

The North Elba Cemetery

A walk through Placid History

by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, April 15, 2005

It's Mud Season. The trails are too sloppy for hiking, but the weather is too pretty to stay inside.

What to do?

Here's an idea for an enlightening walk: a historical tombstone tour through the North Elba Cemetery. Many of the people who made the village of Lake Placid and the town of North Elba what they are today can be found there, resting from their labors.

The North Elba Cemetery is on the north side of Old

Military Road, about a quarter mile west of the Cascade Road, across from a roofless, cylindrical brick tower rising from an open field (an environmental sculpture left over from the 1980 Olympics).

The North Elba Cemetery is divided into sections by the network of one-lane roads passing through it. Most of the graveyard's historic tombstones can be found in the section to the right of the westernmost entrance to the cemetery, adjacent to Old Military Road.



EUNICE NEEDHAM. North Elba was first settled in 1800. Most of the members of its First Colony did not stay on past 1816, known as “the year without a summer,” and the closing of the local iron works in 1817.

Among those who made up North Elba's First Colony were brothers Charles and Jeremiah Needham Jr. Born in Wales, Massachusetts, the Needhams arrived in North Elba on June 26, 1806. It's not clear whether Eunice Needham, daughter of Jeremiah and his wife Ruth, was born before or after they arrived here. What's certain is that little Eunice was the first person to be buried in the North Elba Cemetery, on Jan. 2, 1810, “in the fourth year of her life.”

Eunice's tombstone is a simple, gray marker, broken near the base and laid flat across her grave.

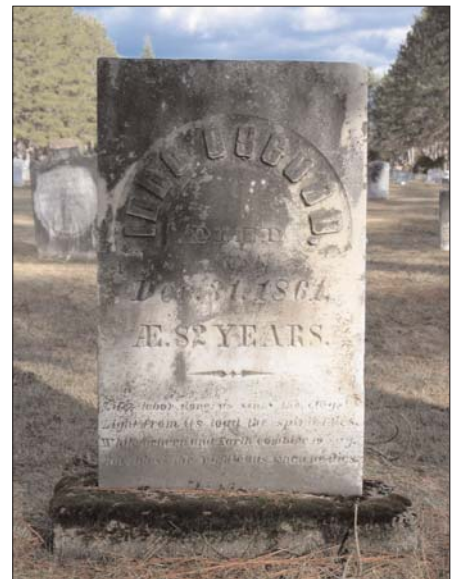
THE OSGOODS. Another member of the First Colony was Iddo Osgood, who came to North Elba on March 4, 1808, at the age of 28. Osgood was a fairly substantial farmer, buying up much of the cultivated land abandoned when the First Colony collapsed. Osgood later became North Elba's first innkeeper as well as a man of some political substance on the local scene.

For many years, most Placidians thought that the Old Stagecoach Inn on Old Military Road was an expansion upon Osgood's original inn. The year 1833, shown on the sign at the Stagecoach Inn, refers to the earliest known date when Osgood's hosted paying guests.

In the mid-1980s, however, researchers concluded that Osgood's and the Old Stagecoach Inn had been separate structures, and that Osgood's had been torn down sometime in the early 20th century. Osgood's Inn was probably located where the Uihlein Mercy Center stands today.

Iddo, a Congregationalist deacon, held religious services at Osgood's Inn, and his son Dillon grew up to become an ordained Congregationalist minister as well as North Elba's first postmaster.

Four Osgood graves stand together in the North Elba Cemetery: old Iddo, who died in 1861 at the age of 82; the first of Iddo's three wives, Clarista (d. 1816); his second wife, Prudence (d. 1831); and Dillon, who died the year before his father at the age of 39.



ROBERT SCOTT. Another early Elba settler was Robert Scott.

Born in 1803, Scott came to Alstead Hill in Keene as a young child with his mother and father shortly after 1810. In 1840, when only nine other families were living in North Elba, Scott and his wife Laura bought a 240-acre tract on what is now called the Cascade Road, about a half-mile east of today's municipal golf course.

By 1850 the Scotts had built a frame house at the base of a little mountain that came to be known as Scott's Cobble. They began taking in guests, one of whom was early travel writer J.T. Headley, who said of North Elba, “I had never heard of it before, and am surprised that its location has not attracted



Freddie was born in August 1859 to Watson Brown and his wife Belle Thompson, daughter of North Elba pioneer Roswell Thompson (also buried in the North Elba Cemetery). The Brown and Thompson families were very close; Belle's brother Henry had married Ruth Brown in 1850. Two months after Freddie was born, his father was killed in the Harper's Ferry raid.

The following year, Freddie's mother took him on a visit to the home of Louisa May Alcott in Concord, Mass., along with his grandmother Mary, John Brown's widow.

"The two pale women sat silent and serene through the clatter," wrote Alcott, "and the bright-eyed, handsome baby received the homage of the multitude like a little king, bearing the kisses and praises with the utmost dignity.

"When he was safe back in the study, playing alone at his mother's feet, C. and I went and worshipped in our own way at the shrine of John Brown's grandson, kissing him as if he were a little saint, and feeling highly honored when he sucked our fingers, or walked on us with his honest little red shoes, much the worse for wear."

Little Freddie died just three years later of diphtheria. He was 4 years old. His broken tombstone, lying flat on the ground above his grave, says simply, "Gone Home."

more attention."

From 1849 to 1851, Scott's nearest neighbor was John Brown, who later gained notoriety in the Harper's Ferry raid of 1859. Brown was returning home one winter day from a business trip to Springfield, Mass., when he got stuck at Keene without a ride over the mountains to North Elba. Brown nearly died on that journey through the deep snows of the Old Mountain Road, but he managed somehow to make it to Robert Scott's, who let him rest up and get warm before hitching his oxen to a sleigh and taking Brown home.

In 1854, Scott was part of the three-man team responsible for building today's Lake Placid-Wilmington Road through the Wilmington Notch, replacing the old winter road running through the Sentinel Range above the Notch behind Connery and Winch ponds.

Scott's boarding house was expanded in the 1870s by niece Martha Scott and her husband Moses Sampson Ames, who rechristened it the Mountain View House. Guests came from all over, and the Mountain View was widely hailed for many years. It burned in 1903.

BROWN FAMILY. The graves of abolitionist John Brown and many other members of the Harper's Ferry party can be found near Brown's farmhouse in North Elba. Three members of John Brown's family, however, are buried in the North Elba Cemetery: daughter Ellen, daughter-in-law Martha, and grandson Frederick.



EPPS FAMILY. John Brown came to North Elba in 1849 to help a small, fledgling African-American colony that had been established here by wealthy abolitionist Gerrit Smith. The members of that colony were not escaped slaves, or even freed slaves; all had been born as free men and women, most of them in New York state. Born as city folks, however, they were having a hard time making it as farmers.

Thirteen Black families are recorded on the North Elba census from 1850 to 1870. By 1871, only of those 13 families remained: the family of Lyman Epps.

The Epps family came to North Elba from Troy in June 1849, taking a wagon trail up the Vermont side of Lake Champlain and crossing by ferry to Westport where, according to one story, they met John Brown's family. The two families joined forces, making the 40-mile journey together through the wilderness to "the Plains of Abraham," as North Elba was called in its earliest days.

Lyman Sr. and his son Lyman Jr. became famous for singing a favorite hymn of Brown, "Blow Ye the Trumpets Blow," at the abolitionist's funeral in December 1859. Both were highly regarded in the community. In 1875 the elder Epps became a founding member

of North Elba's first formal hall of worship, the White Church (named for the color of its paint, not its members). He also helped establish the Lake Placid Public Library in 1883.

Individual headstones, arrayed in a line on either side of the Epps family obelisk, mark the graves of Epps family members. Buried with them is William Appo, another member of the North Elba Black colony, who married one of the Epps daughters.



STUART BAIRD. The tombstone spells his name “Beard,” but a short article in the Essex County Republican spells it Baird, and this is the spelling preferred by local historians.

Also known locally as “Old Baird,” the itinerant tinker’s name was linked with that of the White Church in one of Alfred Donaldson’s famously inaccurate stories about Adirondack history.

According to A.D., Baird was an eccentric who wore the same clothes for years at a time, patching them over when holes wore through the fabric. When he died on Oct. 19, 1873, Donaldson wrote, “his coat of many rags was peeled off, some of the half-rotten patches split open and were found to contain bills of various denominations. ... The total yield was \$350. ...

“The suggestion was made that it be used to build a church,” Donaldson wrote. “It [the White Church] still stands — and is a monument to a vagabonding tinker who unconsciously spent his life in hoarding and secreting funds for its erection.”

Nice story — but not completely

true. When Baird died at the home of one of his customers, the poormaster — none other than Robert Scott — found just under \$200 in cash on the tinker’s person, which was applied to the cost of his tombstone and burial plot.

Fund-raising to build the Union Church — the proper name for the White Church — had been under way for a considerable while by the time of Baird’s death, and pledges from the community had already covered the anticipated cost: between \$1,200 and \$1,500. Work was started on the building in the fall of 1873; two years later, it was finished.

The late North Elba historian, Mary MacKenzie, wrote that the White Church “was a monument not to Stuart Baird, but to the many North Elba residents who made it possible by their willing sacrifices.”

JOSEPH V. NASH. Young Joe Nash’s first exposure to North Elba came in 1839 when, as a 13-year-old boy, he and his brother Timothy, age 15, came walking up the Old Mountain Road on their way from Willsboro, driving before them a herd of young cows. Their father had bought a farm from Roswell Thompson, and the family was starting a new life on the Plains of



Abraham.

In 1850, 24-year-old Joe Nash paid \$240 for a 160-acre plot in the wilderness of Bennet Pond’s western shore. (Today, we know that pond as Mirror Lake). Nash built a cabin, cleared a farm, and the following year married schoolteacher Harriet Brewster, whose family had come to North Elba from Jay in 1841.

Joe built a frame house around 1852, and in 1859 bought another 160 acres, again for \$240, extending south from his earlier tract. Nash’s farm covered all of what would later become Main Street, from the Hilton to the high school, including much of Signal Hill.

In the late 1870s, just a few years before his death in 1884, Nash began subdividing and selling off his property for development. Much of the core of the village of Lake Placid was built on the lots created out of Joe Nash’s farm, and many think of him today as the founder of the village.



BENJAMIN T. BREWSTER. Nash’s brother-in-law, 22-year-old Ben Brewster, bought the tract just north of Joe’s in 1851. For two decades, Brewster farmed. But in 1871, several years after Joe Nash had started taking in boarders at his home, Brewster decided to build the first real hotel within the boundaries of what would later become the village of Lake Placid. He called it the Lake Placid House, but most folks knew it simply as Brewster’s.

Brewster did well — not as well as Nash, but well enough to build himself a stately Victorian residence in 1883 that, 40 years later, became the Mirror Lake Inn. There, Brewster lived out the

remainder of his long life in comfort and ease.

Near the end of his days, at the age of 84, white-bearded Benjamin Brewster was cast for a bit role as Father Time in one of the many silent films then being shot in Lake Placid. When told that his face would soon be seen all over the country, he was not impressed.

“Well, I’m known all over the country anyhow,” he said — and he was probably right.

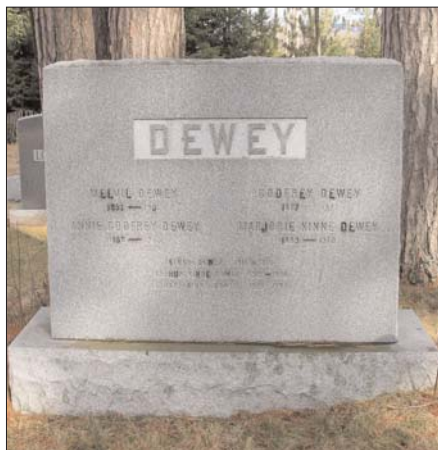
Note: While a marker for the graves of Benjamin Brewster’s father, Thomas P. Brewster, and other members of his family stands in the same section of the North Elba Cemetery as most of the other historic burial plots, the headstones for Ben Brewster and his wife, Julia Ann Washburn, are found to the north of the eastern end of the road running along the back of the cemetery.

THE DEWEYS. Heading back out toward Old Military Road from Benjamin Brewster’s grave, there are two more sites on the left that are especially worthy of note.

The first, standing far back from the driveway, is the family plot of the Deweys. Father Melvil and son Godfrey may have played the most significant roles of any two individuals in the whole

history of Lake Placid. Melvil Dewey founded and developed the Lake Placid Club, and Godfrey Dewey single-handedly won the bid for the 1932 Winter Olympic Games in Lake Placid.

Our final stop after visiting the Deweys’ headstone is a few steps back toward the driveway.



THE MacKENZIES. Mary MacKenzie, who died on April 15, 2003 — two years ago today — was, for all practical purposes, the creator of Lake Placid and North Elba history, being the first to delve into the source material of that history in a really rigorous, systematic way. She was first named official North Elba town historian in 1960, the

same year her husband Seymour died. In 1980, the year the Olympics returned, the village of Lake Placid also named her its official historian.

MacKenzie’s small, illustrated book, “Lake Placid and North Elba: A History, 1800-2000,” was published the year before her death, and two more of her books are being published posthumously. “Collected Poetry 1931 to 1937” is being released next month by *Blueline*, the literary magazine of the Adirondacks. And next year a massive volume, “The Plains of Abraham: Collected Writings on the History of North Elba and Lake Placid, N.Y.,” will be published by Nicholas K. Burns Publishing.

If there is anything in this brief historic walk through the North Elba Cemetery that you have found enlightening, stop for a moment at Mary’s grave and thank her.

