



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE CORTLAND RURAL CEMETERY

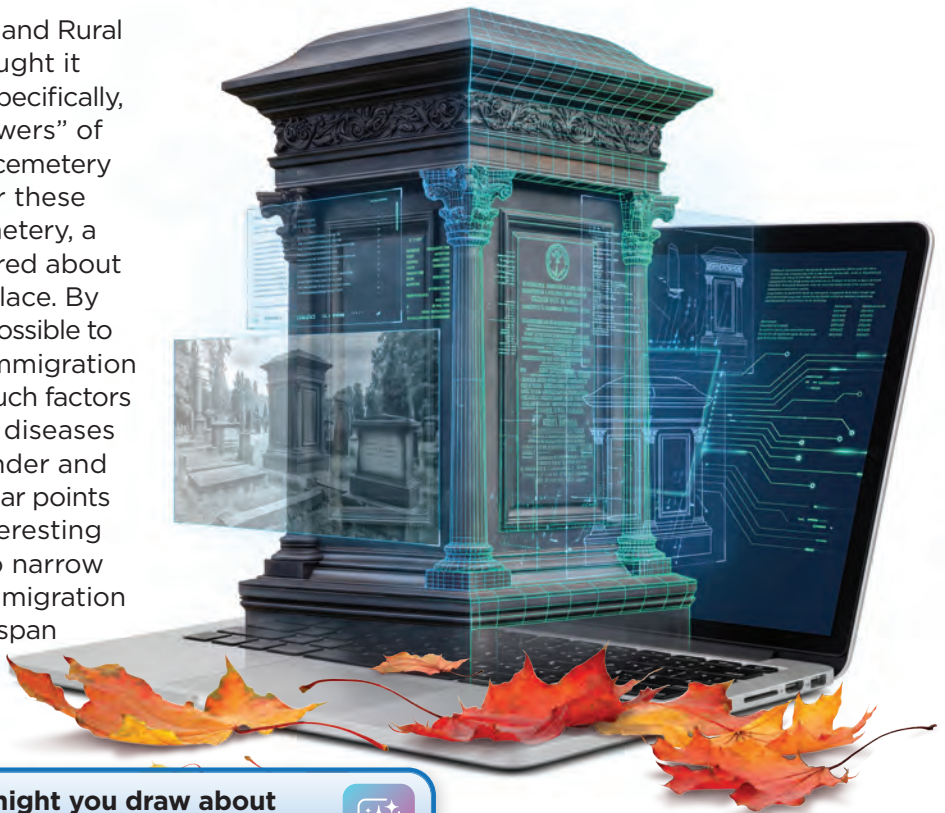
FALL 2026

Using the Future to Help Understand Our Past...

The CRC Meets AI.

BY JOHN HOESCHELE AND JOSEPH F. GOVERNALI

Although it may appear that AI and the Cortland Rural Cemetery are completely unrelated, we thought it might be interesting to bring them together. Specifically, we wanted to see if we could apply the “powers” of present-day AI to some questions about the cemetery and those who have been interred here over these 161 years. Since the establishment of the cemetery, a broad variety of information has been gathered about the people for whom it is their final resting place. By looking at these data, we thought it might be possible to explore such areas as ethnic group burials; immigration trends revealed in the burial data; the role of such factors as wars on burial data; the manner in which diseases impacted burials; relationships between gender and lifespan; and comparisons of burials at particular points in time such. Because there are so many interesting areas that could be explored, we decided to narrow down our review into three specific areas: immigration trends, spikes in burial data over time and lifespan as related to gender. Below are the prompts we gave AI to analyze the data followed by responses we received from AI.



 **Prompt 1: “What sorts of conclusions might you draw about immigration trends based on our burial data?”**



AI Answer: The cemetery burial dataset serves as clear historical record of the town’s shifting demographic and immigration waves from the early 19th through the late 20th century.

In the earliest records — spanning the mid- 1800s to the turn of the century — the surnames are overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon, English, and early colonial New England stock (e.g., Adams, Abbott, Allen, Ackley, Alvord, Annas). This reflects the original westward migration of settlers from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and eastern New York.

Beginning around the late 19th and early 20th centuries, new, distinct ethnic clusters emerge:

- **Middle Eastern/Levantine Migration:** A notable concentration of Arabic/Levantine surnames appears in the dataset, particularly the Abdallah family (with intermarriages to families such as Khauri and Fedall). Burials for individuals like Ossit C. Abdallah (d. 1944), Mary Abdallah (d. 1950), and Charles Abdallah (d. 1980) highlight a settled, multi-generational Arab American community that established deep roots in the town starting in the early-to-mid 1900s.
- **Southern & Eastern European Influx:** Surnames of Italian origin (Agostine, Ardovino, Arduini) and Eastern European stock (Achamitz, Antonnuck)

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2





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Using the Future to Understand Our Past CRC Meets Ai... (continued)

appear predominantly in mid-to-late 20th-century burials. This aligns with industrial expansion in Central New York, which drew labor for manufacturing and rail infrastructure.

- **Religious Diversity & Integration:** The record specifically notes burials in distinct sections, such as “Jewish A.”

These shifts illustrate a classic rust-belt transition: a small agricultural settlement populated by early British-descended pioneers gradually absorbing Eastern Mediterranean, Southern European, and Jewish immigrant populations as local industrial opportunities grew.

✦ **Prompt 2: “Any observations or conclusions you might draw about spikes in mortality... e.g.: Wars, pandemics, etc.?”**



AI Answer: Examining death dates and ages at interment reveals clear patterns regarding historical spikes in community mortality.

- **Infant & Child Mortality (19th to Early 20th Century)** The most striking spike in mortality visible in the early dataset is among infants and young children. The burial log includes numerous entries designated as “BABY”, “CHILD”, or listing ages in days or months:
 - **Floyd Abbott** (d. 1893, age 0, “F-BABY”)
 - **Infant Albro** (d. 1869, age 9 days)
 - **Lidney Alabam** (age 11 mins) and **James Alamanco** (age 2 days) buried in “Potters Field”
 - **Harold C. Albot** (d. 1895, age 9 months)

This concentration of infant deaths before the 1920s reflects the prevailing realities of the era prior to modern antibiotics, clean milk standards, and pediatric sanitation, where seasonal outbreaks of cholera infantum, diphtheria, and influenza claimed early lives.

- **Potter’s Field & Public Health Vulnerability** The frequent mention of “Potters Fld” (Potter’s Field) as a burial site for infants and short-lived individuals (e.g., Gary Alexander, d. 1960; Infant Alexander, d. 1961) underscores socio-economic stratification in health outcomes. Indigent families and transient laborers suffered disproportionately during localized disease outbreaks and lacked resources for private, multi-grave family lots.
- **Military Conflict Impacts** While full cause-of-death details are omitted, military service impacts appear in the records. The presence of a “Vets” section (e.g., Kate Nelson, d. 2000) and specific young adult male deaths during war eras (such as the 1917–1918 WWI period and early 1940s WWII period) align



CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

with national military losses, showing the community's involvement in global conflicts.

✦ **Prompt 3: “Similarly, anything that might be extrapolated or concluded about demographics, like gender and age?”**



AI Answer: Analyzing the age and sex variables across the centuries provides insights into human lifespan expansion, family structures, and gender demographics.

- **Significant Increase in Life Expectancy Over Time**

Comparing birth and death years shows a dramatic upward trajectory in overall lifespan between the 19th and 21st centuries:

- ❑ **19th-Century Lifespans:** Individuals born in the early 1800s frequently died in their 40s to 60s (e.g., Abram Adams, d. 1877 at age 47; Elijah Adams, d. 1829 at age 41; Eunice Aldrich, d. 1946 at age 72).

- ❑ **Modern Longevity Expansion:** By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, octogenarians and nonagenarians become the norm. Examples include Helen Jones Abbott (d. 1992 at age 91), Norman Abdallah (d. 2012 at age 97), Dudley Marvin Akin (d. 1994 at age 87), and Gertrude M. Albro (d. 2015 at age 98).

- **Gender Demographics & Widows** The record reveals a strong pattern of female longevity. A large proportion of women outlived their spouses by a decade or more, frequently documented in the notes column as “Husb [Name]” or listing surviving children.

- **Kinship Networks & Lot Utilization** The lot numbers and surviving relative notes reveal how family units utilized cemetery space across generations. Families like the Adamses, Allens, and Amesess maintained large family plots (e.g., Lot 24, Lot 23, Lot 35) spanning multiple decades, illustrating strong long-term local residency and generational continuity within the town.

As we wrap up, there are two points that should be understood about our data and findings. First, two other large cemeteries in our area (St. Mary's and Glenwood), as well as numerous smaller graveyards in our county, probably affected such factors as ethnic and religious distribution of burials in our cemetery. Another possible limitation in our findings is that we used AI to identify ethnic group identification according to surname (i.e., family name). Obviously, this approach is not as accurate as a self-report of ethnicity, but it can be useful when looking at groups of people (if its limitations are understood).

It might seem a bit strange to bring together the very old Cortland Rural Cemetery and the very new field of Artificial Intelligence, but viewing the results from our very cursory review makes clear that the outcomes of such an analysis can be fascinating. There is a great deal that can be learned about our community by applying this new technology to a variety of historical data. We look forward to working in this area in the future.

Economy Paving Once Again Donates a Truck!

The Compagni family at Economy Paving once again donated a pick-up truck the CRC this summer, the third one over several years! While previous vehicles were used exclusively but to great effect on our grounds, this beauty was made ‘road ready’ so we can use it for short errands like picking up supplies or fuel. Thanks again, Economy Paving: Organizations and supporters like you are critical to keeping us looking good and afloat!



A Tremendous Asset to Our Team...

Joseph Governali Joins CRC Board of Trustees!

We're excited to announce the election of Joseph Governali to our Board of Trustees.



Governali has been a member of the Cortland community since 1974, when he located to the city to join SUNY Cortland's Health Department, where he served as a long-term chair and from which he retired in 2010. Originally from the Bronx and New Rochelle, Governali attended Manhattan College, taught in elementary schools on Long Island, completed his graduate work at the University of Illinois, and worked with the American Medical Association in Chicago before coming to Cortland.

In addition to his leadership at the college, Governali served as board president of both the American Lung Association of Central New York and Cortland's Family and Children's Counseling Services, and he and his wife Nancy (deceased, 2025) were active and engaged supporters of other local organizations including the Lime Hollow Nature Center and Cortland Free Library.

Joe's significant board and non-profit management experience will strengthen our cemetery's oversight. Plus he has a deep personal involvement with family genealogy, an interest resulting from a variety of cemetery visits, including the largest cemetery in the country, Calvary Cemetery in Queens NY and small, rural cemeteries around Houston, Texas.



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Cortland Rural Cemetery
110 Tompkins Street
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