

Stories From Fort Hill Cemetery

Over the years, the Fort Hill Cemetery on Halifax St. in Winslow has lost its luster. Air pollution and the exhaust from cars and trucks climbing the hill beside it have left their mark on the gravestones, turning them black in some places and shades of gray in others. Many have suffered damage from frost in the form of cracks which can sometimes lead to pieces of stone breaking off. Stones, which have lost their support, again, due to our Maine winters, and fallen down flat or broken off, have sometimes been reclaimed by the vegetation so they have either completely or partially disappeared from sight.

But fortunately, a group of volunteers, with funding and support from the Town of Winslow, have started a restoration project to return the cemetery to its previous state - a historic town burial ground dating to just before the American Revolution.

The crew of volunteers is comprised of men and women who participate for many reasons. Some love history and genealogy, while others just enjoy the challenge of working with their hands and restoring the land and stonework back to their former beauty. Love of digging is mandatory, even if you're not the one doing it. I suspect everyone has a secret interest in archaeology, just waiting to get some dirt under their finger nails, or any place else, for that matter. Others just want to be of service to the Winslow community and enjoy being outside in the fresh air and sunshine while they do it.

Some volunteers are residents of surrounding communities, eager to help with this type of project. Some are members of the Fort Halifax Branch of the Daughters of the American Revolution whose particular interest is finding and restoring the graves of Revolutionary War Patriots. And some are folks, who stopped by one day and were hooked by the activities going on.

Last year, some of the volunteers cut grass and tree limbs, raked, used leaf blowers and generally cleaned up the space. Some buried gravestones were uncovered and brought back into the light of day. One buried stone was found due to an enthusiastic volunteer using the leaf blower, blowing the dirt off a buried stone enough that it was recognizable as a gravestone and not just a rock. Many of the stones lay on the ground, but volunteers put them on wooden supports awaiting restoration this year.

On just about any day, one can hear the noise from a generator sitting in the back of a truck powering the skill saw cutting off a badly damaged stone bottom. Volunteers are chiseling out the grooves where the stones will reside and making other alterations by hand. Or they may be gluing the top half back onto the bottom of a stone broken in two, or onto the base or pediment. Everyone participates in cleaning the stones following a tried and true process.

Some detective work is needed to find out which small foot stone is related to which larger stone. It usually contains only initials and may be found close to its original placement or far away. One ten year old boy who died in 1885 is identified only by the initials "B. M. W." printed on his foot stone. But where is his grave marker? It was there in the 1930s, but now it's gone. Has it been damaged and removed, or is it sitting just a bit under the surface waiting to be discovered? At any rate, this is his only stone for now.

Documentation of those buried in Fort Hill began a long time ago. During the 1930s, The Works Progress Administration (WPA), part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, employed people to record the gravestones in Maine. Many cemeteries were missed and mistakes were made, but still, it was the basis for the cemetery lists that now exist. At some point, The Maine Old Cemetery Association (MOCA), took possession of these lists and has placed them at the Maine State Library, the Hampden Historical Society, and our own Taconnet Falls Genealogical Library. They are also available to members on the MOCA website.

Another part of the project has involved adding the names and photos of all the stones to "Find A Grave." This web site has over 210 million memorials for people all over the world.

Someone in Winslow can create a memorial for their great-grandmother who died in New Jersey, click on a box, and someone in that area will take a picture of that grave site and post it to the memorial. And it works in reverse; people in Maine are traveling to cemeteries photographing sites for those in California.

The next step of the project is documenting what has been done. A Burial Marker Survey Sheet is filled out, the work done documented, measurements and a sketch done of the stone, and a before and after photograph taken. Sometimes the before picture is so degraded and dirty, it is hard to believe the after picture is the same stone.

And finally, the plot number will be added to Find A Grave based on a survey done in 2010 by George Lessard, former Winslow Cemetery Superintendent. This survey is a careful depiction of Fort Hill by sections with lists of the burials in each lot. Anyone wanting to visit Great-grandfather Ezekiel can find him without having to tramp the entire cemetery of 444 graves.

Volunteers are welcome to join in the project no matter how much or how little time they have to give. All levels of expertise and strength are needed, from moving tombstones to taking before and after restoration photos. Anyone interested in participating can contact the Project Director, Dale Macklin, at 716-7593.