

three flags on a guardrail



Community Efforts Spur Newfound Interest in Historic Cemetery

John Dioguardi had seen the old cemetery before, the tops of the headstones unmistakable among the trees and tall weeds behind Noblestown United Presbyterian Church.

Like others who had grown accustomed to the sight along the town's main thoroughfare, he thought it sad, but wasn't sure exactly what to do about it, until earlier this year when he got a call from Uniontown Cemetery Supervisor Frank Nagody, right around the time Nagody's father passed away.

A lifelong resident of nearby McDonald and Primrose, the elder Nagody had told his son a number of times about how he was pretty sure that the cemetery's borders had once stretched beyond the road. When news made the papers last year that some volunteers had started working to clear the brush and restore what was left, the elder Nagody was elated. When his son ran into the wife of one of the volunteers at his father's funeral, he decided to get involved, and knew exactly who to call.

The owner of Rome Monument, a fourth-generation company specializing in custom monuments and headstones, Dioguardi about once a year dragged his son-in-law and the rest of his crew and equipment out to a cemetery that had fallen into disrepair. He worked on the one at Dixmont State Hospital back in 2006, right around the

time the main structures were being demolished to make way for a Walmart. He got involved there after reading about a Hopewell woman in the newspaper who wanted to preserve the gravesites, many of which didn't even have names, just index numbers to indicate the final resting places of patients who likely endured the inhumane use of restraints and lobotomies for which the asylum eventually became known.

He also worked on Calvary Cemetery in Pittsburgh the summer before last, after it was hit with what could very well be the worst case of vandalism the area has ever seen. A Jewish cemetery he worked on the year after had suffered an equally nasty bout of vandalism. For Dioguardi, the procession of holocaust films he had seen over the years drove the enormity of that particular job home.

But Noblestown, he says, was the worst he had ever seen, in part because it was so old. Many of the headstones there were made of sandstone or marble, materials phased out by many cemeteries by the mid-19th century because they weathered so badly. Runoff from the road had also washed out a number of the stones and carved a gully right through the middle. Additionally, trucks traveling on the route above had caused four, six-foot and one fifteen-foot granite monument to vibrate right off their stone supports, sending them crashing



LEFT PAGE, TOP: Three monuments belonging to the Bell family, once toppled, now righted on their new concrete supports.

LEFT PAGE, BOTTOM: Rome Monument volunteer Reed Schwertz looks on at the work being done around graves like the one just behind him of Civil War veteran William A. Smith.

THIS PAGE, TOP: Volunteers from Rome Monument, including Rob Hawthorne, used excavation equipment to remove about 50 stumps and dig new supports for almost a half dozen toppled monuments.

THIS PAGE, RIGHT: Rome volunteer William Morgan Jr. uses a crane to reassemble and place the monuments, including a 20-foot granite obelisk, while Dioguardi's son-in-law, William Hapach Jr., directs from below.



down the hillside and scattering their sections.

“In those days,” points out Dioguardi, “people chose the worst places for cemeteries.”

With the earliest visible stone dated 1837, chances are the cemetery contains members of the church’s original congregation – strict Seceder Presbyterians who crossed the Allegheny Mountains after the Revolutionary War to build farms on what was then the frontiers of America. Back in those days, cemeteries like the one at Noblestown were often maintained by family members, writes Lucy Bregman in her book, “Religion, Death and Dying, Vol. 3.” When those individuals moved, passed away or simply grew old themselves, the gravesites inevitably fell into disrepair. That may have been what happened at Noblestown, and with a Veteran’s Administration Report noting the cemetery’s declining state in the late 1930’s, chances are it had already long been abandoned.

Those stones that have survived, however, are providing insight into the area’s early settlers, and just how historic the site is. One belongs to John Mars, who may have fought in the Revolutionary War. According to a 200th Anniversary History church booklet written by former Reverend Robert G. Larimer, the church’s original congregation likely included a number of such war veterans. Local

historian Bob Leonard, who has been researching the cemetery, says that a “JM” is listed as a member of the 5th Pennsylvania Regiment.

Elizabeth Kraeer, meanwhile, whose name is etched on a granite stone dated 1896, may have had other ties to the Revolution. The niece to a wealthy Philadelphia merchant named Jacob De Haven, her descendent H. Wayne Kraeer of Avella says both her descendents and her brother’s descendents have been trying for over a hundred years now to prove that DeHaven loaned \$450,000 to George Washington to finance the revolution. They claim the loan, which today would be worth upwards of \$100 billion dollars, was never repaid. Both a lawsuit and even a congressional bill were introduced to repay De Haven’s descendents. However, all attempts have thus far been thwarted by a lack of written documentation, says Kraeer.

Another stone dated 1863 belongs to Civil War veteran William A. Smith, whose letters home to his parents were found by Leonard after the reclamation project began last year. In one of those letters, Smith writes that he is suffering from a severe fever, typhoid, which would eventually claim his life. After fighting in the Battle of Chancellorsville, he succumbed while on the march with Company D of the 140th regiment to Gettysburg, but not before writing home to his parents in North Fayette to ask if they had received the money he had sent and to

TOP LEFT: When volunteers began working on the cemetery they found many monuments literally in pieces like this one.

BOTTOM LEFT: Gravel laid in a gully carved out by runoff will prevent future erosion.

FAR RIGHT: While erosion had washed out some stones, a sixty-year-old elm tree, now dying, had encroached on others.



tell them he was sick.

It was Smith's stone and those of several other possible veterans interred within that got retired school superintendent Chuck Hughey venturing into the overgrown thicket armed with a weed wacker last year. He says that he got involved after seeing three flags left by Veterans of Foreign Wars members in a phone pole laid on its side to serve as a guardrail at the edge of the parking lot. Hughey figured if he cleared a path to the graves the flags could be placed where they belonged. However, after clearing much of the cemetery, Smith's was the only one he could find. Complicating matters further is an apparent lack of records pertaining to the cemetery. Any records kept by the church, says Dr. Reverend Patty Giles, were consumed in a mid-19th-century fire.

The cemetery, says Reverend Giles, is a project she has been wanting to tackle ever since she came to the church in 2002, but a lack of resources has made that difficult. She says that since Hughey began clearing the area last year, however, the congregation has shown renewed interest in continuing to clear the site, and that she and others have since found more stones in the brush on the far end of the property. It's just one facet of what Giles dubs an overall "resurrection" of the church property, which has coincided with the renovation of the manse house, a garden at the rear of the church, and patchwork her husband just completed on the church foundation.

For Dioguardi, he says his first objective at the cemetery was to remove old stumps so that Hughey and others could keep the area clear in the future. He estimates that they removed about 50 that first day. The second day they laid concrete footers for the granite monuments that had toppled. Hughey says that initially he and the rest of the volunteers had not realized that the pieces fit together, figuring them for separate monuments, until Dioguardi came in and

began assembling them like pieces in a puzzle.

But first they needed to solicit help from township supervisor Jim Morosetti to have the road crew build up the side of the road to prevent future runoff. Otherwise, any concrete or grass they laid would just be washed out in the next heavy rain. With the help of North Fayette Police Chief Jeffrey J. Falconer, Morosetti also had a lane closed while Dioguardi's crew used a boom truck to reassemble the monuments. Now that the pieces have been cemented back together with silicone epoxy and architectural-grade cement, says Dioguardi, "they're not going anywhere."

In the end, Nagody estimates that Dioguardi donated at least \$10,000 worth of manpower and equipment, and says he and ten others Nagody recruited from Crossroads United Methodist Church raked and reseeded the area. To ensure proper drainage, Hughey also laid gravel in the gully, and by late summer, grass had taken root throughout.

At a rededication ceremony last year, accompanied by a gun salute, a flag was placed at Smith's gravesite, and Leonard's wife placed a memorial in the form of a planter to honor those veterans whose resting places remain unknown. Dioguardi says he has plans to donate a stone to honor the veterans interred there, which will be placed at the corner of the parking lot. Thanks to a \$500 donation provided by Mark West, there are also plans to build a walkway leading throughout with steps.

At one time, according to the church's historic booklet, congregation members used to picnic in the cemetery during intermissions from long-winded sermons. There, sitting on the headstones, they would lunch while talking about their crops. Sometime soon, maybe more people will begin to rediscover the site again.