

November 2021

HALIFAX NEWS

CEMETERY RESTORATION: A DAUNTING TASK

by Andrea Rand, Halifax, Vermont

If you have ever driven North on Route 112 in Halifax towards Jacksonville, undoubtedly you have passed by Niles Cemetery on the left side of the road. Not to be confused with the small and less well-known Niles Farm Cemetery located on private property off Larrabee Road, the Niles Cemetery resides on land donated by Samuel Niles, who migrated from Stonington, Connecticut to Halifax in 1796. Samuel's parents were David Niles, a Revolutionary War soldier who perished at the Battle of White Plains in 1776, and Sarah (Frink) Niles. Samuel's brother and sister-in-law, Oliver and Lydia (Plumb) Niles, were in Halifax by 1797 together with two more brothers and their widowed mother, Sarah. Sarah died in 1817 and is buried in the Niles Farm Cemetery. Brothers Samuel (1769-1845) and Oliver (1762-1861) and many of their progeny are buried in the cemetery that bears their family name. An additional two-acre section was donated by the family of Dr. Edward Samuel Niles (1853-1929), a grandson of Oliver and Lydia Niles.

Niles Cemetery is separated into two parts. The old part is located up on the knoll, and the newer area is on the flat lawn. The oldest known burial belongs to Samuel's wife, Mercy Niles, who died in 1800. Her headstone is one of a few, relatively small slate tablets. The majority of tablet headstones on the knoll are made of marble. The large obelisks are marble, and large block-shaped monuments are granite. There is a direct correlation between the size of the monument and the wealth and stature of the family who purchased it. Size, type of stone, plus degree of detail in the carving were indicative of a family's wealth, mirroring the prominence of the person within the community.



Those in the legal, medical, and religious professions have some of the most impressive grave markers. In Niles, marble obelisks and large granite monuments belonged to the prominent families in Halifax, which included but was not limited to the Eames, Fowler, Niles, Learner, Prouty, Stark, Stone, Stow and Sumner families.

Up until this past summer, the older portion of the cemetery located on the knoll was in poor shape with broken stone tablets, toppled monuments, and stones that were so encrusted with dirt and fungus they were difficult to read. I can't help but reiterate† the importance of preserving our cemeteries. There is more to a cemetery than the names and death dates of the deceased. When a cemetery is studied in its entirety, a great deal of historic information can be gleaned, and preserving this information is the major goal of the Halifax, Vermont Cemetery Restoration Team. Linda Swanson, Gary Rand, and I have taken on the mammoth—and important—task of restoring the town's cemeteries.

† see May 2021 and Dec 2020 newsletter

Problems with Old Cemeteries

Generally speaking, the cemetery commissioner's job is maintenance: mowing grass, removing debris, and most importantly, overseeing burials. It is the families' responsibility to take care of headstones and monuments. In cemeteries with recent burials, family members occasionally return to see to their headstones, and the town keeps those cemeteries mowed. But disused cemeteries become overgrown, and very old stones suffer varying degrees of degradation. The oldest stones, usually slate, cleave off in layers eventually obliterating the inscription, and the marble stones have a habit of breaking off and decomposing into sand. Once this happens, the information as to who is buried there is lost forever. Furthermore, if records at the town office are incomplete, which is common especially for older burials, it becomes a nightmare to do genealogical research.

The Restoration Process

The winter of 2020-2021 was a time to do research on how to clean and fix cemetery stones. Because none of us had experience in cemetery restoration, we started with what we knew. We began this past April by trimming back tree limbs and raking up leaves and other debris. After that, we cleaned the stones in the new portion of the cemetery. This entailed washing and scrubbing with a biocide which was either D2 or bleach combined with power washing. Stones have an uncanny way of collecting a litany of "stuff" over time: dirt, mold, moss, mildew, lichens and a hard crusty stuff that I call land barnacles. If left unchecked, they do irrevocable damage by embedding their roots into the stone matrix causing water to get trapped in the rock. The combination is a recipe for disaster for headstones, especially marble, slate, and brownstone. In areas with an annual freeze-thaw cycle, the trapped moisture expands causing the slate to split and the marble to crumble into sand. Slate and

sandstone become the most vulnerable to mosses and lichen growth. Making stones with less surface area such as polished granite greatly decreases the chances for lichens and mosses to colonize. Mold and mildew still grow on the granite stones but are somewhat easier to clean. Lichens, when moistened, can be taken off a flat surface with a flat-edged tool. But on a rough granite surface it is very difficult to remove the embedded lichens. It is necessary to kill the fungal growth on the stones. Unfortunately, using cleaning agents is only a temporary fix, and eventually these organisms will recolonize. At times we used a power washer to clean the stones. When used properly, this method resulted in the cleanest stones.



Once we got a handle on the cleaning techniques, the next step was addressing the stones that were leaning, broken in half, lying on the ground, or completely deteriorated. These issues were confined to the marble tablets in the older portion of the cemetery. One of the most important aspects of cemetery restoration is to stand up fallen stones. Left in the ground, they become more susceptible to degradation due to mowing, weed whacking, and freeze-thaw cycles. For stones that are badly damaged, standing them up is often difficult. Many of the slate stones at the Clark Cemetery had snapped off at the base, and standing them back up without burying a portion of the inscription was a challenge. The sheer weight of some of these tablets makes it difficult to move them. Marble, granite, and slate densities average 168 lbs. per cubic foot. A slate stone measuring 2.5 ft x 6 ft x 1.5 inches can weigh about 315 lbs. Some of the smaller stones we could maneuver ourselves, but for the larger tablets we used a pry bar lift in conjunction with a tripod lift and chain fall (see photos).

The manner in which stones were erected evolved over time. The oldest slate tablets have about one-third of their length buried in the ground. A large slate tablet that has four feet exposed has two feet below ground. The slate stones were carved with flanges on either side to increase their horizontal stability. Then large rocks were placed in the hole on either side of the tablet to keep the stone erect. Even though they could be heavy, they were the easiest stones to reset. Some marble stones were set into the ground much the same way, but later

marble tablets were set into six-inch thick slotted stone bases made from marble, mica schist, or soapstone. Thin shim stones of slate or mica schist were then used to level the base stones. Many of the marble headstones snapped off at that base. If we were lucky, the stone fell completely out of the groove that was carved into the base. Marble tablets broken on an angle and badly eroded had to be re-cut with a diamond blade to create a clean flat edge for an epoxy to adhere properly. The stone could then be inserted into the slotted base with epoxy and a hydraulic concrete crack filler to prevent water seepage. These may not be permanent fixes due to the softness and poor condition of the marble stone. Minimal work was done on the large marble and granite monuments mainly because they were still standing erect and level. Also, they were just too heavy for us to fix. Stones that had completely disintegrated were replaced with a vinyl plaque adhered to a 10 x 20 x 6 inch poured concrete block listing the deceased's name, birth and death dates. This was a thirty dollar fix that unfortunately may not be a long-lasting one. The cost of a carved granite marker with the same dimensions is well over \$500. Only time will tell as to how long the cheaper one will last.

Once all the stones were fixed; the last step was to level the ground by adding fill and top soil to the depressions caused by collapsed graves. It wasn't until the late 19th century that vaults were used to protect the coffined bodies. The last step was to seed the lawn.

The last aspect of the restoration process is the documentation of the stones, creating and updating the database for the cemetery. We will photograph all stones and make data sheets for each individual including all genealogical information known. Plot plans will be created or improved. The Find a Grave web site will be updated if warranted, and all information will be housed at the town offices for future use. Unfortunately, what we have discovered in all the cemeteries we have



worked on is record-keeping is outdated or completely lacking. One problem we encountered at Niles were names on the plot plan but no headstones in the cemetery. Another issue was a depression that appeared to be a collapsed burial but is no indication as to who is buried there. A third problem was that there are markers in the new part of the cemetery but nothing among the memorial tokens to identify who is there, and the plot plan matching the burial. These issues create problems for those who conduct genealogy research. This winter I will need to sit at the town office and pore over documents to help resolve some of these issues.

The Long-Range Payoff

Restoring cemeteries has proven to be quite a challenge. When we started at Niles in April we looked around and thought it would never get fixed. But after four months of hard labor, and some help from a few other people in town, the cemetery looks spectacular. By August you could really see the transformation, especially the portion on the knoll. Even with all the issues, Gary, Linda, and I feel it is worth the sore backs and knees and baking in the hot sun to restore the old town cemeteries. Most importantly, we hope our work has temporarily halted the deterioration of the headstones. Even if over time the stones decay beyond help, there will be updated documentation to help identify those who are buried in the cemeteries. Whether we will be able to fix all the cemeteries remains to be seen. But the ones we do restore will be beneficial to anyone interested in the history of these Halifax families.

Detailed biographical, historical and genealogical information for the Niles families in Halifax appears in Volumes I and II of The History of Halifax, researched and written by cousins Molly Stone and Constance Lancaster, both of whom are 5th generation descendants in the line of Oliver and Lydia (Plumb) Niles. Connie's great-grandfather is Edward Samuel Niles, whose family purchased part of the original cemetery in 1885, as well as adjacent land, and gifted both portions to the town in 1936 and 1970.

VETERANS IN THE NEWS: BORNE THE BATTLE PODCAST

Army, Air Force, WWII, 100-Year-Old Veteran Fannie Griffin McClendon



Fannie served with the only overseas All-Black Women's Army BN unit known as the Six Triple Eight. Fannie shares how the unit persevered through hardships while unclogging the mail system in England so frontline troops got letters from their loved ones back home—integral in the Allied Victory. She discusses how the battalion will soon be honored with a congressional gold medal. The story is #258 on “Borne the Battle” podcast site: [Borne the Battle \(google.com\)](https://blogs.va.gov/VAnTage/95478/) at 9 min 25 sec. <https://blogs.va.gov/VAnTage/95478/>.

TOWN NEWS

SENIOR MEAL

November 19th: The next Senior meal is Friday, November 19 serving at noon at the Halifax Community Hall, 20 Brook Road, West Halifax. Menu: meat loaf, potato, veggie, roll and dessert. Take-out available. Please call Joan at 802-368-7733 if you plan to attend. A free will donation of \$3.00 is asked but not mandatory. Sponsored by Senior Solutions. Hope to see you there.

FIRE DEPARTMENT

- Oct. 15 Four men responded to a call on Hatch School Road for a person with low blood sugar.
- Oct. 15 Six men responded to a mutual aid call in Whitingham.
- Oct. 15 Eight men and one truck responded to mutual aid call in Marlboro, Vt.
- Oct. 15 Two men responded to a call on Green River Road for a man fallen.
- Oct. 21 Nine men and one truck responded to a fire on Rte. 9 in Marlboro.
- Oct. 26 Ten men and one truck responded to Deer Park Road for a downed wire burning.
- Oct. 28 Four men and one truck responded to Marlboro to cover their station.





JOAN'S SIGHTINGS. The foliage has been very nice this year. Not a lot of birds at the feeders. Only a few Chickadees. I miss having lots like we used to. Several Blue jays, three or four White-Breasted nuthatch, a couple of Red-breasted Nuthatch, a couple Titmice, Mourning Doves, now and then a Flicker, a Downy Woodpecker, once in a while a Hairy Woodpecker, a few Blackbirds, once in a while a Red-winged Blackbird. I hear a few Crows sometimes and a Catbird. I miss seeing a lot of birds around the feeders; the first snow will bring them....but I am not quite ready for that just yet!

Happy Thanksgiving to all. Send your sightings to Joan at jwcinvt@gmail.com

– Joan Courser



On Hanson Road, we are watching the crows and blue jays, and the sparrows down from the rocky heights. The sparrows you see now spent the summer nesting in the mountains. The sparrows of summer have migrated south.



23.



WILDLIFE. Help build a database of where **key mammals cross roads in Halifax** by reporting sightings of these animals or their scat on roads: **moose, black bear, bobcat, river otter (left photo), fisher (right photo).** If you see one on or crossing a road, or if you see tracks that suggest one crossed the road, let me know (LaurelACopeland@gmail.com, 802-368-2439). Include **date, time, & location (address or landmarks or smart-phone photo).** Thank you! – Laurel

Newsletter
P O Box 27
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Beautiful October Day on the Beaver Pond

Halifax News

NOVEMBER 2021

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NEWSLETTER STORIES - Send your Halifax story to Laurel LaurelACopeland@gmail.com or Joan JWCinVt@gmail.com (PO Box 27 05358).



Canedy Farm Glowing in Fall Sunshine

Editing: LaurelACopeland@gmail.com. Free color e-version by email / online.