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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Someone keeps leaving toys and birthday cards at a 7-year-old's grave in a historic Black cemetery. No one knows who.



Karon Flage has visited Nannie's headstone over the years and has taken photos of the toys left for her. (Karon Flage)

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Lindsey Brittain Collins discovered Nannie in the same way most people do: unintentionally.

Collins knew nothing of the girl on the day she decided to visit two adjoining historic Black cemeteries in Georgetown in 2016. She had been drawn to the tucked-away graveyards after learning that a small brick structure on the grounds may have served as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The day she walked through the area, she passed overgrown weeds, broken grave markers and people using the space as a dog run.

Then, she noticed the dolls.

She saw several antique figures and other toys sitting in front of a headstone that offered just enough information to show that those gifts were for a girl who lived long ago and not long enough. The marker read “Nannie,” and it held two dates that indicated she died at the age of 7, just days before her birthday.

Born May 26, 1848

Died May 18, 1856

Collins also noticed something else on the ground: a laminated birthday card addressed to Nannie.

“I thought it was beautiful,” she says. She recalls thinking: “Who is it that has this connection to this young girl who died so long ago?”

An energy that Collins felt standing in that spot and the questions that remained with her after she walked away compelled her to return months later. She arrived not long after Nannie’s birthday and found a new doll and card. She knew then, she says, that the person who had left those earlier items was still around, thinking of Nannie.



Toys are left at Nannie’s grave marker. (Karon Flage)

“I continued to go back and visit over the years,” Collins says. She recalls seeing toys grow weathered. A doll that wore a tan dress one year lay in threads another year. But one thing remained consistent, she says. “Every year, after her birthday, without fail, there was a new doll and laminated birthday card.”

The grave marker of Edgar Allan Poe was known to draw a mysterious visitor each year on the writer’s birthday. In the darkness of night, a masked person would leave a bottle of cognac and three red roses.

A similar mystery has intrigued those who know about Nannie’s headstone.

Who leaves those cards and toys? they have wondered. Is it one person, or is it many? Is it a descendant, or is it a stranger? Will that person show up next month, on May 26, to mark another birthday?

Not even the people who are overseeing the preservation of those cemeteries have those answers. No one, it seems, has many answers when it comes to Nannie. The difference between Poe and Nannie: He was well-known. She is unknown. The identity of her birthday visitor isn’t the only mystery connected to her headstone. So, too, is her identity.

“There are mostly question marks,” says Patrick Tisdale when I ask him about Nannie on a recent evening. He volunteers with the foundation [Mount Zion-Female Union Band Society Historic Memorial Park](#), which manages the restoration and preservation of the cemeteries by those names. “We don’t know anything about her beyond what is on her headstone.”

That headstone, though, offers some clues about the life she might have known. It reveals that she was alive during a time when many Black people remained enslaved across the country. Her death came six years before President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

[They were names on headstones until the pandemic. Then they became reminders that ‘Georgetown was Black.’](#)

It also shows that she was connected to someone who had a comfortable level of wealth, Tisdale says. Many grave markers during that time were made of inexpensive wood, concrete or soft sandstone, he says. Nannie’s headstone was made from Virginia bluestone. Tisdale describes some of the other people in the cemeteries with bluestone grave markers as ship builders, businessmen and clergy.

Without a last name listed on her headstone, there is no way to know for sure who Nannie’s parents were or whether she was free or enslaved at the time of her death. But all the dolls that have been left for her are Black, and the placement of her headstone makes it probable that she was, too, Tisdale says. It sits on a side of the property that a group of free Black women obtained before Nannie’s death.

“Black women weren’t allowed to buy property at that time, but as Black women do, they found a way,” says Lisa Fager, executive director of the Mount Zion-Female Union Band Society Historic Memorial Park. “Nannie, as a young Black girl, was part of that. She was shown what free Black women could do. If I look at it like that, I think she was loved.”



Lindsey Brittain Collins, an artist, created pieces inspired by the dolls left at the Nannie’s headstone. (Lindsey Brittain Collins)

Fager has found photos showing that some of the toys that now sit in front of Nannie's headstone were placed there more than 11 years ago. She finds it amazing that no person or animal has disturbed or taken them.

"Who is she?" Fager says. "I want to know. It's important to know our history."

Since discovering Nannie's headstone during a walk, Karon Flage has visited it every year or two. Each time she goes, she takes photos of the toys. She has also let her thoughts wander to the person who brings them.

"Is it an older woman and she's leaving the toys her grandchildren have outgrown?" Flage asks. "Is it someone who lost a child and doesn't have a grave to visit for some reason, so she visits this grave instead?"

Is it someone who wants to remain anonymous? If that's the case, Flage says, she is fine not knowing any answers.

"Some mysteries you want to know the endings," she says. "I don't need to know the ending for this."

There is a power to Nannie's story, even with the unknowns, or maybe even more so because of them. She is drawing people to a historic Black cemetery and making them consider what life in Georgetown might have looked like for a Black girl in the 1850s. She is making strangers think about human connection — then and now.

During her visits, Collins has seen the cemetery change from a once-neglected space to a place that volunteers are actively working to restore.

She also developed an unexpected connection to Nannie's mystery visitor. An artist who grew up in the D.C. region, she was inspired by the dolls left at the site. She started working on a painting shortly after that 2016 visit. That eventually grew into pieces that she completed over the years and recently showed as part of an exhibit in New York.



One of the dolls left at Nannie's headstone.
(Lindsey Brittain Collins)



A painting by Collins of that same doll.
(Lindsey Brittain Collins)

The series features painted images of the dolls surrounded by concrete. Over time, as the concrete crumbles, the painting beneath it becomes more visible. It becomes unearthed.

Collins believes that one person has been bringing the cards for Nannie each year based on the similarities between them. She also suspects that person is elderly. But she stops herself from imagining much more. She doesn't want to guess wrong — about Nannie or her mystery visitor.

Last year, Collins worried that the pandemic might keep the visitor from coming. She went to the cemetery shortly after Nannie's birthday and found nothing new. She then went again in July, and learned that the [coronavirus](#) had delayed the birthday offering, not stopped it.

A tiny ballerina dangled in front of the headstone. Nearby, she found the laminated card.

"Happy Birthday, Nannie!" it read, before listing the age she would be now: "172."