

A common effort: Restoring the North Burial Ground

BY NICHOLAS BROWN

Great things are happening for one of the most historic and venerated landscapes in Providence: the North Burial Ground. For many decades the North Burial Ground has suffered from funding constraints and competing needs of an often financially strapped municipal government. But indeed, the same leadership that has transformed Roger Williams Park and won for it the major merit award from the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2000 has initiated steps which have already made visible improvements in the overall stewardship of the city's oldest cemetery.

The first settlers in Providence tucked away the deceased members of their families in their own backyards. But in 1700, the city's fathers established an 11-acre plot of land in the northern part of the city for a "burying ground, military training, and other public purposes." The cemetery now contains almost 105,000 gravestones on a 110-acre site. The oldest decipherable gravestones date from the 1720s. From its inception, the North Burial Ground has operated as Providence's common burial ground. The independence and egalitarian spirit that characterized Providence's early settlement is reflected in the cemetery, which has always been open to all. If you walk through the oldest section of the cemetery, you will see early African-American slaves buried next to prominent white citizens, and laborers next to wealthy Providence proprietors. The prominent cemetery researcher John Sterling published in 2000 a list of all the grave markers in the North Burial Ground for the 1700-1846 period. This publication is available in most public libraries in the state.

The gravestones in the North Burial Ground not only chronicle the past social and humanitarian attitudes in our state, but also the lives of prominent Rhode Islanders important to our civic and social history. Six governors are buried here, three Providence mayors, two Brown University presidents, and the famous American educator Horace Mann. The civic importance of the North Burial Ground is also reflected in the many examples of public memorials and dedicated areas for such groups as the Providence Firemen, the Order of Elks, a number of veterans organizations, and the Armenian massacre victims. Most importantly, the North Burial Ground gravestones tell us about the common families of our city and state -- stories about immigrant families who came here to make a better life, stories about those who lost a family member fighting for our country, stories about families who lost infant after infant to disease, and stories about people who made a difference in their community.

A highlight of the recent conference in Providence of 2,100 preservationists assembled by the National Trust for Historic Preservation was a tour of the North Burial Ground.

And what did these special visitors see?

A team of specialists working to restore displaced or deteriorated headstones.

A newly appointed superintendent, Tom D'Amore, who already has implemented specialized maintenance techniques after consultation with major old-line cemeteries such as the Mount Auburn Cemetery, in Cambridge, Mass., and with the Association of Gravestone Studies.

Some 1,000 feet of new wrought-iron fence along the west side, replacing a rusty chain-link barrier.

A battery of new machines, notably those to mow more precisely without damage to headstones.

And there is much more ahead. Through the efforts of Mayor Vincent A. Cianci Jr., Superintendent of Parks Nancy Derrig and the park commissioners, perpetual care funds held in trust by the city have been reinvested and the revenues made available for a significantly higher level of care, which includes an increase in staffing at the North Burial Ground. The next couple of years will see focus on more gravestone repair (with some 400 gravestones targeted in 2002), the removal of dead trees and the planting of 200 new trees, and the replacement of worn-out turf throughout the cemetery. There are many years of hard work and continued allocation of resources needed to restore the North Burial Ground to the historical and aesthetic standards that the citizens of Providence should expect. The Friends of the Historic North Burial Ground was formed in 2000 as an auxiliary to the efforts of the city. In concert with the park commissioners, Ms. Derrig and all her staff, we believe that the North Burial Ground is important to the city and the state. It deserves the support of all Providence and Rhode Island residents. Volunteer help, especially in gravestone inventory and conserva-

tion work, is welcome. Those interested should contact Robert McMahon at the Providence Parks Department at 785-9450 or at rmcmahon@providenceri.com. Also, the scourge of all cemeteries is vandalism. Neighbors can help control that by reporting suspicious loiterers to the Providence police at 272-1111.

The North Burial Ground tells us a lot about past Rhode Island generations: how they lived, how they struggled and succeeded, and how they shaped our community. How the current generation of Rhode Islanders takes care of this important Rhode Island landscape will say a lot about us to those who come after.

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