

# Work under way on new park dedicated to WWI hero Johnson

BY MARY MARTIALAY

*Gazette Reporter*

Work is under way to convert a vacant lot at the Interstate 90 entrance to Arbor Hill into a walk-through park dedicated to World War I soldier Henry Johnson.

Construction crews are currently building several steel and concrete piers that will support a wrought iron fence surrounding the park. Weather permitting, work should be complete by Memorial Day, said Joe Montana, director of the Albany Community Development Agency.

The park will take the place of a former gas station abandoned in the 1990s and demolished in 2004.

Montana said the total cost of the new 1.5-acre park — including a \$351,000 cleanup of polluted soil — is \$830,000, a sum cobbled together from various grants and city money.

The city announced plans to build the park in May 2005 after nearly a decade in which the owners had failed to pay property taxes on the blighted parcel at the gateway to Arbor Hill.

As a memorial to Henry Johnson, the park will join Henry Johnson Bou-

levard and a monument in his honor at Washington Park.

Montana said the state provided a \$316,000 grant for cleanup of the site, with the city paying the remaining \$35,000.

Park costs — \$479,000 — include \$79,000 in bonded expenses for sidewalks, a \$7,500 grant for trees, a \$7,000 grant for topsoil and the remainder from a four-year accumulation of Community Development Block Grant money.

Johnson was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second highest military honor, in 2002 after a decade of efforts on the part of supporters to secure a Congressional Medal of Honor in his name.

It was during the final push for the military award that plans for the park were conceived, Montana said.

At about the same time, it was discovered that Johnson had been buried in Arlington National Cemetery in 1929 — not in a pauper's grave as had been thought.

Johnson served in the U.S. Army from 1917 to 1919. He went to France

as a private with the 15th New York National Guard, an all-black unit headquartered in Harlem, but was not allowed to fight in an American combat unit overseas because he was black.

He joined a group of black soldiers in the 369th Infantry who fought under the French flag and would eventually come to be known as the Harlem Hell-Fighters.

While on sentry duty May 14, 1918, Johnson single-handedly fought off a German raiding party, killing four Germans and forcing the others to flee. Johnson suffered 21 wounds in the battle but still managed to save an injured comrade from capture by the Germans.

He was awarded the Croix de Guerre with Gold Palm by the French government, which commanded the 369th at the time. He was the first American to receive the award in World War I and was promoted to sergeant.

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