



Illuminating Our Past

Story and photographs by Ron Gaskins

As shadows lengthen into dusk, figures clad in military uniforms and civilian dress from 150 years ago light lanterns in the Grafton National Cemetery. Then, appearing like ghosts, they trace a path among the headstones, searching for a particular grave. When they find the grave they stop and a tall gentleman in uniform opens a book. He then begins speaking the story of the fallen soldier buried there.

Since 2006, volunteers from the West Virginia Reenactors Association and the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War have organized the Grafton National Cemetery Lantern Tour to honor the memories of fallen Union Civil War soldiers. The tour takes place on Memorial Day weekend, this year on Friday, May 24.

Mark Tennant, a member of both groups and the organizer of the annual event, proposed the idea of the lantern tour after attending a similar event in Tennessee. "It was Memorial Day and I was on vacation, and there was a torchlight tour led by a

park ranger at the Chattanooga National Cemetery," he recalls.

Since its inception, the Grafton National Cemetery Lantern Tour has become a popular event. "We had over 200 people attend in 2006, the first year," Tennant says. Thereafter the crowds have averaged around 100 people.

The Grafton National Cemetery has its roots in the days following the end of the Civil War. During the war, fallen soldiers were generally buried close to where they died, e.g., near a battlefield, a road crossing, or a hospital. Many gravesites were marked but not all with a name. The idea began to grow of a national cemetery in a central location, easily accessible from all areas of the new state, where all fallen Union soldiers—named or unnamed—would be honored.

Land in Grafton was chosen as the site for the new cemetery for several reasons: it was fairly level; it was located in a town that was a major stop of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (a must for transportation of the bodies); there was already a cemetery nearby where soldiers had been buried; and it was near a federal military hospital. Once the cemetery was created, the U.S. Burial Corps supervised the exhumation and reburial

of 1,251 troops. While records were kept on the locations from which bodies were removed, of the more than 1,200 Civil War dead buried in Grafton's National Cemetery, 664 graves are only marked by a number.

Remembering Their Sacrifice

Although the names of many soldiers were buried with them, the West Virginia Reenactors Association and the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War have made it their goal that the legacy and sacrifice of these soldiers should not be forgotten. Holding oil or candle lanterns, the reenactors lead guests among the headstones, pausing to remember soldiers and their stories, including the first Union fatality of the Civil War, Pvt. Thornsberry Bailey Brown. Brown was killed in an exchange of gunfire with three Confederate scouts.

Another lesser-known soldier, probably from the 106th New York Infantry, was killed in battle and buried at the Presbyterian Church grounds in Keyser, then known as New Creek. Notes were made that the fallen soldier's white dog remained in the vicinity and slept on his grave every night after his death. The dog stayed nearby from late 1862 until June of 1868, when the soldier's body was disinterred and placed in the National Cemetery.

Escorted by soldiers in uniform and ladies in hoop skirts and bonnets, tour guests are reminded of the time when brother fought brother, with each defending the country he loved. Soon Tennant, the tall soldier leading the tour, pauses at a grave that emphasizes this sad fact.

On November 6, 1863, he explains, Union troops under the command of Gen. William Averell attacked Confederate

troops on Droop Mountain in Pocahontas County. After a hard fight, the Union won a major victory. Later, one of the Union regiments, the 10th West Virginia Infantry, was assigned to burial duty. Tennant solemnly reads the following details from Terry Lowery's book *Last Sleep: The Battle of Droop Mountain*:

Among the burial detail on Droop Mountain was Private Andrew "Andy" Jackson Short of Company F, 10th West Virginia Infantry. Working in the darkness, Short dragged the lifeless body of an enemy soldier to the gathering point for the dead. While lifting the corpse, he noticed the deceased possessed a crooked finger and was similar in size and height to his own brother, who had joined the Confederate Army at the beginning of the war. Requesting a light, Private Short discovered the man was, indeed, his brother, Private John J. Short of Company A, 22nd Virginia Infantry. Both men had been raised near the Pocahontas and Greenbrier County line, but had taken different courses at the outbreak of the Civil War. Once again the phrase "brother versus brother" rang horribly true.

Having to fight against family surely weighed heavily on many soldiers. Indeed, Pvt. Andrew Short buried his brother with the other Union dead and marked his grave with his name, thereby showing that even though he disagreed with his brother about the war, he still loved him. After the war, when the bodies were disinterred, the burial party must have assumed Pvt. John Short was a Union soldier because they buried him

◀ **Dressed as a Union** soldier, lantern tour organizer Mark Tennant reads the story of a fallen comrade.

▶ **Of the more than** 1,200 Civil War dead buried in Grafton National Cemetery, half are unidentified.





◀ **Reenactors portray soldiers and** civilians at the lantern tour, held annually on Memorial Day weekend.

▶ **Eric Smallwood of Fairmont**, a member of the East Fairmont High School Busy Bee Band, authentically portrays a Union bugler.

in the Grafton National Cemetery. National cemeteries were generally designated for Union soldiers only. Only Confederate soldiers who died in Union custody or in a Union hospital were included.

Keeping History Alive

Founded in 1988, the West Virginia Reenactors Association, with some 50 members, hosts reenactments at Droop Mountain, Rich Mountain, and Phillipi. The association also helps plan reenactments at Antietam. Anyone of any age can be a member.

Members of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, however, are all descendants of Union soldiers or sailors. There are only eight West Virginia members. Their goals are to keep alive the memory of those who defended the Union during the Civil War and to preserve Union gravesites and memorials. The lantern tour is an ideal project for the group, and the expertise of the Reenactors Association ensures a truly authentic experience.

The women in period dress on the lantern tour add much to the authenticity. According to Tennant, women had key roles in the Civil War that are often overlooked. They provided nursing care and also donated supplies.

Tennant adds, “The only woman buried in the cemetery is a nurse. She is one of our unknowns, but we know she was a nurse.”

In costume on the lantern tour as a nurse and a Union officer are Linda and Bill Donegan of Charleston. As the sun sinks beyond the hills, the couple sings “Faded Coat of

Blue”:

No more the bugle calls the weary one.
Rest, noble spirit, in thy grave unknown.
I’ll find you and know you among the good and true
When a robe of white is given for the faded coat of blue.

With each tale of a fallen soldier, the sun slips lower in the sky until it, too, becomes only a memory. At one point a train passes. The chugging of the engine sounds ghostly as we stand in the dark. The darkness, displaced only by lantern light and the stories of the fallen warriors, helps transport us back in time. It is easy to believe that it is the 1860s, when our nation is healing and our state is just beginning.

At the conclusion of the tour, a bugler in uniform plays “Taps” from the upper terrace of the cemetery, reminding guests and the honored dead that “Day is done, gone the sun, from the lakes, from the hills, from the sky. All is well, safely rest, God is nigh.”

This year’s lantern tour will be held on Friday, May 24, at 8:30 PM. The event is free of charge. For more information, visit www.graftonwv.org or www.wvra.org.

Ron Gaskins of Evans, West Virginia, enjoys photographing and writing about the history of our state. He is the owner of West Virginia Fine Photography, a commercial photography business. For more information about Ron and his work, visit www.wvfinephotography.com.

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