

SUNAPEE CEMETERY HISTORY

Compiled by in 2022 by Barbara B. Chalmers, Cemetery Commissioner

Establishment of Seven Burial Grounds: In 1798 a vote at town meeting established a committee to recommend sites for town burial grounds. Three years later, two sites were chosen: one to the north and one to the south of the Sugar River, today's Old Eastman and Colby Cemeteries. In the 1830s, family burial grounds on lands of Cornelius Young, Nathaniel Perkins, and David Angell began to be used to bury neighbors that became today's Cooper, Lower Village, and South Cemeteries. In 1865 Elbridge Chase provided land for the Georges Mills village cemetery. Three years later, the town voted to build a tomb at the Lower Village graveyard where those who died during the winter months could have their remains securely stored until spring were the thawed ground could be dug. In need of more burial lots, land for New Eastman Cemetery was purchased in 1963.

Sextons: In 1824 a vote at town meeting established Sextons, one man for the north and one man for south, who managed the burial grounds and buried the dead. They were paid per burial (\$1.50 in 1859) and hourly for cemetery maintenance. Each sexton lived near the burial ground(s) in their care. The use of sextons ended in 1918 when a town cemetery committee was formed.

Town Hearses: In 1850 a vote at town meeting authorized the purchase of a used hearse carriage. The town bought a small parcel of land in 1853 by the Union Church and Lower Village graveyard where a hearse house was built. The town established the position of Keeper of the Hearse in 1860, a man who provided a horse and drove the hearse for funerals, leading a procession of mourners who followed on foot to the burial ground. In 1872 the town bought a new hearse, then fitted sleigh running gear on the old hearse for use in winter. Farmer George Gardner, of Burkehaven Hill, was the keeper of the hearse from 1919 to 1927. In 1945 the hearse was sold for \$20 and the hearse house lot was sold for \$85, then it was torn down.

Toller of the Bell: In 1863 a vote at town meeting established the Toller of the Bell, a Lower Village man who was paid 25 cents to ring the Union Church bell for each death and funeral. In later years, two men held this post, one for the Union Church and one for the Methodist Church. 1899 was the last year the town marked a death by tolling a church bell.

A Citizen's Last Right: Records show that the town derived no income from bell tolling or using the hearse. No town income was derived from grave digging or selling graves until the early 1930s. Beginning in the 1870s, town burial grounds were expanded by adjacent land owners who sold family grave plots for \$5 to \$8. For town residents, their hearse ride and burial were a right and free of charge, funded by town taxes, like roads. Even residents who wished to be buried elsewhere, say the family plot in Goshen, had use of the hearse and their grave dug at Sunapee town expense. A gravestone was a family expense, which left the town poor to be buried in unmarked graves.

Town Cemetery Commission: In 1908 a vote at town meeting authorized the formation of a Cemetery Committee to rectify the run-down condition of the town's cemeteries. Funds began to be annually appropriated for this purpose and expended by a Cemetery Commission. The sextons remained in charge of burials until 1918 when their work was absorbed by the three-man commission. The derelict condition of the cemeteries was the impetus in 1902 for the town to accept gifts of money to ensure perpetual care of cemetery plots, each in its own savings account, with interest earned to be used for maintenance. These funds formed the first town non-expendable trust fund, later guided by the Trustees of the Trust Fund. In 1989 a vote at town meeting authorized an expendable trust fund for future cemetery projects and expansion.