

Preservation of aging Cortlandville cemetery

Weather, development threaten the nearly 90 gravestones, to

By PATRICK C. RUPPE
Staff Reporter

SOUTH CORTLAND — One of Cortland County's oldest cemeteries sits virtually unnoticed by the thousands of motorists who pass by it each day on Route 13.

The South Cortland Cemetery, nestled between the former Smith Corona building and the J.M. Murray Center on Route 13, was established nearly 200 years ago.

The last person buried at the graveyard, Daniel McAllister, was buried in 1932. The oldest stone marks the gravesite of John Calvert, who died in 1808.

The cemetery is the final resting place of some of the town's first settlers, soldiers from the Revolutionary War, children who were not even a year old and people who lived well into their 80s.

While some of the headstones are in surprisingly good condition, others lie fractured on the ground or lean from sinking or shifting ground.

Still other stones have been uprooted over the years and lean against other headstones, their inscriptions indecipherable.

It's a piece of the county's history that must be maintained, said Cortlandville Historian and Town Councilman Ron Rocco.

"The cemetery needs some tending," Rocco said. "The gravestones, some of them have fallen over. Trees need some pruning. We want to maintain this in a more dignified manner. It won't be long before the extreme winter climate destroys what is left."

While some headstone inscriptions are still easily readable, cracks are widening and threaten to soon shed the outer layers of the stones.

There is no deed on the property, Rocco said, but as an abandoned cemetery, the town is responsible for maintaining the 39,000-square-foot plot of land, which houses nearly 90 gravesites. The town mows the grass and maintains the stone wall and wood fencing that surrounds the plot of land. But money to refurbish small cemeteries is scarce, Rocco said, and those sites are often overlooked.

Rocco said there could be funding available through the state that could be used to prevent further weathering of the headstones and provide for the general upkeep of the graveyard.

"There is money for cemeteries," he said. "I'm looking into that. But I hope there are also people locally who would support restoration."

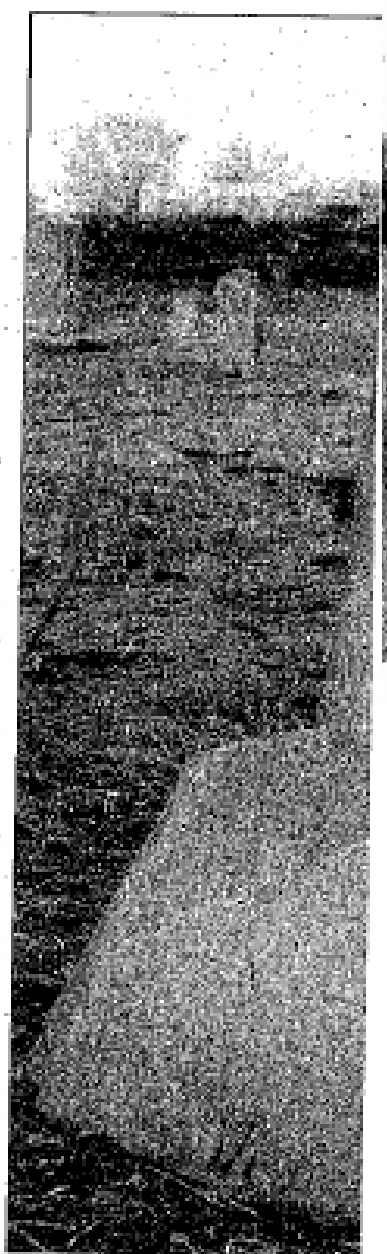
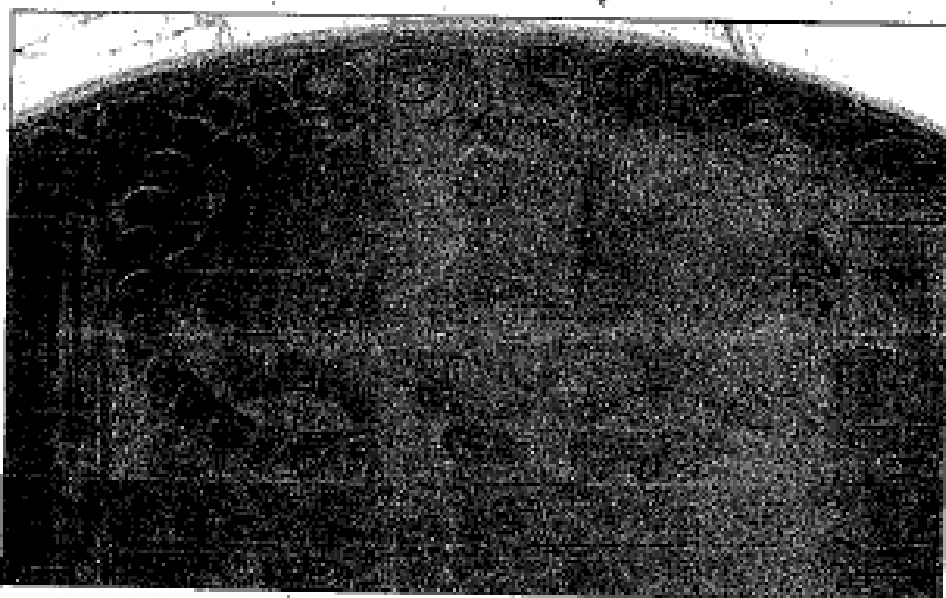
Rocco said he would be addressing the issue soon with members of the Town Board.

Rocco said he is also considering contacting SUNY Cortland to see if students and faculty would be willing to take on a restoration project.

The other issue that potentially could threaten the historic site is the encroaching business develop-



Cortlandville Historian Ron Rocco examines a tombstone Thursday in the South Cortland Cemetery. The cemetery, nestled between the former Smith Corona building and the J.M. Murray Center, was established nearly 200 years ago. **BELOW RIGHT:** A cracked tombstone sits on the ground. 1E



ment in that section of the town.

With a proposal to build a Walmart Supercenter just across Route 13, and another proposal to possibly build a Home Depot just south of the graveyard, pressure could ensue to move the graveyard, Rocco said, although it would be a cumbersome and likely unpopular proposition.

"It is just sad that it is there, like so many cemeteries, surrounded by development, nearly invisible to people that pass by," Rocco said. "I want to see if we can maintain it for as long as possible. Some of the earliest citizens that lived in Cortlandville are buried here."

