Historical General Ellis Cemetery rededicated after renovation project

by Alice Maggiore

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ONONDAGA -- As recently as two years ago, you may have missed the General Ellis Cemetery, one of the oldest in Onondaga County.

Though the grass was cut, and the grounds maintained, tombstones lay broken on the ground, and a fence sat rusted out atop a hillside above Onondaga Road.

But when Onondaga Community College decided to move into the old county hospital across the street and turn it into an academic building, new eyes fell upon the forgotten cemetery.

In two years, OCC, the Onondaga Historical Association, and the Town of Onondaga Historical Society have worked to restore the ornate iron fencing that early neighbors may have seen 215 years ago when they went to visit buried loves ones. The headstones are repaired, and now the names are much easier to read.

One of those names is the cemetery's namesake, General John Ellis, who served as a General in the War of 1812.

General Ellis was one of Onondaga County's first settlers, moving to Onondaga Hill in the late 1780's from Massachusetts.

Onondaga Historical Association Volunteer Dick Case says General Ellis lived on the hill when the surrounding area was wilderness, and the City of Syracuse was a swamp.

"As a founding member of our society, he has a fascinating story when people begin to look at his life, and how United States history was developing," says Rick McLain, an Associate Professor of History at Onondaga Community College.

General Ellis was a Revolutionary War Veteran. In the War of 1812, he fought for this region of the United States, keeping it from falling to the British Empire.

McLain says showing his students the cemetery helps bring history lessons to life.

"Local connections bring home the importance of how we got here today," he says. "There are many old cemeteries across the country, but having a General from the Revolutionary War and War of 1812 here on campus is a great opportunity for students to learn. It's great that it's been restored so students can appreciate the significance of it."

Case is also relieved to see the cemetery get new life.

"I have a fascination with old cemeteries and I've watched a lot of them go down, some of them plowed under.... So to see this restored in this way, by the college, I think it's important," says Case, a retired Special Feature Reporter for Syracuse Post Standard. "It's a little park, a memorial park, and that's what it should be."

The first burial in General Ellis Cemetery was recorded in 1798.

A restored, blue historical marker now claims the post, across from Mulroy Hall at Onondaga Community College.