

## Fredonia's Burial Grounds and How They Grew by Douglas Shepard

We very rarely think of our burial grounds as part of our built environment the way we do houses, brick streets, public parks, cut-stone sidewalks, fountains, plaques and monuments, street lamps, and all other marks we leave on our community as reminders of what we were and what we meant to say. However, we should, because our burial grounds are equally reflections of attitudes and priorities, and records of how they changed.

Pioneer Cemetery and Forest Hill Cemetery, for example, are in people's minds today for a variety of reasons. There is an effort under way right now by the Fredonia Preservation Society and the Town of Pomfret to find ways of preserving and rehabilitating Pioneer Cemetery; the architectural significance of **E.A. Curtis's** Romanesque gatehouses at Forest Hill, which are much in need of stabilization, has been pointed out by Dr. Daniel D. Reiff in his *Fredonia Architecture* and elsewhere; and the **Darwin R. Barker** Historical Museum and the Chautauqua County Genealogical Society have been collecting and preserving the historical and family records of those buried in our local cemeteries.

What is now to be added to those efforts is consideration of the two burial grounds as examples of the handling of public spaces. We can see that the Village considers that our Common should be green, not blacktop nor cement. That it should have walkways through it and benches to sit on and trees to sit under, but that traffic flow is important enough to divide the Common in half. The fountains themselves, as statuary, and the water falling into the basins represent priorities and decisions made almost 100 years ago and ratified by succeeding generations. Our burial grounds can be looked at in the same way.

Is the burial ground fenced or open? Was it always? Are there paths? Are the paths and grave sites lined up with military precision, laid out in a curved formal pattern, meandering, higgledy-piggledy (a technical term much used by cemetery savants), or a confusing mixture? Are the grave markers high or low, plain or ornate, clustered or evenly spaced? Are there special family plots marked off from the others? Is there grass? Are there trees, bushes, flowers? Trimmed and restricted, free and rambling? Is the burial ground (or was it) in the middle of the village or on the outskirts? On high ground and visible, or tucked away discreetly?

Answering some of those questions tells us a great deal about ourselves. Our oldest burial ground, now called Pioneer Cemetery (it was simply "The Old Cemetery" until the Town of Pomfret changed the name by **1908**), began as a result of an accident. In October, **1807**, six-year-old **Hannah Woodcock** was killed by a tree being cut down. Probably because her father, **Oliver Woodcock**, had not yet settled on a permanent location, **Hezekiah Barker** was said to have offered a small piece of land as a burial place near the edge of his 360-acre lot, a good distance from what he, at least, was thinking of as the center of the tiny new community of Canadaway.

We do not know exactly where **Hannah** is buried; in fact, we have no locations for the first twelve who died in the settlement. However, from June, **1810**, we have a reasonably good record which permits us to come to several conclusions. In the first place, little emphasis seems to have

been put on the grave locations and their markers. From contemporary comments and later reminiscences we know far more about locations of the earliest distilleries, mills and shops than we do about the location of early burials, precise dates or sometimes first names. This is partly due to the lack of money to pay for permanent markers. Also, death, particularly among children, was so common and, for the faithful, survival in the next life was so much more significant than being memorialized in this one, that little emphasis was put on grave markers.

Another revealing aspect of Pioneer Cemetery's early history is the fact that the grave sites of those who died between **1810** and **1817** are randomly distributed in the "front" part of the cemetery. We know that the grounds were not fenced and, apparently, not well tended. Indeed, until **1815** at the earliest, the grounds had not even been laid out in delineated burial plots.

A subscription paper was circulated on May 24, **1815**, to raise enough money to buy the burying ground "for the purpose of clearing off the said Burying Ground and erecting a Suitable fence around the Same." A particularly interesting entry is that of cranky **Squire Morton**, as he was known, who pledged \$2.00 with the written proviso "if the ground is loted" which tells us that burial lots had not yet been laid out. A deed of October 1815 to some adjacent land notes that 1 ½ acres had been appropriated for burying ground" on June 20, **1815**. In other words, the formal transfer of the land to the Town was made on that day.

At some point **Squire Morton's** proviso was heeded, although we don't know exactly when. There are the remnants of a very early system of lot identification by numbers anchored in the ground. Those still visible range from 2, very near the entrance, to 545. The important point here, for our purposes, is that the lotting was done in straight rows. (fig. 1) It must have been done fairly early since the sexton's records of burials from 1867 describe placement only in relationship to those buried nearby: "**Mrs. Kane** on the south side of a grave marked My Mother, close to **Barker's** fence and the **Gillett** lot," for example. That kind of record-keeping continued at least through **1893**. By **1909** the Town Board had instructed **E.A. Wilbur** to survey the entire burial ground, make a map and assign a distinct number to each grave site. It is this system that has been in use since.

The map he made has rows of numbers from 1 through 1614. (fig. 2) It also has an attempt at softening the rigid layout by extending the access road that once ran across the top of the early section, giving it a squared-off loop. That part of the planned road does not seem to have been constructed, and we are left with a row and tier arrangement that is familiar – even when it isn't consciously noticed – and traditional. However, the tradition was to change, and here again Fredonia preserves a record of that new aesthetic.

Where did the new aesthetic come from? The traditional burial grounds, especially in the larger cities in the United States, had become over crowded, cluttered and run-down. They also began to pose a health hazard as the city closed in around them. Therefore, a move was begun to establish new cemeteries at the outskirts where they could be laid out more spaciouly. At the same time, a developing sense of Romanticism presented Nature as an antidote to the unhealthful, artificial city. Both impulses combined to create the "garden" or "rural" cemetery notion first demonstrated in the **1831** Mt. Auburn Cemetery outside Boston.

This type of burial ground was to be parklike, with winding paths, overarching trees, ponds, hills and groves. (fig. 3) By the 1840s cemeteries like Brooklyn's Greenwood Cemetery became a park and picnic area for visitors who strolled the paths admiring some more of the elaborate funerary art. These garden cemeteries became America's first large-scale public open spaces and inspired the American park movement which was to follow. The new attitude toward the burial ground's function can be seen in the parklike names: Woodlawn, Spring Grove, Glenwood, Maple Grove, Evergreen, and Forest Hill.

Fredonia's Forest Hill Cemetery was first proposed in **1853**. As the *Fredonia Advertiser* of June 3, **1853**, elegantly described it, the Cemetery Association would "procure the forest lot in the rear of the [Pioneer Cemetery]. This location, by tasteful arrangements and proper improvements, can be made the attractive and hallowed spot which intelligent respect and love suggest should be devoted to those who are sleeping in death." Although that initial effort failed, a second try during June and July, **1854**, succeeded. The Village Cemetery Association was formed and, on July 15, 1854, the name The Forest Hill Cemetery was chosen.

The first secretary of the Cemetery Board, **Lucius Hurlbut**, a local engineer and surveyor, visited "some of the more modern cemeteries" and mapped out Sections A, B, and C based on what he had learned from his tour. Those sections are north of the office just off Lambert Avenue. Very deliberately, according to the new style, the graves sites and surrounding paths were laid out in a circle and two free-form shapes adapted to the contours of the ground. (fig. 5) Although a few large trees had to be removed to make way for the drives and the walks, most of the "primeval forest" was kept to provide what **C.S. Pervical**'s dedicatory Ode of **1855** called "the pleasant woodland bowers."

The original nine have grown to forty acres, but the design has remained true to the initial concept: a parklike burial ground with curving drives and walks meandering by the overarching trees. But the cemetery is more than just itself. Along with the adjacent cemetery, which represents the earlier tradition, we have two perfect models of the changing concepts about public space here preserved for us in our two central burial grounds, Pioneer and Forest Hill cemeteries.