

The McGuigan Pioneer Cemetery

The McGuigan cemetery is one of the oldest burying grounds not only along the Rideau River but in Eastern Ontario. It was used for approximately one hundred years between 1800 and 1900. Unfortunately, there are few written records anywhere either as to its existence or as to who was buried within its confines. The few tombstones now standing on the small knoll overlooking the Rideau River tell only a small part of the role this pioneer cemetery played in the history of the area.



Misty Morning at McGuigan Cemetery

History Discovered

In the early 1960s, Alice Hughes, Delmar Thompson and Harold Richardson, in pursuit of their incredible task of recording the inscriptions on all of the graveyards in Merrickville Wolford, heard of an overgrown and abandoned plot of stones and markers set back off the road between Merrickville and Burritts Rapids on L&G county road 23.



1965, McGuigan site before restoration

Crawling and scrambling through the underbrush they came upon a few visible stones. Years of abandonment and disuse had left the few markers toppled in a tangle of brush, but the early inscribed dates on the markers immediately spoke to the importance of the site. Family plots on pioneer farms were not uncommon, but the size of this

property and the few names visible made it apparent this cemetery had served a valuable community purpose in the early 1800s.

History Uncovered

At the urging of Mrs. Hughes an initial site survey was conducted and Wolford Township, over several years, provided help in cutting trees and clearing brush. During this time, volunteers from the recently created Merrickville and District Historical Society took on the cleanup task and modest improvements to the site were accomplished.



Spring 1979, Cemetery cleanup, Alice Hughes, Max Martyn and Monica Heidi (Katimivik co-ordinator)



Unearthed Stones

It was not until 1979 that the Historical Society was able to undertake a significant restoration of the site. With assistance of an Ontario Government New Horizon grant and the active participation of a Smiths-Falls-based Katimivak group the restoration was completed and an official opening of the site was conducted on July 25, 1981.

Dr. Robert Legget, assisted by Air Vice-Marshal M. P. Martyn, Chairman of the Historical Society McGuigan Cemetery Restoration Committee and by Mrs. Alice Hughes then President of the Merrickville and District Historical Society unveiled a cairn to the memory of those buried there. Since then, the cemetery now set in a pastoral setting on land donated by Mrs. Liv Hilliard has been maintained by the Historical Society and tended by Corporation of the Village of Merrickville-Wolford.



Max Martyn and Dr. Robert Legget observe a moment of silence at Official opening restored McGuigan Cemetery , July 25, 1981



Robert Legget tree planting ceremony Ontario Maple tree in memory of the opening.

History Unfolded

Over the years many descendants have sought out the resting place of their pioneer ancestors and found it here in the peaceful and picturesque setting.

From the early 1800s until its closure in the 1890s, the cemetery exhibits several distinct patterns of burial. The first to find rest here were the United Empire Loyalists who arrived as pioneers in the closing years of the 1700s. These earliest settlers received loyalist land grants along the lower Rideau and many are buried here.

The earliest stone uncovered was that of Samuel McCrea, a Loyalist from New York state who took up land in Oxford Township the vicinity of Burritts Rapids. The Loyalists were followed between 1818 and 1830 by British veterans of the Napoleonic War whose pensions included the opportunity to take up land in the "colonies". Joseph Cox, one such warrior, died in 1860, having fought not only with Wellington against Napoleon, but in Canada in the war of 1812. He is buried here, along with a number of his descendants, many of whom died as children.

But, perhaps the most poignant memorials are the unmarked slabs of stone believed to be commemorating the resting place of unknown predominantly Irish labourers who died of accident or disease during the construction of the Rideau Canal. A cairn with a memorial plaque has been installed in remembrance of these and other unknown and undiscovered graves.



Opening ceremony, Memorial Cairn

Finally, the later tombstones contain names of pioneer sons and daughters whose family names are still dominant in the area, including, McCrea, Stafford, Nicholson, Cox, Chester, Tackaberry and Weedmark to name only a few. Over the years many descendants have sought out the resting place of their pioneer ancestors and found it here in the peaceful and picturesque setting.

History Told



The hard life of the early settlers is evident both in the number of stones dedicated to children, as well as the inscriptions many contain. Caroline Davidson died at 13 years of age in 1851 and the faded inscription on her stone reads:

*"In memory of Caroline,
beloved daughter of Peter and Elizabeth Davidson,
died Dec 28, 1851, aged 13 years,
I would not live always,
I ask not to stay,
where storm after storm,
rose dark o'er the way"*

The stone of Thomas Jenkins, an ex Royal Sapper and Miner and Lockmaster at Nicholsons Locks who died suddenly in 1847, contains this dire warning:

"Reader pause, death may be on its way to meet you."

Other heartfelt messages include this on the stone of Elizabeth Campbell who died at the age of 26 in 1885:

*"Beneath this stone lies my bosom friend
One whom I long adored
She's gone and left me to depend
On God forever more."*

By the middle of the 18th century, with the rapidly growing adjacent community of Merrickville, the space limitations of this historic cemetery were becoming evident and gradually interments shifted to the Union Cemetery, just down the road towards Merrickville. Most of the interments after 1865 were of children of earlier burials. For example, the last known person buried here was, ironically a granddaughter of the first. Harriet McCrea, granddaughter of Samuel and Jennet McCrea died at 45 years of age in 1886.

History or Hoax? The story of Miles McGuigan.

Miles McGuigan after whom the Cemetery was named was an Irishman, born 1787 in Bodny, County Tyrone where he joined the local militia in 1806. The following year he enlisted with the 81st Regiment Loyal Lincoln Volunteers and served under Wellington as a Drummer Boy in the Peninsular War. It is said, during battle he was shot through both legs but survived and after a long convalescence continued his military service in Spain and Italy. In early 1814 he was moved with his regiment to Canada and was stationed at Matilda (Iroquois) and Kingston to participate in the last days of the war of 1812. When his term of service was over in 1815 he was given his discharge, a small pension and 100 acres of land on the second concession of Oxford Township.



He was clearly an enterprising fellow. Probably anticipating the value of waterfront property when the Rideau Canal was built, he sold his inland property allotment in Oxford in 1834 and purchased land on the Rideau

River in Wolford. There he is credited with having owned and built several of the attractive stone "cottages" along the Rideau shore. About 1839 he sold his home and married the widow of John Leahy U.E.L., moving to the widow's farm. In the Leahy/McGuigan home Miles and his wife raised their family and the cemetery which was located on their property, became known as the McGuigan Cemetery.

It is ironic that the gravestone of Miles McGuigan, after whom the Cemetery was named, has not been found. In fact he may not even be buried there. Indeed there is some suggestion that as a serious Mason, McGuigan ended his earthly presence in a Masonic ritual. He was a member of the Merrickville Masonic Lodge, No. 55, in St. Lawrence District in Ontario. It is said that when he died, it was his last wish that his body be dissected, and then placed in the Merrickville Lodge for future work in the Masonic Third Degree.

His wishes were carried out, and his bones remained in the Merrickville Lodge until the Lodge Room and building were gutted by fire in 1959. It is said at night his spirit can be seen limping through the Cemetery named for him, seeking the resting place he never had.

article by John Cowan

Visit McGuigan Cemetery

You'll find the cemetery at 448 County Road 23 (Burritts Rapids Road). A path leads from the south side of the road about 100 metres to the entrance of the cemetery.

The cemetery is 1.5 km east and of Merrickville and 8 km west of Burritt's Rapids.