

MAPPING THE PAST

Radar mapping at Glenwood Cemetery aims to reveal long-forgotten grave sites

Maynard - As the sun beat down on the grass of Glenwood Cemetery on a recent summer morning, Bob Perry and his son Jesse were searching the cemetery, looking for a grave. But these two men weren't looking at engraved markers complete with names and dates. Instead, these guys were staring fixedly on a small computer screen attached to a device that looked like an industrial floor buffer. They hauled the buffer, actually a ground-penetrating radar sled, slowly back and forth, waiting for the black dot on the screen to jump, a clear indicator they had found their target — a collection of unmarked graves dating back more than 90 years.

On this recent hot September morning, the two men were searching for signs of at least 13 unmarked graves holding victims of the 1918 influenza epidemic. It's an effort to ensure a piece of the town's history is not forgotten. The town and the Maynard Historical Commission hired Perry, and his family-owned company Topographix to scan the area and map those unmarked graves.

"We are looking for a definite hyperbolic activity with arches," said Perry, pointing at the computer screen on his three-wheeled machine. "Anytime we get an anomaly, that shows up as a hit that shows me there's something in the ground." At any sign of activity on the screen, Perry stopped to mark the spot on the green mossy ground with a mini red flag.

Because the victims were buried in wooden coffins that have since disintegrated, the ground is marked by clear depressions. At one point, Perry's son stumbled into a depression.

"Well, that's a burial there, if I've ever seen one," said Perry.

New technology to find old graves

For the last eight years, Perry has been mapping cemeteries, traveling from his home base in New Hampshire to cemeteries all over the country like Maynard's Glenwood. Recently, he traveled to Savannah, Ga., looking for remains of Civil War veterans. While some of what Perry finds are obviously graves, often things are not so clear-cut. The key, he said, is to stay positive.

But this search for burials is a particularly special case for Perry, who will use the information he finds in a case study he is working on.

"An epidemic sheds a different light on this," said Perry. "With mass burials you can have more than one in a spot."

Peggy Brown, the head of the town's Historical District Commission and member of the Community Preservation Committee, spearheaded the project. Brown has long been fascinated by the mystery surrounding old historic cemeteries, especially Glenwood Cemetery.

"I've always been interested in the history of Maynard," she said. "I've just been personally really interested in the cemetery."

In 1997, Brown began recording and creating a database of headstones. That work fueled Brown's curiosity about Section 7-0 of Glenwood, a large area bare of any tombstones.

After poring through cemetery records and old newspaper clippings in the library and Town Hall, Brown discovered the unmarked area was a possibly location of at least 13 people who died during the flu epidemic. Records of many of the victims were not kept, or have been lost. In some cases, headstones weren't carved as bodies were buried in haste.

The numbers, for a small town are staggering. Brown learned that, in the eight-month stretch from Sept. 22, 1918 through May 29, 1919, 53 people in Maynard died of the flu. At least 26 were buried in Glenwood and 13 of those are unmarked.

The town steps in

Brown said she was determined to learn more and in October 2008 submitted an application for funding through the Community Preservation Act. The CPA allows for the preservation, rehabilitation and restoration of historic resources that have been determined by the local Historic Commission to be significant in a town's culture. In May, Town Meeting granted Brown and the CPC about \$3,000 for ground penetrating radar surveying of the area in question.

"It is important to acknowledge and to keep alive the memory of our past citizens," wrote Brown in her final application for CPA funding. "This project will honor their passing and the contributions they made to the town of Maynard."

Brown wrote that Glenwood Cemetery is an integral part of the Maynard community and it is important the town preserve that record of its earlier inhabitants.

"I've always wanted to do this ever since I realized the records were incomplete," said Brown.

She said the research has added relevance, given the heightened concern over the emergence of the so-called swine flu.

In 1918, Glenwood was the burial place for victims of this abominable killer that wiped out more than 50 million people worldwide. But today, the cemetery houses some 6,400 known burials on 11 acres and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Lots of work left

Over the last two weeks, Perry and his son scanned more than 3,000 square feet of cemetery ground using both a utility scanner and a 3-D scanner. Perry said he often returns to double-check his findings after the first scan because things like soil or recent weather could affect the outcome. The duo left 79 red flags representing what could be 79 unmarked graves.

Once she has Perry's findings, Brown said she will install individual granite markers and a central commemorative monument and update the cemetery plot records.



Ann Ringwood/Wicked Local staff photographer

Peggy Brown, chairman of the Maynard Historical Commission, is shown a point of high confidence by Bob Perry. He is using ground penetrating radar in Maynard's Glenwood Cemetery to hopefully find victims of the 1918-1919 influenza epidemic.