

Census of Cemeteries Suggested by Writer to Preserve County History

(By Charles Edward Thomas, Ridgeway Historian)

The editorial in this week's "News and Herald" and Mr. Atmar Morrow's letter on the care and preservation of historic sites inspires an appeal to some Fairfield County group or individual to make a census of cemeteries in the county. Much of the history of the county is recorded in its cemeteries, and much of this is fast being lost in Fairfield County, through the ravages of time and more tragically through the thoughtless vandalism of mis-directed people. Mr. Morrow points this up in the tragic condition of the ancient Woodward tombs just off the highway between Simpson and Rockton. Vandals have recently smashed some of the heavy marble slabs covering these historic Woodward and Gadsden graves in this pre-Revolutionary burial ground, one of the really important historic sites of the state.

This spring while my nephew Lee Thomas was at Ridgeway for spring vacation from Virginia Episcopal School, he and I spent two days studying local Ridgeway history in some of the older burying grounds of lower Fairfield. Many of the earliest graves in the county were on private plantations, and often only a few of the graves were marked with carved monuments; therefore many of these are lost or at best, difficult to locate after the growth of years, loss of homes, and abandonment of farms. For instance, in an entire afternoon's search we were not successful in finding what is said to be the oldest pre-Revolutionary burying place near Ridgeway on "Cedar Tree" Plantation, now owned by Mrs. A. J. Van Exem, just north of Ridgeway on the Winnsboro highway.

The earliest marked grave in Aimwell Cemetery, Ridgeway, appears to be that of Samuel Rosborough, born 1809, died December 14, 1830. He was one of the eight children of John Rosborough, 1774-1842, and his wife, Annie Cubit,

1772-1841, both of whom are buried at Aimwell, along with their eight children. This is unusual for a family of that size to be buried all in the same place, and tells something perhaps of the value placed on family ties by those strong old Presbyterians of that time. John Rosborough was ordained the first ruling elder of Aimwell Presbyterian Church in Ridgeway in 1801, although the church had been organized in 1790. One of his sons-in-law, Samuel Peyre Thomas, 1804-1854, also buried here, wrote back to a classmate at Harvard College in later years, that he had married the daughter of "the most up-right man, I have ever known, John Rosborough."

The first grave in St. Stephen's Episcopal Churchyard at Ridgeway is that of John Peyre Thomas, M. D., 1796-1859. Two of his children who had died earlier are now buried here, as they were later moved from Aimwell. Dr. Thomas with the Palmer and Davis families had built St. Stephen's just five years earlier.

Apparently the first burial in the Methodist Churchyard at Ridgeway was that of Walter Kennedy Lawhon, 1854-1862, only son of Joseph Lawhon, 1818-1875, and his wife, Elizabeth Bell Lawhon, 1818-1905. However, the Methodist Church or "Ruff's Chapel" as it was first known, was not built until 1872. Nearby is the grave of David H. Ruff, 1796-1877, the builder of the Chapel, who gave the 60 silver dollars that went into the chapel bell to give it a mellow tone. Mr. Ruff's sister, also buried here was Mrs. Nancy Ruff Lawhon, 1798-1887, mother of Joseph Lawhon.

As for the small plantation burying ground in the Ridgeway area, I have surveyed too few for any definitive facts. However, there is one on John Hood's place, west of Ridgeway, with eight carved tombstones to Kennedys and Harmons and one carved "Cynthia E. Ros-

borough, Consort of T. L. Rosborough, 1832-1858, Aged 26 years. This lead my prep school nephew to ask, "What is a Consort?"

There is more than history to be gleaned in ancient country cemeteries.

On the Craig place, northwest of Ridgeway, and only a few hundred feet south of the Mount Hope land, is a pre-Confederate family burying ground. We found here eighteen carved stones, all to Kennedys and Craigs, with a few graves marked only with boulders at the head and the foot. The earliest Mount Hope slaves are said to have been buried in the Kennedy-Craig cemetery, before the Slave Burying ground was started on the Mount Hope plantation. There are no carved tombstones in the Mount Hope colored cemetery, although there are numerous boulders marking head and footstones. Local folk remember the last burying at Mount Hope during the World War of 1917 and 1918, when "Uncle Jimmie" Gadsden died in Ridgeway, and his last request was "That I be taken home, to the Mount Hope Burying Ground."

Beyond the St. Stephen's Churchyard to the north is the Davis Family Slave Burying ground. I have not visited it since I was a boy at Ridgeway about 1920. However, I remember several carved stones there to Negro slaves of the Davis family. The Davises had given the adjoining land on which St. Stephen's Church is built.

None of the colored cemeteries in the Ridgeway area appear to have tombstones of graves before the late 1800's and early 1900's. There are carved stones in the Bethlehem Baptist Church cemetery, a mile beyond that church, which is west of Ridgeway. The colored Presbyterian Churchyard, south of Ridgeway on the Columbia highway, is a well-kept and the best marked colored cemetery in the area, but none of the graves ante-date this century. The same is true of the Pisgah Churchyard, east of Ridgeway on the Longtown highway.

There are some interesting and imposing monuments in both the Longtown Presbyterian and Baptist cemeteries on the Old Camden road, but I have not checked the dates there for the earliest graves. Colonel Nicholas A. Peay, the builder of fabulous "Melrose" was buried in the Baptist cemetery in 1857, and thereby was spared witnessing the

tragedy of the Federal troops' burning what was generally recognized to be the finest plantation house in upper South Carolina. Many years ago Col. Peay's descendants offered the great granite gate posts of "Melrose" to St. Stephen's Church at Ridgeway. Because of the weight and size of the handsome columns, the Episcopalians were so slow in moving them, that they were subsequently offered the Longtown Presbyterian, where they now grace the entrance to that Churchyard.

These hallowed spots recall Gray's "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard." Two stanzas taken out of context are:

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell forever laid,
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?

Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of death?

Or a line that I ran across some-
where many years ago, comes back to me when I visit a Churchyard like St. Stephen's at Ridgeway:

"I would rather sleep in the southern corner of a little country churchyard than among the tombs of the mighty!"