

Old Squirrel Hill Cemetery Studied by Mercyhurst University Archeologists

By Helen Wilson
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Pittsburgh, PA – Where the bodies are buried in old Turner Cemetery in Squirrel Hill has long been a mystery, but Elizabeth Abernathy, an archeology student from Mercyhurst University, is planning to find out. She is fulfilling her undergraduate thesis by mapping, photographing and researching the cemetery under the direction of faculty advisors Dr. Mary Ann Owoc and Project Archeologist and instructor Allen Quinn.

The old graveyard won't give up its secrets easily. The original settlers of Squirrel Hill were laid to rest there, but they didn't rest in peace. In the years since 1785, when John Turner buried his mother in the burial plot of the family farm and then allowed other settlers to use the plot for a graveyard, the half-acre cemetery has had its share of ups and downs. After the last burial around 1880, the cemetery was abandoned and overrun with weeds and shrubs. Some of the deceased were disinterred by their descendants and moved to other cemeteries. When the cemetery was cleaned up in the early 1900s, most of the existing stones, but not the graves themselves, were rearranged in a group near the bottom. If any records had been kept of burials in the cemetery, they have never been found. Ms. Abernathy has been studying old maps and other records of the graveyard, and in visits over the past few months, she and her team took exact GPS readings on the location of each still-extant tombstone. At her last visit she began to use a fluxgate gradiometer to do remote sensing along grid lines to search for anomalies that might indicate where bodies were buried. She and her team will be back in the near future to finish the fieldwork. Spikes in the readings might indicate possible burial sites. By plotting the spikes, an idea of the layout and arrangement of possible graves can be determined. The Mercyhurst project does not include any excavations.

When the project is finished, Ms. Abernathy will present a copy of her work to the Turner Cemetery/Mary S. Brown-Ames Historical Committee, which is planning to commemorate possible gravesites with markers. The historical committee is part of the Mary S. Brown Memorial-Ames United Methodist Church, which is adjacent to Turner Cemetery and has maintained it since 1908. The church and cemetery are both located at 3424 Beechwood Boulevard, Pittsburgh, PA 15217.

For more information, contact

Allen Quinn, aquinn@mercyhurst.edu or 814-824-2140

Sandy Rim, Chairperson, Turner Cemetery/Mary S. Brown-Ames Historical Committee, sandyrim@meetingsinfo.com or 412-421-0701

Helen Wilson, Turner Cemetery researcher, hjtwilson@gmail.com, 412-521-1596 or www.turnercemetery.org

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