

Historical Notes on the Cemetery

By Sylvia Hasenkopf

(Sylvia is a Hudson Valley historian and genealogist who worked with the Oak Hill Preservation Association in applying for and ultimately obtaining National Historic Register status for the Cemetery. This article was originally published in the "Greenville Pioneer").

One of the most peaceful places in Greene County is the Oak Hill Cemetery. It sits well back from the road, atop a small hillock, along Route 81, on the western side of Oak Hill Village in the Town of Durham.

I had transcribed that cemetery back in 2001, and remember being very impressed with how well the cemetery was cared for. There were few, if any broken stones at the time and I was relieved to find, when I visited recently, that the cemetery is still cared for by the loving hands of the Oak Hill Cemetery Association.

The move is on to put this cemetery on the National Historic Register. The Oak Hill Preservation Association (OPHA) has been tireless in its efforts to record and preserve the history of Oak Hill and one has to be thankful that such an organization exists. It takes the passion of a relatively few number of people to ensure that our past remains alive and is available to instruct and enlighten future generations.

In order to qualify for the National Historic Register, a detailed history of the place was necessary and I was honored to be able to help OPHA in this regard.

In researching the old Patents it became crystal clear that the entire Village of Oak Hill and a fair amount of land in all directions around it, totaling 5,000 acres, was awarded to Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Maitland on June 23, 1767 by the British Crown, in recognition of his service in the French and Indian War, which ended in 1763.

Lt. Col. Maitland was an absentee landlord, however, and, like many other Patentees of the time, he viewed the acquisition of so much land in the "wilderness" as a business investment. Unfortunately for him, he died in 1772, and his estate was tied up in the legal system for decades to come.

Sometime between 1770 and 1772 three intrepid Dutchmen made their way to the area now called Oak Hill Village. Lucas DeWitt, Johannes Plank and Hendrick Plank brought their families with them, believing that this land was unclaimed and began to establish a small settlement, which was named Dewittsburgh. They cleared land, built their log homes and planted their first crops.

In 1774 it was discovered that the settlers in Dewittsburgh were illegally settled on lands owned by Maitland, and the executors to Maitland's estate required the settlers to take leases on their farms.

Lucas DeWitt's lease, which he signed on May 3, 1774, was very specific. He was to pay a rent of one ear of corn, and a proportion of the King's rent per year for a period of five years. After the initial five years, he was to pay a yearly rent of 5 pounds and 12 shillings. Of course, in this leasehold system, the farmer never owned the land outright.

In 1776 the guns of war shattered their peaceful existence. The Revolution had begun and the Mohawk Indians, allies to the British, were making incursions into these hinterland settlements, burning homesteads, scalping settlers and taking hostages to Canada to be ransomed to the British. The early Dutch settlers at Oak Hill abandoned their farms and moved closer to their families along the Hudson River and in Ulster County.

It wasn't until the closing years of the Revolution, likely in 1782, that the settlers returned to their homesteads and began the task of rebuilding. By 1790, the trustees of Maitland's estate decided to have the land surveyed. They hired William Cockburn, a land agent and surveyor from Kingston, to create a map of Maitland's Patent, broken into parcels, ready to be sold or leased to prospective settlers. The fragmented map still exists.

Lucas Dewitt managed to buy his farm, although the date this transaction occurred has been lost to the sands of time. In years to come, a cemetery was established on DeWitt's farm and Lucas DeWitt is likely the first burial. Although there are three tombstones, which predate DeWitt's August 12, 1820 death date (Elizabeth Richtmeyer, died July 9, 1805, Pluma Tremain, died July 14, 1806 and Aaron Thorp, died February 12, 1819), each tombstone indicates "In Memory of" and they are more likely memorial tablets.

Nonetheless, the DeWitt Family Cemetery quickly became the Oak Hill Village Cemetery, with the burials of many local inhabitants.

The original cemetery was .6 acres in size. On October 26, 1938, G. Clark DeWitt transferred an additional two acres to the Oak Hill Cemetery Grounds and on June 1, 1972 John DeWitt transferred three more acres to the Oak Hill Cemetery Association, Inc. The current size of the Oak Hill Cemetery is 5.6 acres.

In 2001, I had completed a full transcription of this cemetery and identified 611 tombstones, many containing multiple names. At least 226 burials predate 1887, when the right of way from the Turnpike, now Route 81, was transferred to the Oak Hill Cemetery Road Association. This old section contains the graves of many of Oak Hill's founding families, including: DeWitt, Utter, Plank, Tripp, Farmer, Flower(s), DeFrate, Peck and Thorp. The tombstones in the oldest part of the old section are plain with few adornments, typical of early settlements in Greene County.

One confirmed Revolutionary Soldier is buried in the Oak Hill Cemetery - Thomas Farmer. After further analysis of the oldest graves, I believe that there are likely three more Revolutionary soldiers buried in this cemetery: Lucas DeWitt who was a Captain in Col. Hardenburgh's Regiment in Ulster Co. (he did return to Ulster County during the Revolutionary War), George Flower(s), whose name I found on the roster for Amasa Mills Regiment in Connecticut and Aaron Thorp, also from Connecticut on the roster for Col. Charles Webb's Regiment in Captain John Mills Company.

One veteran of the War of 1812 is also buried in the Oak Hill Cemetery - Levi Rugg. At least two civil war soldiers are buried there as well - Henry Scutt and Nathan Augustus.

Take a ride out to this cemetery on a sunny, summer day and walk among the stones of Oak Hill's founders. Think back to the struggles and successes and the joys and sorrows these early pioneers faced - and you will appreciate even more the beauty and serenity of Oak Hill Cemetery.

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