

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

The vanished church and the cemetery that remains

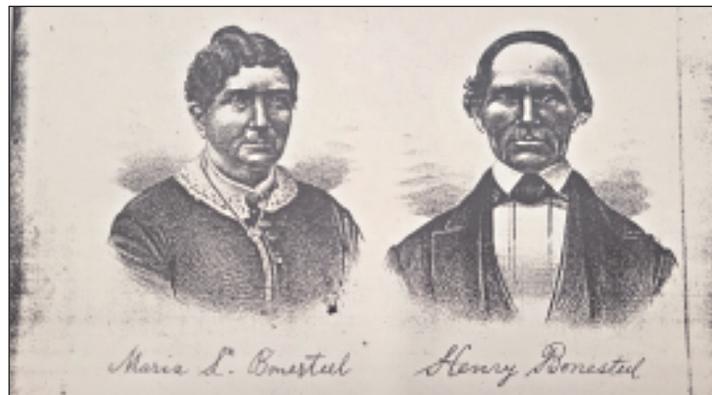
Driving south from Green Lake to Markesan on County Road A, travelers may notice a family gravesite monument surrounded by a fence in a farm field on the west side of the road. Just before the road curves west lies what is now called the "Bonesteel Cemetery." This small cemetery is easiest to spot in autumn, after the crops have been harvested, but before the snow falls.

Many passersby wonder why a cemetery sits in the middle of a farm field. At one time, this burial ground was much larger than the remaining 16-by-16-foot fenced area. Years ago, a congregational church stood on this site, with the cemetery beside it.

The church closed in the 1890s and its records have been lost. However, headstones uncovered in the field reveal the names of some of Green Lake County's pioneer settlers.

Over the years, farmers working the land discovered scattered headstones and placed them within the fenced plot. Today, 27 headstones rest inside the enclosure surrounding the large Bonesteel family monument. How many people were originally buried in the cemetery — and where they now lie under the farm field — has been lost to time.

The fenced section once was the Bonesteel family plot. Among the headstones found there are those of Henry Bonesteel (1807–1877), his wife, Maria Deavitt (Davitt/Devitt) Bonesteel (1818–1892), and their daughters Amelia (1847–1866) and Henrietta (1850–1867). Their son Edward (1849–1934) is buried in Peabody, Kansas. The resting place of another son, Albert (1857–?), and his wife is un-



HEADSTONES FOR HENRY Bonesteel and his wife Maria Deavitt Bonesteel and their daughters Amelia and Henrietta are found in the Bonesteel Cemetery. The Bonesteels came to Green Lake County from New York in 1846, owned and farmed 280 acres of land in Green Lake County. Henry was a deacon of the congregational church, which once sat on the cemetery site.

submitted photo

known, though census records show them living in the township of Metomen in 1910. Maria Bonesteel's mother, Lydia Deavitt (Davitt/Devitt) (1799–1849), also has a marker here. She died while visiting Wisconsin with her husband, George, who later returned to New York.

The Bonesteels came to Green Lake County from New York in 1846 and farmed 280 acres on what then was known as "Green Lake Prairie." Henry served as a deacon in the congregational church that once stood on this land. Their son, Albert, briefly attended Ripon College in 1872 before returning to farming. Eventually, he managed his own 240 acres, as well as his mother's 280-acre farm. Albert became the first president of the Fairwater State Bank, founded in 1903, and served on its board of directors. He married Mary McCune, daughter of an early Fairwater settler.

Other headstones found in the field tell of lives cut short. One belonged to 1-year-old

Frank Tucker (1873–1874). His stone reads: "There was an angel who visited the green earth and took away our lamb."

Children's markers also include Wilhelmine "Minnie" Schmuhl (1869–1870), Wilhelm Kopplin (1857–1869), Julius Hurlbut (1850–1855), Addie Devendorf (1855–1861) and Edith Snow (1859–1868). Except for Minnie Schmuhl, it is unknown if their relatives also were buried here. Edith's stone notes her parents were S.D. and M. Snow.

Other identified individuals include Abner Durkee (1815–1845), Araline Daniels Grant (1830–1855), Thristove (Christove) Klein (1809–1879), Henriette Ott (1832–1873) and Johanne Westphal Schmuhl (1830–1875), Minnie's mother.

The headstone of Cynthia D. Leonard (?–1858), first wife of Anderson Leonard (1824–1878), also was recovered. The Leonards married in 1846 and had four children. Their son, Harrison, born in Wisconsin in 1852, suggests that the family had moved to the state by then. Anderson later remarried, became owner of the National Hotel in Ripon and is buried in Kansas.

Smaller markers called "footstones" also were found.

"Traditionally, a gravestone is larger and meant to mark the entire gravesite, often with just the family name," regional historian Dan Freimark of Wieck-Skipchak Funeral Home in Berlin said. "Headstones mark the individual gravesite, usually with the name, dates or inscriptions. In the past, many cemeteries also included a footstone to mark the 'foot' of the grave."

The congregational church and Society of the Town of Green Lake occupied two acres



THIS HEADSTONE AND footstone for 1-year-old Frank Tucker (1873–1874) was found in the farm field surrounding the Bonesteel family monument. Below his birth and death dates the headstone reads, "There was an angel who visited the green earth and took away our lamb."

submitted photo



THIS RECENT PHOTOGRAPH on the Bonesteel Cemetery shows the headstones found in the nearby farm field laid neatly within the Bonesteel family plot. This fenced area at one time was just a small part of a larger cemetery that sat next to a congregational church. It is unknown how many people might have been buried in this cemetery and how many lie below the farm field.

submitted photo

within the 160 acres owned by Oliver P. Reed (?–1905). Some records suggest the church was founded in 1851, though the Bonesteel Cemetery contains older burials.

A *Green Lake County Reporter* article from May 6, 2004 noted that by 1853 the church was referred to as "The Meeting House." It stated that there were trustees and members whose names match grave stones found at the cemetery, but this could not be confirmed.

It is unclear when the church building was moved. Dave Berndt, current president of the Fairwater Historical Society, believes it may have been relocated to the first farm east of the cemetery and used as an outbuilding. No trace of the church remains.

Over the years, property owners have cared for the site. In 2004, Michele and Rick Hargrave, then owners of the land, cleared brush around the Bonesteel plot and recovered 16 complete and two partial headstones from the surrounding fields. Some stones had to be dug out of the ground and one large granite marker even required a backhoe.

During the COVID-19 shutdown, Berndt spent the spring

and summer trimming weeds and repairing the fence. Because most stones had been moved during decades of farming, he explained it would be "impossible" to restore them to their original positions. Instead, he arranged them neatly inside the fence and continues to care for the cemetery.

In 2021, Ripon residents John Splitt and Colleen Kok noticed that a decorative gate in their garden matched the fencing around the Bonesteel plot. They contacted Berndt, who returned the gate to the cemetery. How it came to be used as garden décor remains a mystery.

The Bonesteel Cemetery is on private land. The public should respect both the property and the memory of those buried there by viewing it only from the road while driving by.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information, visit www.riponhistory.org, facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.