionary*. Oxford, Great Britain: Oxford University Press.

Liddell & Scott. (1996). *Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford, Great Britain: Clarendon Press.

Rainville, L. (2014). *Hidden History: African American Cemeteries in Central Virginia*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press.