

Witmer Memorial Cemetery: Its History and Restoration

By Peter Ames (3375) Town of Niagara Historian, Niagara County

This is the second article in a new series about Western New York cemeteries.

The Witmer Memorial Cemetery is in Niagara County's Town of Niagara and is at the corner of Witmer Road and Pennsylvania Avenue. It is the only non-Jewish cemetery in the Town of Niagara. The Town, founded in 1812, now owns and maintains the Witmer Cemetery.

Early History

Two Witmer brothers came to the Western New York area from Pennsylvania. John Witmer came in 1810 and bought land to farm in the Town of Niagara, further east, past what is now the town hall. His brother Abraham came the following year and purchased Lot 24 in the Town of Niagara as his family homestead and farm. It was on Abraham's land that the original portion of the Witmer Cemetery is located.

Although there likely were early Witmer family burials on this land, no early headstones could be found. In the 1990s, there was a headstone reading done by the previous Town of Niagara historian, Dorothy Rolling, and others. My friend Jeff Manning and I have started an Excel spreadsheet on those buried in the cemetery based on these headstone readings and subsequent research. The earliest burial documented thus far was of Ezekiel Hill in 1838.

In 1875, there was an exchange of property to a Witmer daughter and son-in-law, and other portions of the land were offered for burials to the area's general public. There is a map from that time period that shows the separate plots with the surname of who owned the plots. Unfortunately, it does not list any of the names of the people buried in the individual graves. Cemetery records, that were kept by family members over the years, disappeared around the 1970s, more than 50 years ago. Because there are no existing records, we can only guess as to the exact location of persons buried within these plots. Consequently, no more ground burials are allowed. However, the recent addition of a columbarium to the cemetery will provide space for the remains of those who would like to make Witmer Cemetery their *forever* home.

Cemetery Restoration

With no more burials at the cemetery, and thus no income for its upkeep, the cemetery began to fall into disrepair. When I saw that some of the stones of the pillar holding the main gate to the cemetery were missing, I knew that the pillars to the gate needed to be repaired. I sought a bid for its repair that was quoted as \$30,000 to repair and repoint the two pillars that hold up the wrought iron gates. This was much more than we could afford, but I knew that if those pillars fell, they would not be rebuilt. Luckily, the local Lions Club paid a local masonry expert \$2,000 to do the work, and they also paid for a concrete pad around the flagpole, signage at the road, and a section of fencing.



Because the Witmer Cemetery is owned by the Town of Niagara, mowing and weed whacking duties are provided weekly during the growing season by the Town of Niagara Parks Department. They provide equipment and manpower when needed and are a great help to the cemetery's handful of volunteers. Prior to 2019, the cemetery only had basic maintenance. Since 2019, the cemetery volunteers have cleared the fence lines and the large areas of invasive species such as the Japanese Knotweed.

The cemetery is fenced on four sides and when our restorative process began in 2020, the longest three sides were covered with unwanted vegetation. Our main goal over the past four years was to clear it all and keep it that way. This goal was accomplished. We also cleared the north and east fencing for the Havas Shalom Cemetery, our next-door neighbor.

Our cemetery volunteers reclaimed the southwest corner of the cemetery, which was a former dumping ground, and we planted a perennial garden which included a concrete pad and bench donated by David Witmer, the 3x great grandson of Abraham Witmer. He also paid for a similar bench in the Witmer family plot in the back of the cemetery, and for the soil and mulch for the garden.

Many of the trees and bushes are over 100 years old and hadn't been trimmed for years. Much of it now has been done.

On the other side of the south fence there was a berm of soil about 12 feet deep and 8 feet high and 300 feet long. Weeds, trees, grapevines, and knotweed infested that fence. We cut the weeds along the fence and laid carpets to smother the weeds. The owners have since removed the berm, which should help make maintenance much easier.



The perennial garden and bench, with the Havas Shalom Cemetery in background.

There were several areas that had been overtaken by daylilies. These were dug up and replanted with the rest at the eastern fence. We also extracted bunches of sumacs that were spreading throughout the area. The larger and healthier ones were saved.

Some Notable Cemetery Residents

Besides the early Witmer settlers, there are some other noteworthy individuals interred at the cemetery.

There are 12 veterans whose service ranged from the War of 1812 to the Korean War. Each of them is marked with a flag holder. Flags are placed each Memorial Day and Veterans Day, and the Lions Club pays for 12 wreaths, and they place them at the graves for Wreaths Across America. These remain at the graves from December through March.

Ezekiel Hill, who was the first schoolteacher west of the Genesee River, and the first Town of Niagara Town Clerk in 1812, also is buried at Witmer.

George Martin (1840-1924) was a freed slave who fought in the Civil War as a member of the United States Colored Troops. Both he and his wife, Jane (1833-1899) are buried in Witmer. We became aware of George when we determined that a fallen headstone belonged to a member of the US Colored Troops in the Civil War. The Lions raised the money for a new foundation for the headstone and Niagara Monument reset the stone at no charge. The Lions also paid to landscape the grave and place an inscription on the back of the headstone that reads as follows:

George Martin

Born April 25, 1840 Clark County VA
Emancipated on May 22, 1854
Fought as a private in Company C
3rd Regiment of the USCT Artillery
From July 3, 1863 – October 31, 1865
Potato farmer in the Town of Niagara
Niagara Falls Boulevard from 1875-1919
Died January 3, 1924 Pontiac, Michigan

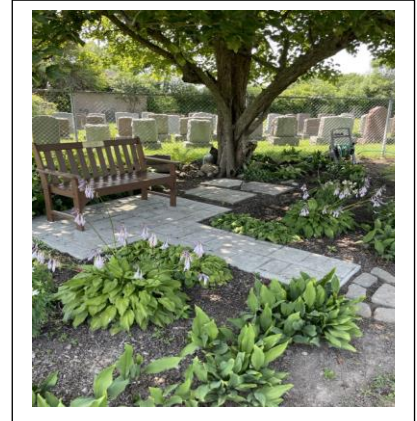


I researched George Martin and his family for over six months and learned that George and his four siblings and mother were all born as slaves. The father who was free bought their freedom and moved the family to Pennsylvania where George enlisted in the USCT for two years and trained at Camp William Penn.

To Learn More about the Witmer Cemetery and Its Residents

Witmer Cemetery is open all day, every day, for anyone who would like to visit. There are several benches within the cemetery where one is welcome to repose and reflect. If anyone seeks information on any of the residents, they are welcome to contact Town of Niagara historian, Pete Ames, at 716-297-4429. He would be happy to meet with you and discuss any information that he could share with you about the Witmer Cemetery and the people who are buried there.

Note: The Photos in this article are a part of the Society's archives. Additional photos about the Witmer Cemetery can be found earlier in this issue on page 53.



Peter Ames has researched family history for over 30 years. In 2016, he was appointed the Town of Niagara historian, and in 2022, he was awarded the Julia Reinstein award at the annual meeting of the Government Appointed Historians of WNY. He had served on the board and as president of the Niagara County Genealogical Society and on the board of the Oakwood Cemetery. Pete has been restoring the Witmer Cemetery since 2020 and is focusing on future cemetery maintenance.