

# Mapping out a living.

## Litchfield man uses self-education, talent to restore, digitize cemetery maps

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Above Bob Perry's desk, a small piece of paper reads, "Formal education will make you a living; self education will make you a fortune." The quote, by business writer and speaker Jim Rohn, suits Perry perfectly. He is a fourth-grade dropout and the owner of a successful business called topoGraphix, a digital mapping and virtual site surveying company.

Perry, who has lived in Litchfield for the past four years, was recently honored by the state Department of Education for his entrepreneurial achievements. He is working on six projects right now and has about 60 more lined up. "If I don't have three things going on at one time, I'm bored as hell," Perry said.

He specializes in restoring old paper maps of cemeteries and digitizing them so they can be printed and updated. He can also create maps using paper lot cards, spreadsheets or other forms of record keeping.

Right now, Perry is mapping Edgewood Cemetery in Nashua. The map he was given to update is from January 1905. He describes working on the maps as like piecing together a puzzle. Jeff Snow, superintendent of the cemetery, said the greatest benefits to computerizing maps and records are safekeeping and convenience.

"Having everything stored digitally offers great security against fires and other disasters," Snow said. Snow will be able to retrieve and print maps and records very easily after Perry has finished his work. He also will be able to direct people to burial sites with an entire map of the cemetery. Right now, he only has segmented maps of the cemetery that are not as useful.

Perry learned the computer graphics skills he needed to computerize maps after enrolling four years ago in the federal Vocational Rehabilitation Program, a program that serves those with disabilities. He has come a long way from the fourth grade. Perry, now 56, said he had problems in school because he is dyslexic. Back then, he said, no one knew what the disability was, so he was placed in special education classes.

After leaving home at 14, Perry decided he wanted to enlist in the military. He joined the Navy 10 days after he turned 17. He could barely read and write, and said he failed three written tests before he passed and was sent to basic training.

While in the Navy, he met a teacher who had worked with disabled people before he was drafted as a cook on the ship. Perry asked him for help in writing a letter to his family. He said his shipmate helped him learn to read and write using "Dick and Jane" books.

Perry served in the Vietnam War, where he said he developed hearing problems and vertigo. When he left the service, he entered a training program for mechanical drafting. He worked as a technical illustrator for nine years before he began making hand-drawn maps of cities. One day, he found a map of Lowell, Mass., from 1879 and wanted to see how different it looked today. He took aerial shots of the city and decided to map it out.

Perry discovered he had a talent for making maps and began to work for some local cities and businesses, but said he found himself out of work when companies began using computerized graphics. "I spent years developing my skills. Then AutoCAD came out," he said, referring to the popular design software. "I said there's no way I was going to go that way."

He took a job driving a limousine for about \$5 an hour plus tips. Before long, though, he found himself wanting to get back to mapmaking. After a car accident that left him unable to drive for a living, he enrolled in the VR program. He decided to focus on mapping burial grounds after he was asked to map a cemetery in Massachusetts. He took the job planning to farm it out to someone more experienced in mapping cemeteries, and found there wasn't anyone.

"It kind of snowballed from there," Perry said. Perry also has a passion for history, especially with the city of Boston, where he grew up. He finds plenty of history within the cemeteries he maps. On site, he often finds himself reading headstones when he should be mapping them. Sometimes, by studying old maps, he even finds very old graves buried under new ones.

Each cemetery takes about 125 hours of work, and Perry has traveled as far as Colorado for projects. He had always wanted to work for himself, and said he feels very comfortable running his own business. "Every inch, I'm doing it my way," he said.