The history of Marmora's first recorded cemetery

by Gerald Belanger

In the early 1800's, Marmora's first recorded cemetery was developed at the easterly boundary of the Village. Originally it served as an old Indian burial ground.

Between the years 1790 and the early 1800's, six townships in what would later become known as Hastings County, had been completely surveyed. Prior to 1821, Marmora was in total wilderness and often referred to as "The Lands in Rear of Rawdon".

With the establishment of the Ironworks in Marmora by Charles Hayes in the early 1820's, the area started to grow as employment possibilities became a reality. It is perhaps for this reason that the Township of Marmora was surveyed by 1821. By 1822 the huge iron blast furnaces were in full operation and by 1824, between 150 and 200 men were working at the Marmora Ironworks. The Marmora Township population was established to be 314, of which 87 were under the age of sixteen.

On April, 1823 Patrick Butler was killed at the Ironworks. He is presumed to be buried at the old Indian Cemetery grounds now referred to as the "Common Cemetery" due to the fact that all denominations were being interred there.

By 1825c, Marmora's first Catholic Church was built on the west bank of the Crowe River not far from the Ironworks blast furnaces. The small limestone church was officially called "St. Matilda's" and for years was used by all denominations. A small cemetery had also been set aside by Anthony Manahan, the Ironworks Manager (1825-1830), on a flat strip of land just below the rocky hillside on the north west side of the church.

In his book, "Species of Adventure", André Philpot wrote this about the cemetery:

'It may have been blessed by atmosphere as a burial grounds, but the great sheets and blocks of limestone made burial difficult. Probably only thirty settlers joined the "unknown slumbers".'

'An elderly local citizen used to play among the stones as a child. "The rain would wash up the bones at the base of the cliff," he told me. "We kids used to look among them for pocket watches. A man in town used to buy the bones."'

John Hughes, son of Laughlin Hughes, was buried at St. Matilda's small cemetery after drowning in the Crowe River. Margaret Hughes, Laughlin's daughter, died on August 15, 1828 and was buried at the Common Cemetery in the Village.

During 1855, Hughes donated a small piece of his farmland for a new cemetery. He did this because of the difficulty in opening a gravesite at the rocky ground located around St. Matilda's Church and cemetery. This cemetery is usually referred to as the "Hughes Cemetery" and is located on the Centre-Line Road, a few miles north of the village. The first recorded interment at the Hughes Cemetery was Alexander McCallum who died on November 28, 1858. John Quinn was the last to be buried at this site after his death on February 2, 1876. During this time, approximately twenty burials were carried out at the Hughes Cemetery. It is estimated that St. Matilda's Church was abandoned in the early 1870's and only used after that as a hang-out for the river drivers who worked for the local lumber companies in the area. Three of the river drivers who drowned are buried at the cemetery; Joseph Richards, who died May 3, 1867 (age 22), Ulderic Desilets, who died on May 13, 1867 (age 26) and Ignac Paradis, who died on May 10,

1869 (age 20).

In 1875c a new brick Catholic Church was built on Burstall Street in the Village of Marmora. From that year on, all Catholic burials took place in the cemetery grounds located directly behind the church. One of the first recorded interments at the new cemetery was Mrs. Robert O'Neill (Ellen Wolfe) who died on April 25, 1876.

On May 5, 1873, David Fitchett and a few other concerned citizens presented Solomon Johns, Reeve of the Marmora Village, and his Councillors with a petition protesting the untidy condition of the Common Cemetery grounds. Margaret Brady, owner of an inn/hotel on Forsyth Street in the early 1850's was very instrumental in having the cemetery grounds cleared. William Leonard donated a fence to protect the property surrounding the cemetery.

On August 9 of that same year, a cemetery committee consisting of: Wellington McWilliams, William Leonard, and David Bentley, introduced a by-law to council requesting that all interment rights be registered or deeds issued. It wasn't until 1907 that the Ontario Registrar General declared that burial permits had to be officially signed before burials could take place in a cemetery.

By 1911, the small Common Cemetery in the Village was considered to be full. It was difficult to determine exactly how many spare, unused burial plots were still available at the time since most of the interments had never been properly accounted for or indicated on any map of the grounds.

At a Village Council meeting held in November, 1911, Rev. Moore made a motion that Joseph W. Pearce, Robert T. Gray, Henry Wiggins and Daniel Shannon explore the proper Statutory steps necessary to set up a Cemetery Board and to find a suitable parcel of land near the Village which could be used for burials.

In 1915, John William Phillips, a resident of Marmora for 48 years, offered to sell a strip of land to the Village which he owned that ran along the south side of the existing Common Cemetery grounds. Four years later, Council decided to take the necessary steps to enlarge the cemetery grounds, clean-up the existing grounds and secure a title-deed to the existing Common Cemetery. This sudden burst of action was sparked by threats from the Provincial Health Department to close the site down.

It became necessary to either have the municipality take over the cemetery or elect trustees and have a special Act of Parliament give them a deed to the property, grant them the power to enlarge the cemetery grounds and regulate or control all interments.

Trustees were appointed by the committee on March 28, 1919 to manage and act as owners of the cemetery. Amendments were then made to the Cemetery Act after it was discovered there was never a title of deed issued for anyone concerning the ownership of the old Common Cemetery.

Once this amendment became official, it also provided a solution regarding the road allowance which ran through the old cemetery grounds.

On July 1, 1927 the land, renamed the Marmora Protestant Cemetery, adopted new rules and regulations governing the newly enlarged grounds. One rule read: 'During funerals all horses are prohibited from entering the cemetery except those drawing the hearse.'

During the planning of the new No. 7 highway, the Village Council at that time pressed the Government to ensure it would pass directly through the village, eastward to Actinolite.

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On November 9, 1933 the Marmora Herald wrote;

'Along in front of the cemetery the road will be a little to the north of the present street and the cemetery will be approached by a ramp. The face of the ramp next to the Highway will be constructed of concrete.'

During the Depression years (1935) the entire Marmora Protestant Cemetery grounds was levelled and all existing holes filled by local men on relief.

On May 13, 1947 the Marmora Loyal Orange Lodge No. 319, obtained a deed for burial property on the west side of the existing Marmora Protestant Cemetery grounds. On the property they raised the necessary funds in order to build Marmora's first vault. Frank Bobyk of Marmora designed and built the concrete structure in August, 1948. The Canadian Legion Branch 237 of Marmora, in conjunction with the L.O.L., then developed burial plots for veterans on land adjacent to the Orange Lodge members burial plots.

On July 19, 1949, the Village Council met in their town hall chambers to discuss issues relating to the Marmora Protestant Cemetery. Plot owners were upset and dissatisfied with the actions and behaviour of the previous Cemetery Board members. It was decided by Council to elect a new Cemetery Board who were required to hold public meetings so that all plot owners could address their grievances. It was also suggested at the meeting that a yearly financial statement should be given.

The Cemetery Board, realizing that burial plots were again few in number in the old section of the Marmora Protestant Cemetery, purchased property on June 10, 1971 to the south of the property belonging to the Orange Lodge and Legion. On August 20, 1990 the Marmora Protestant Cemetery Board would again enlarge the cemetery grounds when they purchased property from Mrs. Manley Lavender.