

Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary 1823-2013

No. 11—R. I. P.

Prior to 1831 America's cemeteries were categorized as family, churchyard, or municipal burial grounds such as town commons. It was the construction of Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts that led the movement to build large cemeteries with winding roads and picturesque vistas entered through massive gates.

At the turn of the 19th century American cities lacked art museums, botanical gardens, and public parks so the large open cemetery grounds with their beautiful sculptures and horticultural art became public spaces used for picnics, hunting and shooting, and carriage races. Some even issued guidebooks and posted visitor rules. With the advent of public parks, activities formerly held at cemeteries declined until the recent resurgence of unconventional cemetery use. While many cemeteries adhere to strict usage regulations, Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery, a national historic landmark, is celebrating its 175th anniversary with elaborate puppet shows. Other cemeteries welcome theatrical performances of Shakespeare, jazz concerts, winter sledding, running, and picnicking.

With one exception, Vestal's cemeteries began as either a small burial ground, a church graveyard, or a family cemetery. Only eight of Vestal's ten cemeteries remain. While some of our earliest settlers crossed the Susquehanna on Crane's ferry to their final resting place at the 1791 Riverside Cemetery, many rest for eternity in one of these Vestal's cemeteries.

Willis Cemetery at 3041 Vestal Road

In 1796 Anna Willis purchased 111 acres at Willow Point in the area of Willis Road, now Jensen Road. The tiny .16 acre family cemetery contains 43 graves, the earliest being John E. Gifford who died December 2, 1810. Burial records have not been found; all information is compiled from grave markers and secondary sources. No longer an active cemetery, it is maintained by the Town of Vestal.

Randall Cemetery at Locust Avenue

Originally located near the mouth of Randall Creek, now Tracy Creek, the family cemetery contained approximately 12 graves when it was moved in November 1964 for the construction of the Route 17 Expressway. The graves were relocated to the Vestal Park Cemetery. Burial records have not been found; all information is compiled from grave markers and secondary sources.



Stone-walled Rounds Cemetery on Front Street.

Rounds Cemetery at 144 Front Street

Jacob Rounds purchased 25 acres of land bounded on the north by the Susquehanna River and on the south by a portion of River Road, now Front Street. One tenth of an acre in the southwest corner of the property was used for a cemetery where 24 members of the family are buried. Jacob's death in 1833 is believed to be the first burial in the cemetery. Burial records have not been found; all information is compiled from grave markers and secondary sources. No longer an active cemetery, it is maintained by the Town of Vestal. The cemetery was designated a Local Historic Landmark in 2012.



Gravestone of Lydia Truesdell at Vestal Center Cemetery on Route 26 South.

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Vestal Center Cemetery at 2141 NYS Rte. 26 South

Perched on a hillside along the road that drops gently into “the Center”, this 1.4 acre cemetery is the resting place of many Vestal Center settlers. Jabish Truesdell, a Revolutionary War soldier who escorted General George Washington into New York holds a prominent place in the front row. The earliest grave marker is that of Lydia Truesdell who was “killed by the kick of a horse” in 1813. Once managed by the Vestal Center Cemetery Association, it is no longer an active cemetery and is maintained by the Town of Vestal. Incomplete burial records are supplemented with information compiled from grave markers and secondary sources.

Bunn Hill Cemetery at 821 Jensen Road

Tucked among the trees on a 165x106 foot piece of land owned by the Third School District, the Bunn Hill Cemetery contains approximately 132 graves, the earliest belonging to James Ames who died July 9, 1825. Burial records have not been found; all information is compiled from grave markers and secondary sources. No longer an active cemetery, it is maintained by the Town of Vestal.

Crumm Road Cemetery at 328 Crumm Road

Located on a steep hillside that descends from the edge of Crumm Road, the 1.25 acre cemetery, also known as Upper Tracy Creek Cemetery, includes the names of prominent Tracy Creek settlers. Approximately 73 graves are found with the earliest believed to be little Willie C. Bullock who died on October 9, 1838. Burial records have not been found; all information is compiled from grave markers and secondary sources. No longer an active cemetery, it is maintained by the Town of Vestal.

Tracy Creek Cemetery at 914 Tracy Creek Road

Slightly less than 1 acre in size, the cemetery lies precariously along the east bank of Tracy Creek. Also known as Lower Tracy Creek Cemetery, it reflects the names of families from surrounding farms as well as mill owners and an early town supervisor. Based on the markers, James L. Card who died September 4, 1832 may be the earliest burial of approximately 250 interments. The Tracy Creek Cemetery Association maintains the cemetery. Incomplete burial records have been supplemented with information compiled from grave markers and secondary sources.



Crane Monument at Vestal Park Cemetery.

Vestal Park Cemetery at 316 Main Street

According to cemetery records Daniel Garrison who died on June 6, 1831, is the earliest burial at Vestal's second largest cemetery. Initially a one acre churchyard cemetery, additional purchases of land increased the size to 8 acres containing more than 4360 interments. The graves of Revolutionary War veterans and early settlers, John Rush and William Weston, are found here along with many of those who were instrumental in the growth and development of our town. The Randall family cemetery was relocated to Vestal Park in November 1964. Records are available for this active cemetery.



Civil War Marker.

This Civil War veteran was a member of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) organization.

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Vestal Hills Memorial Park Cemetery at 3997 Vestal Road

Constructed in 1931, Vestal Hills is the largest and the only memorial park or lawn type cemetery with horizontal in-ground markers rather than vertical monuments. An active cemetery with over 23,000 interments, the well-kept grounds include mausoleums and a columbarium in addition to traditional in-ground burials. A Tower of Memories Chapel and gardens provide areas for quiet meditation. Visitors enter through the main cemetery gates designed by Buffalo architect G. W. McClune. Complete records are available. Vestal Hills Memorial Park was designated a Local Historic Landmark in 2012.

Gravestone rubbings are no longer encouraged due to the risk of tipping or damaging fragile monuments. Faint names and dates can be "coaxed" into view using simple, non-damaging techniques. Complete information about photographing and cleaning older stones is found at the Historian's office and online. If you're searching for ancestors buried in Vestal's cemeteries, you can use www.findagrave.com or contact the Historian's office to check for possible unmarked graves.

Additional Information about Vestal's cemeteries and sources for this article are found at the Historian's office.



Main Entrance Gates at Vestal Hills Memorial Park.

Ingraham Hill Cemetery at 63 Ingraham Hill Road

This half acre cemetery high on Ingraham Hill was a Vestal cemetery until 1873 when a mile-wide strip of Vestal's eastern border was annexed to the Town of Binghamton. Originally the Ingraham family cemetery, the earliest documented burial is Benjamin Ingraham who died February 18, 1847. The 1862 date on the Ingraham Hill Cemetery entrance stone reflects the date when the cemetery became a public burial ground. The cemetery was incorporated in 1888 and remains in the care of the Ingraham Hill Cemetery Association.