

WHO WILL BE THE LAST TO BE BURIED AT WOODBROOK CEMETERY?

By Marie Coady

Cemeteries are much more than warehouses for the dead. They are the essence of our collective and individual life, as well as the repositories of a community's most cherished values. Woodbrook Cemetery is a just such a repository, as well as a symbol of Woburn's most cherished values.

One of those values is providing a place where current or former residents of Woburn can be buried on their home turf. A place nearby where relatives and friends can know the comfort of being able to pay their respects without traveling great distances to unfamiliar territory.

Not insignificant among those values is the cost. According to Veronica McManus, a 10-year member of the Woburn Board of Cemetery Commissioners, "We can keep our rates as low as possible, because it's owned by the city. It's a not for profit organization, and we don't make money. We've compared rates with other cities and towns and found them to be significantly higher."

In fact, the costs of interment in most other communities are twice what they are at Woodbrook. But the most compelling quality that makes Woodbrook a symbol of Woburn's values is the high level of perpetual care given by the grounds keeping staff. One has only to stroll the grounds to see there is much more going on here than a day's work. It's a labor of love.

On Memorial Day more than 5 years ago, I walked Woodbrook's grounds and asked whoever would talk to me what they liked most about Woodbrook Cemetery. The general consensus was that it is a place of serenity, individuality, safety and most of all, tender loving care.

Woodbrook Cemetery came into being when town selectmen voted to purchase 8 to 10 acres of land from Charles Choate in 1844. The land was then laid out by a committee of 5 in 1845. In 1868, town selectmen voted to choose a Cemetery Committee to make the necessary by-laws, rules and regulations for the operation of the cemetery, and the Cemetery Committee has done just that for 133 years.

Through bequests from Sewall Flagg in 1874, the Cemetery Committee purchased an additional 12 acres for the purposes of enlargement, and other donors made private funds available so those new areas could be developed.

In 1892 when Woburn became a city, Woburn's mayor appointed a Board of Cemetery Commissioners to oversee all the facets of running Woburn's three cemeteries, and that's how today's Board of Cemetery Commissioners came into being.

Now, after more that 150 years of providing a final resting place for Woburn residents, Woodbrook Cemetery is drawing its final gasp. According to the Cemetery Commission, the pressing need for more space will force Woodbrook to close its gates to new purchases in 3-4 years.

According to Veronica McManus, “The situation is not only the lack of available land, but the cost. We need a minimum of 30 acres that, if properly developed, could possibly take the city through another 100 years.”

McManus also makes it clear that this crisis isn't something the Commission “all of a sudden” thought to address. The problem has been addressed by former Commissions as well.

In fact, the Commission had already looked long and hard at land in the Forest Park area that was willed to the City in 1871 by Thomas Coolidge and Jonathan Thompson for cemetery purposes. That land includes two tracts of land, usually termed the Tottingham and Kendall Lot that originally made up 75 acres, but part of that was taken when 128 was built, and today the only section left is the land between Main Street and Forest Park, which amounts to about 30 acres. Just the right amount according to McManus.

Problem is, when the City Engineering Department looked into it, they found that due to the tremendous amount of ledge, as well a significant amount of wetland resource areas, it would be neither practical nor cost effective to develop it as cemetery. So that tract of land is off the table.

According to McManus another goal of the cemetery commission is, “If we're fortunate enough to develop a new cemetery, and considering that passive recreation space in the city is at a minimum, we definitely would want to work to have a new cemetery that could also be used for passive recreation. We would like to work with Conservation and Recreation Commissions in a willing association to include hiking, biking, bird watching, horticulture, etc., much like Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge. Why couldn't Woburn develop a top notch cemetery/recreation area like Mount Auburn?” McManus asks.

Right now the Commission is working toward creating a Cremation Garden that will provide 250 more spaces where loved ones can be buried. And although cremation is a new trend that not everyone chooses to take advantage of, it will give Woodbrook a reprieve and allow them to stay open to the needs of the community a while longer.

There are, however, still some open areas of land available in Woburn that would make a perfect setting for a combination cemetery/passive recreation area. The Northeastern Land comes immediately to mind. Instead of burdening the city with the infrastructure needs of a new housing development, why couldn't we use that space for a cemetery/passive recreation site? Maybe Northeastern University could make a magnanimous gesture to make up for all the years it never paid a dime in taxes to the city.

Another site is Winning Farm. If it were possible to take advantage of the Townhouse Ordinance, why couldn't the city take Winning Farm and instead of putting 200 single family homes there, take 50 percent of that land and develop it for cemetery purposes. Shannon Farm also comes to mind, but that would require a private transaction between the city and a private party.

Each time a citizen and taxpayer proposes any of the above suggestions, they are told it's impossible to consider. Then suddenly a developer appears with a fistful of cash, and anything is possible. But any move to provide land for a new cemetery will still need the support of our elected officials and the pressure put on them by ordinary citizens to keep one of Woburn's most cherished values in intact.

So the question remains: Who will be the last person buried on home ground?

But if Veronica McManus' determination bears fruit, we may all benefit from her tenacity. As she stated recently, "My husband and I are Woburnites down to the core, 2nd generation, went to school here, and raised our children here. I had the opportunity to live anywhere I wanted, but I chose to live in Woburn, and I will die here, and want very much to be buried here."

I don't know about you, but my money is on Veronica McManus.

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