



Onslow Cemetery trustees with the memorial stone plaque on the day of their anniversary celebration in September 2013.

250 Years of Tradition at Onslow Island Cemetery

By Jennifer Cox (with files from Bonnie Waddell and Marie McCully Collier)

Located in the idyllic rural community Onslow outside of Truro, Nova Scotia, the Onslow Island Cemetery rests amid rolling hills and rich salt marshes, near where the North River joins the Salmon River on the easternmost side of the Bay of Fundy. The area's tides are known to be the highest in the world.

Despite its name, the cemetery is not on an island. It is on a bowl-shaped hill surrounded by a diked marshland. It is occasionally surrounded by water during the spring freshet or when there is a storm surge. The five-acre cemetery has approximately 400 gravestones and room to accommodate at least another 400 burials. The first recorded burial in the cemetery was Mary McNutt, infant daughter of William and Elizabeth McNutt. According to the Onslow Book of Records, she was only two months old when she passed away in 1765.

Among the oldest graveyards in Nova Scotia, the Onslow Island Cemetery was established in 1763 by a vote at the third meeting of the Onslow Township. The minutes show, "that the East side of the Island in the Uper Mash be aloued and sequestred for a buring place."

The Onslow Township appointed three commissioners to look after the cemetery. An act of the Nova Scotia legislative assembly in 1853 recognized the Onslow Island Burying Ground, outlined the duties and responsibilities of the trustees, and gave them the authority to establish an annual assessment for the maintenance and improvement of the cemetery.

Fast forward to a sunny day in September 2013, the Onslow Island Cemetery was the site of a celebration ceremony, organized by the cemetery's trustees, commemorating 250 years. The event was attended by approximately 90 local residents and out-of-town visitors with family ties or interests in the graveyard – some coming from Ontario and New Brunswick to attend. Guest speakers shared tales of local history and folklore. Allison (Allie) Groves, 88, was given the honour of unveiling a commemorative anniversary stone and plaque. Groves played a key role in cemetery history. Besides being a retired trustee, he began opening and closing graves when he was 14 years old, taking on this duty when his father was away serving in the war, and continuing the role for 64 years. Volunteer Jean King cut an anniversary cake and members of

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Allie Groves unveiling commemorative plaque.

the Colchester Historical Society arrived in period costume in honour of planter ancestors buried in the cemetery.

Many memories were shared at the anniversary celebration. One woman recalled visiting the graveyard with her father in the 1930s and noticing conch shells at the base of some of the gravestones. This practice was not uncommon in Nova Scotia, and in some communities was a way of commemorating loved ones lost at sea. Another custom was the use of coffin plates – a practice that goes back to the 1600s. At first only used by people of wealth, by the mid-1800s most families could afford them. This practice peaked in the late 1800s. A metal plate, about the size of an adult outstretched hand, was engraved with the name and age of the deceased and attached to the coffin. Before burial, the plate was removed from the coffin and given to the family as a keepsake in memory of their loved one. Several of these plates have been preserved at the Colchester Historical Society Archives, while others remain in family homes around the community. Another custom of some industrious early settlers of Onslow was to commission their tombstone to be cut ahead of time. Not wanting a tombstone to sit idle in the



Bonnie Waddell in period costume.

community, they were repurposed as doorsteps until it came time to mark the family grave site.

Remembering and documenting the history of the cemetery is a priority for current trustees. Once completed, this history will be posted on the cemetery's new website (www.onslowislandcemetery.ca), established to commemorate the 250th anniversary. Aply assisted by volunteer Bonnie Waddell, a brief history of the cemetery under the auspices of the Colchester Historical Society Museum and Archives is being compiled. Her diligent review of the Onslow Cemetery Company's handwritten minute books for all annual meetings since 1903 has revealed much about the challenges of former

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trustees to maintain the cemetery. Past records show that for two centuries, trustees have relied on the commitment of volunteers to maintain the grounds. Many locals have had a vested interest in caring for the cemetery because their kin are buried there. Volunteering has also been a way to work off the price of a lot. The funds required to maintain Onslow Island Cemetery came from yearly tax assessments, until the cemetery was incorporated in 1901. Volunteers could receive a tax credit based on the amount of labour they contributed. In the early 1900s residents were credited \$1/day for their labour and an extra \$1/day if they brought a team of horses to help maintain the property.

Waddell plans to research more of the history of the cemetery, using the information from headstones to search obituaries, funeral home and probate records. In 2010, Colchester Historical Society volunteers recorded the inscriptions of the oldest headstones still standing. The earliest of these date back to the 1790s. This work continues as the archives gather information from the many graveyards in Colchester County.

One community leader buried in the Onslow Island Cemetery was Ephraim Hayward. In 1755, when the British were at war with France, the Acadians, who had successfully farmed the land, were forced from their homes. By 1760-61 the British government was looking for settlers to take up the abandoned farmland. Wanting to attract settlers loyal to the Crown, they enticed a population of planters to migrate from New England with promises of free transportation and “improved” farmland, including the fertile diked salt marshes that the Acadians had built and maintained. Jim Smith and Carol Campbell, Colchester Historical Society historians, have documented that Captain Ephraim Hayward, a respected miller, brought together a group of 121 family and friends to migrate from Western (now Warren) Massachusetts on the promise of land. These settlers were the first English-speaking settlers in what was later named the township of Onslow. There are headstones still standing in the Onslow Island Cemetery for 22 of these early settlers.

The fact that the cemetery continues to be maintained by the community after 250 years demonstrates centuries of commitment, but there have been times when help was scarce. The cemetery began to fall into disarray in the 1950s after two out of three longtime trustees died. Seeing the grounds in disarray, a local women’s group approached the trustees and called a public meeting where committees were formed and the community once again rallied together to upgrade the property.

Early grass cutting was done by hand with a scythe. For example, in 1932, D. Langille and his son, Murray, received \$12 in payment for this work. In 1956, a power mower was purchased, after careful and lengthy deliberations by the trustees. Since then, trustees have utilized volunteers and some paid help to maintain the cemetery. Recently, to take the burden off volunteers, trustees tried hiring a contractor for the full six months of mowing, but this was too expensive to sustain. A compromise was found in a combination of volunteer and paid labour to ensure consistent care at a reasonable cost. Indeed, several of the current trustees are regular volunteer mowers and many visitors remark on the pristine condition of the cemetery.

Current governance of the cemetery was established by “An Act to Incorporate the Trustees of the Onslow Cemetery Company” in April 1901. It states that “The trustees shall have the power to make such by-laws, rules and regulations for the management and care of the cemetery, for ornamenting, improving and laying out lots, and for disposal of the same, and for the regulation of all matters essential to the management of the cemetery, but such by-laws shall be subject to the approval of the Governor-in Council.” In 2013, in its 250th year, a successful presentation was made by the trustees to the legislature of Nova Scotia to amend this bylaw by stating that “such by-laws shall be subject to the approval of the members of corporation.” This was a major accomplishment. Henceforth the bylaws governing the management of the cemetery can be amended locally. Such amendments will be considered by the members at the 2014 annual general meeting of the cemetery – the first amendments in 113 years!

Marie McCully Collier, president of the current board of trustees, has a deep respect and appreciation for the cemetery and its history. Four generations of her family are buried there. Her fellow trustees and members of the Onslow community and surrounding areas have similar strong family ties.

“For this reason we continue to come forward as volunteers to care for the cemetery,” she says, noting that, “There is also a strong and continuing interest in the value of graveyards to help family members and genealogists trace the history of our ancestors. We continue to build on their shoulders.”

McCully Collier says of those buried in the cemetery, “Their work and hardships helped to establish what we have today. It is important that we remember and respect them and honour them by caring for their burial ground and protecting their history. Many people came forward this year to help us accomplish a year full of remarkable achievements for the cemetery.” **N**