



# Cortland Rural Cemetery

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## A Monument for the Ages Technology Versus Tradition

by CHRISTINE BUCK

Imagine that you are walking the winding paths of the Cortland Rural Cemetery enjoying the park-like setting, beautiful views, and interesting grave markers. You spot a lovely blue-gray obelisk

monument, approach it and notice the crisp, clear raised lettering. Curious, you reach out to touch it. This isn't granite or marble, you realize. It's metal!

Yes, it is nearly-pure zinc. Many don't realize that along with grave markers of sandstone, marble, limestone, and granite, most Victorian-era cemeteries also display a modest number of metal monuments. Once familiar with the blue-gray coloring, a trained eye can spot them as "common oddities," monument styles seen in numerous rural-style cemeteries but in few numbers.

Noting the crumbling of older stone monuments and buildings in Europe and this country, many American foundries produced metal products such as statues, civic monuments, garden decorations, fences, fountains, architectural details, urns, and eagles. But only one firm manufactured zinc cemetery markers, the Monumental Bronze Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut, and its subsidiaries.

Founded in 1874, the company selected the euphemistic trade name of "white bronze" for these monuments. These cemetery memorials were touted as being more enduring than stone and able to withstand climatic effects.

The monuments and statuary produced for cemetery purposes were all made to order in many different sizes, styles, and designs, from small footstone markers, to obelisks with portrait busts, to imposing life-size statues. Only a limited number were marked with the manufacturer's name.



*Dickinson Obelisk, Lot W-53  
Cortland Rural Cemetery*

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# A Monument for the Ages

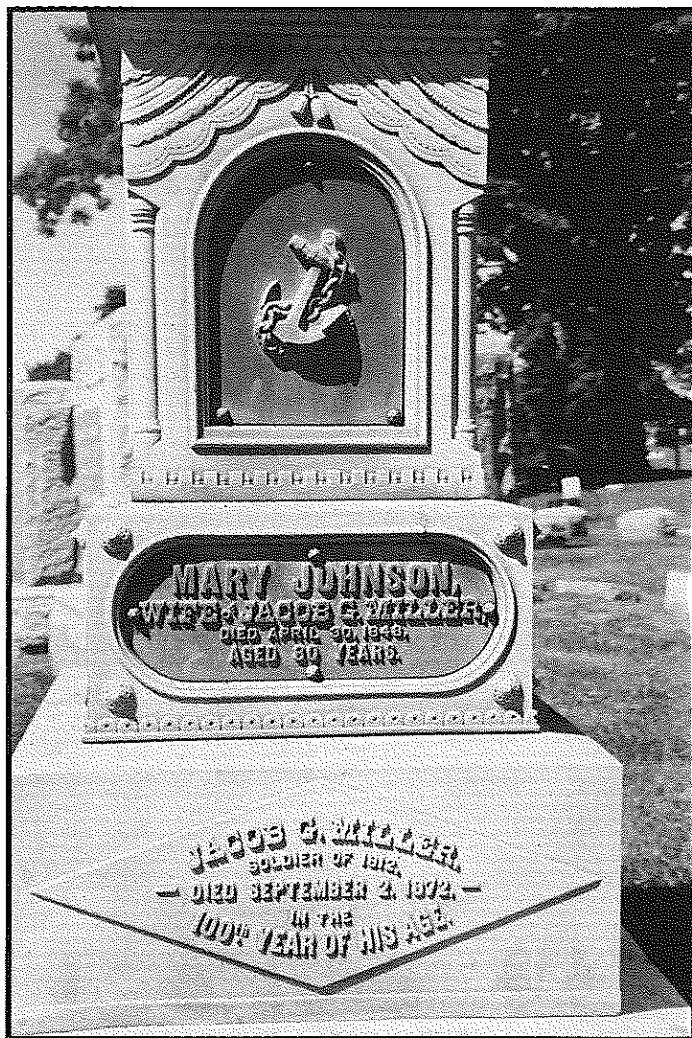
## Technology Versus Tradition *(continued from front)*

The monuments' designs, which could be stock items selected from a catalog or custom designed for a higher price, were first produced in the company's artistic studio, modeled in clay, and reproduced in plaster of Paris, from which a wax casting was produced. The final mold was made by placing refractory material around the wax pattern and the wax subsequently melted away, leaving a fine-detail mold in which the molten zinc was cast. The fusing and joining of different parts was done by using the same zinc material, at a high temperature, along the joints to form inseparable pieces.

Following the joining was a hand-finishing process; then sand-blasting, which gave the surface a pleasing appearance; and a brushed-on finishing treatment (a trade secret). A final natural corrosion layer imparted the blue color and provided protection for the metal.

There were other purported benefits of the white bronze material. The raised lettering was assured to last for ages, as opposed to other cemetery markers whose faces became illegible; the white bronze was said to eliminate the problems with moss, mildew, and tree-influenced discoloration; the metal would not be affected by atmospheric influences; and the monuments were made with removable tablets so that future inscriptions could be added. Purchasers also selected individual decorative features representing interests, occupations, fraternal organizations, or symbols of faith. These last two features made the memorials personal, yet adaptable. Lastly, the pricing was reasonable.

Rather than being sold by monument dealers, these white bronze memorials were sold by local agents using a company catalog and example in place (they hoped) in the local cemetery. The salesperson's challenge was to overcome the public's skepticism and perception that marble and granite markers were more desirable because of tradition and custom. One way of doing this, as did the early rural cemeteries when trying to attract



*Detail from Goodyear monument, Lot M-100, Cortland Rural Cemetery*

clientele, was to sell first to prominent community citizens.

As the business grew in the 1880's subsidiary companies were established in Detroit, Des Moines, Chicago, and St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada. By 1885 a "rapidly increasing demand" for the product had occurred. The *Scientific American* recommended a change from stone to metal monuments to keep up with other new technology such as the telegraph, telephone, and electricity.

The Cortland Rural Cemetery is home to four distinctive white bronze markers:

- The Corwin stacked tower on Lot G-32 is date 1878 and topped with an urn and flame with decorative roping. A memorial to Ezra, Hannah, Philistia, and DeForest Corwin, the family chose meaningful decorative symbols: anchor (life eternal), the handshake (farewell to earthly existence), crown on cross (sovereignty of Christ), star with fraternal organization symbols, sheaf of wheat (the divine harvest), and angels (messenger between God and man).
- Nearby is the Dickinson draped obelisk on Lot W-53. The symbols selected were the crown on cross, a chain with broken link, roses, a hand with finger pointing upward, and Jesus with three little children (two infants and a child are buried on the lot.)
- The Goodyear monument on Lot M-100 with urn, drapes, tassels, roses, and open work memorializes eight people whose relationships are not all indicated—from a 100-year-old veteran of the War of 1812, to two Civil War deaths, to Mrs. Goodyear's father, to Dr. Franklin Goodyear, among others. There are also three white bronze footstones.
- The Lester and Mary Hane marker on Lot W-92 is the blocky shape popular by the 1890's in granite monuments. It has base and columnar detail imitating natural stone and rustic "twig-style" lettering that had a period of popularity. With the familiar anchor and crown on cross motifs, the Hanes also selected two Biblical quotations, "In my father's house are many mansions" and "I go to prepare a place for you." A matching footstone marks each grave.

According to research by Barbara Rotundo, white bronze markers attracted a cross-section of purchasers. This is substantiated in Cortland by examination of the four lot owners' occupations of builder, merchant, physician and trimmer. It is possible that one or more of these lot owners was also a Monumental Bronze Company agent, since an agent's own monument sometimes served as a salesman's sample.

The era of white bronze cemetery monuments was short lived. Beginning in 1874, reaching the

highest level of popularity in the late 1880's, and gone by World War I, a combination of causes has been identified for the decline.

Perhaps sensing serious competition, a New England granite association launched a comprehensive marketing campaign for their more expensive "natural" product. The public began to believe that inexpensive equated to cheap, and some cemeteries actually banned the erection of white bronze monuments. Second, after the turn of the century, a change in society's attitudes toward technology and progress occurred. That which is fashionable in one decade is not necessarily in the next. As the sales force of agents began to see that a full-time living could not be made from selling this product, enthusiasm may have waned as suggested by frequent changes in agents and their addresses.

While there is no evidence that white bronze markers were erected after 1914, the tablet inserts for additional family members were available into the 1930's. The company continued to make other products, including munitions during the World War, until its doors closed in 1939.

Ironically, a century and a quarter later, these monuments have carried out their manufacturer's original promises; they have resisted disintegration from the freezing and thawing cycles of our climate; they have retained their crisp lettering; they have remained free from moss, mildew and discoloration; and they have defied environmental degradation. While some of the very largest markers have begun to distort or "creep" somewhat over time (due to the effects of weight and gravity), the technology appears greatly superior to stones of marble, sandstone, and limestone from that period.

Is there a place in today's market for reproducing white bronze grave markers? Monuments displaying the hobbies and personalities of those memorialized have never been more popular than now. Individuality is "in." From trucks, to motorcycles, to fishing, to the family farm, to photographic likenesses, all can be seen today in active cemeteries. Also consider the public's hearty endorsement of discount stores, which feature low price over quality and service. Third, internet sales provide new opportunities to reach a world-wide audience.

*(continued on page 6)*

# Superintendent's Report

1999 has been a busy year. Using donations received by the Cemetery Foundation, we were able to rebuild and resurface almost 1,000 lineal feet of roadway, repair extensive masonry damage to the exterior of the Cemetery Chapel, and complete restoration of the interior of the historic Chapel. Reconstruction of the port-cochere (covered entranceway) on the front of the Chapel will be completed next year and donations are being

solicited to repair and protect the stained glass windows.

The water service to the Chapel has been replaced and a replacement electrical service is planned for the year 2000. Cremation Niches are being constructed inside the Chapel, by the Cemetery, and will be available for purchase soon after this newsletter goes to press.

With approximately 14,000 lineal feet of roads



*Rotary Club members are shown installing the new flowerbed.*

to maintain, many of them in quite poor repair, the Cemetery is dependent on your generous contributions to the Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation to rebuild and repair them. We plan an annual program of road repair, funded by donations, which will result in restoration of the historic system of roadways to a comfortably drivable and functional condition. In current dollars, that is estimated to cost \$15,000 or more per year, just for the roads.

With a generous contribution of money (to purchase plants) and labor from the members of the Cortland Rotary Club, the Cemetery added a significant new flower bed near the entrance of the Cemetery. Highly visible from Tompkins Street, the impressive display of annual flowers, perennial flowers, and spring flowering bulbs will prove to be a multi-season eye-catcher. Special thanks to the Cortland Rotary Club for funding this project and Countree Experience of Marathon for the

design. Last year Rotary funded the repainting of the entire fence surrounding the Cemetery and we are very grateful for their continuing support.

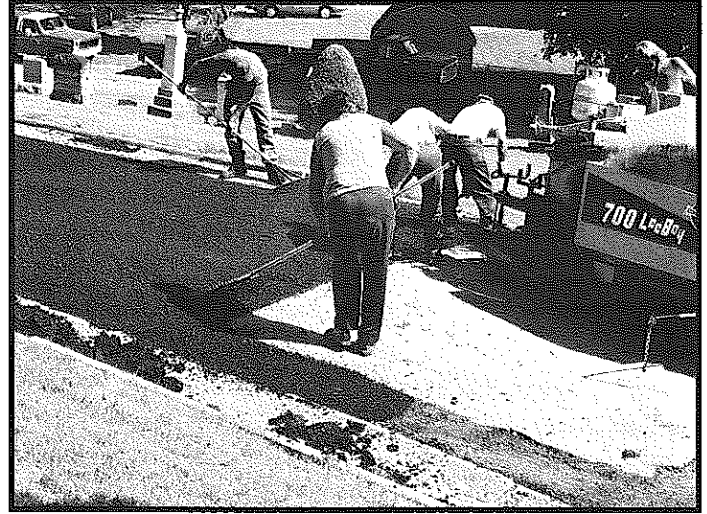
2000 is the City's Centennial celebration year and we are planning a big Open House over the Memorial Day weekend in conjunction with them.

One highlight will be a walking tour of the gravesites of former Mayors. Be sure to mark your calendar and join us if time permits. Come see your donations at work!

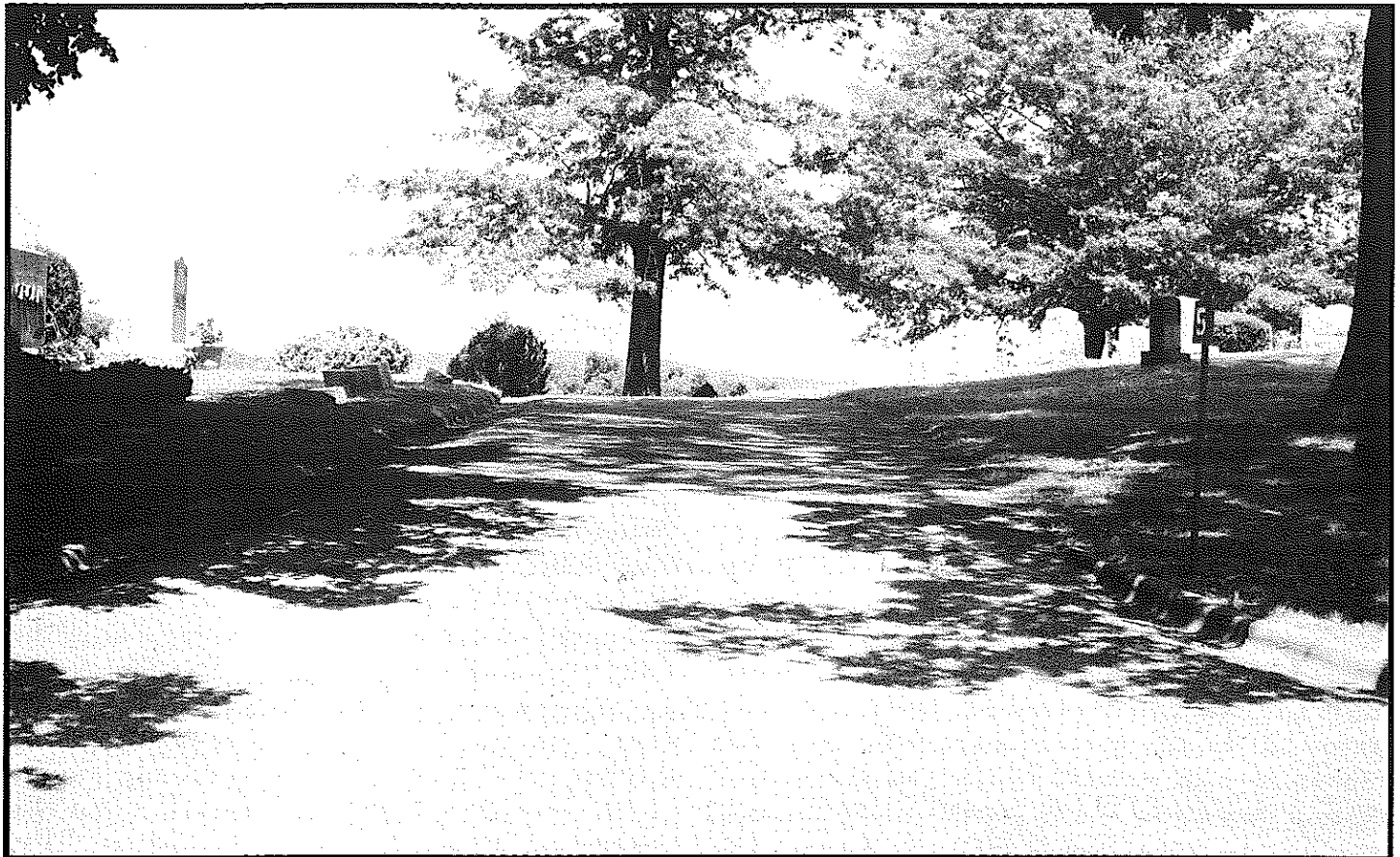
Andrew Palm  
*Superintendent*



*Before*



*Economy Paving crew doing road repair.*



*After*

# A Monument for the Ages

## Technology Versus Tradition *(continued from page 3)*

While United States' foundry technology is active and available, the number of foundries has shrunk dramatically over the past few decades due in large part to environmental regulation of metal wastes. Zinc is still mined in the United States, but raw material costs, labor, shipping, and overhead would all be factors in the product's price.

When you visit the Cortland Rural Cemetery or other Victorian-era cemeteries, keep watch for a monument that is blue-gray in color and a different hue than the nearby markers. Examine the crisp detail and rap on it with your knuckle to hear a hollow ring. This should confirm its status as a

white bronze memorial. Look at the individually-selected decorations. Know that you are viewing a treasure from the past, and contemplate the technology that apparently could not overcome tradition in the early part of the 20th century.

### Sources:

Rotundo, Barbara, "Monumental Bronze: A Representative American Company." In *Cemeteries & Gravemarkers, Voices of American Culture*. Edited by Richard E. Meyer. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1989, pp. 263-291.

"White Bronze," *Scientific American* (November 14, 1885).

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## Cemetery Foundation Offers Centennial Trees for Purchase

The Rural Cemetery is a style of landscape architecture featuring winding, tree-lined roadways. While our roadways wind, they are not tree-lined anymore, and a program is available to remedy that situation.

In support of the plans of the Cortland Rural Cemetery to restore the historic appearance of the Cemetery, the Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation is soliciting donations to purchase trees to replace those lost over the years to storms and old age. The trees will be planted in places where trees formerly existed in unsold lots reserved for trees and in walkways where appropriate. This tree program is not designed to benefit a particular lot owner, but instead to add grace and beauty to the entire Cemetery, so trees are not being sold to be placed on family lots. Donors will have the opportunity to request which pre-designated location they would like to provide a tree for, and we will make every effort to honor those requests.

In honor of the City of Cortland's celebration of its Centennial in the year 2000, we are

designating these trees as Centennial Trees. Each tree will bear an identifying tag which will note the species of tree, date planted and the name of the donor who actually purchased the tree.

Larger scale shade trees such as oaks, maples and lindens will be used in larger sections, and smaller scale ornamental trees such as crabapples, hawthorns, spruces and firs will be used in sections where space and size are a limiting factor. The spruces and firs will also be used in areas where winter foliage visibility from the surrounding roads is an important attribute.

Trees will be professionally installed in the spring of 2000, and guaranteed to survive, by the Cemetery's landscape contractor. The donation to purchase one of the larger trees is \$300 and the donation to purchase one of the ornamental trees is \$250. Your donation is fully tax deductible.

To request further information on the Centennial Trees, please write to Andrew Palm, Superintendent, Cortland Rural Cemetery, 110 Tompkins Street, Cortland, NY 13045.



Centennial  
Event  
Planned  
for  
Memorial Day  
2000



As part of the official yearlong celebration of the City of Cortland's Centennial, the Cortland Rural Cemetery will be having a large Open House over the Memorial Day weekend (Saturday, Sunday and Monday), May 27 - 29, 2000.

The City of Cortland was chartered in 1900, replacing the Village of Cortland. The Village was established in 1853 with the not-for-profit Cortland Rural Cemetery being established immediately after to serve the residents of the Village and surrounding area.

Jointly planned and conducted by the Trustees of the Cortland Rural Cemetery and the Board of Directors of the Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation, along with the City's Centennial Commission, the Open House will highlight the history of the municipality which is immortalized in the serene and tranquil beauty of Cortland Rural Cemetery.

Don't forget to put this event on your calendar. Plan to visit and spend some time on one of our self-guided tours, visit with our guides, enjoy our programs and see the improvements your donations have made!



## Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation Members

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*Cemetery employees installing a bronze Veteran marker.*



Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation  
P.O. Box 288  
Cortland, New York 13045