

Friends of the Bryson City Cemetery

Newsletter 2016-001

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About this newsletter

This is the first issue of what is intended to be a quarterly newsletter for the Friends of the Bryson City Cemetery (FBCC). There are two primary purposes of the newsletter:

- 1) Keep Friends informed of matters related to the cemetery and FBCC in general, and
- 2) Provide readers with both the history and legend of those interred on this hallowed hill.

We encourage readers to submit articles of an historical nature related to those buried there. The articles could take the form of, for example:

- a biographical sketch,
- historical and/or genealogical background of individuals or families
- a narrative of events which involve multiple individuals or families.

If you are interested in submitting an article, please send a note which includes the intended subject of your article and your contact information to the editor at either the e-mail or snail mail addresses below.

hallowed.ground@friendsofthebccemetery.org

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Formation of Friends of the Bryson City Cemetery

The FBCC group was formed on October 6, 2015, in a meeting held at the First Baptist Church of Bryson City. Ten charter members elected officers:

President – Ivan Gibby
Treasurer – Gwen Franks Breese
Secretary – Tim Hall

As noted in Article III of the bylaws, the FBCC purposes for existing are twofold:

- A) Provide assistance in the restoration, maintenance, and preservation of the historical Bryson City Cemetery, and
- B) Foster knowledge of its importance to Bryson City, Swain County, and surrounding areas.

Membership dues are \$20/year per individual or \$30/year per family¹. Anyone with an interest in the history of the area and people is encouraged to not only join the FBCC, but otherwise support its purposes. One need not have a relative buried there to be a member.

Officers will be elected annually, as will board members. Developing and maintaining a steady course is critical, but we also do not want the organization to become stale. Turnover is viewed positively, and all members are encouraged to offer their services. The first annual election will take place at the annual meeting, to be held on February 11, 2016.

Bryson City Cemetery historical background

At least as early as 1866, the area we now know as the Bryson City Cemetery was used as a burying ground. The earliest documented grave is that of Alfred Cline, a Civil War veteran. According to an article in the October 9, 1866 issue of the Charlotte Democrat, "A man by the name of Cline, residing in the lower part of Jackson County, was shot down in cold blood, a short time since, by a band of marauders from Tennessee, known as the Robert Burchfield robbers."

There are dozens of fieldstone-marked graves in the cemetery. While some of these almost certainly came later, it is reasonable to assume that some may predate the burial of Alfred Cline.

The central portion of the cemetery was sold by Cline's widow, Lucy Ann Raby Cline, her brother John B. Raby, and children of Alfred and Lucy Ann to trustees of the three main-line denominations in Bryson City – Baptist (D.K. Collins), Methodist (W.T. Conley), and Presbyterian (E.M. Scruggs) – in 1884 for \$62.50.

A marker placed near the grave of Lucy Ann at the time of the county centennial states that Lucy Ann donated the cemetery property as well as the area around the square in Bryson City. In reality, Lucy Ann Raby Cline donated neither the cemetery nor the town

¹ A "family" membership covers adults and dependent children living under one roof.

property – she sold both. Though she sold the town area at what might be considered a benevolent price, she reserved some of the prime territory for herself and subsequently sold the reserved property for considerably more than it would've warranted if sold for farmland, had the area not been designated the county seat.

Lucy Ann certainly deserves to be honored, not as a purely altruistic soul but as a bright businesswoman who contributed to the public good while simultaneously providing for the welfare of her family.

After the purchase of the cemetery property, church trustees sold family plots in fee simple. Many family plots were sold but never recorded with the Register of Deeds. The first recorded sale of a plot was from the three trustees – W.T. Conley (Methodist), D.K. Collins (Baptist) and Kelly E. Bennett (Presbyterian) – to M. A. McCauley in November 1909. Multiple other plots had been previously sold, and are referenced in later plot boundaries, but were simply not recorded.

The Franklin family owned property which adjoined the church-purchased cemetery on the east. They logically elected to use their property for a family burying ground, but also sold tracts to others, including the Coburn and Orr families in the late 1920s and early 1930s. These family plots are located at the southeastern section of the cemetery, near the cemetery sign.

In May of 1952, Berlin and Lillian Franklin Thomasson and Coburn and Margaret DeHart deeded to the three church trustees a right of way and road easement over their lands on the east (Thomassons) and west (DeHarts) sides of the original cemetery. Both couples subsequently had their lands lying inside of the road surveyed and subdivided into plots, most of which were subsequently sold.

The Bryson City Cemetery of today is thus a combination of the original Cline property which had been deeded to the church trustees and subsequently sold by the trustees, the Franklin/Thomasson addition, and the DeHart addition.

Cemetery maintenance – past, present, and future

Records of early cemetery maintenance are sparse. A few of the recorded deeds included provisions such as “The trustees reserve the right to keep all walks open and trim its shade trees” and “All walks must be kept open.” In the case of the latter provision, it is unclear if the responsibility was on the shoulders of the grantor (church trustees) or the grantee.

The 12 September 1889 issue of the Swain County Herald included an announcement on cemetery maintenance which clearly indicates that the maintenance was viewed as a community responsibility: “The citizens are requested to turn out Saturday, at 8 o'clock in the morning, to labor on the cemetery (sic). Bring tools, willing hands and hearts and let us have the resting place of the dead tidied up.”

Jessie Greyer recalls her grandmother Bennett discussing decoration days in the early part of the 20th century where many in the community would turn out to clean and decorate the graves.

Times and traditions changed. By the 1940s, the town of Bryson City annual budget included line item entries for cemetery maintenance. Town-supported maintenance persisted for decades, typically accounting for about 1% of the overall town budget. But in recent years, with changes in town management and the recognition that the town itself had no legal role in the cemetery, maintenance dropped off considerably.

Over time, the cemetery condition worsened to the point that several individuals formed an informal group to consider options for dealing with the deteriorating situation. It was from this small group that Friends of the Bryson City Cemetery came into existence.

During the summer and fall of 2015, FBCC efforts included:

- Mowing, trimming, and pruning
- leaf removal,
- cleaning and straightening of grave markers,
- dealing with a serious kudzu and poison ivy infestation

Non-member volunteers, including Jim Gribble and Dan Trehern, the New Century Scholars group and their

coordinator, Julie Richards, and a group from the Presbyterian Church provided valuable assistance. A planned stick pickup day with the local 4-H club is planned for next month (Monday, March 7).

Mowing, trimming, and leaf removal required between 100 and 125 man-hours of effort. Additional volunteer assistance in 2016 would be greatly appreciated. Please contact Don Casada (488-2358) if you're willing to help.

A few family plots have been maintained by family members. FBCC is delighted in this, and encourage other families, as well as groups and individuals to

volunteer to accept partial or full responsibility for family plot or section maintenance. FBCC is happy to coordinate and assist in such efforts.

Over the long term, there will be needs which go beyond the routine mowing and cleaning efforts. Many markers are leaning and need to be reset with a more robust foundation. Numerous graves are marked with only field stones or concrete blocks, and some with nothing at all. It is our intent, over time, to provide relatively inexpensive granite markers with name and dates cut in the stone. For the unknown, a simple engraving such as "Known to God" will be used.



75-year old Clyde Pilkington, who cared for the cemetery grounds for many years, at the Bryson City Cemetery (photo courtesy of Clyde's granddaughter, Lisa Coday)

Over a hundred grave markers were cleaned in 2015. Before and after photos of a couple are shown below.

