

By Doug Warren

The Orr's Island Cemetery is one of the historic crown jewels of Harpswell. Founded in 1838, the cemetery is a place of eternal rest, serene beauty and a repository of the lives and times that have formed this island community.

Among the hundreds of graves that dot the cemetery's 4.5 acres are generations of fishermen and their families, a native son who served with the 20th Maine regiment that defended the Union's left flank during the battle of Gettysburg and one hardy soul whose time on Earth touched three centuries.



"It's an important part of our history and heritage," said Jack Sylvester, chairman of the Orr's Island Cemetery Association, the nonprofit organization that owns and maintains the property along Route 24. "The grave markers often represent the only surviving record of many of the founding families of this community."

To mark the burial ground's 180th anniversary, the Cemetery Association has launched a five-year, \$200,000 fundraising drive with four specific goals: to enhance the perpetual care trust fund; to prepare the cemetery's final burial section, the Valley Terrace; to replace the fencing that surrounds the cemetery; and to create a Veterans Memorial for those with close ties to Orr's Island who have served in our Armed Forces.

"It's an ambitious goal, but one we're working hard to reach," said Jim Jones, the Cemetery Association's president and superintendent. "To date, our members have pledged close to \$75,000 and we've already collected upwards of \$54,000." The Cemetery Association also hosted the popular "Summer Moon" festival at Lowell's Cove in July. The event, which featured five bands and food from local purveyors, netted \$12,800 for the cemetery's operating budget. A portion of the proceeds was donated to support the historic Orr's Island Meeting House, located just north of the cemetery.

According to Sylvester, William and Frances Orr donated the first parcel of land for the cemetery in the 1830s and the meeting house parcel in the 1850s. "It was one of the few spots on the 1,000-acre island that had enough depth of soil to sustain a burying ground," he explained. Prior to that, Orr's Island residents had to travel by boat to Harpswell Neck to attend

services at the Neck's Meeting House and later the Elijah Kellogg Church and often for burials in the cemeteries there.

A walk among the headstones in the Orr's Island Cemetery, which are meticulously maintained, reveals names that are familiar to Orr's Island and beyond. Orr, Doughty, Johnson, Linscott, Stilphen, Black, Sinnett and Wilson ... just to name a few.



In plot I3 in the cemetery's "Old Yard" is the grave of William Gilliam, who, according to cemetery records, was born in 1799, lived through the entire 19th century and died in 1902. But "Old Bill" isn't the oldest person buried in the cemetery. That honor goes to Ellen Hansen, who died in 1968 at the age of 104. Abraham Lincoln was in the White House when she was born. The Hansen's 100-acre farm located on the northern tip of the island is now owned by Bowdoin College and is the site of its Coastal Studies Center.

William B. Pennell, born in 1838, was a private in the 20th Maine, Company K, which fought heroically under the command of Joshua Chamberlain at Little Round Top. He was 26 years old when he died in 1864. His grave in the "Old Yard" section of the cemetery is marked with a star signifying his membership in the Grand Army of the Republic. There are 14 other men buried here who fought for the Union.

In fact, Pennell is one of many veterans buried on Orr's Island. Sylvester estimates that of the roughly 700 people at rest in the cemetery, 115 are veterans. That is why he is so determined to create a new Veterans Memorial.

"After World War I and World War II, bronze plaques affixed to boulders listed the names of veterans from the island. Those are now on permanent display at the Orr's Island Library," Sylvester said. "But nothing has been done to honor those who have served since, and it's time the situation is addressed."

Plans for the memorial are still being designed. Sylvester said they include a walkway from a new gate in the fence along Route 24 leading to a simple granite platform at the back of the Old Yard. It will feature granite benches flanking two granite slabs listing the names of all island residents, and summer visitors with strong ties to the island, who have served in the military. A new flagpole will also be incorporated into the space, which will provide a place for reflection and to take in the beautiful views to the east.

Donations already made to the fundraising campaign specifically designated to the Veterans Memorial should allow that project to proceed first, with work starting as early as next year, Sylvester said. The fence replacement project, which will be done in stages as money becomes available, will be the next most noticeable part of the fundraising effort. The new, two-rail fence will be made of Azek, a processed material that looks like wood but is much more durable. Jones said work on the fence could begin by next summer.

The Orr's Island Cemetery Association has more than 100 active members, and unlike many small, private cemeteries in the state these days, it is in relatively stable financial condition. "It's due to the dedication of older families and many newer ones living in our community, and beyond," Sylvester said. "But there's no question that shifting population trends and changes in burial practices are having an impact on volunteer organizations such as ours."

The Cemetery Association is reaching out to the public to help fund its stated goals. Those wishing to make a tax-deductible contribution by credit card – and those who might have an interest in joining the association -- can go to the organization's website: orrs-island-cemetery.org. Checks can be mailed to: Orr's Island Cemetery Association, PO Box 232, Orr's Island ME 04066.