



Cortland Rural Cemetery

110 TOMPKINS STREET • CORTLAND, NEW YORK 13045

MEMORIAL DAY 2001

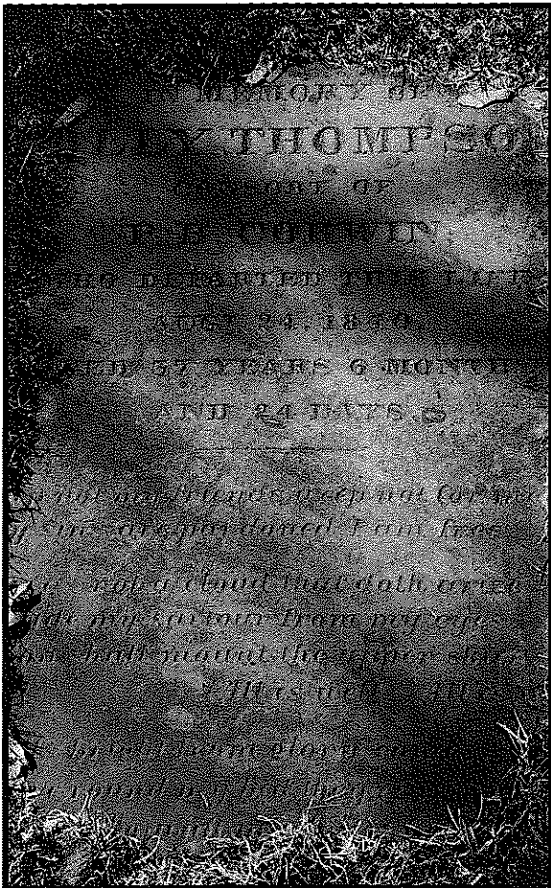
“Although He Is Dead He Speaketh”

By CHRISTINE BUCK

People who are fond of visiting old graveyards have at least one thing in common—the enjoyment of reading intriguing epitaphs. From the Greek for “upon a tomb,” Webster’s dictionary defines “epitaph” as, “An inscription on a tomb or gravestone in memory of the person buried there.” In addition to being an entertaining pastime, the study of epitaphs is enriching and rewarding. It embraces history and biography; literature and religion; social behavior and folklore.

One sees epitaphs ranging from one word to covering an entire gravestone. There are inscriptions

“Weep not my friends weep not for me,
My sins are pardoned, I am free.
There’s not a cloud that doth arise
To hide my saviour from my eyes.
All is well, all is well.
Angels bright from glory come,
The’re round my bed, the’re in my roon.
They wait to waft my spirit home.
All is well, fare ye well.”
Sally Thompson Corwin, died 1840 (Lot G-32)



Gravestone of Sally Thompson Corwin (1840) (Cortland Rural Cemetery)

focused on occupations, age and military; on illness, cause of death, harshness of death and afterlife; on family relationships, children and tears; on literature, bible verse, friendship, angels and more.

Epitaphs have been used since ancient times as symbols of love and remembrance for the deceased. The Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans all had them. England’s epitaphs began during the Roman occupation years, and the pilgrims then carried the custom to the New World. Settlers coming from New England to our upstate New York wilderness in the late 1700’s brought the epitaph with them. Because of hardships, most of our area’s early burials did not have gravestones. Those that did were marked with only a simple fieldstone or wooden symbol, perhaps with initials carved by the family.

As living conditions and travel improved, stonemasons from New England migrated here and provided their services regionally. In their workshops during the winter they carved designs on the native stone gravemarkers and inscribed “Here Lies” or “In Memory Of.” In the spring they traveled by wagon to outlying areas to sell their monuments and gravestone carving services. They would board at an inn, advertise their arrival, and take tombstone orders.

The earliest colonial gravestone art and epitaphs reflected the religious tenor of the times. Religion was bleak and stark. God was powerful and revengeful.

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“A Revolutionary Soldier.”
Hezekiah Herrick, died 1848 (Lot J-22)

"Although He Is Dead He Speaketh" (continued from front page)

Gravestones carried dire warnings of mortality's inevitability. An example of the early religious thinking is this most frequent epitaph of early years, found in England, New England and locally, with many variations:

*Stranger, stop and cast an eye.
As you are now so once was I.
As I am now so you must be.
Prepare for death and follow me.*

A religious revival in the early 1800's brought great change to religion. Salvation by faith and eternal peace were new concepts. This produced a sense of genteelism in cemetery language. Epitaphs changed from warnings to soothing words for the bereaved such as, "Her gentle spirit soars away to dwell with God in endless day."

*"Rest. Tho, out of sight, dear to memory."
Professor George Arnold, died 1905 (Lot G-30)*

The origin of individual epitaphs varies. Sources were the Bible, literature, devotional verse, poetry, or a creative mind. Clergymen wrote epitaphs. Distinguished literary figures wrote epitaphs. Domestic poets and family members wrote epitaphs, many of which were stronger in sentiment than skill.

*"The beloved Physician"
Miles Goodyear, MD, died 1870 (Lot J-36)*

Originality was not essential, and plagiarism was common. To provide greater variety, epitaph books were produced as early as 1791. Just as we would select a greeting card today, these inscriptions were available for a family's choice.

Epitaphs were written in one of three forms: a voice from the grave, a voice of the living, or neutral. The voice from the grave speaks to the living in this epitaph remembering Col. James Bennet, who died in 1819: (CRC, Lot C-19)

*Death is a debt to nature due
Which I have paid and so must you.
Weep not my friends dry up your tears,
I must lie here till Christ appears.*

The voice of the living sometimes speaks about the deceased and sometimes to the deceased. This example is for Reverend H. R. Dunham, Presbyterian minister in Cortland, who died in 1858: (Cortland Rural Cemetery, Lot L-10)

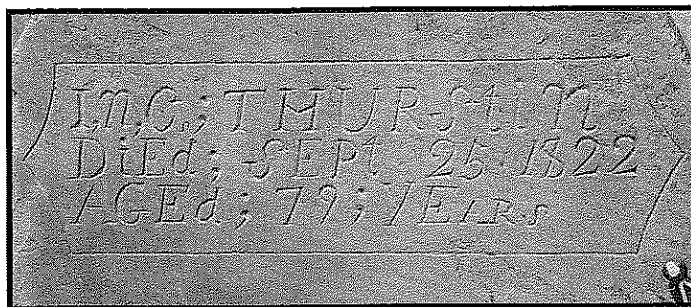
*An earnest humble devoted man of God.
Faithful unto death. He rests from his labors,
and his works do follow him."*

The neutral form relays a Bible verse, a poem or general advice such as:

Life how short. Eternity how long.

One charming aspect of reading epitaphs is viewing the contrast between the beautiful carving and the linguistic shortcomings of the early stonemasons. Stonemasons-turned-carvers were both laborers and artisans and as such displayed the skills of the common man.

There are many phonetic spellings, even of simple words (boddy = body; beond = beyond; loly = lowly). There are words divided incorrectly (wit-hstand; we-re). Occasionally a lack of planning or skill caused the available space on a line to run out before the word was done. It was then either left incomplete, or finished on the line above or the line below. There are strike-outs and wholesale chisel-outs. Forgotten letters are common, sometimes with a carat to the addition on the line above. There are words used incorrectly, rhyming troubles, grammatical errors and incorrect punctuation.



*Early Carver's Punctuation Troubles
(Upper Lisle Cemetery)*

There are antiquated words such as "relict" for "widow" and "consort" for "spouse." There are elevated (superscript) letters serving as abbreviations (doct for doctor, dau^t for daughter). There are more contractions than we see today—an apostrophe often replaces the letter "e" (pass'd, flow'r).

And there is gravestone humor. Just as grief and gaiety mingle in our lives, there is both sadness and laughter in the graveyard. Some humor results from stonemason illiteracy or error. There is occasional intentional humor, but its frequency is exaggerated. Fictional epitaphs are sometimes published as factual, making for gravestone folklore.

As with many customs, epitaphs had a period of great popularity and then people thought them old-fashioned and out of style. Their peak years in our area were from about 1820 to 1855. Then the Victorians embraced large, imposing monuments as the fashionable way to remember loved ones. Dignity

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"Although He Is Dead He Speaketh" *(continued from page 2)*

became important. For example, an 1859 regulation at the Cortland Rural Cemetery stated that no offensive or improper inscriptions were allowed. Any such tombstone would be removed by the Trustees. Some chose to display epitaphs during the Victorian years but most were shorter and more dignified, such as "Saved by Grace."



*Popular Victorian-Era Monuments
(Cortland Rural Cemetery)*

Following the Victorian era, sameness was the appropriate way to honor loved ones. After the turn of the century, most monuments were of similar style, listing only names and dates.

Epitaphs have great historical value for a community. First, they represent a written record of that community and commemorate those whom history does not remember. Women and everyday people, usually neglected in history books, are represented.

It's 1948—a pile of gravestones is discovered on a Groton Road farm just outside Cortland. Their inscriptions are recorded. For Mary Ann Lattimer, died 1835: "An honest Irish woman and a good Spinner."

Gravestones and epitaphs serve as important genealogical tools. Consider the clues to our heritage that come from inscriptions such as "Polly Wiswell, wife of Oliver Wiswell, Esq. Daughter of Capt. Asa

"Dearest babe thou has left us
Here thy loss we deeply feel
But tis God that hast bereft us
He can all our sorrows heal."
Minerva Taylor, died 1839 (Lot C-75)

Blair of Blandford, Massachusetts. Died October 13, 1819, age 33, leaving Oliver C. Wiswell her only child who was born March 10, 1816." (CRC, Lot C-10)

Epitaphs suggest social patterns. They reflect the temper and mood of a locality and period. They show personalities, occupations, anticipation of death, anxieties, achievements, religious beliefs and opinions of life of the average individual. From Rachel Wood's

(died) "About 1856 in Australia."
Seneca Mahan, (Lot G-30)

1820 epitaph we learn that her young child is "Inter'd in the same grave."

While gravestones record names and dates for identification purposes, epitaphs were written to perpetuate people's reputations and to comfort the bereaved. Survivors chose most epitaphs and considered what they thought important about their loved one. Epitaphs are symbols of love and remembrance for the deceased.

We still have a need to show love and remembrance for those who have gone before us, but now do so in other ways. We print detailed obituaries, hand out memorial cards at funerals and publish anniversary memorials in the newspaper. A walk through an active cemetery such as Cortland Rural may yield a photograph of the deceased or current tombstone art reflecting interests or hobbies—from

"He hath done all things well"
Charles Gibbs, died 1807 (Lot C-22)

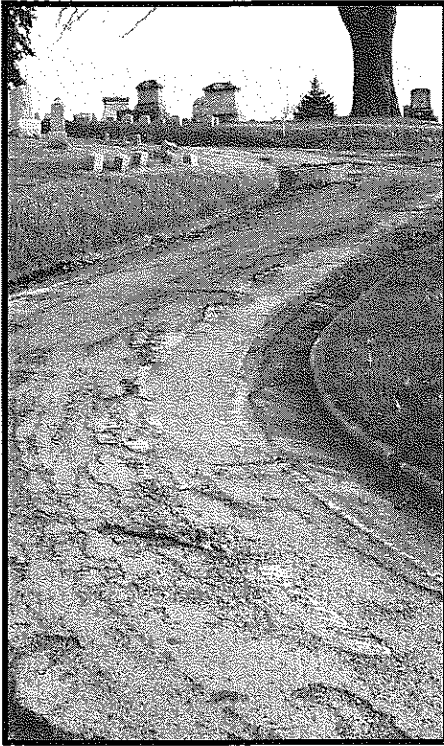
motorcycles to a family farm. Newell "Spiegle" Willcox's monument fittingly displays a trombone. (CRC, Lot C2-179) Some contemporary monuments carry an epitaph, such as for Timothy Allen Little, "Do not stand at my grave and weep; I am not there, I do not sleep." (CRC, Lot B-204)

Although the Cortland Rural Cemetery was established in 1853, near the end of the golden age of epitaphs, it hosts a wide array of inscriptions, ranging from the early 1800's to the present. When Cortland's three earlier graveyards were removed to Cortland Rural in the late 1860's, some families upgraded the monuments to the newer Victorian style. Many original monuments, along with their epitaphs, were discarded as old-fashioned; however, for those who had no family to oversee the removal and reburial, the early gravestones were simply moved with the remains. The largest concentration of these older stones is in Section C lying flat over the graves.

Many early burying grounds have vanished from the landscape, leaving few indications of their existence. Many historic gravemarkers have deteriorated with age and are no longer legible. As our old gravestones continue to decline, intriguing epitaphs of the past disappear each year. Efforts to record what remains today will perpetuate the history and personality of an earlier time.

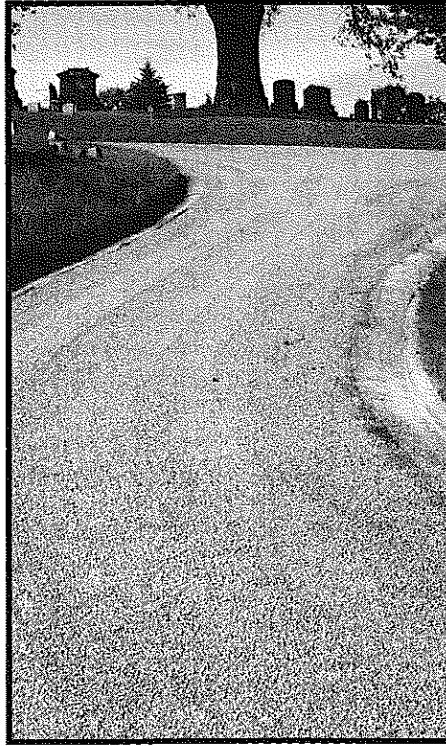
"Although he is dead he speaketh."
Samuel Jewett, died 1837 (Lot C-80)

Your Contributions at Work

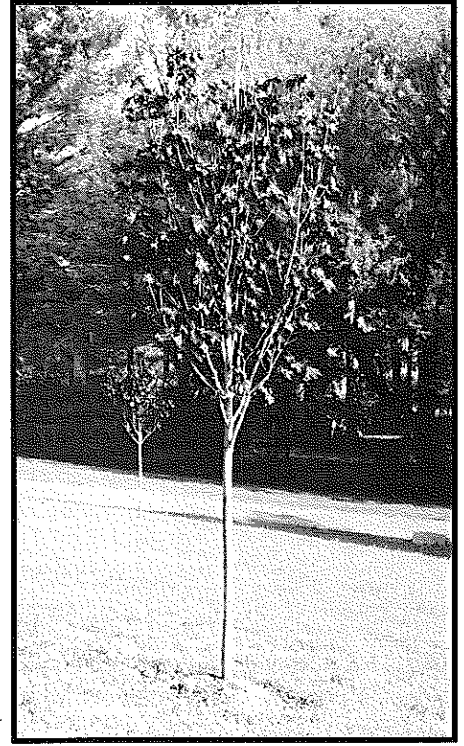


Road In Need Of Repair

Road located between Section C and Sections J & K



Road After Repair



*Crimson King Maple Trees—
Part of the Centennial Trees Planting*



Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation

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