

Cemetery Update

By Rich Chere – Summer 2021

For Forrest Harper, it's personal.

The First Reformed Church Cemetery Manager has maintained the historic burial ground since June of 1988 and he is often reminded why it is so special to so many.

"I have three or four generations of family buried here. It's a special place for me," Harper explains. "When the grass is cut and the flowers are happy, it's a great place. People all over town tell me it's never looked so good. My guys (crew), who are young, feel it, too."

Maintaining the cemetery is no easy task, but superintendents have put their hearts into the job for generations. Here is an overview of those who have kept the FRC Cemetery a distinctive place over the years:

Andrew A. Van Ness

Born in 1860, Van Ness was superintendent in the 1930s. In the 1933 First Reformed Church directory he is listed as an elder. According to family history, at the time of his death in 1937 he was "Superintendent of the First Reformed Church Cemetery, where he collapsed and died." Interestingly, his great, great nephew - Mark Convoy - worked in the cemetery as a teenager more than 30 years later and has kept his ties ever since.

Adrian C. Lincoln

The 1950 First Reformed Church directory says of Lincoln: "It was during the pastorate of the Rev. E.H. Keator, D.D. (1925-46) that the cemetery was beautified and expanded. The present 'Circuit' section on the south side was a nursery and the fine evergreen stock grown there was used as a basis of a complete replanting. New roads, fence, truck, and other modern equipment was added through the goodness of generous friends, and now we believe we have a cemetery of beauty over which the Church Steeple towers amid the peace of everlasting hills."

Ben R. Massey

The FRC directory lists Massey as Cemetery Superintendent in 1958.

Lou Meivogel

It is thought that Meivogel was cemetery foreman or superintendent from 1946 to 1970 after coming to this country from Holland after World War II.

"When I started working in the cemetery in 1969 when I was 16, Lou introduced himself to us as having worked there 'for 23 years,' " Mark Convoy remembers. "He'd say, 'Go ahead, ask me. I know every stone in this cemetery.'"

Meivogel resided on Madison Ave. in Pequannock and served as a volunteer fireman for Engine Company No. 2. Former FRC Pastor Williams Bennett officiated at his funeral when he died in the late 1970s.

John Schneider

For better than a decade between 1969 and 1979, Schneider served as superintendent after selling his Sunoco gas station on the Turnpike between what is now Tavern 5 and the American Legion Post 240. He and his wife Fran were members of the First Aid Squad for more than 25 years and were extremely active in the FRC.

"He enjoyed the work, I think. He was a hard worker," recalls his son, Kurt. "Most of my summers from 1966 to 1970 were spent at a family business in Branchville, but I worked a couple of summers with him in the cemetery, or maybe it was just one summer. I was part of the great fence painting.

"I remember he was pretty (particular) about taking care of around the stones, cutting the grass and the many ways he'd like to do it efficiently. Like burning it or whipping it with weed whippers. I don't think we ever used any chemicals.

"I remember working with the undertakers during burials. The tips weren't big at the time. We had two burials one day and I made two dollars."

Bob Sackmann worked in the cemetery several summers after graduating from Pequannock High School in 1972.

"I worked for Mr. Schneider some time during the summers of '72 to '76," Bob reflected. "I still have a pretty nice scar on my leg from when the tree branch limb saw slipped and cut through the shorts into my thigh. I spent most of the time pruning, mowing around grave stones and keeping things tidy both in the cemetery and the Manse."

John and Fran Schneider are both buried in the cemetery.

Richard DiSavino

DiSavino is thought to have followed John Schneider, acting as manager from 1979 into the next decade.

Jack Valle

A dedicated member of the First Reformed Church, Valle served as superintendent in the 1980s. His work in the cemetery and cemetery office building made an impression on the congregation and on his son, Rich, who serves on the Cemetery Commission.

"He liked working outdoors, he enjoyed people and he liked being helpful," Rich explains of his dad. "I think the biggest reason he liked it was he got to do things and help people find what they needed in times when they were distraught. He like that he could help people at least have some peace at the end of a loved one's life."

Rich worked in the cemetery with his father.

"I actually helped with several burials," he says. "I was nice because I got to see what he did. I wasn't there when he (spoke to the families), but he often needed help setting up the grave. We would sit at the side and when everyone would leave, we'd lower the casket and then arrange the flowers on the grave after the dirt had been filled in."

Bob Sharp and Dave Barrows

Sharp and Barrows both held the title Cemetery Manager at various points during the 1980s and 2010s.

Forrest Harper

Still on the job as Cemetery Manager, Harper started in June of 1988.

"I love working here," he says. "I get to interact with folks in their time of need. It's rewarding to be able to help them through hard times. I help them with some closure."

There are others, of course, who have generously maintained the First Reformed Church Cemetery through the years. Some of the details have been lost, but it is our hope that relatives, friends and congregation members might be able to provide some of the missing information so that we can honors those folks. Please let us know if you can provide any further information.

Cemetery Update

By Rich Chere – Fall 2019

Standing in the First Reformed Church Cemetery on a spring morning in late March, Walter Kever had a good idea of what to expect. Using Ground Penetrating Radar, the 55-year-old excavator was searching for unmarked graves.

Nevertheless, Kever was not fully prepared when the GPR discovered 34 graves holding the remains of infants buried within the historic Cemetery back in the 1930s, and perhaps much earlier.

“We found more than 30 graves in the children’s area, sort of an unmarked potter’s field,” Kever explained. “They were all lined up. It was very sobering. It’s very sad if you think about it. But it was very satisfying to find them.”

Forrest Harper, the FRC Cemetery Manager who accompanied Kever on the project, had always been aware that infant graves likely were present in the area behind the Sanctuary. He was always careful to avoid disturbing the area, even though it was unmarked.

“I was told as a young man by Charlie Van Ness, who used to be the sexton of our church, that he remembered there being a section in that area where they would literally just dig holes and bury babies. There were no services. Bizarre by today’s thinking,” Harper reflected.

“That’s why I never wanted to do anything in that area until we found the graves. I didn’t want to dig in that area. It’s somebody’s grave. When they came up with the idea of using radar to locate graves it was incredible.”

Kever offered to help.

Along with engineer Robert Oestreich, he runs Applied Service Corp. in Lafayette, an environmental company founded in 1988 that does remediation and structural support which includes locating buried oil tanks and pipes. Much of the work involves taking out tanks and cleaning up contaminated soil.

A year ago the company invested in GPR, a \$30,000 apparatus the size of a walk-behind lawn mower with four wheels and a handlebar.

The lawn mower-like device is pushed across the area being surveyed and displays below-ground images. In this case it showed a line of objects each 18-20 inches long and 12-18 inches wide buried head to toe from the road behind the Sanctuary in a straight line towards the Boulevard.

“What you see (on the screen) is an arc. The GPR will start sending signals on an angle in a forward direction and as you go over the area the signals become more straight down. As you move away from it, they’ll be on an angle behind you,” Kever said.

“Some arcs are very pronounced, like an underground tank. Some are very slight. You tap the screen on the center of the location and it will put a dot of that GPR location. The GPR will tell you there is an object there. It won’t tell you it’s a tank or a coffin. It takes a little training to identify it. It helps us to know what you are looking for.”

The remains are only about three feet deep.

Research is required in an effort to determine whether some of those children buried may have been victims of a health epidemic or whether families simply could not afford the cost of a service, burial or markers.

There are two existing markers, including one at the beginning of the row for a child who lived 1930-1932. The Cemetery Commission plans to install a stone marker designating the area.

“To mark that section would be a neat way to at least memorialize them,” Harper said. “They’re forgotten really.”

No longer.

“Number one is to respect the remains. That was a human being,” Kever stressed. “A lot of them have been buried for a long time. Possibly 150 years or even longer. To locate them gives you a good feeling so they won’t be disturbed.

“I was really a little nervous about doing it. I wanted to make sure I did it right. I didn’t want to make any mistakes.”

In addition to the infant burial area, Keever used the GPR to solve another mystery. Harper wasn't sure which side of a headstone one of his own relatives was buried. GPR gave him the answer.

And they were able to locate a family in the oldest section of the Cemetery.

"There was a family buried in one area. The graves were from the 1700s," Keever said. "I looked at Forrest and said, 'They could never have conceived we were using radar to locate their remains more than 200 years later. They'd be amazed.'"