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Friends of Riverview Cemetery board members (from left) Tedd Cocker, Cheryl Markiewicz, Mary King, Kate Wilhere and Lee Anderson spend time continuing the cemetery's upkeep. The historic graveyard had fallen into disrepair over the past several years.

Resurrecting an old cemetery

Friends of Riverview volunteers behind resurgence of 39-acre facility

By TERRI SANGINITI
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For the past year, volunteers have lent a hand in the upkeep of the sprawling 39-acre Riverview Cemetery to again make it a welcome part of the community.

Thanks to their collective efforts, the historic cemetery, which had fallen into disrepair in recent years after twice changing hands, is undergoing a resurgence.

At 6:30 tonight, members will meet at the VFW Hall at 313 Brandywine Blvd. in Bellefonte for the first annual meeting to review their accomplishments since their incorporation last spring as the nonprofit Friends of Historic Riverview Cemetery, said Lee Anderson, who heads the group and authored a 2005 book about the cemetery, "Reading the Stones: A Collection of Memories from the First State."

The cemetery was deeded over to the group on Jan. 30 by owner the Rev. Tom Davis.

Since then, the following improvements have been made:

- New signs have been installed at the cemetery's three entrances.
- A new telephone number (762-4705) where calls are accepted and returned is listed in the phone book.
- Volunteers have nearly completed computerizing all the cemetery's burial records.
- All the veterans buried at Riverview are listed on the cemetery's Web site at www.riverviewcem.com.

- New fee schedules have been established for burials, with 50 percent earmarked for an endowment fund.

- A chapel building committee has been formed to find ways of renovating the chapel.

- A committee has been formed to clean out the public mausoleum, whose brass doors have been stolen and where a homeless man was living.

- A fee has been suggested for providing genealogical information.

- A tree-planting project March 21 sponsored by the Delaware Center for Horticulture added 40 large trees to the property.

On the state's day of service Jan. 24, Gov. Jack Markell joined with 100 other volunteers to clean up a giant pile of Christmas decorations, trash and dead tree branches on the grounds.

"We were out in March planting trees, cleaning up the dead trees, fallen branches and trash, little things that ordinary citizens can do," Anderson said. "It's a way of getting people involved and feeling good about it."

Friends treasurer Kate Wilhere acknowledges that none of the volunteers on the board of directors has any past experience in running a cemetery, but she said they are learning the ropes day by day.

"We've learned how to interact with funeral directors and vault companies," Wilhere said. "I've learned how to stake out plots. Two of us have taken over attending the funerals. We've had seven burials since Jan. 30."

Wilhere said the Friends have taken a lot of steps to improve the operation.

"We put identifying markers on the grave with the person's name, date of birth and death so that nobody gets lost," she said, a step taken in response to the plight of Melvin Allen, whose plot was never recorded after his burial in November 1998.

Anderson said when she thinks of the historic graveyard, she is flooded with images of people – the elderly children, men and women of different ethnic groups – joining together to beautify the final resting place of their loved ones.

"Many people who clean up the cemetery go unrecognized, yet they are faithful caretakers of a small piece of paradise here on Earth," Anderson said.

Wilhere, meanwhile, is networking with area high schools to try to get more young people interested in volunteering and joining the group's monthly cleanups.

On May 2, the volunteers will gather again to move large mounds of dirt left over from grave openings to fill smaller holes throughout the cemetery.

"When there are 50 or 100 volunteers, it makes the job that much easier," Anderson said. "People are taking pride in it. They feel that they have a personal investment in keeping the cemetery nice. It's a lot better than it was a year ago."

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