

Before the National Spotlight Returns to Sandy Hook
Remember Connecticut's 5,000 other memorial sites

By Jeffrey G. Nolan

The national spotlight will soon return to Connecticut with construction of the Sandy Hook Memorial.

The mission of Newtown's Permanent Memorial Commission is to remember, honor and celebrate those who died and to provide comfort to those who loved and were touched by them.

Connecticut's 5,000 other memorial sites have similar missions. Many of those, however, have not stood the tests of time or permanence.

Far too many of Connecticut's memorial sites are in a state of despair or abandonment. Now is perhaps the time to rethink Connecticut's approach to what occurs after death.

Twenty years ago, *The New York Times* reported on the disturbing trend of Connecticut abandoning its cemeteries. Little has been done since to address the problem.

Memorial sites are symbols of who and what we are. Their dissolution may simply reflect an ethical and cultural departure from Connecticut's heritage.

What accounts for the demise seems to be loss of what our ancestors understood when they landed in Connecticut. The essence is well stated in the *Guilford Covenant*, written in 1639 by pilgrims sailing toward the new world.

The pilgrims knew a harsh reality was ahead. Survival would require them to stick together. So each committed himself to the other. Each according to his ability, each according to his need. It is as profound as it is simple. It embodies the essential paradox of freedom: the liberty to freely choose to bind one's self to others. *Semper fidelis*. It works.

But as has been true throughout history, hearts can change. Commitment to something greater than oneself can wane. What was once imagined as permanent is abandoned.

"Walk away," was the advice from two partners with a large accounting firm, on what to do about the plight of Connecticut's once thought-to-be permanent memorial sites. Their opinion reflects a belief that nothing is likely to change.

The situation is a *tragedy of the commons* which requires a moral rather than technical solution.

A technical solution would rethink ways to achieve better economies of scale. One widely circulated proposal suggested an approach that would join together several of the associations that run memorial sites in adjoining towns to regionalize, professionalize, and modernize them.

After reading the proposal, one 16-year member of the Connecticut House of Representatives responded, “I don’t believe in regionalization.”

A score of non-profit organizations seem to agree. Twenty associations including 501(c)(13) cemeteries and 501(c)(3) charities have politely declined merger with the two small associations that initiated the regionalization proposal.

The idea of merging to gain economies of scale has been met with indifference, even by associations facing insolvency and failure. “That will be someone else’s problem,” has been the response.

And the problems do arrive. Memorial monuments crumble, the grass becomes overgrown, families complain. One Connecticut town’s solution to landscaping its abandoned memorial sites was featured in a television news story, showing goats grazing among toppled headstones.

Goats may still graze among the ruins of the collapsed Mianus River Bridge. That became someone else’s problem. The national spotlight visited Connecticut then, too.

All of this tragically belies Connecticut’s pilgrim heritage and its nobility of spirit.

Economies of scale, professional standards, and modern technologies are obvious and technical solutions to the challenges we face. Those are secondary, however.

Most important is the need for an epiphany like that visited upon the shipboard pilgrims in 1639.

Every family is spiritually connected to the families of Newtown. Every family experiences grief and has its sacred memorial site. Actions to improve and sustain them would honor everyone who has ever called Connecticut home.

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