

Presentation to The Community Services Committee of the City of Owen Sound

Re: The Potter's Field Monument and Plaque

Wednesday, September 19, 2018 at 5:30 pm

Held at: The Professional Centre

945 3rd Ave. East

Room 220

During the past year, in a volunteer capacity, I've facilitated two tours at Greenwood Cemetery. The first was in January for the Lupercalia Winter Arts Festival, and the second was for the City's Doors Open event. Although the tours were not identical, they both focused on remarkable women in Owen Sound's history, inspired by the theme of this year's Lupercalia Festival: Women and Children First.

Each tour focused on approximately 6-7 remarkable women, as well as an overview of Potter's Field, also known as the Indigent Lot. The following is taken from Terri Jackson's Article *Land for the Living* in the Northern Terminus, The African Canadian Journal, published by Grey Roots in 2009:

"In every cemetery, there is a section for those families of lesser means. Strangers' Plot, Poor Grounds or perhaps Potter's Field are some of the names used for this section. At Greenwood Cemetery, this section is known as the Indigent Plot. These grounds are closed and no longer used for what they were intended. The first recorded burial (deaths were recorded once a month) in the Indigent Plot was John Boddy age 46 years on January 3rd, 1860, although approximately 40 remains had been removed from Chalmer's Cemetery in the middle 1850s for reburial at Greenwood Cemetery. In 1989 another 4 remains were removed from Chalmer's and interred in the Indigent Plot. 1242 people are buried in the Indigent Plot and of those a significant number are Blacks from our community. In the earliest days of the County Town, those families who could not afford to purchase a plot had it purchased for them by the County Office. In the spring of 1916, Council addressed the need for reduced fees for families struggling to purchase a plot and under bylaw 1765 developed a separate structure: 12½ cents per square foot in sections 16 and 17 or 30 cents per square foot for section 18."

Through a publication of the Grey & Bruce Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society, originally compiled by Terri Jackson, I was able to access a list of all known names for persons buried in the Potter's Field. A copy of it has been emailed to Staci Ollerton.

At each of my Greenwood cemetery tours, we ended with a visit to Potter's Field. Participants were presented with this list, and they were invited to read aloud the name or names of persons on it, their age, death year and other details, as available, although there are few.

As you can imagine, this can be quite visceral experience for tour participants, connecting the present with the past, and in a small way, bringing back to life the very people who have gone to their deaths unmarked, their lives almost entirely forgotten. People like Unknown Child, found drowned in the Sydenham River in 1874. And another infant, likely intentionally drowned

in 1933. Or the twins born on Christmas Day in 1892, the children of John Rosie. The nonagenarian, Margaret Bell, who died less than a year short of her 100th birthday in 1907. Or William Handy at the age of 96 in 1901.

Then there are the dozens if not hundreds of people who were escaped slaves, or the descendants of escaped slaves that came to make Owen Sound famous as the Terminus of the Underground Railroad. A massive proportion of our black community is also buried here. Names like Courtney, Miller, Green, Jackson, Chuckee, and others. Even John Daddy Hall, arguably one of Owen Sound's most notable citizens, and who lived to be 117 and whose plaque is prominently featured outside City Hall, is buried in the Potter's Field. Multiple books have been written about John Daddy Hall, lecturers have focused on him, artists still feature him in their work. He lays in Potter's field without a marker.

Even Cook Teets is buried here, hung in the courtyard of the old Grey County Courthouse in 1884. Cook Teets was blind, and even at the time that he was tried for allegedly murdering his wife, it is said that the case against him was based on circumstantial evidence. There was a request for mercy from both residents of Grey County and members of the Ontario bar, but they were unsuccessful. It took almost 100 years, but in 1976, Canada abolished the death penalty. In the US, the ACLU says that "Since 1973, over 156 people have been released from death rows in 26 states because of innocence. Nationally, at least one person is exonerated for every 10 that are executed." We will never be able to say whether this man was innocent or guilty, but his story is an unusual one for Owen Sound. He joins the ranks of those unmarked in the large, open field in Greenwood Cemetery that most are entirely unaware is the final resting place for greater than 1200 of its citizens.

On my last tour, one of the participants approached me when the tour was finished. His words were, "These people were underdogs. I was an underdog too." And with that, and no solicitation whatsoever, this man offered to pledge a substantial amount of money towards the creation of a monument for those buried in Potter's Field.

In discussions via email with Pam Coulter, Amanda Tenant, Adam Parsons, it is my understanding that the Potter's Field is owned wholly by The City of Owen Sound, and that no necessary permissions are required outside of Council to allow for a monument to be put up at the site. It is likely that a plaque will also be needed to accompany the monument, to give an overview of this project, and to direct people to a website that better speaks to the people buried in Potter's Field. I will be working with the local museums over the fall to host an open house to get feedback from citizens about the ideas they have for the monument, and to gather information whenever possible about the people buried within Potter's Field.

My goal today is to confirm interest on the part of the City to move forward with this project, and to get some direction regarding any project requirements that may help shape the scope of the project.

The specific questions I have at this time are as follows:

1. Is there a size maximum for the monument, and if so, what will that be? Getting specific direction for a maximum of square footage or a maximum by height, width and depth would be very helpful prior to any development of plans.
2. Will the City also allow a plaque to be placed by the monument?
3. Will the City guarantee that the monument will be placed on Potter's Field in an open, accessible area?

It is important to note that the donor is willing to support all costs development and installation costs, with his prior approval of expenses and plans prior to execution and up to an undisclosed amount, for these initiatives. It will be my job to liaise with the donor, who wishes to remain anonymous at this time.

That said, it is my hope that the City would be interested in hosting the website project that comes as a result of this project, shining a light on the lives of those buried in Potter's Field. The scope of this project is still being determined through the development of a team to work together to solicit stories from the community and collectively research. Terri Jackson is integral to this project. Naomi Norquay is also interested, the Marine Rail Museum and Grey Roots have also expressed interest in the project. In the past, The City of Owen Sound did in fact have a PDF of all persons buried in Greenwood's Potter's Field online, but when the City's website was rebuilt, this was lost. We are asking for your support in principle for this additional portion of the project, with parameters to be developed in the coming months.

Thank you in advance for your time, and we hope that we can work together to create this worthy monument for the people of Owen Sound.

Aly Boltman
September 18, 2018