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Unmarked graves a possibility at State School site

By RICK GREEN, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN Nov 23, 2018 Updated 7 hrs ago



An aged sign and a metal fence are the only things marking the Chemung Cemetery at Laconia State School. Grave marker covered by the freshly fallen snow on Wednesday. (Alan MacRae for The Laconia Daily Sun)

Alan L. MacRae

MEREDITH — The granite grave plaques at Chemung Cemetery were covered with several inches of snow Wednesday, the only bit of color a pink pinwheel marking the final resting place of a woman who was born in 1960 and died in 1978.

Located on Chemung Road near Wickwas Lake, the cemetery was created in 1941. Buried there are the remains of about 170 people who resided at the Laconia State School, which was founded in 1901 to care for people referred to in those days as “feeble-minded.”

What was done with the bodies of those who died at the school in the 40 years before the cemetery opened?



Those charged with planning the redevelopment of the State School property may find out soon when exploratory excavation begins. The work is to help determine the potential for underground pollution on the 200-acre property in Laconia at Meredith Center Road and North Main Street.

A report by the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources discusses early burial practices at the school.

“Before the cemetery was opened, residents were buried in unmarked graves at unknown locations on school grounds,” the report said. “This cemetery was not surveyed as part of this study, nor were burial locations on the campus identified.”

Initial dig

The Lakeshore Redevelopment Planning Commission is charged with finding a way to turn the State School property into something that could spur economic development and create jobs.

The panel is working with consultants to come up with a plan to submit to state leaders. A consulting company will bore into the soil to get samples to be tested for pollutants. They will also dig monitoring wells and test pits.

Elizabeth H. Muzzey, the state historic preservation officer, will lend expertise as excavation work is done.

She said discovery of human remains is always a consideration in any major excavation or construction.

“There are state laws that govern this sort of thing, the accidental discovery of human remains,” she said. “One of the steps is to do due diligence to see if there are family members still in the area.”

Since it is not clear whether there are any bodies in the area destined for development, it is hard to assess how big an issue this might be. It was once a larger property, encompassing more farmland, so it’s possible any unmarked graves would be outside the area now being examined.

“It is a very sensitive and important issue, but we wouldn’t want to put the cart before the horse,” Muzzey said.

In some cases, buried remains can be relocated.

Sad history

Also, she said, there should be some memorial to what occurred at the State School.

“It is an important history, a sad history,” she said. “I think it would be appropriate to have some sort of recognition of the people who were there. I’m sure the state will do the right thing.”

Gordon DuBois, who used to work at the State School and has done a documentary film on the facility called “Lost in Laconia,” said the Chemung Cemetery initially consisted of unmarked graves whose wood markers with numbers would be removed for mowing, stacked in a corner and replaced haphazardly once the mowing was complete.

In 1978, a parents group got burial records from a longtime caretaker and the graves were properly marked with permanent granite plaques.

But as for the location of old, unmarked graves on the school campus, DuBois said there do not appear to be any records.

‘Don’t plow too deep’

The school was meant to be self supporting and included a farm to supply food for the residents.

The farm produced potatoes, cabbage, corn, lettuce, eggs, asparagus and celery. There were milk cows. Meat products included beef, pork and veal.

“I interviewed the foreman of the farm a few years ago and he told me that when he first went to work there he was told, ‘When you are plowing the field, don’t plow too deep, you’ll never know what you’re going to find buried there,’” said DuBois, who worked at the institution as an administrator from 1977 until it closed in 1991.

“I also talked to one older resident who remembered caskets being carried out.”

Poor conditions

It is perhaps not surprising that the dead were not treated with greater dignity at the school. Care for the living also left much to be desired.

Overcrowding, a lack of money and staff, along with a sometimes uncaring approach to residents resulted in poor conditions.

DuBois said that when he first went to work at the State School he asked why a certain building wasn’t on his tour.

He was led to the building and was told that it was designed for air conditioning, which was never installed. Once inside, he was overwhelmed by a terrible stench. It was stiflingly hot, residents were naked and staff members were hosing them down.

School for ‘feeble-minded’

From its establishment in 1901 through 1924, the institution was known as the New Hampshire School for the Feeble-Minded.

In the 19th century, there were almshouses in New Hampshire, also called county farms or “poor houses.” This was the way society took care of the poor, indigent and those with developmental disabilities and mental illness.

A movement began to remove children from bad conditions at almshouses. The idea was to place them in an institution where they could be protected and where society could be protected, lest those children embark on a life of crime.

The State School was founded on the generally accepted principle of the time that “feeble-mindedness” represented not only a cognitive shortcoming but also a moral flaw.

Eugenics movement

The eugenics movement swept through New Hampshire state institutions beginning in the late 1910s and 1920s, the Division of Historical Resources report said.

The movement advocated improving the genetic qualities of the human race by, in part, reducing reproduction by people with “undesirable” genetic traits.

In 1917, a law was enacted permitting the sterilization of people who were diagnosed as feeble-minded or having mental disease. Another law was passed allowing sterilization without the consent of the individual as long as three physicians and the Board of Trustees approved.

“The Board of Trustees had monthly minutes and I’ve gone through those records,” DuBois said.

“What would happen is a person’s name would come up. There would be a recommendation that Ethel Jones should be discharged, The board would say she needs to be sterilized before she leaves here. They would vote to approve or disapprove. That went on until 1958.

Sterilization was serious surgery with the potential for medical complications.

“Somewhere between 600 to 700 were sterilized, with 75 percent women, 25 percent men,” DuBois said.

The eugenics movement would have far-reaching consequences.

“The seeds of the concentration camps and the Holocaust were really planted here in the institutions in the United States,” DuBois said.

“It’s an important thing to remember and something that we can’t forget, because it speaks to what we are as a society and what we might be in the future.”