

GRAVE-READING OF UNIQUE HELP TO GENEALOGISTS

Patriot-News, The (Harrisburg, PA) - Sunday, August 29, 1999

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The Hanoverdale Church Cemetery is a busy place on this particular Sunday afternoon.

Grave reading is in progress.

Readers move steadily from grave to grave, recording by hand the location, name, birth date, death date, and any other detail that the tombstone show. Bob Viguers of Harrisburg is among them, putting down his work stool, jotting down the tombstone details on note pad, checking the information, and moving to the next stone.

Helen Foreman of Hershey is here, too. She has a special interest in this cemetery. Foreman counts five generations of family here, including a great-great-great-grandfather born in 1795.

This is genealogy in action and the Capital Area Genealogical Society is nearing completion of a multiyear project to compile a complete record of every grave in the Route 39 cemetery. This information, when pieced together and printed in the society's Keystone Seekers Genealogical Quarterly, may help family history researchers to create a link back as far as the latter part of the 18th century.

'It's a starting point, a point to begin searching other places. It's an aid to doing research,' says **Molly Ulsh**, president of Capital Area Genealogical Society, of the project.

She is coordinating the Sunday grave reading, instructing what to record and how to count off spaces, assigning a row of stones to club members and to the several curious volunteers who stopped to lend a hand, and providing pens and pencils to those who need them. The turnout pleases her and she is excited at the prospect of nonmembers taking interest in the project. The effort to record this particular cemetery started about two years ago.

'Many of our members live all over the United States and because so many families began in Pennsylvania, they like to have [cemetery] information that isn't always available elsewhere,' **Ulsh** said.

Because the midstate was close to major ports of entry, Philadelphia and Baltimore, many immigrants initially settled in central Pennsylvania.

This particular Dauphin County cemetery appears not to have previously documented.

'No one seems to have recorded this one,' says **Ulsh**. 'A lot of local families are buried there. There are a lot of local names. We started on the old ones, those closest to the church' and have been working through the rest of the yard.

The name Lingle appears on several stones and one wonders if this is the same family for which nearby Linglestown is named. The name Nye is evident and one ponders a connection to Nyes Road.

Genealogy is said to be one of the country's fastest-growing hobbies. The keen interest in family history, says **Ulsh**, started to take off in part as a result of Alex Haley's 'Roots,' the best-selling book and basis for the hugely popular television mini-series.

'That made a lot of people think. It grew from there. Now, there are a number of workshops and they're always getting new people,' **Ulsh** said.

The Capital Area Genealogical Society, formed in 1982, has about 100 members. It began after several area residents participated in a genealogy workshop offered by Boscov's.

One of the group's first projects was publishing a list of Dauphin County deaths from the late 1800s.

'That's a real bonus for people who don't live in the area,' who, otherwise, would not have access to that kind of information, **Ulsh** says.

Indeed, the grave reading data can provide just enough information to allow researchers to press for more complete data from a federal census or other state and county records. Birth and death dates can help researchers to zero in on documents that otherwise would be the equivalent of looking for a needle in a haystack. And in some cases, the stone may be the only source of those dates.

Emily Geschwimdt, reference librarian at the State Library of Pennsylvania, says grave-reading projects such as the Capital Area Genealogical Society's reading of the Hanoverdale Church Cemetery, provide important genealogical information. One reason: before 1906, there was no formal state structure for recording births and deaths.

'Good records are hard to come by,' says Geschwimdt. 'The tombstone is probably the closest record to the actual living person. Therefore, the information is probably the most accurate' because it usually came from close family members.

Extracting information from old stones can sometimes require special techniques.

Viguers, a former president of the society and current editor of the Keystone Seekers Genealogical Quarterly, demonstrates one of the tricks. The stool he carries holds a small toolbox in which he stores materials that can help bring hard-to-read information to light.

Working on an old stone worn by age and pollution, he rubs thick chalk over the stone and then brushes it with a blackboard eraser. The chalk dust falls past barely visible crevices that once formed clean letters and numerals and, suddenly, the name and dates emerge.

'There's been a lot of industry in this area,' he says about the acid rain that has damaged many of the older stones. 'In Juniata [County], stones from the same period of time are easier to read.'

Another technique is to spread shaving cream on a stone. The lather will stay in the indentations, making it easier to read. Some use flour the same way.

Uish recounts the time she was at Fort Hunter helping with work in the one-time servant cemetery.

'One we could read just partly said he was killed,' she says. 'We just couldn't read it.'

Intrigued, they brought the stone back to the maintenance building and washed it down with a power washer. Then, she says, someone took a chalkboard eraser, rubbed it over the stone and the information 'popped out.'

Central Pennsylvania can boast a number of reading projects underway by individuals and other groups. Viguers, for example, has compiled several area cemeteries on his own and is working on the Baldwin Cemetery in Steelton, spending as much time as 'eight to 10 hours a day' on that project.

The Derry Township Historical Society, too, has undertaken the significant task of recording every grave within the township, says Anne Searer, chairperson of the society's cemetery committee.

'We are finishing up three of the largest cemeteries in Hershey,' including Hershey Cemetery with more than 3,500 graves.

Once finished, the goal is to have the information in a database that can be searched by name or other data field and to have the information on the Internet so it available to anyone around the world doing family history research.

The work is slow but sure.

'We have a very enthusiastic group,' she says. 'There's a big movement nationally and internationally to get cemeteries read and recorded. Over the years, that valuable information can be lost. The sooner we record it, the sooner we'll have a permanent record.'

When complete, the society will have more than 30 township cemeteries on record.

Besides hard-to-read weathered stones, she says this area's ethnicity, particularly its German heritage, has made reading more challenging. Those stones, while in another language, can also be in a nontraditional script that takes a trained eye to read.

'A lot are in German and I took the German teacher from the high school with me,' she says. 'They don't look like English words. But after you read a few, you get used to it.'

Also, older cemeteries were less planned.

'People were buried very randomly. There are no straight lines. You can walk a cemetery two or three times and find stones you didn't record previously,' Searer says.

She says 'quite a few' people have worked on these cemeteries previously and that the society has inherited some tremendously valuable information. One source, she says, was a former town elder who left the society copious notes about very small, out-of-the-way and forgotten backyard cemeteries.

'Those are just wonderful notes, a huge legacy,' she says

Caption: PHOTO

DAN GLEITER / PN

Edition: FINAL

Section: ARTS/LEISURE

Page: 101

Index Terms: CEMETERY 0829E01; FAMILY; HISTORY

Record Number: 1200950

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