

HISTORY OF NEW CANAAN CEMETERY ASSOCIATION

By Mary Louise Hall King

The New Canaan Cemetery Association was formed on March 19, 1867, by a small group of men determined that New Canaan should have a public cemetery. As stated in its articles of incorporation, the purpose of the Association was to acquire the existing burial ground belonging to the Methodist Episcopal Church and to purchase as much adjoining land as it thought necessary. With its first national bank organized in 1865 and its railroad chartered in 1866, New Canaan was expecting to grow, and these men had foreseen that a public cemetery would have to be enlarged in the course of time.

The Civil War had focused New Canaan's attention on its cemetery situation, for during the war years the town had buried with military honors 15 of its volunteers.

Although New Canaan then had 28 cemeteries, only two of these were public burying grounds. All the rest either belonged to religious denominations or were private cemeteries, small family burial grounds fenced off by stone walls at the corner of a family field. The two public cemeteries - Upper Canoe Hill (1774) and Parade Hill (prior to 1801) - were old, small (only an acre or so), and could not be enlarged, each being surrounded by a highway and privately owned land. The last possible burial on God's Acre (1773), and Congregational burying ground, had taken place in 1857.

Soon after that, all the gravestones had been removed (some to Parade Hill), and the area designated a "park." Church Hill (1762), the Episcopal Cemetery on West Road, was seldom used after the first St. Mark's Church had been consecrated (1834) and the old Episcopal meeting house on West Road, torn down. A "new" cemetery on Maple Street (1824) was privately owned by 12 families, who had paid \$15 each for their plots. The newest cemetery (1852) belonged to the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the men who founded the New Canaan Cemetery Association had good reason to think that this burial ground could be bought. It was not only a financial responsibility for the Church, but it was practically inaccessible at the time.

On April 17, 1852, the trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church had paid \$50 to Justus Hoyt, the blind miller for 1 1/2 acres of land on the east side of Five Mile River, diagonally across the stream from the Hoyt grist mill. This had been laid out by Justus Fitch Hoyt, the miller's son and a member of the Church, into 8 x 16 foot plots, priced at \$5 and \$10 depending on location. Six deeds, each dating August 4, 1853, filed with the Town Clerk, are proof that the Methodist soon sold some of their plots.

Probably more were sold than the few that were recorded over 15 years, but so many informal agreements went unpaid that the Church had had to restrict burials to those lots that had actually been bought.

Soon after they established their cemetery, the Methodists built their second church (dedicated 1854), the building now owned by the Masonic Order at the corner of Main and Church street. Then on October 12, 1865, the trustees committed the Church to pay \$300 for a 6-acre addition to the cemetery. This was done at a time when the Methodists were faced with considerable expense. The steeple on the new church had been toppled during an 1862 storm but had not been rebuilt, because the Church was attempting to raise an additional \$500 for a steeple bell before making repairs. (Both were done in 1869.)

Less than a month after its organization, the New Canaan Cemetery Association was assured that the Methodist Church was willing to sell its cemetery for \$450 - \$150 for the original 1 1/2 acres and \$300 (cost) for the undeveloped 6-acre tract. This was on April 11, 1867, but the deed of the sale was not signed until November 3, 1868. Town action was needed to correct an apparent flaw in the title to the land.

On the petition of residents living in southern New Canaan, a special town meeting on May 11, 1867, had voted to reopen Marvin's Ridge Road from the Norwalk border to present Old Norwalk Road. Laid out before 1720, before the colonial legislature established Canaan Parish, New Canaan's forerunner, Marvin's Ridge Road had been so long unused that not a trace of it appears on the 1867 map. But Marvin's Ridge Road once had run from Norwalk Harbor to the saw and grist mills on the Mill Pond, and if New Canaan were to reopen the entire length of the old road, the Cemetery would be cut in two by a public highway. At the same time, if it was to have access to its grounds, the Cemetery Association must build a 16-foot-wide bridge over Five Mile River and extend Lakeview Avenue (then called Cemetery Street) beyond the bridge, grading it to a 20-foot width. These improvements would cost \$600 over and above the purchase price of \$450 to the Methodist Church. Some understanding with New Canaan's selectmen was called for, so that the Cemetery Association did not bear all the cost of these public improvements.

Enough voters, obviously, approved of the Cemetery Association's plans, for on October 4, 1869, eleven months after the Methodist Church deeded over its cemetery, the annual town meeting voted to pay \$200 to the Association as New Canaan's portion of the expense for the new bridge and road. And then the town meeting voted to discontinue officially the part of Marvin's Ridge Road from "the northeast corner of the New Canaan Cemetery" to Old Norwalk Road.

One further obstacle, however, remained, causing a disagreeable situation for the Cemetery Association board. Section I of its Articles authorized the purchase of additional land "as may be deemed necessary," and the directors did deem that they needed more land if they were to plan wisely for the future. What they wanted was the 5 acres lying south and west of their 7 1/2 acre tract. These were owned by Russell L. Hall one of the Association's original directors and the local undertaker, whose asking price was so high that condemnation proceedings had been taken to the Superior Court. After a Court-made appraisal, a deed was signed on December 27, 1869, whereby the New Canaan Cemetery Association paid \$600 for 5 acres and bore the cost of building a stone wall to separate its new western boundary from Mr. Hall's other lands. Remembering that they had paid but \$450 for 7 1/2 acres, part of which had

already been laid out, some directors who had signed the deed temporarily covered the \$600 with their personal notes.

Before the town vote and the 5-acre purchase of 1869, even before it took title to the Methodist Cemetery grounds, the New Canaan Cemetery Association began carefully to plan for what has been called the most beautiful cemetery in New England. At its first meeting, on September 28, 1868, the board of directors not only decided to build the bridge and extend Cemetery Street, but to begin draining the swamp and removing trees. At the 1867 organizational meeting, the men concerned had used the articles of association of the Woodland Cemetery Association as a model, going over these one by one. Woodland Cemetery, dedicated in 1861, had been laid out on a point of land in Stamford's harbor by Benjamin Franklin Hatheway, a civil engineer. Although nothing appears in the minutes, the New Canaan Cemetery Association engaged Mr. Hatheway's service about the beginning of 1869, for an article in the New Canaan Era of September 4, 1869, reports that the road has been completed and that "the grounds are being laid out in good style by Mr. B. F. Hatheway, the competent landscaper gardener." Certainly Mr. Hatheway's name appears as engineer on the earliest Cemetery maps.

With 12 1/2 acres to work with, Mr. Hatheway, after draining the swamp, began by building a dam and creating a lake - the first of three and the one that eventually have the Cemetery the name "Lakeview." Then, with a proper access over Five Mile River and extended Cemetery Street, he located the Cemetery entrance a few yards east of the original Methodist Cemetery gates, and from there laid out a road leading to and around the lake. What had been the Methodist Cemetery thus became Section A* along the west side of the entrance road, while Section B was laid out to the east. Sections C through H were laid out on land surrounding the sloping down to the lake, separated by roadways and crossed by an occasional path. Along these benches were set out, the same ones to be found in the Cemetery today. Section I lay over the slope, to the west of the lake.

Captain Stephen Hoyt (1800-1879) was the Cemetery Association's first president, and the new Cemetery was his pride and joy. Even after Mr. Hatheway's work came to an end, Captain Hoyt continued to supervise the landscaping, giving and planting at Hoyt Nursery's expense as many as 200 trees at a time. Along the stone wall that the Cemetery had had to build as its then western boundary, he set out in 1878 a row of pines, some of which are standing today.

On October 1, 1870, at 1 o'clock, the Cemetery was officially dedicated from a platform erected at the east end of the lake. Professor Samuel St. John, New Canaan's favorite son, delivered the main address, while appropriate religious services were conducted by the Reverend William Des Brisay, rector of St. Mark's and the Reverend Mark Staples, who had resigned as the minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church to become minister of the Methodist Protestant Church in Silvermine. An ecumenical choir of mixed voices also participated. Purposely, the dedication ceremonies were interrupted for the funeral procession and burial of Mrs. Susan Stevens, at which Reverend Des Brisay officiated. Mrs. Stevens, the wife of Samuel Stevens, had died in New York City two days before, at the age of 46.

Praising the "few of our thoughtful citizens" who had had "the hearty desire for a select and proper cemetery," the writer for the New Canaan Era, after describing the dedication, expressed fervent hopes that the Cemetery Association would not select an appropriate name, suggesting "Maple Hill, Brookside, Woodmere, Evergreen, or Dream Del." But the name "New Canaan Cemetery" persisted from the 1869 town-meeting minutes until 1902, when in its March 1 issue, the New Canaan Messenger printed "now Known as Lakeview Cemetery." Who was responsible for the new name seems to be lost in the past. The Cemetery Association minutes made no mention of it and Lakeview's superintendent continued to enter "New Canaan Cemetery" in the Sexton's Burial Book in the Town Clerk's office until he too switched to "Lakeview Cemetery" in June 1908.

If there had been doubts about New Canaan's need for a public cemetery, these were quickly dispelled. Even before the Cemetery was dedicated, with just 24 hours in which to make plans, the town held its first "Decoration Day" celebration there on May 30, 1868. Overnight, mother-and-daughter teams made 45 floral pieces to be placed on the graves of "the patriot dead," men who had served in the Revolution, the War of 1812, and the very recent Civil War. Although most of the graves to be decorated that day were in the scattered rural burial grounds, the principal celebration took place at "the Cemetery." Many of those who attended were transported there in carriages, for which a public-spirited gentleman arranged.

Two of the Lakeview graves that were decorated on that first Memorial Day were in Lot 279 of Section A. James A. Hart, a shoemaker who had been born in New York in 1793 and had served in the War of 1812, died in New Canaan on September 23, 1863. Nearby, in August 1866, was buried the Irish-born Patrick Fanning, a Civil War veteran from Windham County of the 5th Regiment Infantry. Fanning, a hostler at the local hotel, died of a brain concussion. On April 17, 1886, by vote of the New Canaan Cemetery Association, Lot 279 was donated to the Samuel P. Ferris Post No. 61 of the Grand Army of the Republic. Years later title passed to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. (??) But Lot 279 has always been the center of New Canaan's Memorial Day ceremonies, and in it are buried veterans of four wars.

On October 31, 1942, the Town of New Canaan purchased a large plot in Section M where its former servicemen and women may be buried if they so choose. Nearby the town also owns a landscaped plot where it has buried those residents who died without funds. Since 1938 the Cemetery Association has had a "baby plot," where only infants are buried. More recently, in Section P2, it established a cremation park.

By 1886, when the Cemetery Association gave the G.A.R. its plot, most of the lots surrounding the lake had been sold. Some had been bought by prominent New Canaan families, but nearly half belonged to the summer residents who had begun buying or building houses in New Canaan from the late 1860's on. John Rogers the sculptor, bought the land for his Oenoke Ridge house and studio in 1875, and two years later bought his Lakeview plot. Many others who moved here planned for the future similarly.

The first person to be buried in the original Methodist Episcopal Cemetery was Joseph Gordon Dickinson of Silvermine Road, a 17 year-old boy who died on March 18, 1853. Young Dickinson was among those who, on an 1852 Sunday, had toured the small cemetery Justus Fitch Hoyt had just laid out, and at the time he had wondered aloud who would be the first to rest in the Cemetery. But there are many gravestones in Lakeview much older than his.

As the small rural cemeteries became overgrown with brambles and weeds, some families bought lots in Lakeview where the tombstones at least would be preserved. Then five or more rural or private cemeteries were moved. This explains why in the Drummond plot, bought in 1875, are the gravestones of ancestors buried in an abandoned Carter Street lot - Theophilus Fitch, tanner, shoemaker, and justice of the peace, who died on March 3, 1783, and his mother Lydia Fitch, who died August 31, 1786, aged 102. Among the stones in the Silliman plot at the east end of the lake are those of the Reverend Robert Silliman (d. 1781) and the Reverend Justus Mitchell (d. 1806), the second and fourth ministers, respectively, of the Congregational Church. These stones and others were moved in the 1880's when the Silliman and St. John families gave up their private burying grounds that bordered the south lawn of the Congregational Church.

The oldest stone in Lakeview is that Mrs. Anna Beard Eells, first wife of the first Congregational minister in Canaan Parish. She had died on May 8, 1736, and been buried near the church. At some much later date her stone had been removed to Parade Hill but in 1864 turned up in Milford, Connecticut. When it was returned here, the Cemetery Association, as a public service, set her gravestone alongside other old stones in Section I, as it had done whenever a misplaced gravestone was found.

Most recently, the Association erected the stone that had marked the grave of Mrs. Mary Hanford, the last to be buried on God's Acre (1857). This had been found beneath the front porch of a house.

As a public cemetery, Lakeview has never had restrictions as to race and creed. Blacks, Whites, and Orientals are buried there; Roman Catholics, Jews, and atheist as well as many denominations of Protestants. Lakeview is not even limited to New Canaan residents, and people from other towns, other states, have chosen to buy lots there, attracted by the site.

In his editorial of October 10, 1879, the editor of the New Canaan Messenger thought it remarkable that so small a town as New Canaan should have such an attractive cemetery. High in his praise of the good taste and neatness he found everywhere, he recommended that his readers make the Cemetery the destination of afternoon walks, to stroll as they would in a public park. Then, in 1891, when a New Haven firm published The Weekly Record Souvenir for New Canaan, the Cemetery was called "the pride of the town" and a picture of its lake was a half-page feature. In the 1920's, when he made his pen-and-ink sketches of Lakeview, the artist Whitman Bailey called it the most beautiful cemetery in New England, with but one possible rival.

One reason Lakeview is so often admired is that the New Canaan Cemetery Association on the day of its founding adopted six articles of "Rules and Regulations." Although updated from time to time, these have always been strictly enforced.

Monuments, markers, and mausoleums have been limited in size, and in early days the wording in inscriptions was passed upon, so that everything would be in conforming good taste, with nothing overshadowing a neighboring plot. The original rules pointed out that, as a tree grew, its roots might dislodge tombstones in adjoining lots, so the Cemetery Association has always retained the right to remove trees and shrubs a lot owner planted, if they grew too large. Consequently, all work done in the Cemetery is carefully supervised to meet standards, and anything unsightly, down to faded flowers, is promptly removed. Bequests "for preservation of Improvements" once were sought, but perpetual care in this way was ended in 1908; since then, the cost of a lot has included its permanent upkeep.

Since the 1869 purchase, which brought it to 12 1/2 acres, Lakeview Cemetery has been enlarged seven times, until today its area is just under 41 acres of land and ponds. In 1884 and 1928, a total of 3 1/2 acres along Five Mile River was bought from the heirs of Justus Hoyt, who made the original sale to the Methodists from his mill-site land. Two more acres along the river were brought in 1924, but although filled in in parts and graded and seeded, none of this land is used as burying ground. An 1890 purchase at auction, however, let the Cemetery Association acquire 8 acres south and west of its earlier borders. (This not only was developed as Sections ...but provided a access to South Main Street.) On that land, in the 1930's the present entrance, roadway, and new lake were built.

In 1891 the first of two tracts along the entire eastern boundary was acquired when 10 acres of woodland were bought from the heirs of Professor Samuel St. John, who had delivered the dedicatory address. Ten years later, with some of the trees cleared, the northern half became Section S1, and in 1930's (?) Section S2 was laid out on the southern half. Then in 1933, along the eastern length of the old St. John land, the Cemetery Association bought 8.8 acres from Stephen Hoyt Sons Co. This was done at the time the State of Connecticut was laying out Route 123 through Hoyt Nursery property and when one of the Cemetery Association directors was Stephen Hoyt. Like his grandfather, the first president and his father, who has also been president, this Stephen Hoyt wanted to be sure that Lakeview would be able to expand. Forty years later, the last of this 8.8 acre tract has been laid out as Sections V-1 through V-3, with Section V-3 already developed.

The final acquisition of Cemetery land came on July 26, 1972, when the Town of New Canaan and the Cemetery Association exchanged small parcels of land, the Cemetery receiving .067 acres along the highway at its northeast bound.

When it was incorporated in 1867, the New Canaan Cemetery Association issued 100 shares of stock, which were subscribed to by local men at \$25 per share. Although authorized to increase the number of shares to 200, it never did so, because the initial \$2,500 capital proved sufficient once the Cemetery had been laid out and lots could be sold. Larger than those in the original Methodist cemetery, lots ranged from \$25 in the old section to \$300 for the larger ones

overlooking the lake. For 13 adjoining lots in Section A, one family paid \$378.99 in 1871. Dividends, not to exceed 8 percent annually, were to be paid to stockholders, but in early years dividends often were in arrears.

In Section IX of the 1867 articles, under which the New Canaan Cemetery Association continues to operate, provision was made for the retirement of stock from the sale of lots. Once retired, such stock was not to be issued again, and 26 shares had been retired when the association's annual meeting took place on January 13, 1897. Section XII of the articles provides that every purchaser of a lot is automatically a Cemetery Association member, entitled to one vote for each \$25 paid for his lot or lots, but until this annual meeting no lot-holder (except the directors) had bothered to vote. That year the lot-holders appeared en masse. According to the Messenger, for three years the board of directors had been divided, some having tired of "boss rule." So for the 1897 meeting an enterprising director organized the lot owners, and as a result four of the longtime directors were voted out. Among those were the aging Selleck Y. St. John, president since 1879, and Russell L. Hall, one of the original directors, whose sale of high-priced land had not been forgotten.

Aside from these two early episodes, affairs of the New Canaan Cemetery Association have been amicably run. The board of directors has always numbered nine men, and two of the present board are descendants of early directors who served long and faithfully.

Today, the only voters at annual meetings are those who own cemetery lots. The annual meeting of January 9, 1939, voted to retire the remaining 74 shares of stock, and control of the Cemetery Association thereafter became vested in the owners of the various plots. No longer owned by a corporation, Lakeview Cemetery for 34 years has been truly the nonprofit public cemetery its founders had visualized. All moneys received from the sale of lots goes, as specified in Section IX of the articles, to "the embellishment of the Cemetery grounds" and for current improvement and expenses. Lakeview today as before, is maintained by a superintendent appointed by the Association, assisted by two groundskeepers and an office manager.