



New York Trinity Garden tombstones.
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Preserving Cemeteries — Why Bother?

Mike Lewman looks at why it is important to preserve the graves of our ancestors

In 1853, William Hixon, my great-great-grandfather, donated one acre in Wabash Township in Parke County, Indiana to be used as a public cemetery. William had allowed burials on that ground prior to his formal donation of the land as a permanent cemetery site. In 1891, William's son, Michael, donated an additional acre and one half to bring the cemetery to the two and one half acres it is today.

Hixon Cemetery is one of over 200 pioneer cemeteries in Parke County. Many of these are

poorly maintained, totally inaccessible (sometimes because of uncooperative land owners), or long since forgotten. There are those that believe such cemeteries are not worth preserving. In essence, they say "Why bother?" The following two examples indicate how wrong these naysayers can be.

Coarsegold, California is a small town on the lower slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains located near the exact geographic center of California. It's a long way from Coarsegold

to Wabash Township in Parke County, Indiana, but not too far for Bill and Carole Laverty to travel as they set out from their home on a trek to Indiana in search of some of their family ancestors.

One stop on the Laverty's journey was the Hixon Cemetery that is located near Mecca, Indiana in Wabash Township. Bill was pleased to find the grave of Jane Laverty, his 3x great-grandmother. It was an emotional moment for Bill as he knelt down beside his

grandmother's grave and reached out to touch her gravestone.

Of course, Bill never really knew Jane, but somehow that did not matter. The connection he felt with her spirit was very real and meaningful to him. Tears filled his eyes as he stared intently at Jane's gravestone and said "Somehow it seems like I almost feel her spirit". Jane was born in Ireland in 1756 and was laid to rest in Hixon Cemetery in 1847.

When someone asks, "why bother" with these old cemeteries, the answer lies in moments like Bill experienced. On a beautiful fall day on a hill in an old Indiana cemetery, a thousand miles from his home, Bill was reunited with a part of his family he never knew when he reached out and touched his grandmother's headstone. Somehow that made the long trip from California all worthwhile.

Around Christmas in 1776, in Cumberland County Pennsylvania, a young 18-year-old named Joseph Ghormley made a decision to support his burgeoning new country by electing to serve as a patriot in the American Revolution. Joseph entered the Pennsylvania Militia as a private serving under a Captain Mitchell.

On 25 October 1843, Joseph Ghormley applied for, and presumably received, a pension from the new US government. Information on his pension application indicated that he had lived in Parke County, Indiana for two years, having previously lived in Floyd County, Indiana.

Over two hundred and thirty years later, on a beautiful September day, Vannetta (Ghormley) McDowell, Joseph's



Bill Laverty touches his 3x great-grandmother's (Jane Laverty) gravestone. (Courtesy of author)

4x great-granddaughter, knelt beside his grave in Hixon Cemetery. While there are 75 veterans buried in Hixon Cemetery, Joseph Ghormley is the only veteran of the American Revolution. Vannetta studied Joseph's gravestone and then said, "I've wanted to come here to see his grave for a long time." She had traveled from Evansville, Indiana with her husband.

While this story of Vannetta and Joseph's reunion may not be unique, it does underscore the importance of maintaining all pioneer cemeteries for future generations. None of us can know who might search in the next 10, 20 or even 50 years for a distant relative who was laid to rest in Hixon or some other pioneer cemetery in Indiana or elsewhere..

If we do not preserve the past for the future, who will? As the Indiana Pioneer Cemetery

Preservation Project has so poignantly pointed out, "Preservation of a cemetery is not about the living. Instead, it is a commitment to honor and remember the lives of those who have come before us. We owe our pioneer ancestors a better monument than a forgotten grave amid bramble and thicket". ☪☪



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the Parke County Historical Society and founder and president of the Hixon Cemetery Association Ltd., a non-profit Indiana corporation he started to restore and maintain an Indiana pioneer cemetery established in 1853 by his great-great-grandparents, William and Margaret Hixon.