



FRIENDS OF OCONEE HILL CEMETERY

Spring 2017

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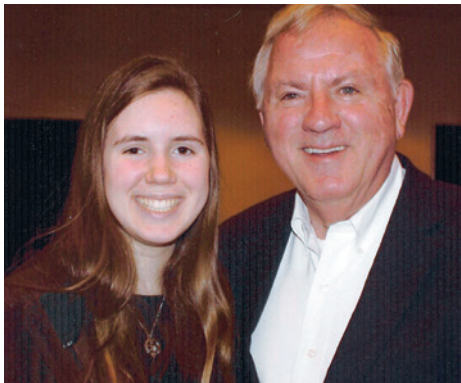
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Cover Image: Crown topping by New Urban Forestry (see page 3).



Don Smith with his daughter Fleming

From the President

As I write this, it’s a glorious spring afternoon in Athens. This time of year traditionally heralds rebirth and renewal and gives rise to new growth in our spirits as well as in nature. So it is at Oconee Hill Cemetery! This year we will see exciting new developments in the life of our treasured cemetery, the result of all the seeds of change and improvement planted the last few years by former Friends president Joe Tillman and his dedicated board of directors. It’s a delight to encourage you to look around and see what’s coming up.

Recently, thanks to a grant from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Historic Preservation Fund, more than 13 dead or diseased trees were taken down and another dozen or so received extensive crown topping work. As a result, sightlines are greatly improved and many handsome trees planted decades ago to beautify particular areas no longer compete with “volunteer” trees that distorted the original landscape plan. It’s easier to explore the cemetery, too, now that new and attractive directional and identification signs have been installed on decorative metal posts that closely replicate original signposts.

Other improvements have sprouted from new ideas and new technologies introduced by members of our active board and by our enthusiastic Trustees. Data produced by recently completed GIS (geographical information system) mapping of all sections in the cemetery will be used to develop new promotional materials and will help those who want to purchase grave spaces find the perfect location. The new maps will also provide invaluable context for those who are interested in the history of the people and families who rest here. Scanning of cemetery records continues, providing lot owners, researchers and historians access to documents long unavailable. We continue to improve and update our website and Facebook page—technologies that would mystify the Athenians who established the cemetery in 1856.

We’ve initiated an email platform that allows us to send news about events and activities at the cemetery to all Friends members for whom we have current email addresses. We were able to promote Women’s History Month in March by spotlighting five outstanding Athens women buried here and were able to remind Friends of the Second Annual Easter Sunrise service.

Community appreciation of Oconee Hill Cemetery continues to grow, too, thanks to the efforts of Friends to encourage local organizations, University of Georgia classes, local school-children and others to visit. And, as awareness and appreciation of the cemetery continues to increase, so does our membership! Your membership dues and financial contributions help us continue the work we do to keep Oconee Hill Cemetery the beautiful treasure it is for seasons and generations to come.

NANCY B. BOWEN
President

Oconee Hill Cemetery Names General Manager

The Board of Trustees of Oconee Hill Cemetery is pleased to announce that Don Smith has been promoted to general manager for the cemetery. In his former role as consultant for marketing and public relations, Don oversaw the transition of cemetery record keeping from paper to a digital format. He created a virtual tour of the cemetery featuring Charlotte Marshall as a guide for 30-plus grave sites, and he developed a history and genealogy web portal at www.oconeehillcemetery.org online to enable anyone to view the records and find specific gravesites.

As general manager, Don will continue to develop new business applications incorporating cutting-edge technology into the

day-to-day operations, as well as overseeing cemetery business and lot sales, assisted by OHC sexton Brian Adler. Before moving to Athens in 2001 to start his own software company, Don spent 36 years in imaging technology and sales management in Atlanta. He is a UGA graduate and is married to the former Margaret McPherson of Athens. Don is a member of the Rotary Club of Athens and Emmanuel Episcopal Church, serves as president of the Renfrew Estates Civic Association and is on the Parents’ Council at Sewanee: The University of the South, where his daughter, Fleming, is a rising junior.



RECENT TREE WORK AT OCONEE HILL CEMETERY

by Richard Lane

Recognizing that trees are essential to the beauty and character of a “natural landscape” cemetery such as Oconee Hill and that the aging tree population within our cemetery is not being replaced and enhanced by younger trees at a rate necessary to maintain itself, the board of Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery (FOH) has for several years been engaged in a series of projects aimed at removing dead, dangerous and unsightly trees; “crown topping” (improved pruning) of significant trees, especially those located within the historic sections on the west side of the river; and tree planting throughout the cemetery.

Most recently, FOH, through the Human and Community Development Department of the Athens-Clarke County Unified Government, applied for and received a Historic Preservation Fund Grant from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The resulting project was funded at \$17,850 (60 percent from DNR, 40 percent from FOH), an amount that enabled us to

engage New Urban Forestry and have them (1) remove 13 trees that were either dead or dying, thus threatening to fall or drop limbs on significant monuments in their vicinity, and (2) do pruning or crown topping of another 15-plus mature trees.

While the process for obtaining/awarding bids for this work was not an easy one, it was so conscientiously and skillfully handled by Chadsity Young, program support analyst, Human and Community Development, Athens-Clarke County, that it turned out to be both educational and (believe it or not!) enjoyable for the FOH members involved. We had thought we would never be able to replace Rob Trevena as “our” contact with A-CC, but Chadsity, like Rob before her, did everything she could to see that all aspects of the project went well, and working with her was always a pleasure.

Working with certified arborist Kevin Hamman and his crew from New Urban Forestry was also a gratifying experience. They, too, went beyond the call of duty to see that a substantial amount of significant tree work was done safely, skillfully and well. All in all, FOH board members are convinced that we obtained the most and best tree work we could ever have imagined.

While several of “the usual suspects” (especially Lucy Allen, Helen Costanti-

no, Kathy Hoard, Richard Lane and Joe Tillman) from the boards of the Friends and Trustees of Oconee Hill Cemetery helped obtain the grant and coordinate various aspects of this important project, one particular friend stepped up to make it the great success it was. Dick Field, a retired forester and educator who served as the first environmental coordinator for Athens-Clarke County, was present daily throughout the project as on-site liaison between FOH and New Urban Forestry, not only overseeing the work being done and sharing his knowledge and expertise, but also bringing his machete with him so that he could remove invasive ivy around the trunks of many trees.

Dick will also advise us as we move toward the next phase of our ongoing series of tree projects—planting of large and/or specimen trees in selected spots throughout the cemetery. While the planting of trees is as yet unfunded (hint, hint), we hope to be able to plant between 10 and 20 trees each fall for the next 5 to 10 years, effectively filling in the gaps so that Oconee Hill Cemetery remains as beautiful for future generations as it has been in the past. Look for healthy trees cropping up on the horizon to replace the dead ones recently removed.

This preservation project has been financed in part with federal funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior, through the Historic Preservation Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. The contents, opinions and recommendations expressed in this project do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior or the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products or consultants constitute endorsement or recommendation by these agencies. This program receives federal financial assistance for identification

and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, gender or disability in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility as described above, or if you desire further information, please write to: Office for Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20240.



RIP: MARY ANNE BITTNER KENNER MARCH 23, 1933–MARCH 18, 2017

by Helen M. Costantino

“Mary Anne Kenner, beloved mother, grandmother, wife, pioneer, nurse, advocate, teacher and friend to countless generations of humans and living creatures great and small, passed away peacefully on the rainy morning of Saturday, March

18, at Highland Hills. We are all blessed to have received her expert care, wise compassion, zest for living, inspiring vision and beautiful love.”

Such was the first paragraph of the obituary for Mary Anne Kenner, the driving force behind the Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery. The words from her family are so descriptive and capture much of the person that we came to love. In 1999, Mary Anne, who had spent much time at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, brought the idea of a friends group for Oconee Hill Cemetery to the Athens Garden Club Council. The group was receptive and the project was begun. The rest, as they say, is history. She found a group of interested people, developed by-laws, applied for tax-exempt status and began a membership drive. From that small group, FOH membership has grown to over 400. Projects have ranged from renovating the Sexton’s House to repairing retaining walls, restoring the historic bridge, building the Wingfield Chapel, creating mapping to facilitate grave location, organizing community events, creating a partnership with UGA and its Willson Center for Humanities and Arts to bring student projects to the cemetery, establishing a successful Veterans Day program, filming Charlotte Marshall and her wonderful biographies of “the locals” and putting up an interactive website. The list continues to grow.

FOH would not exist without the leadership, spirit and enthusiasm that Mary Anne Bittner Kenner brought to us. As we continue to work to restore and preserve the 100-acre treasure that Athens is so fortunate to have, we will remember and honor the best Friend we ever had.



The Trustees of Oconee Hill Cemetery elected new officers for 2-year terms beginning on January 1, 2017. The new leaders are: Lucy Allen, chair; Tom Wilfong, vice-chair; Helen Mills, secretary; and Cissy Hutchinson, treasurer. At-large trustees are Mark Costantino (immediate past chair), Corky Sams and Bobby Gibson. At the conclusion of the business meeting, Costantino passed the ceremonial gavel to Allen. He stated that he is most proud of the increased public awareness of Oconee Hill Cemetery and said, “I truly feel that most Athenians now know that we exist. The common misconceptions that the cemetery is private, full, and white-only have been dispelled. We have raised our public image.” In accepting the gavel, Allen said she hopes to achieve an even stronger level of financial stability, to continue to improve the new business model and to encourage community awareness of and participation with Oconee Hill Cemetery. She stated she intends to support increased efforts to restore and maintain this historic cemetery in the heart of Athens.

UGA Holds Reinterment Ceremony

In November 2015, during a UGA renovation and addition project at Baldwin Hall, adjacent to the Old Athens Cemetery on Jackson Street, human remains were discovered. Work on the construction project was halted while the remains were meticulously removed under the guidance of the state archaeologist’s office. Although remains of 105 individuals were uncovered, DNA samples were sufficient to identify only 30 of them in any way. The vast majority but not all of the 30 individuals were men, women and children of African descent, probably slaves or former slaves. The 105 individuals were carefully catalogued and placed in funeral boxes before being laid to rest in Oconee Hill Cemetery. The ceremony to reinter the remains was held on Monday, March 20, 2017. UGA President Jere Morehead, the Rev. Dr. Winfred M. Hope of Ebenezer Baptist Church, and the Honorable Steve Jones, a judge in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia, spoke at the dignified ceremony. Dr. Gregory Broughton, of the UGA Hugh Hodgson School of Music, sang an a cappella version of “Amazing Grace.” The site for the reinterment was marked by a stately granite marker that provides an account of the discovery and reinterment of the 105 individuals. The marker also contains an excerpt of the poem “Day” by Laurence Dunbar. Oconee Hill will provide perpetual care of the site. The Old Athens Cemetery on Jackson Street was the city’s public cemetery in the early part of the 19th century. In 1856, Oconee Hill Cemetery, a much larger cemetery, was created. The state archaeologist’s office recommended that the remains be buried at Oconee Hill as it is the cemetery nearest the Old Athens Cemetery.

MEMBER EMAILS

The Friends have begun using Constant Contact as a more professional means to communicate via email to our members. As an example, in March, those on our email list should have received five different emails regarding interesting women buried in our cemetery. Like all emails, whether they arrive in your inbox is partly determined by your email filters; if you have a gmail account, you may want to check your “Promotions” tab. The messages would be coming from “Oconee Hill Cemetery.” If you think you are not receiving what we are sending, contact Tom Hodgson at tmhodgson@live.com.

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We wish to thank our 2016–17 members. Without them, the accomplishments mentioned in this newsletter would have been impossible. The following list is current as of March 31, 2017.

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SECOND ANNUAL EASTER SUNRISE SERVICE

A beautiful and moving Easter sunrise service was held at 6:45 a.m. on Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017, in the lovely Wingfield Chapel. Paul Baxley and Frank Granger, ministers from Athens First Baptist Church, and Justin Floyd and Alan Mace, ministers from Athens First Christian Church, led the service. As he did last year, Jim McKillip played the trumpet for the prelude and concluded the service when everyone joined him to sing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today! Alleluia!”

Audubon Society and Boy Scouts Install Nest Boxes



Boy Scout Troop 305 of Watkinsville and its scoutmaster, Craig Vail, joined Brian Cooke, president of the Oconee Rivers Audubon Society, to erect 15 nest boxes at Oconee Hill Cemetery. Cooke instructed the Boy Scouts on the best places to locate the bird houses. The Boy Scouts constructed the nest boxes during their weekly meetings. These nest boxes are intended to attract eight different bird species that are regularly found in northeast Georgia. Because Oconee Hill staff actively removes dead standing trees, called snags, to protect infrastructure, nest boxes are an important habitat provision for cavity-nesting birds. Oconee Rivers Audubon Society members will check on the nest boxes throughout the spring and summer to see if birds are using them. If you see bird activity at a nest box, email president@oconeeriversaudubon.org

Boy Scout Troop 305 built 15 nest boxes in February to attract eight bird species.

Missing Minutes

Email Lucy Allen at erwinallen@charter.net if you have any information regarding the Trustee minutes from 1940 to 1946, which are missing.

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OCONEE HILL CEMETERY WINS ACHF AWARD



Katelyn Corbett and Katy Dingler scan cemetery records. (Photo by Don Smith.)

Oconee Hill Cemetery is the 2017 recipient of Athens-Clarke Heritage Foundation Preservation Award in the category of Publications and Programs for the digital conversion project. In September 2016, the trustees launched a project to convert all records related to the cemetery to searchable files with public access via a special portal. Don Smith, the general manager of Oconee Hill, brought the vision, expertise and energy to achieve this goal in a only a few months, without removing the books from the cemetery premises. Since its inception in 1856, Oconee Hill has recorded deaths and burials in paper format. These unwieldy books dating from 1897 (when a fire destroyed the initial 40 years of records) had become delicate, worn, stained and torn. More than 30 heavy volumes were scanned in record time. Specialized equipment was rented on a short-term basis, and people skilled in particular software were temporarily employed to complete the project. The digitized data is available not only to the sexton, general manager and trustees but also to researchers and the public at www.oconeehillcemetery.online. It is now possible for anyone to look up the records

of any post-1896 interment. This project has eliminated the necessity of daily handling of century-old record books and permitted them to be safely archived and preserved for future generations. The data in the records is not only important to cemetery management but also to families for its genealogical value and to students researching the health of Athens. The trustees, under the successive chairmanships of Dr. Mark Costantino and Lucy Erwin Allen, provided staunch support, and the Friends of Oconee Hill made a secure room available in the restored Sexton's House for the operation.