

Owens Cemetery History

In 1875, a six-acre plot of land was purchased for \$500 from Thomas Owen, a pioneer resident of Thomastown organized in 1855. The land was filled with weeds and blackberry bushes and was unsuitable for farming. The intent of the purchase was to establish a cemetery for the residents of the growing Township. Tree, stumps, weed, and bush removal to enhance its attractiveness as a final resting place for its growing number of residents was done, mostly by volunteer labor.

It is likely that Susannah Adams was the first burial after her death on August 25, 1854, shortly after Thomas Owen purchased the land. She was likely buried on his farmland with his permission. Thomas Owen's wife Mercia was buried there in 1865 after her death in what would eventually become the Owen family plot. (To clear up any confusion due to tombstone dates and popular belief, Nancy McLean, who died in 1848 was not the first or the oldest burial in the Cemetery; rather, she was reinterred there after the small Cemetery on Midland Road was broken up by the laying of M-47 or Midland Road. This was information presented to the Owen Cemetery Association in a letter by a family member involved in an extensive genealogical endeavor.)

In 1904, a fine woven wire fence was erected around the perimeter of the cemetery. The community formed the Owen Cemetery Association in 1917 and their first meeting was held on August 3, 1917. W.L. Case, Emil Roethke, and William Reins spoke to attendees. The ensuing years were spent holding fundraisers and volunteer working bees to maintain the Cemetery. Back in those days, it was acceptable to pack a lunch and have a picnic after a hard morning's work. In May of 1922, the stone entrance walls were constructed with help from area farmers who were likely a part of the Forest Grange or the Faith Arbor of Gleaners. There is a strong possibility that the stones used to construct the wall were from a quarry in Bay Port as that was popular with other local cemeteries. A society article noted that an ice cream social was held at the home of Henry Owen on September 3, 1922, probably to celebrate finishing the walls! (Note this location was the original Owen family home).

Observances of Memorial Day were also grand social affairs with Glee Club performances and invited speakers. The Owen Cemetery Association turned over the care of the cemetery to the Township in the late 1960's. In 1976, the offer of a free burial if you were a Thomas Township resident, ceased and graves were recognized as burial plots for sale. This was not a deterrent as many Township residents continued to be buried in Owens Cemetery and it continued to flourish.

A May 1978 Saginaw News article stated the then 123-year-old Owens Cemetery was undergoing a long overdue “face lift.” Over the years, the Cemetery has undergone further change with access roads, tree removal, erected monuments, and continued maintenance to enhance its beauty. Visitors remark about the beauty and the care of the Cemetery that is evident, not just for special occasions but every day. Owens Cemetery is the final resting place for over 2,400 people. The Cemetery is non-denominational and is open to all Thomas Township residents. There is an eclectic mix of tombstones but it does not have a chapel, a mausoleum, any Irish Celtic or Germanic wrought-iron crosses, or any Tiffany-signed ledger tombstones as in other Saginaw County cemeteries.

Among its most “famous” or notable inhabitants, four people stand out:

- Jacob M. Wiltse (1839-1910), born on the banks of the Tittabawassee River and elected to the Michigan State Legislature in 1882.
- Samuel P. Frost (1845-1937), one of the oldest pioneers in this part of the State coming here with his parents in a covered wagon when he was nine years of age.
- David A. Geddes (1869-1937), lifelong resident of Thomas Township and respected farm leader.
- Elmer A. Rusch (1917-2006), known as “Mr. Thomas Township” and well-known for his many services to Thomas Township.

Thomas Owen Family

To look at Owens Cemetery’s history, the family of Thomas Owen must also be included. Thomas was born in Wales around 1815 and came to London, Ontario, Canada with his parents in 1819. They came to Michigan and on July 15, 1842 in Oakland County, a 26-year-old Thomas married 16-year-old Adelia (Marsha) Ward from Livingston County. She was born in Utica, NY. They settled in Genesee County and were farmers according to the 1850 Genesee County census. At least three of their seven children, Mary Alice, Willis W., and Jay A. were born in Genesee County.

Thomas purchased 93 acres of land near the Tittabawassee River along what is now known as North River Road as well as land in Blumfield Township and moved his family to Saginaw County in 1853, perhaps after he met one of Thomastown’s pioneer residents (possibly John Wiltse) who may have traveled to the grist mill in Flint. Back in those days, roads were mud trails or plank roads (from Genesee to Saginaw County) and travel was difficult. The possibility that the Owen family arrived here via nearby train located in Tittabawassee Township or Paines Station is a likely scenario.

Thomas quickly established himself as a respected pioneer both in his business and community dealings. His family grew by the births of Henry T., Ellen Adelia, and daughter Nellie. (No information could be found on the seventh child, perhaps an infant birth/death between Willis and Jay; Thomas's obituary stated he had seven children.) In 1861, he was elected by ballot as a superintendent for the Poor Farm and in 1862, he began to serve as clerk for Thomastown, a position he held for 17 years. He also served as inspector of schools. His wife passed away on 12-23-1865 and is buried in what would become their family plot in Owens Cemetery. Owens Cemetery was formed in 1875, ten years after his wife passed away but also during the time Thomas served as clerk. Their children married and moved away to raise their own families, some as close as Tittabawassee Township, East Saginaw, and one as far away as St. Paul, MN where he settled after serving in the United States Army. Thomas Owen remained a widower after the death of his wife until his own death on October 24, 1895. His daughter Ellen and her family at some point moved back home to care for her aging parent as Thomas's son-in-law, Charles Tripp is listed in the "Head" position in the 1880 census.

His family members continued to use the family burial plot in Owens Cemetery with the exception of his sons, Willis Owen from East Saginaw buried in Oakwood Cemetery in 1898 and Dr. Jay Owen, who passed away in 1890 and was given a military burial in Mt. Sterling Cemetery in St. Paul, MN. Ironically, Willis Owen's tombstone rests near a large Owen family marker with a plain tombstone rather than a military tombstone denoting his Civil War service and is the only Owen family member buried in that plot. Over the years, family members served as the Cemetery's sexton and Thomas Owen's grandson Ferdinand Owen was the last Owen to serve in that capacity until his death in 1938.

(Historical source information was gleaned from various documents, newspaper articles and Thomas Township's history books written and edited by Thomas Township residents.)