

## The Vine Lake Trust survives through perpetual preservation



Photos by Diane Thomas Trust volunteer Cheryl O'Malley cleans the inscription on the Kingsbury marker.

*BY RUDI ANNA  
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Volunteers were working hard last Friday on a cool, overcast day at the Old Section of the Vine Lake Cemetery, their labor comprised of two initiatives: beautification and preservation. The former meant a thorough grooming of messy undergrowth at the bases of the cemetery's American Linden tree population, and the latter, more intensive of the two initiatives, was the ongoing task of preserving and cleaning the gravestones-- marker by tarnished, bio-flecked marker.

Luckily, The President of the Vine Lake Preservation Trust, Rob Gregg, was heading up the project along with that earnest group of dedicated volunteers.

Formed in May of 2009 and recipient of the Medfield Historical Commission's 2012 Preservation Award, 'The Trust' is a non-profit, charitable corporation promoting appreciation and preservation of the cultural, historical and natural resources in the town's Vine Lake Cemetery founded in 1651.

Taking a quick break from his toils, Gregg explains some of the remarkable features about this place that are worth preserving. While looking out across the verdant, tombstone-studded vista, he describes the section's three seamless gravescapes starting in the middle, "You see predominantly slate markers with head and foot stones, all in straight rows. That was back when they called this place the Burying Grounds." He mentions it's subtle reminder of the Puritanical perspective towards death, sternly depicted on the stones with a skull in profile above the inscribed names.

"Move beyond these," Gregg continues, "and the markers start to change to colonial. The ornamental skulls become angel wings. Then everything east of the road in the newer section is what we would call rural, where you have more of an infusion with nature, and stones were adorned with shrubs and trees." These changes tell the story of the people's changing attitudes. "It was an attempt to soften the blow in our attitudes toward death," says Gregg. "They're dramatic remarks about this place, about the role of death in our lives."

The more Gregg tells the history, the more apparent it becomes how vital the efforts to preserve Vine Lake are. The history contained within its cemetery gates seems to beckon us towards its cold hard grasp-- a grasp locked in its understanding of how crucial the history of this region is, no matter how daunting or expensive keeping it all intact seems to be.

Funding for this preservation comes exclusively from private donations, and Gregg initiates one direct-mail fundraising campaign per year.

The money collected is appropriated for supplies because most consumer cleaning agents aren't up to par for this kind of work. "There are prescribed industry standard steps that we go through, and we use a biodegradable cleaning agent. That's what the volunteers cleaning gravestones are using today," says Gregg. "Anything you find under the sink is virtually off-limits, as far as for what's considered 'correct' cleaning of slate and marble gravestones."

The basic steps for correct preservation of a gravestone, in terms of cleaning it, can be broken down into two main steps. Barbara Andrulonis, a member of the Trust's volunteer core, explains the process, "The first thing we do is spray the marker with regular tap water, just wet it all down. Then, we put on a Bio Wash. It's completely skin-friendly, and it helps to cut down on all this biological growth. It's a special formula the rain doesn't wash away."

The bio-guard applied, best practice dictates letting the chemicals sit for a few hours to soak. She picks up a nylon-bristle brush and, "Then it's just scrub, scrub, scrub. Just good old-fashioned elbow grease, from the back-bottom and work to the top-front." Her toolkit contains an assortment of brushes and cuticle sticks, anything that might be needed depending on the stone's features and inscription characteristics.

Once finished, the stones look the same, but the magic is slowly working, "In a couple weeks, you'll come back and see it white." Looking at a few markers she and her husband cleaned together almost two weeks ago, the difference is stark. Gravestones made with marble stand out like shining white teeth amidst a sea of rotten ones. "The Bio Wash does a great job of preventing growth and then the sun comes out and bleaches them white."

The solution lasts for several years, though it ultimately depends on the material as to how it will finally stand out. Marble turns white, slate returns to its natural, clean gray color, and all of the splotches usually disappear.

Another part to this work is resetting the stones. "Over time, some of them get knocked over by car, weather or neglect. Many of them naturally sink into the ground," says Andrulonis, pointing to a lopsided marker with a regal but disheveled '1874' on its weathered inscription, "They'll get dug up and reset." The larger memorials get reset with lime mortar.

Though every stone is enhanced via volunteer hands, for work requiring more heavy-duty expertise, a professional conservator is hired who repairs the larger stones. Gregg points out one of the signature lots anchored by a sandstone obelisk near the entrance that looks crooked, cracked and more than a little worse for wear. "A number of storms caused the stone to shift and then a branch came down and nudged it off-center," he says, "so he's going to come down in September with his excavator and pick the large block up epoxy it, and put it back down."

For the volunteers, the remaining work will likely last for a while, well into the fall months. "I think we'll be able to clean one entire side this season. But there's so much more to do, weather permitting. I was here last November with my Columbia rain gear because you get soaked," reminisces Andrulonis. "As long as I can stay warm, I can clean forever."

Getting new faces to join the volunteer corps is also key to getting the work done faster and keeping the overall experience fun and fresh. Through word of mouth, new people keep showing up.

One of the reasons Andrulonis enjoys it so much is her life-long draw towards cemeteries. “I’ve always been a cemetery type of person. I grew up in Philadelphia, and just like Boston, Philly has a rich history. During grade school, we’d go on field trips to Center City and do the whole Betsy Ross, Liberty Bell thing, and we’d also do the cemeteries. So when you see 1700 on something, you think it’s impressive.”

To Andrulonis, gravestones read like a kind of history book, “When my two little boys were babies, we’d take them in a double stroller and we used to walk to an old Episcopal church’s cemetery near our house. It had a lot of old gravestones around and, by walking, that’s how I’d get them to nap. Meanwhile, I’d try to put together the markers’ stories, especially for family plots. If you’re a stay-at-home mom, and you have two little kids, it’s an interesting alternative to watching Sesame Street and Thomas the Train on TV.”

That early experience must have established an important influence on her kids. On this day, Andrulonis brought one of her sons along with her. He was working all over the old section, busily grooming the American Lindens. “I’m having fun out here,” he says, kicking some mud off his boots.

The number of volunteers who show for a preserving session is integral to how fast the improvements come. Newcomers can show up with nothing more than themselves. The Trust supplies all necessary product. Presently, there are about 30 volunteers available for a variety of projects, and the advice for newcomers is very simple, “Wear old clothes. You’re gonna get dirty.”

Potential volunteers need only to get on the Trust’s names list to know about everything happening. The Trust sends out a free monthly newsletter and regular emails containing information on upcoming preservation sessions or social events. Everyone who comes out will have something to do and someone there to show them how to do it. “Rob shows them all. They might start cleaning or resetting stones. Rob likes to team up new people with someone who’s been coming so they can shadow and get to know each other. It’s a community,” says Andrulonis, who was a newcomer to Medfield in 2007. Volunteering through the Trust has given her another outlet to meet new friends.

There are many rewards for volunteerism. Adds Gregg, “One reward is that you come and have a good time with other people working here; the fellowship of coming is nice too because there’s a tremendous amount of preservation that needs to be done. It’s challenging to do it—not difficult—we give all sorts of guidance and supplies, but it makes a dramatic and immediate difference, so if people are looking to volunteer and have their efforts recognized individually and publicly, this is a great opportunity.”

To learn more about the Vine Lake Trust, find out more about social events taking place at the cemetery and to learn more about volunteer opportunities, please visit the website:  
[www.vinelakepreservationtrust.org](http://www.vinelakepreservationtrust.org) — Hometown Weekly Staff