

2/10/2020

Attachment 9

Application for Network to Freedom, Table Rock Cemetery For Block S5 – History of the site since its time of significance to the Underground Railroad....

HISTORY OF THE TABLE ROCK CEMETERY

The Table Rock Cemetery is on the western edge of the village. It is a full city block in size; indeed, it is all of Block 33 of the Original Town of Table Rock. It is bounded by Pennsylvania and Luzerne Streets, and 9th and 10th Streets.

The cemetery lies on a gently rolling hill, divided by two intersecting, tree-lined roads that create four quarters. Most of the oldest graves are in the northwest quarter. The outer perimeter is marked by trees as well, including catalpa trees planted on the western border and cedar trees along with inner roads and around the perimeter.

The cemetery is one of the older ones in Nebraska. It is considered by History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society) to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a cemetery “that reflects the historic character of cemeteries established during the Territorial Period (1854-1867).”¹ An application for the listing has not yet been made.

The cemetery was established by at least 1857, because at least two burials took place in 1857. The plat of Table Rock prepared by Robert V. Muir in 1857 and 1858 and recorded in 1858 marks Block 33 as the cemetery.²

¹ See the Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey; Reconnaissance Survey General Report of Pawnee County, Nebraska,” prepared for the Nebraska State Historical Society’s State Historic Preservation Office, August 1, 1993, page 24, available online at <https://history.nebraska.gov/historic-preservation/survey>.

² Muir later reported that he surveyed and platted Table Rock in 1857. “Married Sixty Years Ago; Mr. and Mrs. R. V. Muir Celebrated Anniversary,” *Nebraska State Journal*, September 12, 1912, page 21. The final plat is dated 1858

The oldest marked grave is that of Achsah Griffing, who died on October 21, 1857. However, she was not the first buried there. The names of the first two persons to be buried in the Table Rock Cemetery are lost to history, but the third was Hannah Jane Gere, who died at age 13 on July 18, 1857. The Gere family had come in 1856, one of the first families to arrive of those who came here under the auspices of the Nebraska Settlement Company. Horatio N. and Juliana Gere brought four of their five children, aged 9 to 16. In a short journal, Juliana Gere marked the onset of Hannah Jane's illness, describing the dramatic and horrifying course of symptoms of what was probably typhoid fever.³ Juliana wrote that following the funeral, "Nearly every person present followed her dear form to its final resting place, which is about ½ mile distant and is as lovely as I could have selected. Hers was the third grave in the new burial ground on the town site."⁴

Which grave is Hannah Jane Gere's? There is no stone bearing her name. However, there is a set of three limestone tombstones which bear the marks of chiseling but no inscription or other marking. These are the sort of handmade stones one would expect for newly-arrived pioneers. Perhaps there lie the three buried there before Achsah Griffing, whose stone appears to be from a slightly later period.

Near the set of three is a large flat stone the size of a grave which shows the same sort of rough workings but also has letters roughly chiseled on its face, with a cross, and a date: 1858. Next to it is the remains of a "house roof" style tombstone the size of a small child, with no inscription. The larger one is sometimes known as the Mysterious Tombstone. Local legends about whose graves are thus marked by those five rough limestone tombstones abound. Some interpret the letters as a

and is the first record in the registry of deeds at Pawnee County, Nebraska, recorded at deed book 1 OS, pages 1 to 3.

³ Juliana Gere's journals are transcribed and interpreted in a meticulously-researched booklet by Doralyn Steiner Cheney, *Stories of Early Settlers Along the Nemaha* (Table Rock, NE, Table Rock Historical Society, 2016), page 25.

⁴ Doralyn Cheney, *Stories of Early Settlers Along the Nemaha*, page 25, quoting Juliana Gere's journal entry.

name, others as a set of initials of more than one person. Some stories relate to deaths known to have occurred after 1858. The most accepted story is that an emigrant or emigrants passing through died of illness and were buried there.

The year of 1858 that is chiseled in the one Mysterious Tombstone represents a horrific year for the settlers of Table Rock, a year that culminated in a bitter winter when the two specific incidents involving the Giddings family occurred. That year came flooding which wiped out the homes of many of the newly-arrived settlers, who had mostly built in low lying areas near the river and creeks. After the flood waters receded, there was an aftermath of great illness. Some accounts of the time relate that at times so many people were ill that there were not enough who were healthy left to care for the ill. Lydia Griffing wrote in her journal that when she succumbed to illness while carrying for her sick husband, they both lay in bed, unable to rise even to care for their baby, and expected death. A young man came to see them, found the little family incapacitated, and stayed to nurse them to health. The winter was a bitter one, with a late Spring in 1859, “a serious misfortune.”⁵ There are no records as to how many left, but Rev. C. W. Giddings, president of the Nebraska Settlement Company, later reported that 200 families had come with the settlement company in the 18 months before the flooding, but by the end of 1858 only a small portion were left.⁶

The Table Rock Cemetery Association was established after a July 1880 town meeting at the Methodist church for the purpose of establishing such an association.⁷ C. W. Giddings had died the year before the 1880 meeting to establish the Association, and his wife Clarissa died a few months after the meeting. In 1884, the cemetery was quitclaimed to the Table Rock Cemetery Association by two daughters of C. W. and Clarissa Giddings, Fannie Norris and

⁵ Doralyn Cheney, *Stories of Early Settlers Along the Nemaha*, page 36.

⁶ Doralyn Cheney, *Stories of Early Settlers Along the Nemaha*, page 34, citing A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, IL: The Western Historical Company, 1882), page 1254.

⁷ J. C. Layden, “Table Rock Cemetery, From Its Beginning,” 1975. This unpublished history by a long-time sexton of the cemetery is in the records of the Table Rock Historical Society and may be found on its website at <https://www.tablerockhistoricalsociety.com/network-to-freedom.html>.

Lydia Holmes, and their husbands.⁸ Orville Howe reportedly surveyed the cemetery and prepared a map.⁹

Almost thirty years of burials without management by an association had left a cemetery with plots in disarray; alignment, especially in the older sections, is difficult to ascertain even with a map. Another result of lack of management in earlier times is that the older burial records are sometimes incomplete. There are said to be numerous unmarked graves. The names of some who lie in unmarked graves are established by burial records, obituaries, and newspaper accounts. For some unmarked graves, the location is known, but not for others. Those believed buried in the cemetery but in an unknown plot include a grave shared by three horse thieves hung at Christmas in 1864 and that of Nicholas Craig, a village marshal whose 1896 murder was never solved.¹⁰

In 1891, the first Cemetery Association by-laws were passed. That same year, horticulturist C. H. Barnard of Table Rock, set out cedar and catalpa trees at the cost of 30 cents each. The greater portion of those trees survive to this day, providing shade and beautify. In 1894, a wooden fence was reportedly built around the cemetery, and at some point an iron fence was placed around at least some of the perimeter; a section of the iron fence is in the Pioneer Museum.¹¹

In 1903, an imposing Civil War statue in the northeast corner of the cemetery was dedicated by the Grand Army of the Republic and its auxiliary, the

⁸ Signing the deed were Fannie Norris, her husband C. H. Norris, Lydia Holmes (Fannie's sister Lydia Giddings Gere Holmes), and C. H. Norris as attorney in fact for A. Holmes (Lydia's husband). The deed was executed September 26, 1884 and recorded on October 23, 18894 at Deed book 12, page 217.

⁹ J. C. Layden, "Table Rock Cemetery From Its Beginning," 1975.

¹⁰ Information about some of the unmarked graves can be found on the website of the Table Rock Historical Society at <https://www.tablerockhistoricalsociety.com/list-of-unmarked-graves.html>.

¹¹ Information in this paragraph comes from J. C. Layden, "Table Rock Cemetery From Its Beginning." The photograph which shows the steps may be found at <https://www.tablerockhistoricalsociety.com/table-rock-cemetery.html>.

Woman's Relief Corps.¹² It is of the sort known as the "Silent Sentinel," the largest made by the foundries of the time – the statue is 7 feet tall and weighs over 1,000 pounds. It stands on a 21 foot tall base of Indiana stone that weighs 31,600 pounds. The original cost was \$600.

About 60 Civil War veterans are known to be buried in the cemetery, all but two of whom fought for the Union.¹³ A number of the veterans' graves are unmarked. In the last three years, the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War have dedicated three new military tombstones for Civil War veterans at the cemetery. One was for William McNeal, who died in the war and whose remains lie in a place unknown; the U. S. Army provided formal military honors in conjunction with the Civil War reenactors. McNeal's family was one of the first wave of settlers who arrived in 1857.¹⁴

In 1906, a well was dug to provide water for the cemetery.¹⁵ In 1915, the by-laws were updated and printed in pamphlet form.¹⁶ In about 1920, decorative cement steps were built at the northeast corner of the cemetery, near the Civil War statue.¹⁷

In the 100 years since the cement steps were placed, there have been no significant changes. In the past decade, some of the cedars have had to be cut down, as were two Table Rock sugar maples of considerable age. The bulk of the cedar trees continue to shade the two intersecting inner roads and much of the perimeter, the peonies continue to thrive and add color each year in May, and the

¹² Photographs and information about the Civil War statue are available at <https://www.tablerockhistoricalsociety.com/civil-war-statue.html>.

¹³ Information about the veterans and their graves may be found at <https://www.tablerockhistoricalsociety.com/roll-of-honor---civil-war-soldiers-of-table-rock.html>.

¹⁴ A. T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, page 1248.

¹⁵ J. C. Layden, "Table Rock Cemetery From Its Beginning," 1975.

¹⁶ The 1915 by-laws are available at <https://www.tablerockhistoricalsociety.com/table-rock-cemetery.html>.

¹⁷ J. C. Layden, "Table Rock Cemetery From Its Beginning," 1975. The steps no longer exist. It is unknown when they were removed.

dedicated members of the Table Rock Cemetery Association continue to meet each year.

As of February 2020, there are 1,888 burials and there are believed to be more in unmarked graves. The cemetery remains active and burials continue to date. The Village of Table Rock provides a small annual stipend to contribute to maintenance of the cemetery. Plots may still be purchased from the Table Rock Cemetery Association, and anyone who purchases a plot may be buried there. It is a place of history sentiment and many are those who have moved away but yet prefer to be buried in the home of their heart. The last of the plots purchased by Fannie Giddings Norris is the resting place of her granddaughter Helen Norris Siemsen (1919-2018), and in the Howe section Helen Howe Saylor (1934-2019), a great granddaughter of Orville and Mary Pepon Howe who recently passed away, will be buried there this year by her husband.