

# Old bones tell pioneers' story

Most graves were relocated, but a few were overlooked until recently

Amid its building and expansion on the threshold of the new millennium, the St. Cloud State University campus has revealed surprises galore right in its own back yard.

And it's an old story.

When our city was first emerging, back in the mid-1800s, it was the custom at death to bury the body of the beloved on the family homestead, in the back yard, or on a vacant lot. Most were left unmarked.

But a private cemetery did develop on the South Side of Block 26 in Lower Town, near a small Episcopal Church which stood on Fourth Avenue South between Sixth and Seventh streets. This was the first church building erected in St. Cloud.

From this church, in 1858, the body of young John Hale Taylor, 27, prominent in this Episcopal Church and in civic affairs, was "laid to rest" — but where exactly?

It is important to keep this cemetery in the back of your mind as you read to the conclusion of this amazing story.

Closer to the river, on the high



PHOTOS COURTESY STEARNS HISTORY CENTER

**Block 26, where bones have been unearthed at St. Cloud State University, was once home to the city's earliest cemetery. It lies adjacent to Hill Hall in the lower left**

**corner of the photo. This photo was taken after homes were built on top of the site.**



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avenues gave way to new halls and dorms, educational facilities, administration, recreation, maintenance, etc. It's been a dazzle of growth to bring us up to January 1999 and the construction of a new library — right over old Block 26.

The homes have been gone from here for some 30 years. A parking lot has covered the area for 25 years. Directly east of the lot lies the SCSU Performing Arts Center.

As a backhoe bore down through the old earth in the southeast corner of Block 26 on a cold January day this year, the remains of two graves appeared about 4 feet down. Then, two wooden boxes bearing the remains of small children. All had been laid out in an east/west Christian fashion.

It was astonishing. The work of careful searching and sifting of soil began by student and professional archaeologists. It continued for many weeks as more and more remains were found. These were sent to Hamline University in St. Paul for examination. Results showed that the skeletal

the attractive Stearns Hotel built in 1857 by Charles T. Stearns (for whom our county is named). When he left our city for New Orleans in 1864, he also left in the back yard of his hotel the unmarked grave of his 13-year-old daughter who had died in January 1861. Nearby, in another unmarked grave, lay the remains of an infant child born to George F. Brott, founder of Lower Town and Stearns' son-in-law.

The remains, a few bones and beautiful long brown curls, were found while workmen were excavating for the basement of the new Normal Home in September 1884. They were sent to New Orleans to the respective families.

Even little Freddie Richmond, son of John L. and Harriet Wilson who died in 1858, was buried somewhere on the Wilson homestead, which today encompasses the area of the Empire Apartments on Fourth Avenue North. A small lamb marker over his grave — but not the body — was removed from there some 50 years later by the Wilsons' daughter, Nettie, to North Star Cemetery and placed next to John and Harriet.

Most deaths in these early times were of women and children and a few old folks who just



**(Left) Northstar Cemetery, along Cooper Avenue, is the final resting place of many of St. Cloud's prominent citizens, including its founder John L. Wilson and his wife Harriet. Remains unearthed from Block 26 in the early**

couldn't survive the rigors of pioneer life. Most caskets were wooden boxes that deteriorated in about 30 years. Remnants that might remain included metal ornaments or handles, nails, buttons, scraps of cloth and bones. Major bones of full-growth adults could probably be identified for at least 100 years, especially if the soil conditions were dry and shady. Graves were usually dug from 4 to 6 feet deep.

In 1884, the North Star Cemetery, just two miles southwest of

St. Cloud, began to sell lots. It was the only regularly incorporated cemetery in the township. At this time, and for several years to come, the remains of many of the dead were transferred here from other parts of the city. In 1989, Gretchen Leisen prepared a booklet of epitaphs of all those who were buried in North Star before 1870. But for those not included, identification is anyone's guess. Early records were either not kept or have been destroyed.



**1900s were transferred to this cemetery. (Right) St. John's Episcopal Church, St. Cloud's first church building, was relocated from its original site near the old cemetery. This photo is from 1877.**

From the old cemetery back on Block 26, most remains were moved to North Star. But as the city began to plan for more residential areas, the block was divided into lots. In 1910, Anton Rieland was erecting a house at 617 Third Ave. S, between Sixth and Seventh streets, when excavators unearthed the skeleton of a man. It was complete with cloth shroud, coffin handles and screws but no wood.

This grave had evidently been overlooked when others were

moved to North Star. Then, as neighbors began to build, two more graves on adjoining lots were reported. Again, in 1933, as sewer lines were being installed, other remains were disturbed. Perhaps more went unreported. At any rate, Block 26, once containing the old cemetery, was entirely built up by 1920.

As time went on, St. Cloud State College (later University) also expanded its campus, moving west and north and south. Family homes and tree-lined

remains were of Caucasian adults and children from possibly as far back as 140 years.

Research into archives and history wondrously revealed the "dig" site as that of the old cemetery of the 1850s and 1860s, where obviously many more graves had been overlooked.

Now, with the digging finished, 24 graves have been found. Only 13 contained remains which have been respectfully handled and sent off for study. They will be returned to St. Cloud for burial. It is not likely that the remains will be identified since DNA testing proves very expensive.

Surprises? Yes. Richard Rothaus, assistant history professor at SCSU who has led the dig with students, is thankful this find was not overlooked or bulldozed over. It has provided a unique learning experience for many and uncovered a wealth of city history. Now, these old settlers' bones can rest at last in peace. (And wouldn't it be grand if they could tell us their names?)

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