



Mick Zawislak

How some of suburbs' oldest cemeteries are seeing a renewal

Mark Welsh | Staff Photographer

Pioneer history is being revived in a busy area along Lake-Cook Road in Highland Park.

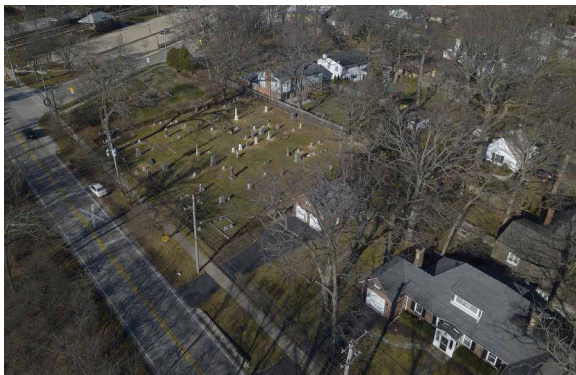
Just east of the Braeside train station and not far from Ravinia Festival where family sheep once grazed, dozens of gravestones in the pioneer Daggitt Cemetery have been righted, repaired and cleaned to look almost like new.

Previously illegible inscriptions can now be read. Margaretha Rudolph's stone, which had been broken into four pieces, was reassembled and positioned with her family.

The recently completed work has made a dramatic change at the 175-year-old final resting place for early settlers, providing a fresh perspective on area history.



AT DAILYHERALD.COM/VIDEO: Moraine Township Trustee Cindy Wolfson, who is overseeing restoration work at the pioneer-era Daggitt Cemetery along Lake-Cook Road in Highland Park, stands near the monument to the cemetery's founder, Robert Daggitt.



Daggitt Cemetery on the north side of Lake-Cook Road in Highland Park was established as a family burial ground in 1845 by Robert Daggitt, a carpenter who came from England with his wife and nine children.



Daggitt Cemetery in Highland Park was established in 1845 as a family burial plot by Robert Daggitt, a carpenter who came to the area from England. The family monument and plot where Daggitt, his wife and nine children are buried is at right. (Mark Welsh | Staff Photographer)

"I think we really owe it to the people who come before us to honor their contributions," said Cindy Wolfson, a Moraine Township trustee who is overseeing the multiyear project.

Be it a renewed sense of place, the popularity of genealogical research at sites like findagrave.com or even cemetery walks, Daggitt isn't the only old burial ground benefiting from extra attention these days.

"It is becoming apparent to so many that this history will be lost if something isn't done to preserve it," said Helen Wildermuth of Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration LLC.



The headstone of a Civil War veteran who was a musician is among several that were cleaned and repaired as part of a multiyear plan to restore Daggitt Cemetery in Highland Park.

The Nashville, Indiana-based firm has performed

restoration work at Daggitt and other suburban cemeteries, including Hillside Cemetery in Palatine.

"It's history," explained Terry Kelly, Palatine Township assessor and chair of the township cemetery committee. "The founding fathers of Palatine are buried there. It's important."

Robert Daggitt was a carpenter and cabinet maker who came to the area from England with his family in 1837. He received a 160-acre land grant in 1843, Wolfson said.



Daggitt Cemetery on Lake-Cook Road at St. Johns Avenue in Highland Park was established by Robert Daggitt as a family burial ground in 1845. The first phase of a project to clean, repair and reset markers has been completed.

“The country was a perfect wilderness, wild game of all kinds was abundant but the comforts of civilization were few and not easily accessible,” according to a historical account of Lake County in 1891.

Daggitt created a family cemetery on a half acre near his home after his 13-year old daughter, Ann, died of “quick consumption” or tuberculosis in 1845.

“He had nine children,” Wolfson said. “Three of them died close together. He buried them on a little knoll on his property.”

Neighbors asked to bury their loved ones nearby and Daggitt created family plots. He donated grave sites for his neighbors’ use during an epidemic in the 1850s, which increased the number of burials.



Dozens of grave markers at Daggitt Cemetery in Highland Park recently were righted, cleaned and repaired as part of a multiyear project to restore the pioneer cemetery established in 1845. The cemetery was established by Robert Daggitt, who came to this area from England in 1838 with his wife. They had nine children. - Courtesy of Moraine Township

“I learned a lot about the people and the lifestyle and the hardships they faced, like the cholera epidemic,” Wolfson said.

Daggitt’s holdings grew to as many as 3,000 acres, according to various accounts, including grounds of the present-day Ravinia Festival, where his sheep grazed.

“You start thinking about the lives of the people,” Wolfson said. “Can you imagine, there was a stagecoach from Chicago to Milwaukee that ran right by here.”

Today, the Green Bay Trail parallels the nearby railroad tracks. Adjacent to the cemetery on St. Johns Avenue, Founders’ Park merges “the many layers of history concentrated at this unique location,” reads an inscription.

The stories of early settlers here and in other small cemeteries throughout the suburbs provide a sense of place and community.

“Yes, there is a definite interest in preserving our burial grounds,” said John Heider, of Gravestone Repair in downstate Monticello. “They are outdoor museums that display the last physical symbols of people who lived in the area.”

Heider previously worked on Fort Hill Cemetery near Round Lake, and in 2021 he plans on restoring more than 350 gravestones in Illinois, about 100 of them in the suburbs. Last year, another certified professional who works primarily in the suburbs repaired between 350 and 400 grave markers, he said.

Over time, ownership of the Daggitt Cemetery became unclear. Like many other original family cemeteries, it became neglected, fell into disrepair and essentially was abandoned. The city and park district maintained what had been known as Grace Cemetery until Deerfield (now Moraine) Township in 1996 replaced the fence, cleaned the property and rededicated it as Daggitt Cemetery.

When the renewal project began, the township instructed Stonehugger to “do the worst ones first,” Wolfson said. The plan is to continue the work next summer.

A state law passed in 1986 requires townships to take responsibility for abandoned cemeteries.

In Illinois, the Human Skeletal Remains Protection Act protects from disturbance all graves, grave markers and grave artifacts that are 100 years old and not in a cemetery registered with the Illinois Office of the Comptroller or the Illinois department of Financial & Professional Regulation.

Anyone who wants to probe or uncover, clean, repair or reset graves in unregistered cemeteries must secure a permit from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and people are strongly encouraged to take a cemetery preservation workshop.

According to IDNR, 15 permits have been issued for preservation projects in unregistered cemeteries in the past five years.



The grave marker for Margaretha Rudolph had been in several pieces before it was cleaned and repaired as part of a renewal project at Daggitt Cemetery in Highland Park.