

Historic Westminster Cemetery is a time capsule of the city's life and growth

Historic Westminster Cemetery, founded over two hundred years ago and now bounded by Ralph Street and Greenwood and Manchester avenues, is the final resting place of nearly 6,000 people who lived in the Westminster area. Long the destination of the city's annual Memorial Day parade, the cemetery is a 14-acre time capsule preserving the stories of all who are buried there.

The cemetery began as a burial ground surrounding the Union Meeting House, Westminster's first documented house of worship, constructed and maintained by the Protestant congregations that worshipped there. Local settlers followed the European tradition of burying their dead in country churchyards. The earliest dated gravestone still visible is that of two-year-old Christian Yingling (Jungling), dating from 1790 and inscribed in German. Gradually, as the congregations of Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Baptists, and Presbyterians grew, they left the meeting house, constructing their own buildings throughout the area. Abandoned and in disrepair by 1891, the old meeting house was sold and dismantled, its location marked today by a Victorian urn at the top of what is known as the "memorial mound" and the site of the city's annual Memorial Day ceremony.

Despite the removal of the Union Meeting House, the surrounding cemetery remained a burial place. Included are the graves of hundreds of the town's founders, builders, innovators, war veterans, county and city officials, lawyers, judges, politicians, doctors, and educators. Hundreds of more ordinary citizens also rest within the cemetery grounds. Their stories may not be well known, but they also played an important role in the life and growth of Westminster and its surrounding area. Those interested in touring the cemetery and visiting the burial sites of local notables may wish to preface their visit by reading "Historic Westminster Cemetery & Union Meeting House" by David W. Berr and Mary Ann Ashcraft.

Among notable graves in the cemetery are those of William Winchester, founder of Westminster, and his wife, Lydia Richards Winchester. One can also find a memorial to Jacob Sherman, an early tavern

owner and builder of the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House on East Main Street. Westminster Cemetery includes the graves of over five hundred veterans. Their military service ranges from the American Revolution to recent conflicts. Three patriots of the Revolution, Henry Neff, Caleb Stansbury, and William Winchester are buried there. There are over fifty graves of Union veterans of the Civil War, some with graves marked by simple tablets provided by the government and one, that of Frederick Richter, marked with an elaborate statue of a Civil War soldier. William McDaniel, for whom McDaniel College is named, lies in one lot. In another lies John Smith (of Wakefield), one of the founders of its predecessor, Western Maryland College.

Many notable women also lie buried within the cemetery. Sadie Kneller Miller, a native of Westminster, became one of the first nationally known female sports writers and photojournalists during the early twentieth century. Her remains, along with those of her husband, occupy the only mausoleum in the cemetery. Another local woman of note is Dorothy Elderdice, remembered by many for her dramatic productions highlighting the history of Westminster and Carroll County, as well as for her very large costume collection. She was a local activist for peace, women's rights, and civil rights for African Americans. Well-known newspaper editors, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, and political and civic leaders are buried throughout the 14 acres, their stories covering more than two centuries of local history.

When services in the Union Meeting House ceased before the Civil War, concern arose regarding the management and upkeep of the deteriorating building and surrounding grounds. At a public meeting in November 1863, citizens considered an offer from the estate of John Fisher to buy his 12.5 acres of land surrounding the existing cemetery. John K. Longwell led a committee to study the proposal and recommended the land be purchased to stabilize the meetinghouse and provide a larger and improved burial site. Officials purchased the land for the sum of \$1893.75. The following year, the Maryland General Assembly passed an Act of Incorporation to establish the Westminster Cemetery Company, reviving the charter of the old meeting house, and transferring all rights, franchises, privileges and

immunities of the previous company to the new company. From that time to the present, the cemetery has been operated by a board of managers as a private corporation for the benefit of lot holders.

Today the Board of Managers of the Historic Westminster Cemetery Company consists of a president, treasurer, secretary, and seven managers-at-large. It meets monthly to make decisions concerning the operation of the cemetery. One goal is to preserve the history of the cemetery and those who lie in repose there. To that end, the cemetery company recently obtained a matching grant to develop an online presence which will include the digitization of all cemetery records. This will enable individuals and families to do online genealogical research, post remembrances and photos of loved ones, and share them with the public. In addition, online tours accessible by smart phone will highlight various groups including historically important individuals, war veterans, McDaniel College personalities, and the Greek families of Westminster. Other groups will be able to develop tours as well. As Historic Westminster Cemetery prepares to move into the future, it continues to remain a time capsule of the past.

Guest columnist Clay Matthews is a retired social studies teacher and serves as Secretary for the Board of Managers of the Historic Westminster Cemetery Company. He writes from Westminster.

Photo 1: Credit: Historical Society of Carroll County Caption: Citizens watch as a Memorial Day parade approaches the Westminster Cemetery gates circa 1900.

Photo 2: Credit: Submitted photo Caption: Scouts from Westminster Troop 393 follow a long tradition of placing flags on the graves of Westminster Cemetery veterans for Memorial Day.