

New York History

Historical News and Views from the Empire State

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Old Town Cemetery: Preserving A Newburgh Treasure



The Old Town Cemetery is situated between Grand, Liberty, and South Streets, where it has sat for over two hundred years. It has borne witness to an ever-changing Newburgh, from a sleepy village to a bustling city. Many people are unaware of this gem in the heart of Newburgh and how close they came to losing it forever, but thanks to concerned citizens in Newburgh, its future is looking brighter.

On the Friends of the Old Town Cemetery's website, the graveyard is said to be the oldest cemetery in the Hudson Valley with origins to 1709, the year some 53 German settlers were granted over 2,000 acres which would become Newburgh.

In 1713, Old Town Cemetery it was part of "500 acres set aside" called a "Glebe," for the maintenance of a school teacher and a pastor. A church/schoolhouse would be built in 1733, but all that is currently left is a plaque marking the place where it once stood. The Old Town Cemetery friend's group believes that the cemetery contains some "1,300 stones, headstones and footstones, with at least 1,700 persons buried; [possibly] as many as 2,500, as there are numerous gravesites without headstones."



Included are numerous well-known Newburgh residents such as Henry Robinson. His Egyptian Revival style mausoleum was constructed in 1853. The mausoleum is believed to have been built by Andrew Jackson Davis, who also worked on other parts of Newburgh and was one of the most renowned architects of his time. Additionally, there are numerous Revolutionary War veterans buried within the confines of the cemetery – and not all of them fought on the Patriot side.

Located some distance from the rest, some maintain, are the graves of Hessian soldiers who relocated to Newburgh after the surrender at the Battles of Saratoga. These Hessians were said to have been on their way to Virginia, and some have reported seeing their ghosts roaming the cemetery looking for their regiment. If they are buried there, their graves are unmarked (they're believed to be in the cemetery's southwest corner). Legend also maintains that no graves were allowed to be dug near those of these hated mercenaries.

In addition to the Hessians, some of whom were billeted in the Hasbrouck house a short distance away, are the graves of some noted members of the Hasbrouck family who were quite influential in Newburgh. Facing Grand Street are the graves of Isaac Hasbrouck, who was the son of Colonel Jonathan Hasbrouck, as well as Isaac's sons Jonathan III, Eli and their three wives. Isaac's son, Jonathan III, was the last owner of the Hasbrouck house, a dwelling that served as General Washington's headquarters in 1782-1783.



Another notable grave connected to the Hasbrouck family is that of Martin Weigand. For many years, Weigand was the principal tavern owner in Newburgh. Some believe that his first tavern was located at Liberty and Broad streets until in the late 1700s when he moved it to its present location

on Liberty Street in the northwest corner of the cemetery. Numerous efforts have been made to buy and restore the old tavern, now boarded up and in a state of decay.

The history of the cemetery has always been a tenuous one. A commission was created for the upkeep and governance of the cemetery, which included the appointment of five commissioners. According to an 1865 Newburgh newspaper, the commissioners had a budget of 250 dollars. By 1886, the commissioners had a wrought iron fence installed to surround the burial ground and replace a less durable one that was in disrepair.

According to the *Newburgh Evening News*, the start of the decline of the cemetery can be traced to a charter change in Newburgh that changed the form of city government to a city manager in 1916-17. The commission and its budget were not included in this new charter, and without funding, maintenance was difficult, if not impossible. Even before the end of the commission, a 1905 *Sunday Telegram* article reported that local residents were decrying the state of the gravesites of the founding fathers of Newburgh. That article, however, noted that the cemetery continued to receive funding until at least the 1940s.

The Old Town Cemetery's history from around World War I to the early 1990s was one of neglect. Eventually, local resident volunteers began mowing, clearing weeds, and conducting other routine maintenance. However, they faced larger issues of people sleeping in the cemetery, vandalism, drug use, and graffiti. These problems were nothing new for ancient cemeteries or cemeteries that were all but abandoned.



In a [previous article](#) I wrote for the *New York History*, I noted some of the problems with maintaining and preserving older or abandoned cemeteries and burial grounds, which has become a contentious issue in New York State. In a time of stretched budgets, minimal maintenance, sometimes as little as twice a year, has often become the norm.

The Old Town Cemetery's future looked bleak until money was secured for the restoration of the Roberson Mausoleum in 1999, as well as the graves of two Congressmen buried in the cemetery, Jonathan Fisk and Thomas McKissock. Their monuments were cleaned and repaired. The [Friends of the Old Town Cemetery](#) were also organized that year at a meeting of the Newburgh Preservation Association, a group dedicated to preserving Newburgh's historic past.

The mission statement of the friends group is simple: "To ensure ongoing restoration, care, landscaping, documentation, promotion, and celebration of Old Town Cemetery, both as an historic resource and as a strolling park." Today, the Friends of Old Town Cemetery are moving closer toward realizing their dreams for this one-of-a-kind place. It is slowly becoming a tourist attraction complete with events, as well as a place of refuge from the hustle and bustle of urban life for city dwellers. They recently held a living history event in the cemetery featuring some of its more well-known occupants.

Today, Old Town Cemetery is a testament to what one community can do when a few individuals are determined, sometimes against formidable odds, to make a difference.

Photos: From top to bottom; Eli Hasbrouck Grave (Courtesy of Friends of Old Town Cemetery); Robinson's Mausoleum before its restoration (HABS/HAER Library of Congress); Weigand's Tavern (AJ Schenkman); the restored Robinson's Mausoleum (Courtesy of Daniel Chase).

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