

Rural Hill History

Early History

The Rural Hill Cemetery Association was founded in October 1885¹ and its plans for a “nice” new cemetery for Northville were noted in the November 16, 1885 issue of the *Detroit Free Press*². Prior to this, the Village of Northville was primarily served by the small Oakwood Cemetery, located on Cady Street just south of town. Oakwood experienced its last small expansion in 1880³, but space there was too limited. Recognizing an increased need for more land to inter the recently departed citizens of the growing village, a new cemetery association was formed. The association began as a non-profit with a membership subscription of \$125.¹ The founding board of directors was composed of prominent Northville citizens: Francis R. Beal, Dr. John Marcus Swift, Charles Monroe Thornton, Marion A. Porter, Major D. Gorton, Lawrence W. Simmons, Lewis W. Hutton, Albert D. Kendrick, and F. W. Clark.¹ Rural Hill Cemetery was created on December 17, 1885 in Plymouth Township, Wayne County, Michigan when the Rural Hill Cemetery Association purchased 17.5 acres of land for \$1286.25 from Major D. and Lydia Gorton.⁴ This land was a portion of the Gorton farm, located in southwest corner of Section 3 of Plymouth Township on the south side of Perrin’s Mill Pond (now the Johnson Drain). In April 1898, the north half of Plymouth Township broke off to form Northville Township, where Rural Hill Cemetery is located today.

The original 1885 design for Rural Hill was influenced by the rural or garden cemetery movement that began in the eastern United States fifty years earlier. This style of cemetery utilized the natural landscape to create a tranquil park-like setting, making it more than just a place to mourn the dead. The plans called for a design of 29 sections in a flowing layout that followed the hilly contours of the land and had the potential for 511 family lots. (See Original 1885 Plan.) Access to the cemetery was from the north, made possible by a road and bridge constructed over the narrow west end of Perrin’s Mill Pond by John V. Harmon in April 1886.⁵ This first bridge and road, now Rural Hill Drive, were constructed on land acquired by the Village of Northville from C. M. Thornton in 1886.⁵ Over the years the bridge would be repaired or replaced multiple times but it would remain the only access point to the cemetery.^{6,7}

No evidence could be found of how the lots were marked when first surveyed. Eventually all the lots in the original 1885 plan were marked in one corner with a domed metal marker identifying the section and lot number and carrying a patent date of June 10th 1890. Many of these markers can still be located today.

The first family lots were sold for \$15 to \$40 each.^{1,61} The earliest date recorded in the Rural Hill Deed Book is July 15, 1886, and the very first deed was issued to Harriet Clark, who purchased lot 5 in Section 8 for \$35. The Deed Book also shows that at this time members of the board of directors were allowed to purchase lots in the circular hill that makes up Section 29 for \$1 each. By the end of 1886 there were 14 recorded lot sales, with an estimated 138 lots sold by the close of the century in 1899.

The first burial took place in April 1886, before the first deed of sale was recorded. This burial was mentioned in a short article about the new Rural Hill cemetery in Northville in the April 23, 1886 issue of the *Ann Arbor Democrat* which reported that “the first interment occurred there last week.”⁸ The name of this individual is not recorded, but a transcription of Rural Hill interment records conducted by the Burton Abstract and Title Company in 1908^{9, 62} infers that it was probably Myrtie E. Siver. Myrtie died on March 22, 1886 and was the single, 23-year-old sister of the Harriet Clark who was issued the first recorded deed in July of that same year.

By the end of May 1889 the cemetery had a water supply. It was described as “a system of waterworks ... for the benefit of lot owners, involving a 1400-barrel reservoir and underground pipes.”¹⁰ Possible remains of this system may be the 20ft diameter stone-walled depression located in the wooded area southwest of the Veterans Section.

In 1903 the cemetery was restaked with vitrified clay posts to augment the already existing metal markers.¹¹ These two styles of marker, along with the marble corner markers privately installed in some family lots, were very helpful in defining lots in the older sections of the cemetery.

Reorganization and Growth

After 23 years of operation, the Rural Hill Cemetery Association was reorganized on July 8, 1908 for another 30 years. The new directors were James A. Dubuar, Lawrence W. Simmons, Frank N. Clark, Charles Monroe Thornton, E. M. Brigham, George Clark, Arthur D. Brooks and Edward H. Lapham.^{1, 12} One act of the new association was “the laying out of some new drives to further beautify the place” under the supervision of L. W. Simmons, the association president.¹³ Also in the summer of 1908, the Village of Northville replaced the old access bridge to the cemetery with a new one constructed of iron and cement.^{6, 14}

By the early 1920s, many of the prime family lots were already claimed. The Rural Hill Deed Book records an additional 143 whole or half lots sold between 1900 and 1920. There were still lots available in the old sections, but many of these had undesirable characteristics such as insufficient drainage or a steep slope. Large portions of Sections 15 and 16, as well as the northern end of the original Section 19, had especially poor drainage. Issues with slope were detractors in Sections 20 to 24, Section 11, and the southeast end of Section 10.

With the number of attractive lots dwindling, additional acreage was acquired around the end of 1922 on the west side of the cemetery. By May 1923 it was reported that this new “addition consisting of four and half acres . . . has been graded and otherwise improved during the past few months making a very decided improvement to this ‘city of the dead’.”¹⁵ This new addition allowed for the creation of Sections 30 to 37. (See 1923 Addition.) This area was designed to be more memorial park-like, with a linear layout of lots, but still allowing upright gravestones. Early sales in Sections 34 and 37 were for whole family lots, with some being split into partial lots. As lot sales in the others sections of this new addition continued, it became more prevalent to divide lots into halves or quarters consisting of only four or two graves.

The new western addition was enhanced by a mausoleum built of white Bedford stone with a marble interior by the Flowers Mausoleum Company of Toledo, Ohio.¹⁶ The completed structure consisted of 184 crypts, an additional 16 crypts greater than the original plan due to the great demand.¹⁷ Located in the southern portion of Section 33, in the area originally encompassing lots 1 through 12, the mausoleum was constructed at a cost of \$60,000.¹ After completion, the first entombments were Mrs. W. H. Yerkes and Hiram Holmes in October 1924.¹⁸ In the spring of 1925, the Mausoleum Crypt Holders Association was formed, with the responsibility of attending to the care of the building and grounds. The first officers and directors were: president Marion A. Porter; vice president, Charles H. Coldren; secretary, Frank S. Harmon; treasurer, John Schoultz; and directors, Elza J. Simmons, Augustus K. Dolph and William Salow.¹⁹

A now-forgotten feature of the cemetery is the Richardson Memorial Pool. It was constructed in 1930 with a diameter of 60 feet and a depth of 2 to 2.5 feet and had a working fountain.²⁰ The pool was created on the site of “an old brush dump,” based on the plans of Thomas G. Richardson, a well-known Northville businessman who was associated with the cemetery from early on.²¹ The fountain and pool were completed by Memorial Day 1930 and played a part in the remembrance activities that year.²¹ It is unknown how long this pool functioned or when it was dismantled, but evidence for its existence can be seen as the wide circular depression near the northern end of present day Section 16A, where a large evergreen now grows in the center.

Hard Times

During the 1930s the Great Depression and changing times took its toll on the Rural Hill Cemetery Association. On April 16, 1937, a year before the end of its 30 year reorganization plan, a meeting was held in the Northville Village Hall where it was reported that no more funds were available for cemetery upkeep and that lot owners would have to be responsible for their own lot maintenance. It was stated that this was not the result of any mismanagement, rather just an unfortunate situation for a project that many individuals had contributed their hard work and time to since its beginning. At this meeting M. R. Seeley of Northville and Dr. Mark Gardner of Detroit were appointed to confer with lot owners to determine possible solutions for the future of the cemetery. It was stated that the association would likely have to reorganize before the expiration of its charter in 1938. Another option proposed was for the township or village to assume responsibility for the cemetery’s future care and management.²²

By June 1937 a new board of directors and officers had been selected for the cemetery association. The new slate was Harry B. Clark, president; John Litsenberger, secretary and treasurer; and directors Willard A. Ely, Floyd A. Northrop, Edwin C. Bryan, Earl Montgomery, Erwin A. Chapman, Harry B. Clark, Dr. Mark Gardener, H. Ray Richardson and Charles Thornton. The goal of this new group was to continue the maintenance of the cemetery and straighten out the affairs of the association. At this time plots were still available and their sale was being directed by John Litsenberger.²³

On July 6, 1942 the cemetery association submitted a proposal to the Village of Northville which would gift all the association’s assets to the village upon the village’s agreement to take over management of the cemetery. The Mayor of Northville, Elmer Perrin, appointed a committee to evaluate the proposal and make recommendations.²⁴

The proposal and the committee findings were presented to the citizens of Northville and Rural Hill lot owners at an open council meeting and public hearing on August 3, 1942. The committee report did not recommend accepting the association's proposal due to inadequate records of past transactions, which might expose the Village of Northville to lawsuits. A counterproposal was presented by the committee in which the village would operate and maintain the cemetery with reimbursement from the association's funds, but without assuming ownership of the property.²⁵ This counterproposal was accepted in April 1943, with work in the cemetery being carried out under the supervision of the City Engineer, Earl Montgomery.²⁶

The number of interments at Rural Hill decreased through the late 1930s and into the 1940s. This may be due to dissatisfaction with cemetery upkeep and the uncertain future of its association, as well as increased cemetery options available elsewhere, like Grand Lawn Cemetery in western Detroit (est. 1908), Parkview Memorial Cemetery (est. 1926) and Glen Eden (est. 1929) in Livonia, and Oakland Hills Memorial Gardens in Novi (est. 1929). Sufficient space was available during this time period, with Sections 32, 35 and 36 (now 38) having few or no burials.

As the end of World War II became evident, and with the cemetery under new management, demand for more burial plots increased. This resulted in the opening of two new sections. The first was Chapel around 1945; located near the entrance of the cemetery, the original 1885 plan shows the intention for a chapel to be built here, but it was never carried out. The second was Section 32 around 1947, which was planned as part of the 1923 addition. Most of the lots in Section 32 were divided into half and quarter lots when sold, indicating a decreased need for large family lots.

Village Takes Ownership

In the fall of 1947 plans were underway for the Village of Northville to take over the cemetery, including the mausoleum.^{27, 28} The transfer of ownership was finalized at the Village Commission meeting on June 7, 1948, with the acceptance of the May 25th offer of sale for one dollar by the Rural Hill Cemetery Association.^{29, 30}

With the Village of Northville's new role as owner of Rural Hill Cemetery, Alex Serra was named as sexton and Darwin Harper Britton as superintendent in June 1949. In addition, a new three-person cemetery board was appointed in December 1949, composed of A. Malcolm Allen, Charles Carrington and Cyril Frid. In his new position Britton started a large undertaking of resurveying the cemetery and compiling information about existing lot owners and previous interments.^{28, 31} Great efforts to collect this information were demonstrated by a plea in the *Northville Record* in May 1950.³² The results of Britton's efforts are recorded in the Section Map and Lot Map Books. This valuable work was cut short by his tragic death in an automobile accident on Oct 7, 1950.³³ After Britton's death, A. Malcolm Allen was appointed as the new superintendent of the cemetery.³⁴ Proprietor of Allen Monuments and Northville's mayor from 1958-1978, Allen also committed his service to the management of the cemetery for 40 years without compensation.³⁵

In the early years of the Village's management, new burial space was created in already-developed areas by starting to utilize the easements between some sections and lots. At

this time the Village also created Babyland 1 from undeveloped area on the west side of Section 30. Prior to this time, the only evidence of a dedicated infant interment area is along the fence line of Lot 3, Section 20 (now part of Section 19), which contains four marked graves ranging from 1941 to 1944.

Management of the cemetery by the Village, and later the City of Northville starting in 1955, continued to meet the needs of the Northville area. New burial space was added through the continued development of easements and the opening of the Veterans Memorial Plot in 1953, Singles 1 in 1954, and Section 38 (originally Sections 35 and 36) around 1957. The development of Section 38 reflects the new purchasing pattern that began in the early 1940s of dividing lots into halves, quarters or even single graves. Unlike the older areas which are characterized by family lots, Section 38 and contemporary sections are a complex patchwork of unrelated names and markers.

To keep up with the needs of a growing population, a second mausoleum was proposed for the cemetery in the spring of 1952. Plans for construction were submitted to the Village Commission for a structure of Indiana limestone containing 200 to 400 crypts, as well as a chapel.^{36,37} The proposal appeared to have great support among members of the Village Commission and the Cemetery Board, but by the end of 1954 no action had been taken and the issue must have been dropped.³⁸

By the latter half of the 1960s, the last spaces in Section 38 were being purchased and the vastly unused portion of Section 31 against the western boundary fence was developed into Singles 2 and Babyland 2 in 1966.

Modern Times

Today the cemetery is marked at the intersection of 7 Mile Road and Rural Hill Drive by a black granite sign inscribed “Rural Hill Cemetery, In Memory of Elmer M. Richards.” This sign is a newer version of the one that was installed in May 1971 by Eral Richards in memory of her husband.³⁹ The only previous mention of a sign marking the cemetery entrance comes from a 1931 *Northville Record* editorial: “A beautiful place it is but we wished as we entered that someone would put up a new sign to replace the present rusty one on the big brick columns.”⁴⁰

As available space in the cemetery diminished, the City began to develop the 21 acres that the Village had acquired prior to 1953 at the southern end of the current property.⁴¹ The first areas of this new development were Sections 40A and 40B, where burials began in 1972 and 1974, respectively. At this time the previous practice of dividing a section into lots was abandoned in favor of a hedgerow tier system with back-to-back markers.⁴² The cemetery continued to fill and Section 8R was created in 1976 out of a narrow road between Sections 8 and 9. As needs continued, Sections 40C and 40D were laid out and made available by 1977.

The time period from 1980 to 2000 saw the increased urbanization of the City and Township of Northville, and Rural Hill Cemetery continued to meet the needs of this growing population. New space was created by the ongoing development of easements and minor roads, which resulted in the following sections: 10A, 17A, 25R, 29A, 34B and 37A. Expansion into more of the southern 21 acres led to Sections 41A and 41B. Also

during this time, land was salvaged out of sections that had been deemed undesirable in the past. Section 16A was created around 1989 by correcting drainage problems that prevented the full utilization of Sections 15 and 16; Section 11A was made by correcting slope issues in the minimally-developed original Section 11 in 1992.

The issue of limited space continued into the new millennium and was addressed by creating Sections 10B and 17R out of remaining easements. In addition, resourceful engineering allowed for the establishment of Section 19A from the low-lying area at the north end of old Section 19. In 2003, Section 34S was created along the eastern edge of Singles 2 to meet the growing demand for interment of cremains. In the same year, the remaining area at the tip of Sections 40C and 40D was laid out as Section 40E.

Expansion into the last remaining parts of the southern property, which was located in Northville Township, had been challenged by neighbors in the area since at least 2000.⁴³ To remedy the contested development of these 5.8 acres, the land was annexed by the City of Northville from the Township, thus circumventing complicated rezoning issues.^{44, 45, 46} Clearing the land that would become Section 43 began in 2003.⁴⁶ In 2005, Sections 42 and Section 43 were opened and would continue to fulfill the community's needs until around 2018, by which time most of the graves were purchased.

The most recent expansion occurred in 2019 with the platting of Sections 44A and 44B, consisting of over 500 new graves, and included the construction of a ring road around Section 43.

Some future growth may still be possible in the southern area, but due to development it appears that no new land would be available to purchase for further expansion beyond the cemetery's current boundaries.

Areas of Special Interest

Single Burials

As the Rural Hill Register of Deeds Book only records the purchase of family lots, it is unknown how the cemetery originally planned to address the concerns of individuals who did not want to buy a family lot or only required a single grave. It is possible that Section 19 was used to fill this need. This section is primarily composed of a sparse smattering of marked graves and most of it is lacking clearly defined lots. Dates on markers range from the beginning of the cemetery to a few modern interments of cremains. One unmarked grave is that of Mary Adline Jarrait, who is listed in the meager association records as being interred in Section 19, lot 19. She died on June 6, 1887, followed by her two baby daughters who died a few days later and were buried with her. With Section 19 having such limited grave markers and so few existing records, it most likely contains many unmarked single graves.

As time went by, some solitary lots in other sections appear to have been used to address the need for single burials. Tiny Section 31, where the earliest marker is from 1938, may have been created especially for this issue.

Formally addressing the need for single burials, Singles 1 was established in 1953 along the south side of Section 19 and contained about 90 graves. Once this area was full, Singles 2 opened on the west side of the cemetery in 1966 with room for a further 117 individuals. The newest area for single graves is Singles B, which opened in 1983 and is still open to further interments.

In addition to supplying graves for single individuals, the Singles sections were also used to meet the needs of local institutions. Maybury Sanitarium (in operation from 1921 to 1969), Eastlawn Sanitarium (1923 to 1976) and Northville State Hospital (1952 to 2003) all utilized Rural Hill on occasion for interments. Many of these graves are unmarked.

Potter's Field

A potter's field is defined by Wikipedia as "a place for the burial of unknown, unclaimed or indigent people." A *Northville Record* article from 1928 reports the burial of Alfred Peters on May 16th in "a little spot set off from the rest of Rural Hill." The article is entitled "First Burial in Potter's Field Takes Place Here: Alfred Peters Goes to His Grave with No One to Mourn Death."⁴⁷ The location of this potter's field is now unknown and there is no mention of it in the City Records. Likewise, Alfred Peters' grave is unmarked and he is the only individual identified as being buried in this location.

GAR Lot

On January 4, 1888, the Allen M. Harmon, Post 318 of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) purchased lot 11 of Section 18 for the purpose of respectfully laying some of their members to rest. This lot contains the markers for twelve soldiers, five of whom were reinterred from other locations, as their deaths occurred before the opening of the cemetery. The cannon standing over the GAR lot was moved there in 1897, as reported in the *Northville Record*: "The GAR post moved their cannon to Rural Hill Cemetery this week and located it on the post's burial plot."⁴⁸ The last burial in this lot took place in 1909.

American Legion Lot / Veterans Memorial Plot

Following the end of World War I, an American Legion post was established in Northville in September 1919 as a patriotic veterans organization.⁴⁹ This would become American Legion Post 147. By February 1920, this post had already been named in honor of Lloyd Green, "the first one of our boys to make the supreme sacrifice overseas," who died on Oct. 2, 1918 in France.^{50, 51} After nearly two years, Lloyd Green's remains were returned to Northville and interred in Rural Hill Cemetery on Sept. 18, 1921.⁵¹ The first mention of an American Legion lot in the cemetery appeared in the Lloyd H. Green Post Notes in the *Northville Record* on October 26, 1923: "During the past week the post members have graded and seeded down their lot at the cemetery. . . With a little additional work on it in the spring they will have a very pretty lot." There is no record of an American Legion lot in the cemetery records, so it is unknown when it was purchased and if this is where Lloyd Green's remains were originally placed in 1921.

The exact location of the American Legion lot is not known, but a *Northville Record* article from 1966 described it as “a 14 grave plot in the northeast section of the cemetery.”⁵² The obituaries of five veterans specify this lot as their final resting place: Lawrence E. Chandler (d. July 6, 1931),⁵³ Frank Poutney (d. Apr. 4, 1937),⁵⁴ John A. Buswell (d. Mar. 9, 1939),⁵⁵ Frank Zyla (d. Dec. 6, 1946),⁵⁶ Robert Snavelly (d. May 3, 1951).⁵⁷

The idea for a larger veterans plot was proposed in June 1952.⁵⁸ This would become the 248-grave Veterans Memorial Plot that was dedicated on Memorial Day 1953.⁵⁹ There are varying accounts on how the land for this plot was acquired. A November 1952 article in the *Northville Record* stated that, “[the plot] was given by the village a few months ago,”⁶⁰ while a later article recorded that the original American Legion lot “was traded for the present site in the southeast corner of the cemetery.”⁵² However the land was obtained, the plot was “carved out of the brown earth by hand over a year’s period by American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars [Post 4012] members”⁵⁹ from the original Sections 21 to 24. It is believed that all individuals who were interred in the original American Legion lot were moved to this new lot; three whose identities which could not be definitively confirmed at the time of movement are now marked by blank stones. This plot has been and continues to be an important part of the Memorial Day celebrations in Northville every year since 1953.

Masonic Lot

The Masonic Blue Lodge purchased Lot 8 East in Section 17 on August 1, 1908. The Northville Lodge #186 F. & A.M. was chartered on January 11, 1866. There are no gravestones in this lot, and it is unknown if the lot was ever used.

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