

In the Region/Connecticut; Saving Abandoned Cemeteries and Grave Markers

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THE romantic perception of old overgrown graveyards as sylvan retreats for lovers and picnickers is giving way to the reality of broken tombstones and sunken statuary, faded carvings and barely legible epitaphs, all gradually disappearing into an encroaching wilderness.

By one estimate, Connecticut has some 460 graveyards that are abandoned and neglected, ignored by municipalities, which state statutes say may, but not must, care for them. But rescuing them is gaining momentum as citizens across the state become aware of their historical value and their notable sculpture.

Volunteer groups have formed in dozens of communities, but many have little knowledge of what to do to repair gravestones and save fragile plants -- even how to find small family graveyards hidden by overgrowth.

Eventually, many of them turn to Ruth Shapleigh-Brown, the executive director of the nonprofit Connecticut Gravestone Network in Manchester. As a nonpaid volunteer, she travels around the state, advising local groups on cemetery and gravestone rehabilitation and preservation. "A lot of the work we do is searching for unmarked graves that the average person would not recognize," she said.

Mary Donohue, the coordinator of Save Outdoor Sculpture, a division of the Connecticut Historical Commission, can provide a wealth of written information on cemetery restoration. "Stone carving has the same audience as art and architecture, the same conservation concerns for brownstone, marble and brass," she said.

Even in towns where old graveyards are maintained, fertilizing of plantings erodes the stones, and landscape workers mow over flat gravestones, chipping and cracking them. Footstones are routinely removed and discarded to make mowing easier.

Well-meaning as many volunteer preservationists are, all too frequently they forge ahead with a cleanup program, clearing brush, raising and straightening headstones and carting away chunks of fieldstone, unwittingly destroying some of the earliest grave markers.

In rural areas of the 1600's and 1700's, Ms. Shapleigh-Brown said, "there were few stone carvers, and people had no money to afford a carved stone, so they used fieldstones to mark the graves."

Susan Richardson, the archivist at the Greenwich Historical Society, said that among Puritans, "it was the custom to use fieldstones as an affirmation of their rejection of worldly things." She said that Greenwich has about 45 small family burying grounds cared for by garden clubs, church organizations and occasionally the town. "If you call the town and complain about the unsightly brambles, they will cut them down, but there is no regular program," she said.

Genealogists, both professionals and hobbyists, are a major force in cemetery preservation. Kenneth Buckbee, a Torrington genealogist, uncovered a small 18th-century graveyard in Litchfield recently while

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searching for the ancestors of a client. "I couldn't find it," he said. "until a man from a nearby house led me to it -- in the middle of the woods. I'd say a dozen graves are grouped together with different last names, but I think they were all related."

Dr. Nicholas Bellantoni, the state archaeologist, said, "You can walk in the woods almost anywhere and stumble on an old family cemetery." When he suspects that there are more graves than the existing stones indicate, he uses ground-penetrating radar equipment to find them. "We also take core samples of the earth in a checkerboard pattern that can outline a grave," he said, "and compare it with surrounding soil. Once the earth is removed and replaced during a burial, it never regains its original stratification."

TOMORROW at 5:30 p.m., Dr. Bellantoni will join a celebration by students from the University of Connecticut Law School and a volunteer group who are restoring the 18th-century Old South Burying Ground on Maple Avenue in Hartford. Dr. Bellantoni will supervise a demonstration of how radar equipment can be used to determine if there are any unmarked graves in the four-acre cemetery.

Byron Benton is one of the volunteers who plans to attend. He is a descendant of Andrew Benton, who once owned the cemetery site. In 1665, he bought what was then farmland from Nathaniel and Rebecca Greensmith, both of whom were hanged as witches. By the late 1700's the site had become a Benton family cemetery, and in 1800, it was sold to the City of Hartford.

After tracing his own family in obscure cemeteries, John Spalding, an amateur genealogist in Manchester, decided to compile a statewide catalog, which he expects to complete in about two years. He estimates that there are 2,300 cemeteries in the state. "About 20 percent date back to the 17th through mid-19th century" and are abandoned and neglected, he said.

"These are small family graveyards," he said, "or community cemeteries where the people migrated west over a hundred years ago, and there's nobody left to take care of them."

Like Mr. Spalding, Robert Young of Danbury is cataloging cemeteries, but only the 22 in Danbury, "from the well maintained to the totally ignored," he said.

"The condition of the stones ranges from good to abysmal," he continued. "We got started on the Internet, with people who were doing genealogies and had family members who lived here during the 1700's and 1800's." So far he has found stones dating from the 1700's in 10 cemeteries.

Four of Connecticut's cemeteries are listed on the National Register of Historic Places: Riverside Cemetery in Waterbury (1852), Mansfield Center Cemetery (1693), Center Street Cemetery in Wallingford (1679) and Old North Cemetery in Hartford (1807).

Grove Street Cemetery in New Haven (1796), where Eli Whitney, Noah Webster, and Charles Goodyear are buried, has recently been declared a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service.

Many more places are included in the National Register than are given official National Historic Landmark status. But specifications for listing on the National Register are stringent, said John Herzan, National Register coordinator for the Connecticut Historical Commission. "The stones must have artistic value," he said. "There must be landscape architecture, or the appearance of a rural garden, and many other

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requirements. Unfortunately, there is an unrealistic trend to get every town cemetery on the National Register."

Mountain Grove Cemetery in Bridgeport, built by P. T. Barnum in 1849, was modeled after the parklike cemeteries he had seen in England. It would probably qualify for the National Register, but Charles Brilvitch, the city historian, has not yet applied for the designation. Barnum, his family and Tom Thumb are buried there.

NOT far from Mountain Grove is the Old Stratfield Burying Ground, established around 1680 and listed in 1980 on the National Register as part of the Stratfield Historic District in Bridgeport.

"The city maintains the front portion," Mr. Brilvitch said, "but in back there are a lot of stones knocked over or cracked, with bittersweet and poison ivy growing over them." About 1,000 people were buried there, none after 1817.

John Olsen, the president of the nine-year-old Stratfield Historic District Association, is trying to raise money for restoration. In the meantime, he said, "Fairfield University students came over last September and cleaned out the place magnificently, even scraped and painted the iron fence."

Long ago, sextons in every Connecticut town were the paid cemetery caretakers. Today they are hard to find. Talcott Clapp, the sexton of South Windsor, whose father was the sexton before him, said: "I trim the trees, mow, grade, put in foundations for headstones and bury the dead in three 19th-century cemeteries. People coming in to look at gravestones always want to know where the earliest one is."

Of the three cemeteries he maintains, God's Acre is the oldest, and the earliest stone is dated 1708.