

New Hartford, Oneida Co.]

[Off Busy Street—Quiet Peace
By ED MIDURA

*"I saw you in your house of joy,
When free from every pain.
I saw you close your eyes on Earth,
No more to weep again."*

No one remembers the author if the lines above. They can't be found in any library, yet thousands of people pass by them every day and don't know they exist. They are carved on the tombstone of Jane A. Thomas, who died at 1½ in 1817.

The tot's grave is located in a spot as well-known to local people as just about any other here. Less, however, is known about it than just about any other. It is the small cemetery on the north side of French Road just a few steps from busy Genesee St.

Most people call it the French Cemetery—it is on French Road and the name French is prominent on the stones that can be seen while driving by. The City Directory lists the plot as: "French Rd., 2-12, Cemetery." The City Assessor's office says it is the "Universalist Cemetery." The last is the most accurate description.

What appears to be one cemetery is actually two. One has an iron fence around it; the other is located adjacent on the west and does not.

Many stones can be seen standing in the fenced cemetery, some of fairly recent vintage. Many more lie on the ground or are covered with growth. No stones stand in the unfenced area. There are a few strewn around on the ground and the unfenced area has generally gone back to nature.

The gate in the fenced cemetery is never locked; children sometimes play in it. May years ago there was some vandalism in it. The last burial in it was made in 1918 and some of the stones were replaced in the thirties.

A survey of area cemeteries taken by the Oneida County Daughters of the American Revolution in 1926 listed 72 stones in the "Old French Cemetery," the earliest of which was dated 1818 and the latest 1914. Among the persons buried there are the mother and father of Roswell P. Flower, governor of New York State 1892-94.

Contrary to what many people think, the fenced site is not abandoned but is owned and maintained by the Universalist Burial Society, a group formed when the First Universalist Society of Whitestown disbanded about 1870 and which is still active today. The plot next door is believed to be the burial place of an Osborne family which farmed on French Road during the early 1800s. It is believed that the descendants still own the site.

The history of the Universalist cemetery can be traced back to 1804 when the Whitestown society was formed by Nathaniel Stacy, a Madison County circuit rider. It was the third in the state.

At that time the area was a part of Whitestown. Later it was in the Town of New Hartford and was included in the part of the town annexed by the City of Utica in 1925.

For many years the church flourished and included some of the pioneer families of the area—French, Higby, Richardson, Pixley, Sanger, Hart, Stone, Groves, and Jewett. One history of Oneida County says that Judge Hugh White, founder of Whitestown, was a member, although other histories make no mention of such an affiliation.

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Several histories actually tell conflicting stories about the society—they disagree as to whether the Universalists' church was eventually taken over by the Presbyterians or the Baptists; they disagree about when it went out of existence. One, written in 1851, says the society was "long extinct" by then, but records in the possession of James B. French, president of the French Mill Supply Corp. and presently recording secretary of the burial society, show it still functioning in 1869.

At that time, the records show, the society sold to a Jane Roberts for \$1,200 the land at French Road and Genesee Street on which its meeting hall had stood and in 1870 set up the Universalist Burial Society to perpetually care for its cemetery, located behind the meeting hall. The society was composed of five trustees and the \$1,200 deposited in the Savings Bank of Utica where it still is today, to gather interest and be used for cemetery upkeep.

The society still meets once a year on the second Tuesday of September, and is now composed of the descendants of the original families, most of whom drifted to other denomination churches in New Hartford when the Whitestown society broke up. Every fall they meet at the cemetery to clean away the heavy summer's growth. They still operate by the rule set in 1870 that three trustees have to sign to draw any of the interest from the bank and that all five signatures are necessary to remove any of the principal.

[?] French, recording secretary since 1941, keeps the record book which dates back to the very first meeting of the burial society and another that lists the doings of the Universalist society itself. The old, stiff pages with the florid script writing of early secretaries form a significant chunk of local history.

The biggest single event in connection with the cemetery itself came in 1911, when purchase of the iron fence which surrounds it today was authorized. It cost almost \$700. Previously a wooden fence had surrounded the burial ground.

In 1901 police were called in because of vandalism in the Universalist cemetery and in 1909 the Osborne plot was offered to the trustees and a committee was formed to look into the offer. Whether it ever reported is not in the records, though, and the Osborne cemetery still remains somewhat of a mystery today.

It is, a broken headstone lies on the ground and has inscribed upon it: "An honest man, is the noblest work of God." They, apparently, know more than we ever will about this little plot of weed and tree-choked land.

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Transcribed on 14 Nov 2015 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY