Old Delhi Yarn, August 2026
by Marianne Greenfield, Delhi Historian

The Mystery of Abandoned Gravestones

There are several reasons why a gravestone may not be in it's original location. One scenario is when a family member dies they get their own gravestone. Then when another family member dies the family decide it's time to erect a larger gravestone or monument where everyone's name can be memorialized. Then the original gravestone may be removed and repurposed. I occasionally find those gravestones on the stone wall.

Another situation may be due to removing remains to a different cemetery. In the late 1800's there was an effort to remove all the remains in Old Delhi. A neighbor to the old burying ground, Attorney William Youmans, pursued litigation with the Village of Delhi for nearly 25 years, in an attempt to convince the Village to remove the remains of everyone buried in Old Delhi to Woodland Cemetery, which was organized in 1847. Old Delhi was the first secular burial ground in Delhi. The first burial ground was the Flats Cemetery, started 1799, by the Presbyterian Church, near where the Delhi golf course is now. The effort to move many of Delhi's founding fathers and other dignitaries, like Osman Steele, Henry and Electa Leavenworth, was successful to some degree. No list remains with the names of people who are still buried in Old Delhi or the names of people removed to Woodland Cemetery.

Woodland Cemetery was organized after legislation was enacted by the NYS Assembly in 1847, and it quickly became the "cool" place to be buried. Cemetery fashion changed with the Rural Cemetery Movement in the mid 1800's. Early burial grounds near churches were called graveyards. Many farm families had their own burial grounds because they thought the farm would always be in the family. Burial grounds in villages, towns and cities were in out of the way places, away from people. Those burial grounds could be scary places, avoided by most people, due to overcrowding, grave robbers and epidemics of disease. Rural cemeteries were designed to be idyllic, peaceful places with open landscape, terraced hills, walking paths, trees and elegant monuments. The term changed from burial ground to cemetery, from the Greek word "koimeterion", meaning resting place.

Many abandoned gravestones were removed when they no longer marked a grave. The former Delaware County and Delhi Historian, Mr. John Raitt, told me there's an old an gravestone in the foundation of his home. He believed it came from Old Delhi. A neighbor found a gravestone upside down in their back yard. Another person found an old gravestone on the floor of his barn. That one was confirmed to have been removed from Old Delhi when the remains of a Delhi founder, former Hessian Rev War Vet, George Fisher, were moved from Old Delhi to Woodland Cemetery. His family bought him a modern gravestone. George Fisher's original gravestone was carved by Coffin Man and is now in the Collection at DCHA.

Which brings me to the most recent abandoned gravestone story. My friend, Leanne Nabinger, lives near the West Delhi church cemetery, found an old gravestone leaning against a tree when she purchased her home a few years ago. I had the privilege of seeing the gravestone and hope to find the cemetery where it belongs. The lettering on the gravestone reads "Elizabeth B. Wife of RH Russell, who died Oct. 30, 1874 aged 27 yrs, 11 mos & 2 dys". After a fruitless search online I enlisted the help of Ray LaFever, Bovina Town Historian and Archivist and Librarian at the Delaware County Historical Association and Frisbee House Museum. Ray quickly solved the "biggest Russell family mystery" by locating a relative, a great granddaughter of RH Russell, who was thrilled the gravestone was found. Sadly, we still don't know where Elizabeth is buried. She may have died while traveling back from Missouri to Bovina, New York and was buried in an unmarked grave. RH Russell married again and moved to Michigan. Steve Fleming, West Delhi Church Cemetery, has agreed to place "Libbie's" gravestone in the Russell family lot. Now we can take her gravestone back to her family.

