



# The Recorder

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AMSTERDAM, N.Y.

WEEKEND, SATURDAY, JUNE 3, 2023

\$2.50

Melissa Aucompaugh, left, her grandfather, Ken Aucompaugh, center, and her father, Kevin Aucompaugh, admire the new historic marker at the entrance to the Van Vechten Cemetery in the town of Florida on May 22.

PETER R. BARBER/  
THE RECORDER



## TOWN OF FLORIDA

# ‘We have peace and quiet and the view’

## Cemetery marks 140 years open to public

BY ASHLEY ONYON

*The Recorder*

The Van Vechten Cemetery is marking its 140th year since opening to the public. While descendants of the original founders aren't planning a birthday bash, throwing a festive celebration of life within the pastoral

graveyard wouldn't be a first.

“It's not a regular practice by any means,” said Ken Aucompaugh, president of the Van Vechten Cemetery Association Board of Trustees.

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A night to remember

# Historic

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Solemn occasions at the cemetery off McDougall Road in the town of Florida have long been interspersed with family picnics, childhood shenanigans and scenic strolls by visitors enjoying the peaceful surroundings.

"The cemetery was always part of everyday life for us and our family," said Ava Douglass, board treasurer. "We grew up with it and I have an interest in cemeteries, in general, but, because it's associated with our family, this cemetery was something that meant a lot to us."

Ken Aucompaugh helped cut the grass with a reel mower in his childhood. Subsequent generations kept up the tradition to earn pocket money using a gas mower, including his son, Kevin, and his granddaughter, Melissa.

Kevin Aucompaugh is now charged with caring for the cemetery as its superintendent, but recalls youthful romps through the graveyard trying to convince others it was haunted. Melissa, who sits on the board as part of the latest generation coming of age, took friends to explore the grounds as a kid.

"Growing up, I don't know if most kids have a cemetery," Kevin Aucompaugh said.

While the relatives still enjoy visiting the grounds, Melissa Aucompaugh said the focus in adulthood shifted to helping preserve and maintain the historic cemetery where many members of her own family and other local families are buried.

"We're proud of our heritage and the historical value that we bring to the community," Melissa Aucompaugh said.

**'We are proud of the place and glad we can be part of it, because it is part of our heritage, our family. But it's even greater than that because it involves so many other families, too. It truly was a fixture in our community for many hundreds of years.'**

## KEN AUCOMPAUGH

President, Van Vechten Cemetery Association  
Board of Trustees

the final resting place of many more veterans, dating back to the Civil War and up through the Vietnam War. She and other family members place flags and placards at the graves of all known service members each year ahead of Memorial Day.

"It's a good family tradition and it's a nice way to show respect," Melissa Aucompaugh said.

Although many relatives of the veterans have also passed on, Kevin Aucompaugh said Memorial Day often draws the largest number of visitors with 20 to 30 individuals stopping by the cemetery each year. Even at its busiest, the rural cemetery is fairly private compared to those in cities.

"But that's the difference between a city cemetery and this one, we have the peace and quiet and the view," Kevin Aucompaugh said.

## PRESERVATION FOR PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

Present-day stewards are dedicated to ensuring the longevity of what is intended to be an eternal resting place. Local family and board members gather at the cemetery each spring to help clean up the grounds. This year, the board invested about \$5,000

erly reinstalled and sealed, he hopes the board will consider future restoration projects to safeguard the monuments found in the centuries-old cemetery.

"That has been a major improvement," Ken Aucompaugh said. "We have more that could be done."

The long-term preservation of the cemetery largely depends on the final wishes of the living, and their willingness to buy plots in the still-active burial grounds. Lot sales vary year to year, but Kevin Aucompaugh said, during his tenure as superintendent, he's sold an average of around three lots annually.

Descendants of the cemetery founders are perhaps the best customers, with some relatives buying multiple lots at a time to ensure their final resting place is saved with room to share with loved ones. Ken Aucompaugh has a plot picked out in the original family cemetery.

"There's room for a few more for whoever speaks up," added Ken Aucompaugh, while looking meaningfully at Melissa Aucompaugh. "Several generations of our family are buried there in the original lot."

Outside of the family plot, there is well over an acre of unclaimed land with room



PETER R. BARBER/THE RECORDER

Ken Aucompaugh, right, talks about the history of the Van Vechten Cemetery in the town of Florida with Melissa Aucompaugh, left, and Kevin Aucompaugh on May 22.

of 40 new trees around the grounds to complement the many trees dating back to the cemetery's founding. Plans were also developed to expand the cemetery onto former dairy pastures with new roads to reach the available space.

"We are proud of the place and glad we can be part of it, because it is part of our heritage, our family. But it's even greater than that because it involves so many other families, too," Ken Aucompaugh said. "It truly was a fixture in our community for many hundreds of years."

While the remaining descendants know some of their own family's history, Douglass suggested the possibility of researching the backgrounds of some of the other inhabitants of the historic cemetery. She acknowl-

Maintaining an active board is vital to the future of the cemetery, according to Melissa Aucompaugh, who considers the responsibility to be a lifetime commitment.

"We're going to be on it until we die," she said. "It gives you a unique perspective on death, but it also gives you more of a perspective on

life, because you get to know more about your community and your history, and you get to be involved with the people and the land where you live in a way a lot of other people aren't."

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...and we bring to the community," Melissa Aucumpaugh said.

### REVOLUTIONARY ROOTS

Hubartus Van Vechten established the cemetery as a family plot in 1778. Twenty-five relatives were originally buried on the lot started on the family farm. The cemetery association began in 1883 on three acres around the family plot, when public burial grounds were needed. Remains were soon transferred to Van Vechten from the declining cemetery originally at Scotch Church.

"It's a great spot," Ken Aucumpaugh said. "How they discovered or came to this hilltop, I don't know."

Derick Van Vechten, son of Hubartus, was among the earliest to be buried in the family plot following his death at age 94 in 1847. He was a veteran of the Colonial militia fighting during the Revolutionary War from 1776-1783. He was involved in some of the bloodiest fights in the region, including the battles of Oriskany and Klock's Field.

"He was commissioned as an ensign on the battlefield," Douglass said. "That doesn't happen very often. That was something for him to be proud of."

Douglass, under the sponsorship of the Fort Hunter Free Library, secured a grant from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation to install a historic marker at the entrance to the cemetery, honoring and commemorating the service of Derick Van Vechten, in 2019.

Researching her ancestor's history to support the application was a monthslong labor of love for Douglass. The results have helped share a piece of her family and the cemetery's history with the local community and beyond. Tourists from far flung places have visited the site to take in the marker and the historic graveyard.

"I can't tell you how many times we've had people come up and say they never realized this was here," Douglass said.

Of course, Melissa Aucumpaugh said the cemetery is

each spring to help clean up the grounds. This year, the board invested about \$5,000 into restoring and cleaning 21 of the oldest headstones.

Ken Aucumpaugh said many of the selected grave markers were originally placed without foundations and had been toppled over as far back as he could remember. Now that those headstones have been prop-

there is well over an acre of unclaimed land with room for hundreds of graves, Kevin Aucumpaugh said. The cemetery association undertook a beautification project and planned for the site's expansion in partnership with Landis Arboretum in 2008.

The project involved the removal of some dying vegetation and the planting

other inhabitants of the historic cemetery. She acknowledged the task may be best left to the up-and-coming board members.

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