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Founders Cemetery restored

WEST MILTON - While many village residents may not know that it exists on the hillside at the end of Washington St., the West Milton Founders Cemetery, once overgrown and unrecognizable, has been restored once again.

Traveling up the steep gravel road from Municipal Park on State Route 571 leads to a scenic clearing with a bright white fence overlooking a slew of scattered and tattered grave markers dating back to the founding of West Milton in 1807.

Though the cemetery, also known as the Old Milton Cemetery and the Olde Towne Cemetery, has been rejuvenated numerous times in the last 30 years, it had returned to its former state.

The Union Township Historical Society worked on the 99 by 198-foot plot in 1976 and again in the early 1990's. A Boy Scout cleaned up the cemetery for a community service project in 1982 to earn his Eagle badge.

In 2003, former mayor and current councilman Howard DeHart worked with the Masonic Lodge #577 to begin the ongoing task of revamping and maintaining the cemetery for good.

"We took a look at the cemetery and knew that previous attempts to clean it up had met with minimal success. It was completely overgrown and vandalism had broken a lot of the monuments," DeHart said.

Over the next five years, they did what they could to rejuvenate the cemetery as money was available. The Village of West Milton installed the white picket fence in 2004. Tree Masters of Greenville was hired to trim and removed trees and brush.

"There was quite a bit of damage from four-wheelers, but since we put up the fence and no trespassing signs it has not been as big a problem," said Tony Howard, Village Manager.

This summer the village received a grant from the Miami County Foundation to help with repairs to the cemetery. Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration of Indiana repaired and cleaned up the headstones.

"They sent their people back in the brush and found some grave markers in the grass. As they went through the cemetery fixing it up, they found fields tones where the people would go out in the field and get a stone to use as a marker," said Howard.

"Because there was an abundance of limestone there are limestone markers as well. Also, there are several white Venetian marble grave markers that have really withstood the test of time," he added.

Howard had to schedule the restoration crew a year in advance for this project. They started work in the cemetery on Aug. 25 and finished Aug. 27. The total cost was \$7,500 with \$4,000 paid for by the grant.

He intends to continue to oversee the maintenance of the cemetery, as well as to research old municipal and county records to find out more of the history behind it.

Among the roughly 25 grave markers are those of Joseph Evans, founder of West Milton, and his family, including his wife and daughter Susan. The name of the village can be attributed to Susan's admiration for the work of writer John Milton. Because of confusion with the delivery of mail with another town named Milton in northern Ohio, it became known as West Milton in the 1950's.

Joseph Evans' grave marker reads, "Sacred to the Memory of Joseph Evans, who departed this life the 1st day of the 12th month, A.D. 1837, Aged 64 years, 10 months, 20 days."

One Civil War soldier was found buried there as well. Wilson Jenks of Cincinnati was a member of the 48th Ohio Infantry Regiment. He enlisted at the age 44 on Sept. 19, 1861 and was discharged Aug. 20, 1862 on surgeon's certificate of disability.

There are also several members of the Pickering family, who gave land for the construction of the first school inside the village limits.

Erosion is causing some stones to come close to toppling into the stream on the northern side of the lot. There is one grave one on edge with soil being slowing washed away. DeHart says they still have plans to put up some sort of retaining wall to prevent them from deteriorating more. There will also be a farm fence installed along the remaining perimeter.

"It's a disgrace when you allow a cemetery, particularly one where the founders are buried, to deteriorate to the deplorable condition we found it in," said DeHart. "I think we've got a good start on it now."



Susan Evans, daughter of West Milton founder Joseph Evans, is buried in the Founders Cemetery along side her parents.



The Venetian marble stones belonging to the Pickering family were cleaned and repaired.