

RANCHO BODEGA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Seamen's Cemetery

by Adrianus G. Boudewyn - 2015

Sometime around 1848-1850, Captain Stephen Smith donated roughly an acre-and-a-half from his Mexican land grant to create a burial ground for sailors who drowned at sea. Legend has it that the first burial was of an unknown sailor, who drowned at sea and washed up in the harbor. In the early days, it was known as Seamen's Cemetery, since renamed Bay and then Bodega Bay Cemetery and it may be one of the oldest in Sonoma County. It is also the cemetery of lost grave markers. The Cemetery is located at 19933 Heron Drive just as one turns left off of South Harbor Way and is situated on scenic high ground overlooking Bodega Bay on what was for a time Doran Rancho property. It is now within the Bodega Harbor Housing Association development, although it is not legally part of the subdivision. It is enclosed with a split rail fence and it is regularly mowed and visible from satellite when viewing Google Maps. The grave markers have long disappeared—some through vandalism, some disturbed by grazing cows of long ago, and others “rescued for safe keeping”.

Sonoma cemeterian Jeremy Nichols says that the legal record of Bodega Bay Cemetery goes back as far as an 1857 Federal court decision, upholding the legality of the original patents (title) for the larger parcel of land, and is shown on maps of that time. The portion containing the cemetery is referred to as Lot 42, township 5 north, Range 10 west, located at latitude and longitude (also known as lat-long- or GPS coordinates) N 38.31742 and W 123.02556. It shows up on early maps describing the Doran holdings.



SEAMEN'S CEMETERY

Until just recently, title of the cemetery land had remained on the books in the name of Manuela Torres Smith, wife of Capt. Smith and her children, Stephen, Manuela and James. In 2004, legal proceedings were started to petition updating ownership of the property and in June 2005, the Superior Court of Sonoma County awarded title of the cemetery to Arthur Charles (Tooch) Columbo, a family descendant and second great grand nephew of William Smith, the half brother of Tom Smith with the California Indian Legal Services acting as attorneys for the plaintiff.

Early burial records were secured by a variety of people and groups; some official records, others from family bibles. Serious efforts were undertaken by Edith W. Merritt, chair of Genealogical Records for the Santa Rosa Chapter of Daughters of the American Revolution, in the 1920s and 1930s, Tom Chapman of Occidental whose grandmother was Josephine Doran, only daughter of William and Sarah Doran who owned the Doran Ranch (now Bodega Harbor) on which the cemetery was sited, various records kept by pioneer family and by Ruth Burke. Note: Prior to 1905 the procedure for filing death certificates was left up to local jurisdictions and often they were only a line entry in a ledger. After 1905 most death certificates indicated which cemetery the individual was buried in.

At a 1990 program of the Rancho Bodega Historical Society, Mrs. Amos Marion Simpson (granddaughter of William and Sarah Doran), then 79, recalled how she and her daughters would walk to the cemetery and read all of the tombstones. "And there was a sailor from a Scandinavian country who was buried there. And they would make up stories about them, you know." Despite its original name, most of the early burials at Bodega Bay Cemetery were of children of early settlers. Also buried there is the first school teacher of Bodega Bay (then known as Bay). The last burial was in 1934, for Coast Miwok Tom Smith.

It was the late Helen Fulton (part of the leadership of Rancho Bodega Historical Society) who felt that the society should take an interest in the historical significance of the cemetery by arranging for some of its upkeep, and she envisioned an X shaped walking path of pea gravel and to place new grave markers designed by local children. This idea came about, because Helen was also active as a volunteer at the Bodega Bay Elementary School. The project involved 14 students in the fourth and fifth grades making grave markers from tiles and hooded redwood shelters. The project, however, was premature and it came to a sudden halt one day when the proposed walkway (already staked out, ready for pea gravel) met with some local resistance and a possible legal challenge. With the project stopped, the hooded redwood grave markers ended up in storage. Note: since this article ran, title to the property has changed to the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria.

