

21st century technology updates old cemeteries

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AUBURN — It was the moment Ken Ethier had been waiting for.

He knows Clark Cemetery is home to at least 14 gravestones. There's a good chance there may be more.

Last week Ethier, vice chairman of the Auburn Historical Commission, had the opportunity to watch employees from Geophysical Survey Systems, Inc., survey the Prospect Street cemetery with ground penetrating radar machines to find out exactly how many bodies are there.

Ethier joined the Rev. Kenneth Knox, chairman of the Cemetery Commission, and Robert Perry of topo**Graphix**, a cemetery mapping company based in Hudson, N.H., along with other members of the Auburn community at the Nov. 23 survey.

"We know that there are 14 graves, but there could be 30," Ethier said. "You never know. It's very exciting. We're using 2004 technology in a 1750 cemetery. That is something."

Dan Welch and Kenneth Corcoran of Geophysical Survey Systems, Inc., based in North Salem, N.H., mapped out grids in the cemetery. Then, they pulled the ground penetrating radar machine through each grid, measuring 25 centimeters long. The machine allowed the surveyors to view eight feet underground.

The information from the radar will be entered into a computer where the data will be analyzed. Welch said he would discover the exact number of burials after the Thanksgiving holiday.

"What the end result will be is a horizontal map to slice in different depths," Welch explained. "We'll get a print out and see how many people are actually buried."

Welch said human remains are not seen on the computer, but the underground bodies look like upside down "U's."

"Judging by the information we've seen so far, we should have definitive results," Welch noted. "It's looking good so far."

Welch, a training manager and archeologist for the company, said his company is mainly an equipment and sales organization that produces the machines. He said he enjoys using them, especially in unique situations such as Clark Cemetery.

"It's great to be outside and be in a town where everyone is so enthusiastic and excited," Welch noted. "This situation here is common where people forget about these cemeteries. It's great to find them again to be able to preserve and identify them."

Knox was amazed at the technology Geophysical Survey Systems was using.

"This just blows my mind," Knox stated. "This is so exciting. This will help us have a definitive answer as to how many are in here. Otherwise, we'd be guessing."

Perry, who has been busy digitally mapping out Hillside Cemetery, said he has worked with the surveying company before.

"I've done a lot of work with these guys and they're one of the best," Perry acknowledged. "I've found their name and information all over the Internet. They're a top-notch company."

Ethier said the cemetery, near the Oxford-Auburn line, could be as old as 1750. The far right corner of the graveyard is on the Oxford town line, but Auburn's Cemetery Commission will be the primary caretakers of the site.

Ethier said the majority gravestones do not have names or dates written on them, leaving historians no idea who is buried at the site.

He noted that some people in the 1800s and early 1900s used to steal the fieldstones out of the ground and use them as walkway entrances to homes or as house foundations.

"This information that we'll get will help us out tremendously," Ethier said of the survey. "Then once this is taken care of, I want to get this maintainable for the Cemetery Commission. Maybe if space is available, plots could be purchased. Maybe that's 100 years from now. Who knows what could happen?"

Last week's event would not have occurred had Ethier not stumbled onto a Massachusetts law in June that allowed him to clean up the cemetery because it was abandoned.

"In simple terms," Ethier stated in September. "The law says an abandoned or neglected cemetery can be taken care of by the town, using tax money, and selectmen or a cemetery commission can find someone to maintain it."

Once the cemetery has been cleaned, Ethier said the Cemetery Commission will have control of it.

"Our turn will come later," Knox said of the Cemetery Commission. "Cleaning the area and having these guys come in here is Ken's bag and he's done a great job. Once it's cleaned, we'll be able to take care of it like our other cemeteries."