

History of the Old Cemetery on the former GCNS Site Part 1

Many people who have lived in Monroe for any amount of time have heard that there was once a cemetery on the site of the current Behring Senior Center. Information about that cemetery is rather scarce, but I shall share a few facts today that I've found about Block 12 in Russell's Donation.

The first reference I found was in the October 13, 1858 edition of the Monroe Sentinel. All it said was, "Dr. Ball noted that of the 45 adult persons buried in the Village Cemetery, whose graves had tombstones, 36 were those of females."

The village obtained property for the Monroe Cemetery, now called Greenwood Cemetery, in 1859. In November 1863, an article in the Sentinel shared, "Persons who may be desirous of removing the bodies of deceased friends from the old burying ground can have opportunity to do so any time between the 15th of October and the 15th of April, in accordance with the provisions of the village ordinance relating thereto."

A notice on May 23, 1866 mentioned a proposal for building a fence around the old cemetery. Sealed bids for building the fence to very definite specifications (for a cemetery where burials were no longer being made) were due to the corporation clerk by June 4. The fence was to be 4.5 feet high around the entire cemetery, 240 feet by 260 feet. It was to have "Burr oak posts" that were 6.5 feet long with a five-inch diameter at the small end. They were to be set two feet in the ground and not more eight feet apart. The fence boards were to be pine and firmly fastened with at least two nails at each post, breaking joints, with a perpendicular strip of usual width outside the boards at each post. There was to be a horizontal cap the whole length of the fence of sufficient width to cover posts and boards with suitable projection. It was to be finished with a 12-foot, double gate, securely braced and hung with heavy strap hinges and locked and fastened with strong hasps and staples with a padlock and key. The lock was to be secured from the effects of the weather by some protection, either of sheet iron or leather, which needed to be acceptable to the Trustees of the Village. Work was to be completed by June 15. W. W. Wright was the clerk who submitted this to the newspaper. I saw nothing about who was awarded the contract, nor anything about the fence being built.

In an article in the Sentinel on May 5, 1869, the editor asked, "What can be done with the old cemetery? It looks bad in its present condition. We suggest that it be fitted up for a public park. At any rate, clean out the brambles and bushes."

A petition, which already had many signatures, was being circulated that September asking the Village Board to "pass an ordinance removing the few bodies remaining in the old cemetery ground, and fence and otherwise improve that place for a Public Park." There were also many trees (maples, oaks, elms, and other varieties) and shrubs on the grounds that would have taken 15 or 20 years to propagate. It had just been learned that "Mr. Snyder will sell the grove next west of the cemetery to the village for a reasonable price; and thus, by vacating the streets running across it, and between the grove and the cemetery, a park of two blocks can be secured to the village at a cost not to exceed \$800 or \$1,000, which could not be produced anywhere else in the corporation in less than twenty years and at five times the expense. There is not another place in town so easily made into a beautiful grove for celebrations, outdoor meetings and promenades, as this one. It has been overrun by cattle several times this summer, and is at present an unsightly place and a disgrace to the village. Common decency requires that the remains of departed villagers should repose in a more quiet and becoming place, and that the now desert waste known as the 'Old Cemetery' be converted into a beautiful park for the living. Sign the petition."



This scan was made from the 1861 Plat Book of Green County, which is available for purchase from the Green County Historical Society. The block that shows the cemetery is now the site of the Behring Senior Center. There was nothing listed in this block in the 1873 Atlas of Green County and 1891 Plat Book of Green County.

The editor again expressed his opinion about the cemetery still being there in another article more than 10 years later on August 25, 1880. "When the new grounds were purchased about twenty years ago . . . most of the remains were removed from the old to the more commodious and better locality and suitably entombed. But there remain less than a score of the graves in the old grounds, most of them in a neglected dilapidated condition. A few only remain intact. Several of the marble slabs that so many years ago marked the resting place of some fond mother, darling child, or kind-hearted and esteemed father, are thrown down, discolored, and broken by vandal hands or relentless storms of time. If any person can go into that quiet and almost depopulated city of the dead without a feeling of sadness coming over them, as they read inscriptions and epitaphs upon these rudely carved slabs, we would not care to make their acquaintance.

"There are some people who believe it is wrong to disturb the bodies of the departed after once they have been laid to rest. As though the Almighty could not find them on the day of resurrection, when the sea and earth shall give up their dead, and the souls rehabilitated shall come forth to final judgment. It would seem though that the Angel Gabriel would stand a better chance of finding the bodies, could they be removed from these neglected, and dilapidated spots, and placed in newly consecrated grounds where later generations, the newer branches of the family, will have been gathered to mother earth to await the final day."

I'll finish this quote next week and you'll find out if this block ever became a park.