

ORIGINS AND GROWTH OF ASPEN GROVE CEMETERY

By Stephen Robert Katz, October, 2014

A visitor to Aspen Grove Cemetery, especially when the foliage of its abundant trees is in full autumn color, might well conclude that it is one of the loveliest spots in Massachusetts. It is a place of great natural beauty, with hills, valleys, and verdure, all complemented by numerous stately monuments and statues. It also offers a glimpse into Ware's past, its plot markers and gravestones serving as a record of many of the town's noted families and individuals, tracing some of them over generations.

The size and configuration of Aspen Grove Cemetery has evolved over a period of many years, thanks to donations of land to the Town of Ware by civic-minded residents and through the town's purchases of additional parcels.

The cemetery was founded on a twenty-five-acre tract donated by Orrin Sage to the Inhabitants of the Town of Ware in 1852 with the stipulation that it "be used by said Inhabitants for a Cemetery or place of Burial and for no other purpose."¹

Prior to this gift, the town, facing a need for burial space in addition to that available at the cemetery at the East Church, had appointed a committee to consider the acquisition of a new public burial ground. The committee had planned to purchase from Thomas Richardson, for a price of \$500, the tract ultimately donated by Sage. However, before the purchase was completed, Sage offered to buy the property instead and provide it to the town.² He did so, paying the \$500 price to Richardson.

Orrin Sage was originally from Middletown, Connecticut. Two merchants in that town set him up in business in Blandford, Massachusetts. There, he became a successful dealer in cheese, and "built up a character for integrity and benevolence, alike an honor to himself and the mercantile profession."³ While he and his family were living in Blandford, his daughter Harriet married William Hyde, the senior member of what became a Ware banking family, and moved to Ware.⁴ Hyde was president of the Ware Savings Bank.⁵ Orrin Sage moved to Ware in 1848, and became a banker

himself. He served as president of the Hampshire Manufacturers' Bank from 1848 to 1865 and thereafter a director of its successor, the Ware National Bank, and a vice president of the Ware Savings Bank.⁶ An active philanthropist, he was described in his obituary as “modest and retiring in his nature, quiet and unpretending in his habits.”⁷ He died in 1875, and among the several bequests in his will was one leaving \$3,000 to the Town of Ware for the care and upkeep of the cemetery.⁸

The area given by Sage—the oldest portion and the core of the cemetery—fans northward between the present Pleasant and Aspen Streets (this area roughly corresponds to the current sections of the cemetery below sections Q, R, S, Y, and Z).^{*} As described in the deed, the tract was bounded on its southern side by land of John R. Greenleaf and “the highway leading from the Village to Bailey’s mills,” which is today’s Pleasant Street. The easterly side of the tract was generally parallel to, but to the west of, the present-day Aspen Street, which had not yet been laid out. Sage’s gift did not include the area immediately at the corner of today’s Pleasant and Aspen Streets, which was owned by other persons and acquired later.

To visualize the tract, imagine a baseball diamond with Pleasant Street as the third base line and the eastern boundary, set back from Aspen Street, as the first base line, but without the piece at the corner containing home plate and the batter’s box.

That corner piece was secured for the cemetery by means of two land acquisitions. In 1890, the town purchased from John R. Greenleaf and his sisters, Rhoda E. and Sarah M. Greenleaf, the lot on Pleasant Street, near the intersection with Aspen Street, on which the cemetery office now stands. The town paid \$800 for this property. Then, in 1910, the Greenleafs donated to the town the adjacent lot, directly at the corner of and abutting the two streets. There was a house on that lot in which the Misses Greenleaf were residing (John R., a physician, was living in Gardner),⁹ and, in the deed, the Greenleafs reserved “to ourselves and to the survivor of us the right to occupy the dwelling house on said premises for one year from date hereof without charge.”¹⁰

^{*} The current sections of the cemetery are most easily seen on the consolidated map of Aspen Grove Cemetery posted by the Ware Cemetery Commission on the town’s web site: http://www.townofware.com/Pages/WareMA_Cemeteries/index.

In 1892, the Town of Ware purchased a 7.2-acre parcel from John H. Storrs, for \$1,200, thereby extending the cemetery northward to the southern shores of Snow's Pond.¹¹ Continuing the baseball diamond analogy, this acquisition deepened center and right field. (Roughly, this area corresponds to sections Q, R, and part of S of the current cemetery.) Storrs was an active Ware real estate dealer and for many years the town's assessor and a Selectman.¹² It was his heirs who placed the clock and Westminster chimes in the Town Hall clock tower.¹³

Snow's Pond is not a naturally occurring body of water; it was formed by the dam that was built in the early 1800s across its outlet to Muddy Brook to provide water power for a grist mill, which was operated for many years by members of the Snow family.¹⁴ Storrs' deed conveyed the property "subject to any and all rights of flowage that are owned or controlled by the owner of [Snow's Pond]." The "right of flowage" allowed an owner of a dam or water mill to operate it in a manner that caused water to flow onto land owned by others, subject only to the payment of compensation.¹⁵

Areas abutting the northwesterly edge of Sage's original grant were added in increments. Together, these additions comprise a strip running from Pleasant Street, just beyond its intersection with Barnes Street, to Snow's Pond near the dam (roughly in the area of Sections Y and Z of the current cemetery). These acquisitions—to continue the baseball diamond analogy—enlarged left field.

The first addition came in 1854, when Beaman B. Sibley and Rensalaer E. Topliff, both millers from Ware,¹⁶ deeded to the town a parcel measuring 130 rods. According to the deed, the consideration for the transfer was \$16.25. Two years later, Loring Gilbert, a Ware farmer,¹⁷ conveyed a 36-rod tract to the town for a stated consideration of \$4.50. Another piece was added in this area of the cemetery in 1924, when the George H. Gilbert Manufacturing Company donated a parcel to the town.¹⁸ The company, owned by one of Ware's most prominent families, had woolen mills in Ware and the neighboring village of Gilbertville, and was in its time one of the town's principal industries.

Additional areas, extending northward along the easterly side of Snow's Pond and to the west of North Street, to where Muddy Brook flows into the pond, were acquired by the town in

separate conveyances. In April 1909, Lewis N. Gilbert donated to the town a 3 5/8-acre tract, and in July of that year John H. Storrs, his brother George D., and his two sisters, Mabel S. Dunham and Mary B. Storrs, donated another parcel of around 11.4 acres.¹⁹ In November 1913, Lewis N. Gilbert and J.H. Grenville Gilbert purchased two additional tracts from the Springfield Ice and Coal Company and presented them to the town. The Gilberts' deed of these two tracts specified that they "shall be forever used, and at all reasonable times kept and maintained available for use, as a public cemetery."²⁰

Snow's Pond was a good source of ice for commercial ice suppliers of the time, sometimes yielding cakes eighteen inches thick. The Springfield Ice and Coal Company harvested ice there and stored it in ice houses on the shores of the pond. The Gilberts' purchase of these tracts from Springfield Ice and Coal must have pleased the residents of Pleasant Street, many of whom had complained about the disturbances caused by the movement of the company's heavily laden ice trucks during nighttime hours.²¹

The provisions of the deed relating to one of the tracts donated by the two Gilberts preserved the right of R. C. Snow and his heirs "to maintain Snow's pond, so called, at its present height," and their rights as to flowage from the pond. Part of the other tract was conveyed subject to a lease that the Gilberts had previously given to the Ware Coal Company, which had purchased Springfield Ice and Coal's rights to cut ice on the pond and had an ice house and machinery on the property.²² The deed stipulated that Ware Coal's lease and its right to remove the ice house and machinery were to expire on January 1, 1916.

Lewis N. and J.H. Grenville Gilbert were members of the Ware family that owned the Gilbert woolen mills. The company's (and family's) patriarch, George H. Gilbert, gave his nephew Lewis N. an interest in the business in 1857. Upon the death of his uncle George in 1869, Lewis succeeded him as president of the company. Lewis was also at one time president of the Ware Savings Bank, served as Moderator at Ware's town meetings for thirty years, and represented Ware in the Massachusetts State Senate. One of his many acts of philanthropy to the town was the bequest of his home and surrounding estate, along with an endowment, for the Mary Lane Hospital. The hospital was so named as a memorial to his wife, Mary (Lane) Gilbert.²³

J.H. Grenville Gilbert was a son of George H. Gilbert, and was also an executive of the family business. He and his wife donated to the town the land for the beautiful Grenville Park, in memory of their only son, Grenville Brown Gilbert, who died at the age of fifteen of bronchial pneumonia.²⁴

Lewis N. Gilbert made another gift of land for the cemetery in 1912. He purchased from Bertha E. Billings, of New Salem, a thirteen-acre tract lying between Greenwich Road and Muddy Brook, north of the cemetery, and donated it to the town. In making this gift, he sought to prevent the purchase of the land by others who might put it to uses that would impair the natural beauty of the cemetery. Along with the land itself, the deed conveyed to the town “all right to compensation on account of the flowage of any part of said premises by the dam erected at Snow’s Mill;” further, the conveyance of the land was subject to existing rights of flowage possessed by the owners of the dam.²⁵

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Aspen Grove Cemetery has been in existence for over one hundred sixty years. It is an important part of the town’s heritage, not only because of those who are interred and memorialized there, but also as a testament to the munificence of those who contributed to its establishment and growth.

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- ¹ Deed dated September 1, 1852, recorded in Hampshire County Registry of Deeds, book 145, page 447.
- ² *Springfield Union*, July 17, 1952. (All newspapers cited in these notes have been accessed via www.genealogybank.com, a subscription service).
- ³ Josiah Gilbert Holland, *History of Western Massachusetts*, part III (Springfield: Samuel Bowles and Company, 1855), 11, 14 (accessed via www.openlibrary.org).
- ⁴ Records of the Town Clerk of Blandford, Massachusetts, Marriage of William Hyde of Ware to Harriet Sage of Blandford, July 4, 1836, recorded book 4, page 485 (accessed via www.ancestry.com, a subscription service).
- ⁵ Pease-Hyde Papers, 1797–1859 (A collection of papers given to Historic Deerfield, catalogued as S 929.2 P363p, Manuscript, 2 boxes; accessed at http://www.historic-deerfield.org/files/9413/7287/9026/Pease-Hyde_Papers.pdf); Arthur Chase, *History of Ware, Massachusetts* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1911), 245.
- ⁶ *Aegis and Transcript* (Worcester, Mass.), February 18, 1865; *Springfield Republican*, June 11, 1866; June 24, 1875; Arthur Chase, 245.
- ⁷ *Springfield Republican*, June 24, 1875.
- ⁸ *Springfield Republican*, July 7, 1875.
- ⁹ *Ware Directory 1906–7* (Boston: Bass & Company), 73; *Ware Directory 1910–11* (Boston: Bass & Company, 1910), 70; *Gardner Directory 1910–11* (New Haven, Conn.: Price, Lee & Co.: 1910), 60 (all Directories accessed via www.ancestry.com); *Directory of Deceased American Physicians, 1804-1929* (accessed via www.ancestry.com).
- ¹⁰ The two deeds, recorded in Hampshire County Registry of Deeds, are respectively: deed dated April 21, 1890, book 433, page 188; deed dated March 23, 1910, book 652, page 559.
- ¹¹ Deed dated April 28, 1892, recorded in Hampshire County Registry of Deeds, book 449, page 339.
- ¹² *Springfield Republican*, January 17, 1900.
- ¹³ Arthur Chase, 238.
- ¹⁴ Arthur Chase, 4, 8; *Springfield Republican*, May 18, 1921.
- ¹⁵ The 1998 decision of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court in *Dorey v. Estate of Spicer*, 715 A.2d 182 (1998), provides a history of the right of flowage dating back to the Province of Massachusetts Bay.
- ¹⁶ Massachusetts State Census, Ware, Hampshire County, 1855 (accessed via www.ancestry.com).
- ¹⁷ United States Census, Ware, Hampshire County, Massachusetts, 1850; Massachusetts State Census, Ware, Hampshire County, 1865 (accessed via www.ancestry.com).
- ¹⁸ The three deeds, recorded in Hampshire County Registry of Deeds, are respectively: deed dated May 16, 1854, book 155, page 126; deed dated June 25, 1856, book 167, page 37; deed dated January 14, 1924, book 800, page 431.
- ¹⁹ The two deeds, recorded in Hampshire County Registry of Deeds, are respectively: deed dated April 13, 1909, book 642, page 61; deed dated July 1, 1909, book 644, page 407.
- ²⁰ Deed dated November, 1913, recorded in Hampshire County Registry of Deeds, book 700, page 467.
- ²¹ *Springfield Republican*, July 31, 1913; January 8, 1918; *Refrigerating World, Incorporating Cold Storage and Ice Trade Journal*. 46, no. 6 (December, 1913): 48 (accessed via books.google.com).
- ²² *Refrigerating World, Incorporating Cold Storage and Ice Trade Journal* 46, no. 6 (December, 1913) (accessed via books.google.com): 48; *Springfield Republican*, January 6, 1914.
- ²³ Arthur Chase, 223, 245; John Houghton Conkey and Dorothy Dunham Conkey, *History of Ware, Massachusetts, 1911–1960* (Barre, Mass.: Barre Gazette, Published for the Bicentennial of the Town of Ware, Massachusetts, 1961), 78–79, 329.

²⁴ Arthur Chase, 10; *Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, March 5, 1933; *Deaths Registered in the Town of Southborough for the Year 1901*, page 429, item no.8 (accessed via www.ancestry.com).

²⁵ Deed dated July 2, 1912, recorded in Hampshire County Registry of Deeds, book 696, page 405; *Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening* 22, no. 5 (July, 1912): 122 (accessed via books.google.com).