

# **T**he New Monument at the Old Durham Road **Pioneer Cemetery**

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In the summer of 2013, it was apparent to anyone visiting the Old Durham Road Pioneer Cemetery that the wooden display case that housed the four remaining headstones was rotting, and literally on its last legs.Carolynn Wilson, then president of the ODRPCC and I, soon to become president, met with Debbie Robertson, the municipality's town clerk to discuss interim measures. With the municipality's blessing, the headstones were carefully removed and quietly stored in an undisclosed location. (There would be no chance of further 'disappearance' of headstones!)



The committee, in partnership with the South Grey Museum, applied for an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant to rebuild the housing for the headstones. The application was successful, and by July 2014, the committee found itself with \$38,000 and a deadline! We had 16 months to complete the project.

The committee had decided what was needed was a maintenance-free, covered structure that would protect the headstones from all the elements and reduce the

damage caused by sun, moisture and the freeze-thaw cycle that occurs in the colder months. The decision was made to have a design competition. This would heighten community awareness about the cemetery and the Trillium-funded project. Ads were published in local papers, distributed to schools of architecture and design, and flyers were made available at the Emancipation Festival in Owen Sound and in the surrounding communities. Sixteen individuals requested design packages and 12 of them submitted designs for blind review.

A sub-committee was formed, consisting of three members of the ODRPCC executive, the curator of the South Grey Museum and a community member. The sub-committee deliberated over the submissions and in October 2014, chose the design by Toronto architect Daniel B. McNeil. This design (depicted on the cover of the journal) was intended to evoke memories of cemetery dead houses, roadside chapels and rural structures such as log cabins and covered bridges. It symbolizes safe passage and is oriented due north, as a way to commemorate the many paths to freedom refugees from slavery took, all following Polaris, the North Star.

Because the structure was to be made of concrete and required substantive footings, the committee thought it prudent to have a ground-penetrating radar probe done. A radar probe had been done in 1998, when the committee wished to locate gravesites in the cemetery for the purpose of excavating in search of fallen-down headstones.<sup>1</sup> The company that had done the original probe was contacted and they agreed to do it again. In April, 2015, once the last of the snow had gone, the cemetery was probed. The results were similar to the 1998 probe, however, due to advancements in this technology, more possible gravesites were located. This was crucial, because it meant that the proposed location of the pavilion had to be altered to avoid disturbing any gravesites.

Using the probe survey and a topographical map, Dan McNeil spray-painted X's on the grass where all the potential gravesites were located. He then built a light wooden frame, the size and shape of the pavilion, to move around between these markings in order to find the optimal location.

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<sup>1</sup> This move proved to be very controversial, leading to the resignation of several of the original committee members. The film, *Speakers for the Dead* (Holness and Sutherland, 2000), explores this controversy.



A local contractor, Lorne Grierson, was chosen to build the structure. This work started with the digging of the foundation. The committee asked Dr. Dean Knight, the archaeologist who had been involved with the 1998 dig, to be on hand in case graves were disturbed. Keith MacKinnon operated the backhoe for this delicate procedure. It had been anticipated that the backhoe would hit rocks amidst sand and gravel, but instead, it dug into pure sand! The backhoe cut through it as if it were butter! Thankfully, no graves were disturbed. It was now, however, quite obvious why the settlers had chosen this corner of Larkin Alverson's 50 acre lot for their communal burying ground.

After the foundation was poured, the formwork was put in place. The structure is not square. The walls lean in and the south end is wider than the north end, creating a sense of diminishing perspective. Lorne Grierson reported that people would stop by concerned that he hadn't managed to make the building square! Some wondered when the siding was going on and others were curious about whether doors were to be added at each end!

The design included the placement of settler family names on the ceiling. These were cast in cement, and then mounted into indentations that had been carefully inserted in the ceiling formwork. The names are intended to represent the community, not the people buried in the cemetery. We cannot ever know who all is buried there because most of the headstones have disappeared. The ceiling names gesture to different aspects of the community: those who came first (but did not stay long); families who stayed and appear in various historical documents, and families who at some later point moved on. The 29 names include: Allen, Ambush, Andrews, Alverson, Banks, Black, Brown, Cousby, Crawford, Diggs, French, Green, Handy, Henderson, Hero, Howard, Jackson, Johnston, Kelly, Levi, Mason, Meads, Patterson, Shackelford, Sheffield, Simons, Washington, Workman, and Yeoubanks. There are several indentations with no names

in them. These stand in for all the Black settlers who lived along the Durham Road, but for whom there is no public record.



Yet to be completed are the fibre optic plugs that will go in the formwork holes. There are 72 holes, which ordinarily would be filled with concrete. Dan McNeil wanted to add a magical feature to the structure by placing in these one-inch-in-diameter holes, small concrete plugs that have embedded in them various patterns made out of fibre optic line. The patterns include Underground Railroad traditional quilt patterns, such as Crossroads, Bow Tie, and the North Star, as well as images of leaves, trees and other symbols of settler life. The fibre optic lines will transmit patterned sunlight.

The somewhat stark structure is startling from all four directions. It calls attention to the cemetery in a way in which the former display case did not. That display case had been placed in a back corner of the cemetery and was surrounded by an overgrown cedar hedge. The new monument is closer to the road and the centre of the cemetery.

In his design submission, Dan McNeil had called his idea a pavilion, and this was the term that the committee used, right up to and including the dedication ceremony in September (see the review by Kate Russell). It is a pavilion, in the sense that it is a covered yet open structure, meant for public viewing. But in the end, it is a monument to the burial ground and the community which it served.



In 2016, the committee will complete the landscaping and the signage. The annual dedication services will continue every September.