

Friends of the Bryson City Cemetery

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P.O. Box 2223, Bryson City NC 28713 hallowed.ground@friendsofthebccemetery.org

Cemetery mapping

The mapping of the Bryson City Cemetery grounds and tabulation of those buried there has been completed. [Maps of all seven sections and a general overview are available on the FBCC web site.](#)

With the completion of the database of those buried, we are able to develop some statistics of interest. A [set of slides](#) which includes three graphs showing the distributions by period of birth, death, and age have been uploaded to the web site.

Of course the data shown there reflects only the data from graves with engraved tombstones. There are 129 graves marked by field stones, cut marble, etc.

While the plotted data mostly speaks for itself, thoughts offered here on each of the three figures:

- 1) As shown in Figure 1, almost half of the burials took place before 1940; since the majority of the unengraved stones were likely installed prior to 1940, it is reasonable to assume that most of the graves have been there for over ¾ of a century.
- 2) In Figure 2 it can be seen that over 60% of the graves in the entire cemetery (including unengraved markers) are occupied by folks born between 1860 and 1920. For many FBCC members, that roughly covers the generations of our parents and grandparents. One other observation about this plot is how close its shape is to a Gaussian distribution, AKA a “bell-shaped curve.”
- 3) The age at death distribution was something of a surprise to this writer, who would’ve expected a higher rate of infant mortality than is the case. In part, that may be due to absence of markers for some infant deaths.

There are other tabulations which we hope to pursue, and we’ll be soliciting help in that regard.

Our two purposes – and our great needs

The two fundamental purposes for Friends of the Bryson City Cemetery (FBCC), per our bylaws:

- 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.

This year, we want to be on the lookout for opportunities to apply for grants to help us along with those two purposes. Three significant areas which have come to mind related to the grounds which will require considerable effort and expense:

- 1) Repair or removal of walls which are in bad shape.
- 2) Leveling grave markers and their bases
- 3) Addressing collapsing graves

In the winter/early spring of 2016, the grave of [John L. Orr, Jr](#) collapsed following heavy rains. Eight to ten wheelbarrow loads of dirt were required to fill the sunken grave. In the process of planting bulbs this past weekend, we found that the grave of [Jack Coburn](#), which already had sunken several inches, is in danger of collapse; a hole dug with a bulb planter (about three inches in diameter and four inches deep) near his footstone revealed a large cavity underneath. We dropped in a number of stones and managed to seal things off so that a few shovels full of dirt partially stabilized things. The adjacent grave of Jack’s wife, [Bland](#), has sunken as much as that of Jack.

All three of the folks mentioned here were buried in 1934. Considering that this is in the middle of the period of highest concentration of burials (see Figure 1 of the statistical distribution slide set discussed above), there is at least an implication that there may be more to come. Sinking graves are also the primary contributor to the leaning grave markers.

Please give thought to this and share your perspectives at meetings or e-mail them to hallowed.ground@friendsofthebccemetery.org. Suggestions concerning grant opportunities we might pursue are also most welcome.

Grounds

Leaf removal at the BC Cemetery is quite a job. Seven large oaks, two sugar maples, a handful of dogwoods, poplars, birches, and Bradford pears combine to drop leaves by the ton (at least figuratively).

A significant portion of the leaves of this past year were mulched and are being used to provide mulch around gravestones where bulbs are planted, around ornamental trees and shrubs which are being planted, and on the bank along the road on the south side of the cemetery (the one which faces the school). Some have already been moved, and we'll hopefully get a lot more of them moved on Monday, March 13, when the JROTC group will provide us with some of their substantial energy.

Some color is coming back to the cemetery grounds from the lifeless tan/gray of winter. There is something particularly pleasing to the spirit about the appearance of renewed life on cemetery grounds. More than 400 bulbs have been added to the grounds over the winter. Some of these (crocus) have already bloomed and are fading. Others (daffodils and grape hyacinth) are at a peak right now. Yet others will hopefully be blooming throughout the summer. Experience suggests that bulbs do better the second year after planting, but some of the daffodils now in bloom are doing quite well. That includes some planted at the graves of [Dessie](#) and [Hill Coffey](#), as a token of our appreciation for the nice contribution of the Dessie Coffey fund by First Baptist back in November.

Over the last few weeks, a considerable number of gravestones have been cleaned. To date, well over 250 have had a scrubbing. A [link to several before/after photos](#) was recently e-mailed to members.

But also keep in mind that there is a listing (in alphabetical order, by last name, first name) on the FBCC web site of [all the gravestones for which we recorded before/after photos](#).

Membership and meetings

While we're delighted with all members, it is especially heartening that we've recently had some younger folks – six Swain High JROTC cadets - join the organization. Members will recall that a cadre of cadets provided a good deal of support to grounds maintenance efforts back in November. As part of an effort to encourage involvement of our younger members, we are moving at least part of our regular monthly meetings from the historical 1 pm practice to

later in the afternoon. The March meeting is scheduled for Thursday March 9 at 4:30 pm.

Another change in meeting practice which was endorsed at the annual meeting was to include brief presentations by members at monthly meetings. A brief [overview of the lives and contributions of Jack and Bland Wiggins Coburn](#) to local history was provided by Don Casada at the February meeting.

Wendy Meyers has agreed to present on the life and death of [Ben Enloe](#) at our March meeting. Volunteers are needed for future meetings.

Biographical sketches and other articles

In addition to the materials already noted in this newsletter, two additional articles have been posted to the FBCC web site. One is a memory and tribute to [Betty Grueninger Stearns](#), the wife of [I.K. Stearns](#), Carolina Wood Turning President and a member of the first graduating class of Bryson City High School. Betty grew up in Cincinnati, as did her nephew, Carl Grueninger, Jr. Carl authored the piece along with his wife Kathryn and their son, Carl Grueninger III. The article can be found by going to our web site, [friendsofthebccemetery.org](#), and clicking on Biographical Sketches and selecting her bio from the list. Alternatively, it can be found by using the [Search by name link](#) and following through the sequence of searching for "Stearns", picking out Betty's name from the list, and then going to the bottom of her page to see the link to her biographical sketch. Yet one other way is to select the name of I.K. Stearns and then going to the bottom of his page to see articles in which his name is mentioned. One of these is the Grueninger's sketch of Betty's life.

Two other pieces which have been added to the web site are the [presentation provided to the Swain County Genealogical and Historical Society on March 2](#) and an accompanying article, [Saving the Bryson City Bank during the Great Depression](#).

We strongly encourage members – and non-members – to submit biographical sketches of individuals or stories in which folks who take their rest on hallowed hill are a part of. If you would be willing to undertake this, please contact us at: hallowed.ground@friendsofthebccemetery.org.



