

Headstones are toppling over at Middletown cemetery. Who should fix flooding issue?

newstimes.com/middletown/article/Who-should-fix-cause-of-toppled-headstones-at-16236041.php

Susan Campbell

12



1of12

There are at least a half-dozen toppled gravestones and dozens of headstones that are leaning precariously at Calvary Cemetery in Middletown.

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MIDDLETOWN — A local resident is raising concern about rain eroding the earth beneath some headstones at [Calvary Cemetery](#).

A walk through the cemetery, which abuts the State Veterans Cemetery, shows at least a half-dozen toppled gravestones and dozens of headstones that are leaning precariously. With graves dating back to the late 1800s, but most from the 20th century, the Catholic cemetery is the final resting place for many people of eastern and southern European descent.

Kristen Rzasa, who has family buried in the cemetery, is a member of St. Mary of Czestochowa Church, which owns and operates Calvary. She has noticed flooding in the area of their burial site for some time.

“That’s what disturbed me so much about this,” she said, noting that several headstones have fallen over and dozens more are heavily leaning.

“Certainly, nobody is notifying the family members,” she said.

Rzasa sent emails last year to church administrators, expressing concern about the pooling of rainwater in that part of the cemetery. Rzasa said she was told it was the family’s responsibility to maintain the headstones.

The issue first came to her attention in January 2020, when her family member’s headstone was damaged, Rzasa said. While a family member eventually paid for the repairs, she believes the church should do something — such as raise the land — to prevent other stones from falling over.

St. Mary staff declined to comment and referred Hearst Connecticut Media’s questions to the Diocese of Norwich.

Wayne Gignac, director of communications for the diocese, also declined to answer questions about the cemetery, and referred Hearst Connecticut Media to Dale Fiore, general manager of Evergreen Cemetery and Crematory in New Haven.

Fiore, who is also the former president of the Connecticut Cemetery Association, said he was not familiar with the specific issues at Calvary Cemetery, but said it is not the responsibility of a cemetery to maintain headstones.

“But, here in New Haven, we do,” he said. “If a stone is a little crooked or eroding, you clean it up, because it makes the whole place look poor. We wouldn’t charge families for it. I don’t believe in that.”

Fiore said if there is a larger issue causing degradation of the headstones, “it probably should be addressed to the cemetery.”

“As a member of the Connecticut Cemetery Association, every cemetery has different maintenance and management practices,” he said. “We’re not the cemetery police.”

Rzasa also had concerns that the flooding could be getting into caskets and causing damage to the deceased, but experts say that is unlikely.

David MacDonald, president of the Connecticut Funeral Directors Association, said almost every cemetery in the state requires caskets to be put in an outer burial container or a vault. He said a burial container is made of cement, while the vault also has a rubber lining.

“Burial vaults — many are lined and sealed — meaning they are considered protected and keep the elements out,” he said. “Then there’s others that are just concrete, which aren’t considered protected, but it covers the casket in the ground.”

MacDonald said using these coverings has been common practice for as long as he has been in the field. More than protecting the casket, he said, burial vaults serve to keep the ground stable at cemeteries. “Having that concrete container prevents the ground from settling over time, or stones becoming crooked.”