



ANA N. ZANGRONIZ/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Wild turkeys roam the church cemetery at Niskayuna Reformed Church on Troy-Schenectady Road. Part of the large church cemetery is in back of the church's parsonage.

A legacy of faith

Church graveyards connect parishioners to history

BY JEFF WILKIN
Gazette Reporter

Only a few facts survive Deborah Dudley Harman. Deborah was born in Ireland in 1782, married Thomas Harman and lived part of her life in Schenectady. She was 59 years old when she died on Oct. 26, 1841 — 167 years ago today.

The middle-aged woman was a communicant of St. George's Church on North Ferry Street. And she remains a member today — in absentia — six

feet under hallowed soil next to the Stockade's old Episcopal church.

St. George's is one of the few churches in the Capital Region with a small cemetery on its grounds. If a church has kept its past parishioners close, it almost certainly means it has been a community fixture for a couple of hundred years. Other yards are part of Niskayuna Reformed Church and Christ Episcopal Church in Duaneburg.

"Churches were the center of people's lives back then," said David G. Kennison, senior warden at St. George's. "There

weren't a lot of other distractions for your time — so your life centered on the church. As the British expression is, 'It's hatch, match and dispatch,' meaning baptism, marriage and burial."

INTEGRAL PARK OF HISTORY

"It's very uncommon," said Kennison, who as senior warden is the head of the church vestry and is the interface between the pastor and congregation, of the yards. "This adds to the historical character of St. George's. St. George's is proud of its history; it's proud of its posi-

tion in the community for going on 300 years. We are in our fourth century, if you count the 1700s, the 1800s, the 1900s and the 2000s. So we're in our fourth century of ministry to the community. So yes, we are proud of the historic nature of our parish. We are certainly proud of our historic graveyard."

Ghosts are reserved for books, not cemeteries and churchyards.

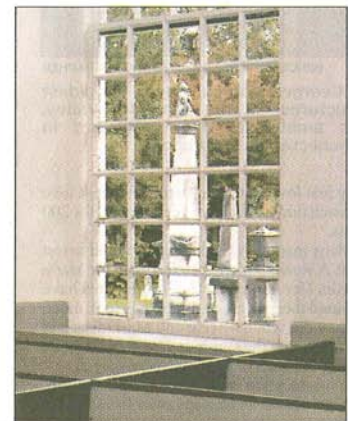
"I have read stories about this graveyard with people seeing ghosts in it,"

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At left, the Rev. Shaw Mudge of Christ Episcopal Church in Duaneburg reads the date on a headstone at the church's cemetery. At right, the graveyard of St. George's Church is easily visible from the inside pews in foreground.



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Yards

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Kennison said. "I have never seen ghosts in it, and I'm here at night a lot of times."

The Rev. Shaw Mudge of Christ Episcopal said members of the Featherstonhaugh family — descendants of Duaneburg founder James Duane — are buried outside the church off Route 20 and Duaneburg Churches Road (Route 127).

"I think people want to be associated with the church, they want their loved ones to be associated with the church so they can come back in remembrance," Mudge said. "We still have associated with our parish descendants of Mr. Featherstonhaugh. So there is an attachment to the family that goes back to the founding of the church."

Coopers and Cookes, Potters and Powells, Van Ingens and Vroomans are among the 450 people buried in St. George's cemetery, and memorials stand on both sides of the bluestone building built in 1759. Visitors are welcome to take the short walk through the cemetery, and travel back in time.

On a recent sunny afternoon, a light wind blew maple leaves over the rows of graves. Grave memorials line the sides of the church building, markers for people whose spots have been covered by church expansions.

WORDS OF COMFORT

Some read the old-fashioned epitaphs. "Sweet is the memory of my child, whose body here doth lay, but sweeter still the thought she lives, in brighter worlds on high," reads the stone of Lydia Anthony, only 18 months old when she died on Aug. 10, 1855.

"It is so nice to be able to read them, and see what someone else wrote about their loved ones," Kennison said. "And they're still readable, so it's a connection to the past. Graveyards are not just graveyards. They're not just a place for people to be buried. They're actually a history of the church, a history of people. So it's a history of families."

"They will look at them with their eyes," Kennison said of visitors to the weathered gravestones, "but then they will come up and



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St. George's Church, among the oldest structures in the Mohawk Valley, sits amidst its own graveyard in Schenectady's Stockade.

they just love to touch them. They just love to touch things that have been around for 200 years."

Many markers were built and carved to test time. A stone worker chiseled deep for Maria Brittin. Her name and important dates have retained their depth, and probably look much as they did when 41-year-old Maria was laid to rest during the summer of 1834 — 27 years before the start of the Civil War.

It might seem odd to see restored Colonial-style houses just steps away from hidden coffins. North Ferry is a residential neighborhood, but people do not seem to mind their proximity to the departed.

"I don't even know it's there — you forget about it," said Pete Husgen of 34 North Ferry, just two houses away from the graveyard. "Doesn't bother me a bit. Is it supposed to?"

Joyce Wachala, co-owner of Arthur's Market on North Ferry across from Green Street, is also not bothered.

"I think in the Stockade — you're close to everything," she said. "St. George's is beautiful. It's gorgeous over there. Everything here is so historic. You just have to take it all in."

The Rev. Dr. Scott DeBlock and his family live in the parsonage next to Niskayuna Reformed Church on Troy-Schenectady Road. Part of the large church cemetery is in back of the house.

"When my three daughters played 'Ghost in the Graveyard,' they really could play 'Ghost in the Graveyard,'" he said of the kids' hide-and-chase game.

He prefers the church cemetery a little quieter.

"I love walking through here," he said. "If you're having a crazy week and you walk through here, you do feel a sense that you're surrounded by a legacy of faith and these folks dealt with the trials of life and are at rest and at peace and in the presence of our savior and this isn't the end of the story, but a continuation of it."

Hundreds of graves are behind the church. The oldest go back to the Revolutionary War; the latest are from the early 2000s.

FOCAL POINTS

Like Kennison, DeBlock said churches were focal points of life during the 18th and 19th centuries.

"People came to church and spent the whole day," he said. "You had a service in the morning, they would have lunch, they would have afternoon activities and they would come and visit their loved ones in the cemeteries and care for the markers and all that."

Some stones are granite, others are limestone and have darkened over time. Some monuments are tall towers of stone surrounded by smaller memorials and iron gates. Others tell stories: Luke Marks and his wife, Ellen Taylor, buried four children in the cemetery during the 1880s and 1890s. The father died in 1918, the mother in 1926.

DeBlock said there's a reason people think about cemeteries more during fall, as Halloween approaches. But it's not a supernatural reason.

"For us theologically, it's not just the crap of Halloween but it's All Hallows' Eve and All Saints' Day," he said of days observed Oct. 31 and Nov. 1. "It's a time to remember those who have gone on before us."

People can still have fun during serious reflections in cemeteries.

"Our past Sunday school director, Mabel Schlieman, on All Saints' Day or around that time, she would bring the kids out for Sunday school class and walk through the cemetery and they would sing 'When the Saints Go Marching In,'" DeBlock said.

"And the wonder about that, is it's in Scripture — 'We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.' We are surrounded by the saints and the memories that have gone on before us and for these kids it's a great learning example to say we have a legacy of faith literally surrounding us and to use that as a learning point for the kids."

For some local churchyards, burials are part of the past.

LOSING SPACE

"There just isn't room nowadays," Kennison said. "You have to be buried in a wooden coffin and a concrete vault, which makes a huge amount of space. It takes two or three times the amount of space as it would before. You used to be buried in a wooden box. The wooden box would go in a few years, you'd go in a few years and your bones would be left."

At Christ Episcopal, about 40 graves are in the small yard in back of the church. Some are just 6 feet or so from cars and trucks rushing up and down Duaneburg Churches Road.

Mudge doesn't think anyone gets nervous walking in the small churchyard, or in any cemetery.

"When you come in here, I think a lot of people don't even think of it," he said. "On All Saints' Day, I remind people there's a community of saints living and dead, and we have seven people below."

Those seven below are church members, including James Duane and his wife, Mary, at rest in coffins stored underneath the church. Those chambers were called undercrofts in old churches.

"If there is something that intrigues people, fourth-grade boys really want to go down and take a look," Mudge said.

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