

A Brief History of Pioneer Cemetery

The first death in the new Canadaway community was that of six-year old Hannah Woodcock killed by a felled tree in the dense woods just south of today's Maple Ave. That was in October 1807.

Local tradition -- no doubt true -- has it that Hezekiah Barker offered a burial site at the far edge of his 259-acre farm. The precise site of Hannah's grave, unknown to us today, was chosen by Windsor Brigham. He and his family had only recently arrived here and were staying with the Richard Williams family, Hannah Woodcock's uncle and close neighbor.

There are nine recorded deaths in the community between that October 1807 and July 1810, but no indication that they were buried in the same place as she was. However, on July 21, 1810 Martha, wife of George Patterson, died and was buried there. Her grave can be located today. The same is true, in increasing numbers, with other burials and markers, as the years pass. By 1818, the Chautauque Gazette had begun, and in 1821 the New York [later Fredonia] Censor, both of which are helpful in recording deaths and places of burial.

It is in 1880, by law, that the Town of Pomfret began recording all births, marriages and deaths, with the Village following in 1885. From then on the record of place of burial is much easier to follow or to verify.

In 1909, E.A. Wilder surveyed and mapped the burial ground, indicating all the extant grave sites he could identify and giving each a distinctive number. A record of locations, names and dates was made, keyed to the map numbers, and an alphabetical index to that record was added. In the 1970s, Jack Blodgett made a new record of every stone and inscription he could find and provided an index to his list. Combining the Wilder and Blodgett records provides a useful beginning for recording all retrievable burial locations in Pioneer Cemetery.

As far as the legal and geographical state of Pioneer Cemetery goes, that is a more complicated matter.

When Hezekiah Barker permitted, or encouraged, Hannah Woodcock's burial on his farm in 1807, he still had some years to go before he could payoff his contract and actually own the land. That took place on 12 November 1812. The parcel deeded to him by the Holland Land Co. was a large one, 259 acres, and, no doubt by prior agreement, Barker sold the east part, 100 acres, to his son Barzillai on 5 December 1812.

Again, although no written record exists, there must have been some kind of understanding about the communal burial ground, on what was now Barzillai Barker's land, since at the very least four people had been buried there by 1812 and eight more by 1815.

The next reference that we have to the cemetery is a subscription paper of 24 May 1815 signed by 30 residents pledging to pay a specified amount to Leverett Barker and Mosely W. Abell for "the purchase of the Burying Ground on the East side of Canadaway Creek,

on Lands belonging to Barzillai Barker and also for the purpose of clearing off the said Burying Ground and erecting a Suitable fence around the Same."

On 20 June 1815, less than a month later, a 1 1/2-acre lot was conveyed to Leverett Barker, Mosely W. Abell, Squire White, Jacob Houghton, and Charles Burritt, although no deed to that effect was ever recorded. This group, to whom the land was conveyed, does not seem to have been a committee of the Town Board. Of the five men, only Leverett Barker was on the Board, and that was as Secretary. Of course, all five were very prominent men in their own right, so it would seem they were representing the citizens of Pomfret in general. Indeed, the last sentence of the subscription they had circulated stipulated that the improvements to the burying ground were to be done "Under the Inspection and Direction of such person or persons as a Majority of the Citizens concerned shall deem expedient."

That may explain why there is no mention of the collection effort, the sale or of any subsequent actions in the Minutes of the Town's annual meetings either in April 1815, just before the subscription list was begun, or in April 1816, after the land had been transferred. In fact, there is no reference to the burial ground in the Town Minutes for the next 21 years.

Luckily, items in the Fredonia Censor give occasional glimpses of activity. It would seem that once the cemetery ground was purchased and perhaps some initial clearing done, and a modest fence put up, interest slackened.

In June 1827, ten years later, the Censor remarked on the "terrible condition of the cemetery." All kinds of cattle were being permitted to roam free and there was "no fence to speak of." That led to another effort, another subscription, to put up a proper fence. The Censor of 16 January 1828 expected the work to be done by the first of May, but, on 20 February, the editor issued a warning that "Persons who have subscribed towards building a Fence around the burying ground...are cautioned against paying any part of the same to William Bond at least until he can show them the subscription paper." Nothing more is heard of the matter, and the fence apparently was built.

In the following year, 1829, the Village of Fredonia was incorporated, its bounds including the cemetery. However, no mention is made of it in the articles of incorporation nor in the Village Board Minutes for the first few years. The first reference in the Minutes is for 27 June 1832 when it is directed that B. Taylor be paid for repairs and a lock for the "gate of the burying ground." That suggests that the Village had assumed the responsibility for maintaining the cemetery.

Five years later, the Town Board issued its first statement on the matter, voting that the Supervisor and the Town Clerk-elect be authorized to look into "the condition of all the burying grounds in the Town of Pomfret and that they cause all such fence repairs and other improvements to be made." That must have included the old burying ground, as it was called, since in March 1840 they agreed to expend \$100 "in fencing and enlarging

the burying ground in Fredonia" and in March 1841 "resolved that the balance of Money now in Supervisors hands be expended in enlarging the burying ground in Fredonia."

At the annual election of the Village Board in April 1839, the Trustees were directed "to take charge of the hearse," and at the Board meeting of 3 April, Messrs. Ferris and Gillis were appointed as a committee to make arrangements in relation to the hearse. Although it is not clear who had owned the hearse, it looks as though some kind of working arrangement had been arrived at between Village and Town, because in March 1842, the Town went ahead with their plans, passing a resolution "that we raise the necessary amount, not exceeding fifty dollars, to fence the burying ground in Fredonia."

Enlargement of the burying ground was accomplished by the Town buying a small strip, north of the original lot, from Squire White and John Brigham. The deed, completed in November 1842, described the addition as beginning at the northeast corner of the burying ground "as it has heretofore been fenced and used." It is that purchase that added the triangular piece at the upper west end of the cemetery as well as a strip all the way along the top of the original lot.

Perhaps foreseeing the day when the original cemetery would be filled, the Village Board appointed a committee in April 1848 to find a new site for a Village burying ground, but they also charged the Committee with circulating a subscription "to improve the present one." Nothing seems to have come of a search for another site, but in April 1849 the original committee was enlarged, adding Buckland Gillett to the group, and stating that Bartholomew Staats was to be the corporation Sexton.

As a follow-up, the Committee, consisting of William Risley, R.Greene, and H.C.Frisbee, entered an elegantly worded notice in the Censor of 15 May 1849 that "Persons desirous of obtaining places for interment in the burying ground of this village, are requested to call upon Mr.B.Gillett, residing nearly opposite of the same [133 E.Main], that proper places may be designated for such purpose. Mr.B.Staats is the legally appointed Sexton."

This is the first clear indication of any agency in either Town or Village trying to regulate the allocation of grave sites.

That suggests there was an agreement with the Town, by which the Town took care of the lot, while the Village handled the allocation of grave sites and the formalities of burial itself.

In November 1849 the Censor reported that "we are requested to state that Mr. James Killean will act as Sexton of the graveyard until the next annual corporation meeting. Application [for the position] may be made to Mr.Buckland Gillett, near the graveyard." Bartholomew Staats had moved to Gowanda at this time, leaving the position of Sexton vacant.

Although no comment on the matter can be found in the Minutes of Town Meetings just before or after, the Village Board Minutes of April 1851 state that "the Trustees are

requested to take charge of the burying ground, appoint a Sexton, etc." As a consequence, at the 22 April meeting, the Village appointed James Killean as Sexton for the following year, directed that Mr. Payne was to have the Hearse, Pall, etc., and that Buckland Gillett "be requested to take charge and direct the control of the same."

That clearly put the Village in entire charge, but whatever the arrangement had been, there seems to have been a shift during the following year because by 2 February 1853, the Town Board resolved "that the publik burying grounds of the town of Pomfret be placed in the charge and custody of the Supervisor for the time being and that he is authorized and instructed to keep them in repair and fenced at the Expense of the town." This strongly suggests that the Town was taking over what it had previously allowed the Village to control.

Whether this was the cause of -- or otherwise connected with -- I another call for a new cemetery is not clear, but in June 1853 formal plans were proposed to buy the forest land behind the old burying ground for a private cemetery. Although that effort failed, the second attempt a year later succeeded. The "Village Cemetery Association" was formed and, on July 15, 1854, the name The Forest Hill Cemetery was adopted.

That may have taken some of the pressure off the Town to be the only provider of burial space. By 1856, however, complaints began to be heard once again. In April an anonymous correspondent in the Censor pointed out that although daily one might see family and friends visiting the Old Burying Ground, one of Fredonia's naturally beautiful locations, how "painful must it be to them, to find it profanely occupied as a 'Cow Pasture,' and open 'Common.' Will not our public functionaries look to it?"

The Town Minutes contain no response to the problem.

However, in May 1858, a Committee of the Village Board was formed "to confer with the Supervisor of the Town about making a wall and securing the bank on the line of Main St. and the old Burying Ground." In July, H. Smith was empowered by the Village to excavate along the burying ground on Main St. for a wall.

This could be no more significant than the Village shoring up the bank to protect its walkways, and the need to confer with the Town Supervisor seems to indicate clearly that the wall building would impinge on the Town's domain.

There are no further references to the old burying ground in either the Village or the Town minutes for the next ten or so years.

During that period, an arrangement was worked out by which George Ryman, Sexton of the new cemetery, Forest Hill, acted as Sexton for the old burying ground as well. Nothing appears in the minutes of the Town nor of the Cemetery Association at the time.

However, we do have Ryman's diary entries beginning in January 1867. (Ryman had been Sexton at Forest Hill Cemetery at least since 1859.)

At this point it would be best to summarize the physical layout of the burying ground as of 1867. The original acre and a half had been added to in 1842, giving us the long rectangular plot running off East Main St. with a triangular "ear" at the northwest corner. That configuration can be seen on the 1851 map, with an odd triangular piece marked out half-way up the west side that may be a private burial ground. The 1867 map has the same outline without the west-line indentation, and the 1881 map shows another strip added to the west side of the original lot.

More land seems to have been added since then to make the lot a complete rectangle.

Because of the angle at which East Main St. runs at that point, the cemetery lot runs northwest off Main St. The gravesites, by and large, are oriented in the traditional due east-west line. That is, the headstones, where they remain in place, stand at the east end of the grave; the footstones, if any, at the west. Some very early graves -- and later ones associated with them -- run slightly more northeast-southwest, but they are no more than some 30 out of the 1600 and more.

The point here is that someone had a plan, a large design for how the grave sites should be aligned. Concrete cylinders with vitreous tops impressed with a number in each were buried with just the glass number plate showing. There are at least 545 such cylinders in regular order still extant throughout the main part of the cemetery but not in the separate sections running along the western edge that seem to have been private burial yards later added to the main cemetery.

When Ryman began recording his work as Sexton for the old burying ground, in January 1867, he did not use, nor did he ever refer to, those markers, so they had either not yet been placed, or their use had lapsed over the years, perhaps with the loss of records.

In February 1870 the Town Board initiated efforts to buy a strip of land from the Forest Hill Cemetery Association "lying north of the old burying ground...to the North line of the fair ground...." That apparently fell through. However, the Minutes of the Forest Hill Cemetery Association in July 1873 note that W.W.McKinstry and A.Hinckley were to be a Committee "to care for the old burying ground in behalf of the Town of Pomfret." Again in 1881 the subject was discussed. "After conferring about the old burying ground and hearing the act passed in 1870 and hearing that recent acts at the old grounds had been and were to our injury as a corporation, after hearing from our former committee to care for the old ground in behalf of the Town of Pomfret, and much deliberation, it was resolved W.W.McKinstry and R.P.Clement be our Committee to take charge of the old Cemetery under the authority of the act...and control it for our protection."

Ryman continued- acting as Sexton at the Town's cemetery until his death in 1894. Fifteen years later, the Town apparently had E.A.Wilder make a thorough map of the cemetery. The map is signed by Wilder and dated 9 August 1909, when the work was completed. However, no resolution directing Wilder to do the work is in the Minutes nor is any payment recorded.

When he surveyed the cemetery, Wilder assigned a unique number to every grave site he could find and developed a ledger of the grave sites and an index to the personal names still legible on the stones. Obviously, since the Town owns and still uses that map and record, it must have been done for them, even though the Town Minutes don't mention it. Equally obviously, Wilder had no other records to go by because he seems to have depended entirely on the extant stones. He too ignores the glass-top markers, as did Ryman, who argues that it was indeed a scheme laid out before either of them began his work, that is, before 1867, and long enough before to have been forgotten or lost track of.

Because the glass markers are in the top part of the cemetery as well, which piece was added in 1842, we can date them to the twenty-some years after 1842, but allowing enough time for them to be forgotten or become not useful by 1867.

Logically it would seem they were put in place when the Village was most involved, when Mr. Staats was Village Sexton, and when "persons desirous of obtaining places for interment" were to call upon Mr. Buckland Gillett so that "proper places may be designated."

It may well have been that when the Town reasserted its rights to the old burying ground in 1853 while the Village was looking forward to a brand new cemetery at Forest Hill, the old records were stored, perhaps at the home of the Sexton, and later forgotten, lost or destroyed.

What we are left with, then, are whatever legible stones remain, Ryman's "geographical" notes ("e.g. [Buried] Mr. Tibbs at foot of Henry Green's children"), and Wilder's map, and it is that map that calls for very careful scrutiny.

Wilder seems to have surveyed the burying ground very carefully, which means he must have spent a good bit of time at his task. He began at the extreme right hand side, entering from East Main St. The gravesite he numbered 1 is that of Charles Robbins, "C.R." on his map. He worked his way up along the easterly line to number 8, then came back down to the Main St. end and picked up again with 9 (mis-labeled "8" on the map) through 12. That covered a sequence of graves laid out at right angles to the eastern boundary.

Most of the rest are oriented east-west, as we have seen. These begin with number 13 and follow the same pattern of proceeding, in this case, due north to the end of a line then coming back down and working back up in the next row. Because the path from the East Main St. entrance makes a natural divider, he used that as his base, coming back down just to the path, then working northerly again assigning sequential numbers and marking initials on his map where the names were still legible.

Periodically he had to shift back to the earlier orientation when he reached some graves further up along that right-hand boundary.

In addition, Wilder's map shows a large loop at the westerly end of the path which is not there now.

Because Wilder's numbering uses the straight road all the way from the entrance as a base line, but ignores the three legs of the loop, it may well be that the loop was a proposed extension of the path that was never actually laid out. In late September 1901, Mrs. Mary C. Spaulding wrote a letter, with a great deal of family history about the Crosbys in it, to her cousin Olive Risley Seward. She explained that when Simon Crosby, their great-great grandfather, died in 1836, their grandfather, Dr. Orris Crosby, was already out west which is why his father's grave did not receive a headstone. "When a new road was extended through the old cemetery it crossed the Crosby lot. Mother [Olive Caroline Crosby Smith] was notified by Uncle William Risley, and she sent money to pay the expense of having her mother's body placed in the Risley lot [Sally Patrick Crosby was moved to grave site #1498] at the same time, and they thought it best to have another superscription put on the stones [Wife of Orris Crosby, mother of Mrs. D.G. Smith, sister of Mrs. Wm. Risley] as all of the older members of the family would soon be gone. Mother furnished the money and Uncle William attended to it. She also furnished enough to have her Grandfather [Simon] Crosby's remains moved to the other side of his wife's grave if the new road encroached in the least upon the grave. For some reason this was not done....so we nearly lost track of his grave; as the road ran across the head of it. I found it by getting down and examining the ground closely. The Revolutionary marker rescues it from oblivion but I am sorry it was not moved.

"When we found it had not been [moved] [it was too late] a new grave had just been made the other side of his wife."

What Mrs. Spaulding is referring to are graves 935, 936 and 937. Since William Risley died in 1883, the "new road" must have been put through earlier than that. Since, on February 1, 1880, the Town Board had resolved that "the sum of one hundred dollars (\$100) be raised in the Town of Pomfret to expend on the Old Cemetery for a culvert at the entrance and a driveway for carriages...." in all likelihood 1880 is when the new road was laid out.

When Wilder had reached the last gravesite above the main path in the northwesterly corner, the "ear," he had reached to grave site number 1066. At that point, he returned to the East Main St. end of the burial ground, but below the dividing path, and continued with 1067 through 1537. He then moved to the sections that run along the westerly edge. He marked them off into three distinct units. The largest section, the one closest to East Main St. and just above where 112 E. Main St. (the new liquor store) stands, was the one he took up first.

That section, and the other two, have the grave sites all laid out parallel to East Main St. rather than being oriented east-west. Wilder picked up his numbering with 1538 closest to East Main St. and to the body of the cemetery, then worked straight up to the top of the large section, came back down to East Main St. and worked up again until he reached the upper limit of this section at the westerly edge.

There are two other sections, above this one. The larger of the two lies easterly, the smaller westerly. For these, Wilder started his numbering over again and in reverse order. Starting at the left hand side of the large parcel at the top with 1, he worked down to 11, picked up with 12 towards the top and came down to 17, then up again to 18 and down to 24. There is no 25, but at the top, in the middle, he has a prominent box with the number 26 in it. (There is another box at the bottom next to 24 that may have been meant for 25.)

Finally, Wilder took the smallest of the three westerly lots and again began with 1 in the upper left corner, marking off six grave sites in two parallel rows. Between them is a box he marked G. and in the extreme upper left another box marked F.

One thing is immediately clear. The lowest of the three westerly segments Wilder considered a continuing part of the main cemetery. However, the two smaller segments he numbered separately, handling each one as an independent unit with its own numbering system, and did not include any of the inscriptions in his roster and index, as though they did not belong with the other Old Burying Ground entries.

These must be what were the "private burying ground" references in the 1841 deed and in later ones. The 1841 reference was to the easterly line of a parcel which ran from the southwest corner of the burying ground on Main St. N.58°West 1.97 to the southeast corner of Pearson Crosby's family burying ground lot.

That private lot (Crosby's) was a square, 1.10 (72.6 feet) on each side. A deed of April 1868 begins in the northerly line of Main St. and runs easterly to the corner of the public burying ground lot, thence north 66 feet to John Miller's private burying ground lot then westerly 72 feet 8 inches to Miller's corner, then north again along the lines of Miller's Button's, Crosby's, etc. to Forbes, then easterly along Forbes to the cemetery then northerly again to the Fair Grounds. One of March 1880 follows a similar line, as does that of March 1893. All record that "ear" in the northwesterly corner.

The 1893 deed describes a line beginning on Main St. 73 feet southwest of the corner of the cemetery wall then running northwesterly along the lands of Harrison Parker, then the private burying grounds of Miller, Button, Crosby and Forbes, a total distance of 128 feet. Then, parallel to Main St., the line went northeasterly 33 feet, then turned northwesterly again and ran along the Matteson and Walworth private burying grounds 67 feet. It then continued another 44 feet westerly to the Forest Hill Cemetery line.

The Harrison Parker land is the "notch," 73 feet wide, where 112 East Main St. is today. The sequence of Miller, Button and Crosby grave sites runs north past the Forbes graves. The line then ran easterly parallel to Main St. 33 feet, that is, part way along the top of the Forbes enclosure, then north westerly again up to the underside of the "ear."

This configuration matches what Wilder drew in 1909.