

Historic Manning Avenue Cemetery Restored

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Tom Riley, Alan Bird, and Bob Meier have been busy. For the last two years, the three have been restoring the old Manning Avenue Cemetery in Butler. Approximately four hundred headstones, which had been severely vandalized over the past forty years, knocked over and in pieces, have been fixed. “No more,” says Riley, “Every stone has been repaired and reset.” The trio collected \$1,500 in donations, and a new sign has been placed at the cemetery. To prevent future vandalism, the cemetery is under 24-hour video surveillance. “The worst desecration was to the veterans’ graves,” says Riley, who was recognized as Bloomingdale’s Hometown Historian during its Centennial Celebration in 2018. Mr. Riley has close ties to the cemetery; his great-great grandmother, great-grandfather, and many other relatives on both sides of his family are buried there.

Manning Avenue Cemetery is truly an historic cemetery - Butler history, yes, but also United States history. The earliest known burial took place in 1808 and there are probably unmarked graves prior to that date. There are two Revolutionary War veterans buried there, two from the War of 1812, twenty-five from the Civil War, one from World War I, two from World War II, and one from the Korean War.

Originally the Francisco Family Cemetery, it was incorporated as the Bloomingdale Cemetery Association in 1867. Interestingly, the cemetery predates the formation of the town of Butler in

1901. It was reorganized as the Bloomingdale-Butler Cemetery Association in 1895. When the last association trustee died, the cemetery fell into a state of neglect and that's when the serious vandalism started.

No one after 1984 remained to care for the property and that is when the senseless vandalism intensified. The ledger book and remaining association funds, but not ownership of the cemetery, had been turned over to the Borough of Butler. Except for occasionally mowing the grass around the toppled headstones and efforts by a few folks to maintain their family plots, little was done to address the cemetery's deterioration.



After completing a project that documented the burials at the Brown/Sanders Cemetery for the Butler Museum in 2016, Riley embarked on the same type of effort for the Manning Avenue Cemetery. However, when Alan Bird got involved, they decided to not only locate buried and knocked -over headstones, but to manually lift as many stones as possible. Bob Meier stepped in and used his masonry knowledge to instruct Riley and Bird on how to repair broken headstones and set them back in place. The goal, which originally had been documentation of the burials, then became a complete restoration of the cemetery.

The restoration was completed in the fall of 2018. Tom Riley and Alan Bird continue to serve as unofficial caretakers of the restored cemetery. Riley's Manning Avenue Cemetery book finished the documentation part of the project. The book (his sixth) about the cemetery includes the history, plot plan, and a photo of every gravestone. Obituaries and biographies of some of the people buried there are also included. For Riley, Bird, and Meier, it's about history and remembering and respect for the past and its people.

