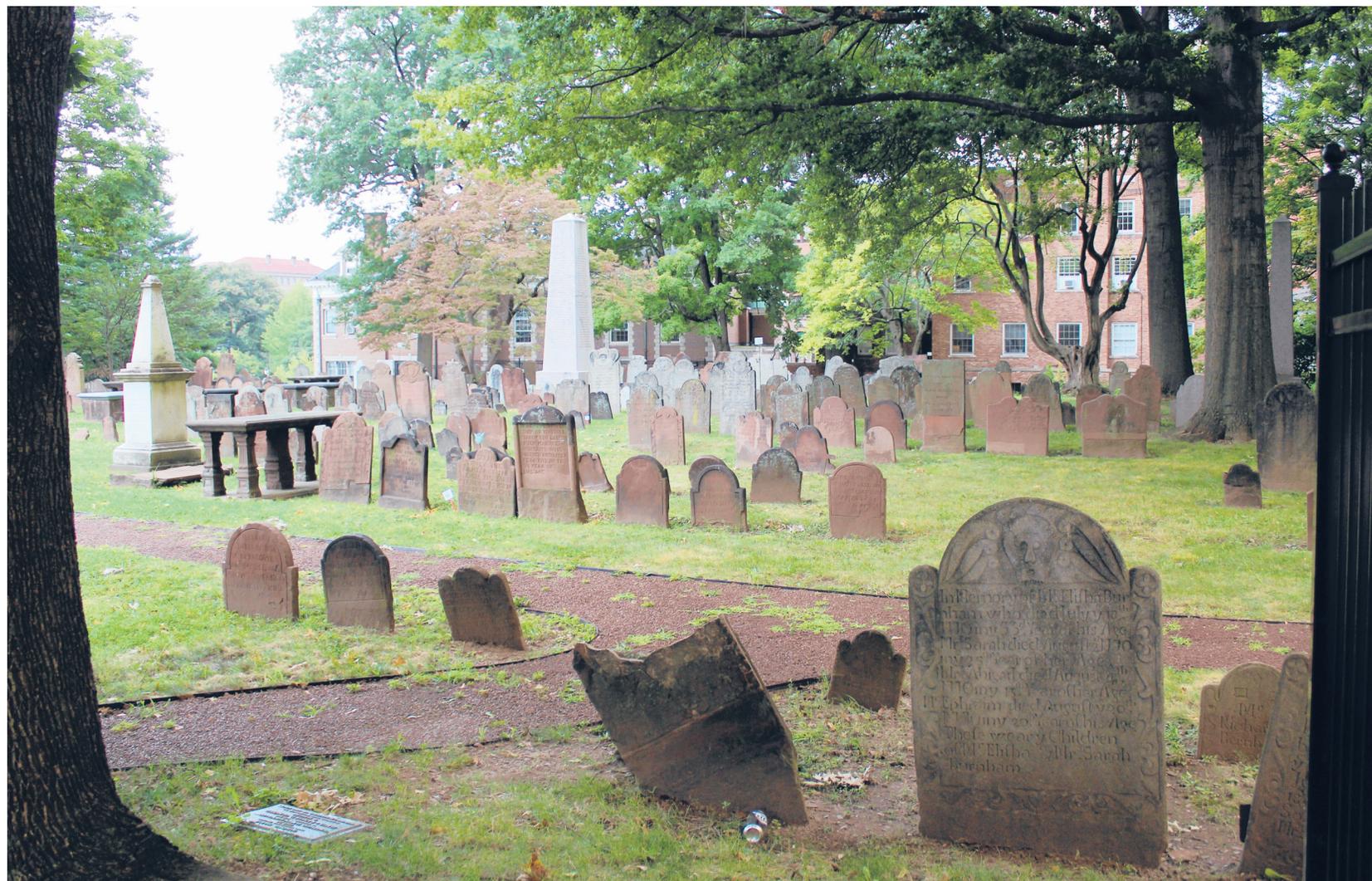


Hartford Courant

SUNDAY CT

COURANT.COM



The Ancient Burying Ground in downtown Hartford is seen in 2019. Preservationists are calling for regional and statewide action to address deteriorating cemeteries.

REPAIRING HISTORY

Preservationists call for state oversight of Connecticut's neglected cemeteries

By **Jesse Leavenworth**
Hartford Courant

In cemeteries across the state, tombstones that tell Connecticut's story are cracked, toppled and crusted with dirt and lichen while earth and grass swallow ground-level grave markers.

"Many of Connecticut's oldest and most historic cemeteries are suffering from severe neglect and are in critical, sometimes desperate, need of care and restoration," state Historian Walter W. Woodward said.

Woodward is among preservationists calling for regional and statewide action to address deteriorating cemeteries.

"The solution begins by joining together to regionalize, professionalize and modernize Connecticut's approach to interring its dead and honorably memorializing them," Jeff Nolan, a volunteer trustee with the Central and Laurel Hill



A repaired 19th century headstone stands in a Terryville cemetery. **COURANT FILE PHOTOS**

cemeteries in Brookfield, wrote recently in a letter to *The Courant*.

The former board member of the Connecticut Cemetery Association said in an interview that he realized the need for change when his mother was buried in Central Cemetery in 2002. Nolan said he and his father "were horrified at the dilapidated mess the place had become." The people running the cemetery were aged and ill and "happy to pass it off," he said.

It wasn't just the grounds that needed attention, Nolan said, but also the cemetery records. Connecticut has about 5,000 graveyards, and among the state's many private cemetery associations, untold millions of dollars are unaccounted for because of lax and nonexistent record keeping by volunteers with no oversight, he said. The need for collaboration to bring some uniformity and economy of scale is urgent, Nolan said.

Turn to Cemeteries, Page 3

SUNDAY CT

Cemeteries

from Page 1

Horror in Bridgeport

The most horrific example of cemetery neglect unfolded three years ago in Bridgeport. Ruth Shapleigh-Brown, executive director of the Connecticut Gravestone Network, cited the case while talking about the need for wider oversight.

Park Cemetery was established in 1878, and an association board oversaw its operation and maintenance for many years. In 2018, Bridgeport authorities found that about 130 graves, including Civil War veterans' plots, had been unceremoniously displaced.

Bones and pieces of old caskets were scattered around. Gravestones and remains had been dug up and shoved aside to make way for the newly dead, while some new graves were stacked atop old ones, according to an Associated Press story.

City police arrested caretaker Dale LaPrade on a charge of felony interference with a cemetery. LaPrade also was later arrested on charges that she embezzled more than \$60,000 from cemetery funds, according to published reports. She died earlier this year while the court cases were pending.

A retired lawyer whose relatives are buried at the cemetery broke the case. Cheryl Jansen had noticed a decline in maintenance and went to a probate judge to track the money families were paying for upkeep.

Jansen found that a cemetery board had not existed since the early 1980s and that oversight was eventually left to LaPrade and her husband. When police searched the property, they found financial records in disarray and mail left unopened for 20 years, the AP reported.

Restoration of the Bridgeport cemetery, including re-interring disturbed remains, was sad, frustrating and painstaking work. Similar cases, on a smaller scale, have emerged. At Fairfield Memorial Park in Stamford, state authorities in 1993 investigated allegations of misplaced burial vaults and plots that may have been used twice.

One crucial piece of record keeping that would protect against abuses and confusion is GIS mapping of individual gravesites, which could be added to all vital records, Nolan said. Connecticut



Shown at Hartford's Old South Burial Ground in 2018, Connecticut Gravestone Network Director Ruth Shapleigh-Brown is among the state's chief advocates for preserving old graveyards. **COURANT FILE PHOTO**

cut universities teach modern GIS skills, but the technology is not used to its potential in public systems, he said.

Vital records link across hospitals, funeral homes, crematoria, cemeteries and town halls, but Nolan, a self-employed supply chain management consultant, says government officials lack a grasp of the bigger picture, which he said is more proof of the need for a state commission on cemeteries that could put the pieces together. A statewide panel also could establish educational programs for cemetery maintenance and record keeping, Nolan said.

'Neglected'

The term "neglected cemeteries" is relative, said Shapleigh-Brown, whose focus is on the state's older, pre-1800 burying grounds. In some graveyards, the grass is mowed, but the time-consuming and expensive work of righting, repairing and cleaning stones is left undone. Nature has overtaken some small cemeteries, gradually lost in the woods.

State law defines a "neglected cemetery" as a burial place with more than six graves that is not under the control or management of any currently functioning

cemetery association; and which has been neglected "and allowed to grow up to weeds, briars and bushes, or about which the fences have become broken, decayed or dilapidated."

Shapleigh-Brown questioned the feasibility of broad state oversight, but she did agree that the state needs to clean up outdated, contradictory and unenforced laws governing cemeteries.

"In the past 20-plus years of being involved with burying ground history and preservation," she wrote in written testimony for a 2014 bill establishing a fund for neglected cemeteries, "I've constantly seen our state statutes concerning cemetery maintenance being ignored and abused with no accountability or concern expressed at any legal level."

For the past six years, municipalities have fully tapped the neglected cemeteries fund. Revenue comes from death certificate fees and is dependent each year on the number of certificates requested, OPM spokesman Chris McClure said. The money can be used to mow grass, clear weeds, briars and bushes, repair fences and walls and straighten gravestones. In 2015, the fund distributed awards of \$2,000 each to communities that included Bloom-

field, Bristol, Wethersfield and Rocky Hill. Although 40 applications were received, the grant had enough funds for only 15 awards, according to OPM.

In 2016, 22 awards of \$2,000 each (from over 30 applications) were distributed to towns that included Farmington and Granby; in 2018, 44 awards of \$2,500 each were handed out to towns that included East Hartford, Berlin and Glastonbury; and last year, awards of \$3,332 each went to 37 communities.

But Nolan says much more could be done. Sharing costs through regionalization would bring updated methods and efficiency, so the best equipment would be available to even the smallest cemeteries, and the work of reversing years of neglect at many cemeteries could begin.

Nolan said he has been frustrated for years trying to connect the two Brookfield cemeteries he helps to oversee with larger organizations. The overriding problem, he says, is political resistance to regionalization in parochial Connecticut.

A bill was proposed for a state cemetery commission in 1994, but no action was taken. The proposed law called for a cemetery board within the Department

of Consumer Protection to regulate cemetery associations. It also called for associations to establish and transfer all perpetual funds to a single endowment maintenance fund.

'Brother Jonathan's' resting place

Gravestones, some bent at severe angles, cover a knoll off a lonely road in Lebanon. Connecticut's Revolutionary War Gov. Jonathan Trumbull, the "brother Jonathan" who supplied Gen. George Washington's army, is buried here, along with Declaration of Independence signatory William Williams and many veterans of the struggle for liberty. The cemetery also includes 82 gravestones carved by Obadiah Wheeler, one of the most famous early carvers in the region, according to the town's website.

On a recent visit, the grass was mowed and American flags were planted by veterans' graves, but stones throughout the cemetery were leaning and cracked and some ground-level markers were sinking and obscured. A tree had fallen across several stones near the rear of the cemetery.

The cemetery is among about two dozen managed by the town and its cemetery commission. First Selectman Kevin Cwikla said he noticed a need to upgrade maintenance when he was elected about two years ago.

"We take our cemeteries very seriously," Cwikla said.

The cemetery maintenance budget recently was doubled, a new mowing service was contracted and a new sexton is being hired, he said. A program is in place to address individual headstones, Cwikla said.

Although cemeteries can and have been saved at the local level, Woodward said, citing work at Hartford's Ancient Burying Ground, "there are too many neglected cemeteries in too many places to leave their survival to chance.

"Creation of a state commission that could set policy, recommend remediation efforts, aid in the acquisition of funding and model successful cemetery protection and preservation efforts would be an important step in keeping Connecticut history alive, now and in the future," he said.

Jesse Leavenworth can be reached at jleavenworth@courant.com.