



Local landmark — The pretty little chapel in St. John's Cemetery is an important part of the cemetery's history, says historian Mike Wladyka. Photo by Ted Amsden

Cemeteries a treasure trove of Port Hope history

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By Peggy Foster

One of Port Hope's most historically significant yet well-kept-secrets tourist attractions stretches across 11 hectares along Toronto Road.

The property takes in St. John's and Union cemeteries. St. Mary's Cemetery is located on additional land at the north end of the expanse.

"There are at least a dozen people every week visiting Port Hope to search for graves of relatives," says Port Hope historian Mike Wladyka, a member of the town cemetery board, which manages Union and St. John's cemeteries.

Mr. Wladyka is often involved in those searches, and is currently in the process of bringing the cemeteries' records up to date to make the process easier.

He is recording the names of people buried in the cemeteries, their date of burial and the location of headstones to make it easier to locate them.

"This is history," Mr. Wladyka says as he points out the grave of the first mayor of Peterborough. "The monuments give us so much information about the people who are buried here."

On the south end of the property is St. John's Cemetery, where a small chapel was built by a grieving husband in memory of his wife.

"Building erected by James Guest Williams in memory of his wife Patience who died July 23, 1880," reads a plaque hung inside the chapel.

were to be buried later at Wesleyville, Knoxville, Welcome and St. Mary's cemeteries as well as at Union and St. John's cemeteries.

But in the last few years winter burials have become more common. That and the fact that cremation is also becoming more popular have left the chapel vault largely unused.

But as a historic structure the chapel remains an important part of the cemetery, Mr. Wladyka says.

The town took over operation of and responsibility for Union Cemetery in 1956. Until then it had been privately owned and managed by the George family, the former owners of what is now the Ross Funeral Chapel on Walton Street.

In 1956 J.T. George sold the cemetery to the town for a dollar. Along with it came two houses, the chapel and a smaller brick structure built in 1881 which was the original vault. The brick building has recently been turned into an office which Mr. Wladyka uses

when he works on the cemetery's records and history.

St. John's Cemetery was taken over by the town in 1968.

Wayne and Violet McMurray have been the full-time caretakers of Union and St. John's cemeteries for several years and live in the main house on the property.

Retired cemetery caretakers Wyatt and Gertrude Waddell live in a house at the south end of the property, at 110 Toronto Rd. When they retired 18 years ago, after 35 years of service, they were given the house to live in rent-free for the rest of their lives.

The chairman of the cemetery board, Mike Brennan, says that when the town took the cemeteries over they were "almost a Flintstone operation," meaning there were few records and no equipment available to care for the property.

"The town works department has been great," he says of the support with maintenance that the cemeteries enjoy now.

Mr. Williams — known locally as Yankee Williams because he was born in the United States — had the chapel built for committal services that took place during the winter, when the bodies could not be buried.

He did it because he thought funerals were miserable enough without people standing out in the cold freezing as well, Mr. Wladyka says.

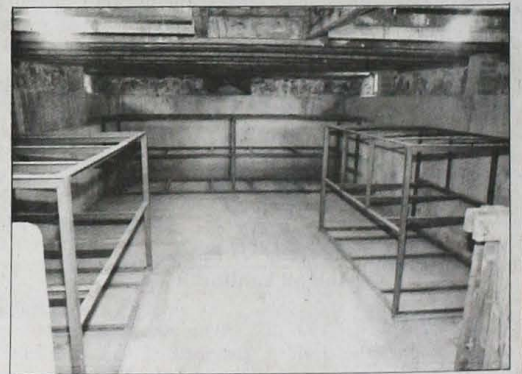
Mr. Williams died in 1910 at the age of 92.

In the last four years the small frame building has been refurbished. Just this summer the exterior has been repainted and extensive concrete work has been done to the walls and floor of the vault that lies under the chapel.

The chapel takes up the main floor of the building, and is complete with a raised area at the front



Piece of history — Mike Brennan (left) and Mike Wladyka of the cemetery board stand beside the graves of James Guest "Yankee" Williams and his wife Patience. Mr. Williams built the chapel in the cemetery in memory of his wife. Photo by Ted Amsden



Old vault — This is the room under the chapel where bodies used to be stored during the winter. Photo by Ted Amsden

where a pulpit stood and a minister would say the final prayers of committal. The coffin would then be lowered through an opening in the floor to the concrete-walled vault below.

Mr. Wladyka says that as many as 60 bodies were stored in the vault and in the chapel during one winter. It served as a repository for bodies that

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