

BODEGA BAY COMMUNITY

Seaman's Cemetery (also The Smith Cemetery & The Indian Cemetery) The Cemetery on Heron Hill



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 Seaman'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

Harbour 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 Harbour 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.

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. Tooch, in 2009, transferred the property to the Federated Indians of the Graton Rancheria.

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 Harbour) 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. ■