

# As older CT cemetery caretakers fade, who'll step up?

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BROOKFIELD — When Tom Nolan's wife died in 2002, he visited Central Cemetery and was embarrassed to find it in such disrepair.

This was where the couple planned to spend its eternal life together and so Nolan approached the [cemetery association's](#) board to volunteer, helping to clear the grass, fix the stone wall, help families looking to inter their loved one at the cemetery — and even tracking down plots for callers looking for their descendants.

Seventeen years later, he's now looking for the next generation to step up — a problem facing countless cemeteries across the state.

"I'll be 88 next month and too old to do it," Tom Nolan said. "It's time to turn this over to the young folks. It's been a joy to be a part of it."

His son, Jeff Nolan, said the association has discovered while crafting its succession plan, that it's no longer enough to just have a younger volunteer step into the role but the management of cemeteries needs to be restructured at a regional or state level.

He said the volunteers mean well but don't have the training or needed knowledge to oversee the cemeteries. Joining up with other towns will help the cemeteries afford to come into the modern era.

For three years, the association has advocated for the change to take place and plans to meet with state officials, including the governor this session to gain traction.

## Throughout the area

Towns across the region are seeing fewer people step up to take care of the cemeteries, which are generally owned by nonprofit associations and churches.

These abandoned cemeteries — some dating back to the late 1600s and early 1700s — can fall under the town government, which generally doesn't have the money or manpower to take them on.

Redding is exploring creating a committee with the historical society to oversee at least the historic cemeteries, according to a report prepared on the topic and [presented last month](#). The town only owns a few of the cemeteries, but helps with the mowing at some of the others.

Judge Martin Landgrebe, with the Housatonic Probate Court, is spearheading New Milford's effort to create a townwide succession plan because many of the caretakers are in their 70s and 80s.

In Ridgefield, officials are trying to determine the [fate of Branchville Cemetery](#). It had been cared for by the late Floyd Bouton of the Bouton Funeral Home, but his descendants didn't want to assume the responsibility, especially because the ownership was unclear.

Danbury has 23 known cemeteries, but only about seven or eight are still active. The others are generally maintained by a friends group, said Bob Young, who is a former president of the group and superintendent of Wooster Cemetery.

He said the group is only able to clean up one cemetery a month and has asked City Council to create a committee to officially oversee all of the sites that don't have owners, as well as provide a \$10,000 annual budget to cover the costs. That effort has been unsuccessful though because officials are worried this could become a proverbial albatross.

"Once you start it, it's essentially impossible to get rid of it," Young said.

He thinks Nolan's regionalization idea is worth exploring.

Brookfield First Selectman Steve Dunn agrees and has advocated for it at the regional level with the Western Connecticut Council of Governments.

"The actions at the cemeteries are essentially the same," Dunn said. "That lends itself to scale."

## **Regionalizing**

Connecticut has about 5,000 cemeteries, most of which are independently owned.

Jeff Nolan sees regionalizing as a way to increase the expertise of those working in the cemeteries because it would provide enough revenue to hire a professional to oversee them, as well as offer actual training.

"This is no longer appropriate for volunteers," he said. "It needs to be regionalized, professionalized and modernized."

He compared it to building a house. The owner would hire someone who knew the proper way to build the foundation, and Jeff Nolan thinks the same should be true for those installing monuments or digging graves in cemeteries.

Young has brought an international cemetery association to Western Connecticut State University twice in the past two decades, most recently in the past 18 months or so. The conference covered many aspects of the industry, including some training, but far less than what professionals would have.

Nolan doesn't see why this effort couldn't be taken on at a state level or even at the regional level because the entire state is smaller than some counties in other states where the cemeteries are all overseen in one place.

By having a regional effort, there could also be some uniformity with record keeping because each town right now has their own codes and way of doing it.

"Imagine walking into a grocery store and each aisle has its own computer system or some are taking inventory with paper and pencil," Jeff Nolan said.

Regionalizing will also allow the cemeteries to purchase the technology and training needed to better keep cemetery records because of economies of scale. This includes ground penetrating radar and the GIS mapping system.

"A small cemetery like us can't invest in that kind of technology," Jeff Nolan said.

## **Modernization**

A key part of the regionalization is overlaying the cemetery records with GIS mapping and completing records electronically.

The records are now filled out by hand by the sextons and kept by the town clerks' offices. Jeff Nolan said people's electronic records follow them from birth to death and cemetery records seems like the logical progression.

He said if the GIS mapping and searchable electronic records are connected, it would be even easier to see which plots are available and who is buried where.

Granville Reed, also with the Central Cemetery Association, said finding peoples' graves is becoming more of the association's tasks because of the growing interest in genealogy and websites like [Find A Grave](#).

Tom Nolan will get calls from people all over the country asking about their relatives or if the family still has plots at the cemetery. He'll have a general idea, but will often walk the grounds to know for sure.

"I had a call from a woman in California this week confirming that the family had two lots," he said. "It's much easier for her to go onto her computer."

Having digital records also ensures the information is protected in case something happens to the papers.

Bob Brown, Brookfield Historical Society's president, said the town is unique because the historical society keeps track of who is buried in all 11 cemeteries, as well as one on the Newtown line and another on the New Milford line.

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He said it would be great to take this to an even bigger level and preserve the state's history.

Jeff Nolan also sees the modernization as a way to connect technology taught in the classroom to the real world because cemeteries are in every community. He said modernizing is also a way to attract the next generation and to ultimately protect the future of the cemeteries.

“We want to get together and leave the place better than we found it,” he said.

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