

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT TURKEY HILL GRAVEYARD?

You may have noticed activity at the old graveyard on Meetinghouse Road. The Merrimack Historical Society held a workshop two years ago, directed by Richard Maloon from the New Hampshire Old Graveyard Association. After repairing and cleaning one gravestone, the Society began a program for cleaning ALL the gravestones. The work had gone slowly until recently. Our Town Manager has approved the work being done and Police have been notified so that any reports of possible vandalism would be understood.

Last year a Boy Scout was looking for service hours and began work. Shortly afterward two girls, who are now BSA Scouts, cleaned several stones. This year, during the Pandemic, the Scouts in the local district held a virtual camporee, where each patrol was to do a service project. One of the patrol leaders contacted Mrs. Creager, from the Historical Society (also a Boy Scout leader) to ask if their patrol could work at the Turkey Hill Graveyard in a safe environment to fulfill this need. At one point, there were seven Scouts and three parents cleaning gravestones. Many of them returned after the needed hours were completed. Then the word spread, and Scouts from other troops and other towns found that it was a perfect site to do service, while getting them outdoors in a safe environment. So far, the Scouts have cleaned over 125 stones, while learning about Merrimack's history at the same time. Nylon and wooden tools are used to manually remove the lichen and mosses from the stones before cleaning. The stones are then cleaned using nylon or natural bristle brushes (no metal) and water with a great deal of elbow grease. No other chemicals are used which might deteriorate the stone. There is a special chemical, which is used after the cleaning to destroy various lichens and mosses and inhibit future growth. This chemical continues to be effective for up to ten years after application.

When Mr. Maloon, from the NHOGA, noticed the activity, he began coming to help, along with several more members of the Historical Society and some of Maloon's friends. He and his "friends" have begun repairing damaged stones as well. They have re-set stones that have tipped or fallen over, have repaired some broken stones, using special approved epoxy and filling cracks to prevent further damage. They have dug into the ground to find the broken sections and braced the repaired stones as they gain strength.

In the process, the Scouts and other volunteers have learned a great deal about Merrimack's history. This graveyard was behind the first Meetinghouse on the west side of the Merrimack River. The first meetinghouse was on the east side in what is now Litchfield, since the town towns were originally joined. The front doorstep of our meetinghouse remains. The ONLY resident of Merrimack to die in the Revolutionary War was a 15 year old drummer, Reuben Cummings, whose memorial is at this location. He fought at Bunker Hill and died at Fort Ticonderoga. The first minister from 1771, Jacob Burnap, is buried here along with his last wife (others died earlier and are buried elsewhere) and two daughters. A 16 year old youth died after being struck by lightning. Whole families died over a few months as different epidemics struck with influenza, smallpox or measles. Families had various spellings, as those who came to the "New World" anglicized their names. "Macauley", born in Ireland in 1704 became "McCalley". "Field" was spelled "Fields" or "Fieald" in different generations. "Spalding" became "Spaulding". Veterans of many wars are found buried here. Many of the Longa family are found here. They came as mercenaries during the Revolutionary War and are still active in our town today. Many mysteries have been unearthed and investigated. In digging out one fallen stone, it was found that another gravestone was under that one used as a support for the new one. The lower one was for a veteran who lived and died in Windham. When his old Windham stone was replaced, his old broken stone was used to support one here in Merrimack.

It is hoped that the volunteers will continue their work at other two historical graveyards, at Reeds Ferry and Thorntons Ferry, when Turkey Hill is complete. This cannot be done without authorization from the town. The graveyards are town property, although the gravesites are the property of the families. Last Rest Cemetery is not a town property, but is owned by a private organization. Reeds Cemetery on Naticook Road, is actively in use as town property. As the volunteers learn how to clean stones properly, they can then clean their own family stones elsewhere. Contact Anita Creager, from the Merrimack Historical Society at 424-5084 or anitacreagert458@comcast.net or the NH Old Graveyard Association for more information or to become one of our volunteers.