

# Ongoing Effort to Preserve Remains of Derry's Earliest Residents

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Dorothy Goldman forms dozens of new relationships with Derry residents each Sunday morning, but most of them have been dead for more than a hundred years before she was born.

A resident of Salem and a member of the Find A Grave organization, a worldwide volunteer electronic database of grave documentation and genealogical information, Goldman is drawn to historic New England cemeteries and the preservation of the lives of the people buried in them.

Goldman spent this past summer and fall in Derry, sorting through an old cemetery index that an Eagle Scout organized more than 20 years ago. The "Spinney"

list, named after its creator, Stephen Spinney, maps the eldest section of Forest Hill Cemetery, Derry's only cemetery, where the graves date back to the 18th and 19th centuries. The cemetery is in East Derry.

Weaving among the tilting stone grave markers, Goldman has taken notes of the family lots, paying especially close attention to the muddled script or the cracked rock. Sometimes washing the surface with a spritz of water and a soft brush, Goldman has photographed the graves, each time checking off another name from the Spinney list. Another soul recorded.

"Derry's history is here, and a lot of them (graves) have been lost over the years," explained Goldman on a crisp, fall Sunday

morning. "These are the people who made the community what it is, and what's a crying shame is they're letting this go."

Goldman walked past a square lot near the entrance to the old section with a sign that reads, "The First Settlers." Leaning against a rolling walker with a digital camera dangling from her neck, Goldman acted as though she knew the family well.

In a way, she does.

Once Goldman photographs a grave, she posts the image on the Find A Grave website, so genealogy buffs like herself can view their ancestors from such far-away places as Canada, Florida, and Maryland. Descendants of various Derry settlers have contacted Goldman requesting that she locate the graves of their relatives.

In her findings, Goldman has discovered stories she never expected when she embarked on her cataloguing expedition, such as illnesses that swept through the community, killing scores of small children, or lost veterans whose graves have disintegrated over the passing generations.

"I try never to leave a cemetery without photographing a veteran's headstone," said Goldman, who added that veterans hold a "big place in my heart."

She has also cultivated an unexpected fascination with grave literature. Epitaphs often exist as a reminder of

what extent religion played in the lives of many early settlers, Goldman explained.

"On earth thou wert all but divine, As thy soul shall immortally be, And our sorrow may cease to repine, For we know that thy God is with thee," reads the epitaph of an infant who died in 1830.

Other epitaphs are simply a poetic commemoration of life, such as the one inscribed on Samuel F. Humphry's grave from 1808: "Behold how soon our nature dies, Blasted by every wind that flies, Like grass, we spring and fade as soon, As morning flowers which die at noon."

Goldman is enchanted by the mystery of the stones. She considers herself "a liaison" for the families to whom these graves belong. And she displays obvious anguish when she discovers another stone that has fallen over or engraving that is too faded to decipher, despite her attempt to tin-foil etch it.

"A lot of them we've lost over the years," she said sadly, looking down at a jagged slab of illegible grey slate. "A piece of history that is gone forever."

As Goldman has progressed through the historic cemetery, using the Spinney list as a guide, she corresponds with Derry's town historian, Rick Holmes, who invited Goldman to consider the project.

No longer willing to adhere the great stones together himself, Holmes



Dorothy Goldman, a member of Find a Grave, visits Forest Hill Cemetery in East Derry each week to locate the burial places of early residents and help preserve the inscriptions over their resting place.

submitted to the Town Council last year a \$150,000 contracted project to repair the entire old section. The council acts as the cemetery's Board of Trustees, delegating just enough funds to maintain the cemetery green every year. Holmes explained the council has not yet responded to the proposed contract.

The responsibility of individual stone upkeep in reality falls upon the deceased's family, most of whom moved away from Derry 150 years ago, according to Holmes, who will willingly train any volunteer to help preserve and

clean stones.

For now at least, Goldman seems to be the cemetery's unofficial keeper, pattering past the cock-eyed rows each Sunday morning, practicing a morbid form of documentary triage.

"I stand looking down the rows and see who's leaning, and I try to decide who's going to go this winter," she said.

It is those stones Goldman addresses first by cleaning and photographing, thereby hopefully immortalizing the gravestone's image.