

Thomas Cemetery in Monteagle, Tennessee

by Jackie Layne Partin

It has its metal post with the “Grundy County Historical Society” sign naming the old cemetery. The sign reads, “Thomas Cemetery.” Why? Maybe because in years past, behind, below and on that extended hill lived a number of Thomas families, a large extended family situation, several generations. Maybe it was so called because no one knew what to call it, but a name had to be put on the sign. For a cemetery right in the midst of much of the goings-on in Monteagle, why hasn’t any history been left behind? Why did and do I get “I don’t know” when I asked about it for several years and even now?

Patricia (Thomas) Taylor grew up behind the cemetery, and as a child she recalls that children from the area played on the old cemetery hill. When I asked her to repeat her statement about the hill, she reiterated that the hill was called the “**old cemetery hill**”; let’s go play on the old cemetery hill. And she remembers speaking of walking over to the new cemetery with her mother and other relatives. Her husband George Taylor remembers walking through the burial ground and recalls seeing from ten to twelve sunken places indicating burials, or for fun and interest – let us add that the sunken places could indicate disinterred bodies.

June (Smith) Long, (deceased), gave a bit of information about the old cemetery when she told researcher, Janelle (Layne) Taylor, that the burial ground was known as the Thomas Cemetery. One interesting item that came up in the discussion was the fact that Archibald Thomas (1870-1914), Dorothy (Rollins) Layne’s maternal grandfather, was disinterred and removed to the Monteagle Cemetery on the Marion County side of the railroad tracks. His death certificate gives Mt. Eagle as his burial place. With June’s input, we can surmise that Archibald was removed after 1914. If Archibald was disinterred, could there have been others removed also? Those questioned always speak of sunken graves. Now I am not so naïve that I don’t realize that old, old graves sink, really sink, if they have no support like a well-built tomb. Has the reader ever asked what the remains of a disinterred gravesite looks like after a few hard rains or snowfalls? It

sinks, way down, more than an indentation in the grass or leaves representative of graves without internal support, grave liners, strong coffins, or graves without continuous care by family or cemetery associations; add more soil.

Years ago, while visiting with a distant cousin, Betty Jean (Norwood) Thomas, Patricia Taylor's mother, I asked about her years of living behind that cemetery hill and what her memories were of the burials. Her answer concerned only the burial of babies. She walked from time to time with her mother-in-law, Alice (McFarland) Thomas, and placed small bouquets of flowers on the babies' graves. Betty Jean apologized to me for not being able to tell me just exactly whose babies were buried there. This gave me the thought that the graves probably were too far in the past for her, her husband, Paul Edward Thomas, or his family to know.

Betty Jean's daughter-in-law, Lynn (Meeks) Thomas, shared her memories of walking on the hill and being fully aware of several sunken graves. Her thoughts were of at least two babies' graves and three adult-like graves. Lynn always felt like there were more graves as in an actual cemetery setting. I think this would be a good place to state that those I spoke with in the past and now in the present (2018) never thought of the burial ground as being the "Thomas Cemetery." They never gave thought to who was buried there; to them it was just an old cemetery.

One would think that if the burial ground was a private family plot, then the names of those interred would have been passed down through the generations where at least a couple of names would still be in someone's memories. If it was a private Thomas burial plot, then why were the most important Thomases, the older generations, buried in the Monteagle Cemetery across the railroad tracks down Winston Avenue in Marion County? Could this be because a decision was made to no longer use that hill as a burial ground but to place the loved ones over at the place where Archibald Thomas had been reinterred? Anyway, why was "Archie" moved? What was wrong with the old cemetery hill grounds?

Janelle (Layne) Taylor and I, on different occasions, talked with Mr. Carl Cantrell who is a descendant of the Thomases through his mother Lula Mae (Thomas) Cantrell, daughter of William Marvin "Son", Jr. and Katherine (Elliott) Thomas, and granddaughter of William Marvin, Sr. and Alice Jean (McFarland) Thomas. We might say that for an immediate response of Mr. Cantrell, the very spot of the cemetery would have been lost forever when an effort to bulldoze the area was stopped, but not until some damage was already done. Two sunken grave sites were destroyed by a dozer or tractor; they were near the sign that was placed some years back. In earlier years some timber had also been cut in the area of the cemetery. Two sunken grave spots remembered by Mr. Cantrell were destroyed when a large field stone was removed in some manner; this stone was a pointer for at least two burial spots. While Son Thomas was alive, he felt that he was the protector of the cemetery, but even at that, according to Mr. Cantrell, two efforts were made to buy the cemetery area. Son thwarted sales to Jim Gossett and George Colston who gave up on buying the land. Why would anyone want to buy a cemetery? I've known people who abhor the fact that graves, even just one, are on their property. They don't want anyone traipsing across their land to visit a loved one's gravesite. Folks, there was/is something strange about this parcel of land!

John "Johnny" McFarland was the last known burial on the cemetery hill according to June (Smith) Long. He was born **1854** and died **Apr. 23, 1923**. His wife Bessie preceded him in death but was buried elsewhere. It appears that Johnny was a brother to George Carter McFarland, making him an uncle to Alice Jean McFarland. This may account for his burial at this spot. Also, one gets the feeling from his death certificate that he had no one with him at the time of his death – all alone, quite ill for years, and troubled with dementia. There is no informant or parents listed on his certificate. The **McFarland** name touched the **Thomas** name when Mucy Bell McFarland married George Washington Thomas, and again when their son, William Marvin Thomas, married Alice Jean McFarland, daughter of George Carter and Ella Mae (Cox) McFarland.

Mucy Bell McFarland was the daughter of William Ed and Cassie (Crabtree) McFarland. George Washington Thomas was the son of James H. and Mary (Tucker) Thomas. George and Mucy's daughter, Maud (Thomas) McGregor, was the informant on his death certificate. Maud, her sister, Gladys, and their brother William Marvin, Jr., lived within throwing distance of their parents' home and the old cemetery. George and Mucy's house stood where the new burial monuments business has located (2018). They would have played in, walked to and carried flowers to the cemetery whether or not relatives were buried there. It was like my two sons playing in the "bush" in the Fiji Islands. Their father nor I could find them or hear their Tarzan calls, but we knew they were in the "bush." There are several "grown children" alive today who speak of playing on that hill. Doesn't anyone wonder how children were allowed to play in a cemetery? My parents would never have allowed that. Maybe there is a good exclamation for that – but later.

According to super researcher George Thomas and his massive data base, George Washington and Mucy Bell Thomas lost a son, Garland Thomas around 1887, and a three-year-old son, Albert Hugh Garland Thomas, in 1916; his death certificate says he was buried in Marion County. But something looks strange about it in the way that the words Mont Eagle, **Marion** County are included in the location of the burial. It almost seems that the parents made a sudden decision to not bury the little boy in Mont Eagle, **Grundy** County, which would be next to their home, the Thomas Cemetery. They lost a grandson, William Thomas in 1916; he was not yet two years of age. He too was buried in Marion County, Monteagle Cemetery. Why not bury them in the family cemetery, Thomas Cemetery, if it was truly a family cemetery?

Now comes one of my wild theories that makes readers roll their eyes. I don't care how many eyeballs roll, but I do want to get the town thinking in terms that it may have never thought. In the **January 24, 1887**, *Daily American* newspaper, we can read, "At Christmas an entertainment was prepared for everyone, in which the school children showed most creditable proficiency. But the kind teacher, so earnest, gentle, patient, was taken ill from the

*effect of the cold and died in a few days. She was laid to rest in the **new** cemetery, which has not yet been laid out into lots."* The teacher, Mrs. Mary E. Stone, was the wife of a Cumberland Presbyterian preacher, Rev. H. M. Stone, who had moved to Monteagle for his health. If Mrs. Stone was buried in the **new** cemetery which did not even have lots laid out, where were those buried who died before her, before **1887**? Was there an **old** Monteagle Cemetery? Were the sunken graves at the Thomas Cemetery actually evidence of disinterred graves of the past? The only other cemetery in the community of Monteagle is the Lappin Cemetery, and believe me when I say that it is truly a "family" cemetery; it is! But five of those graves were removed from the Monteagle Cemetery and reinterred in the Lappin Cemetery.

Let's look at those five Lappin burials that were removed from the Monteagle Cemetery around **1931**. 1) Robert D. Lappin—died **1876**; 2) Wellington William Lappin—died **1879**, according to the **1880** Mortality Schedule-- not **1882** as seen on his stone; 3) Willie Lappin—died **1896**; 4) Dora B. Lappin—died **1896**; and 5) Frances Caroline (Seeley) Lappin—died **1913**. Look folks; the first two deaths happened before land was even bought for the present-day cemetery. Then where were they first buried? Not in the Lappin Cemetery—it was not in existence. If these five people were buried in the present Monteagle Cemetery, why move them? Please go down and look at the large, rough stones that were removed from one place and put in a family burial ground. Those stones are crude, unlike any old stones in the current cemetery. The Lappins also lived within sight of the old "Thomas Cemetery" which may well have originally been a community cemetery.

Sarah C. Young died in **1885**; Sarah Smart (Gilliam) Lowrie died in **1882**; John Moffat died in **1886**; Harold Ormiston Weir died in **1880**; Jane (Moffat) Judd died in **1881**; a male infant of David Thomas Tucker died in **1880**; and I am sure there were others who died between **1870**, the year the town was founded, and **1887**, when we read of a **new** cemetery. Where were the deaths in the **1870s** and early **1880s** laid to rest? Could what we have assigned in recent years as the Thomas Cemetery, actually be the old Monteagle Cemetery, the original burial ground? Wouldn't it have been an

easy wagon drive with a few disinterred bodies from what is known as the Thomas Cemetery over the railroad, a short ride down Winston Avenue and interments undertaken in the new Monteagle Cemetery?

Now before the reader goes ballistic on me, please read the following excerpt from another story I've written called *All Things Monteagle*: "On **Mar. 12, 1886**, Mrs. Moffat and daughter Adaline made a stop in Nashville on their way to be with John Moffat, husband and father respectively, while he was in St. Louis on a lecturing engagement; he was serving as the Vice-President of the Temperance Benevolent Society of Missouri. On **Dec. 9, 1886**, Mrs. Moffat was recalled to St. Louis; her husband's health had become critical. On **Dec. 20, 1886**, while teaching in Gallatin, Tennessee, Adaline received a message from St. Louis that her father was dying. She quickly went to be with him. He died on **December 25, 1886** and was later laid to rest in the new Monteagle Cemetery." In this excerpt I write "**new cemetery**" because in the **Nov. 16, 1886** issue of *The Daily American*, we read in the section of **Monteagle** news, "A new cemetery has been selected, and a deed made conveying it to the town. All the bodies in the present ground will be reinterred in the new place." John Moffat may well have been the first burial in the new cemetery. His foreseeable death may well have brought about the decision in November **1886** to act upon the need for a new burial ground. His grandson Harold Ormiston Weir died in **1880** and has a marker in the new cemetery, so he may have well been one of those disinterred from the old burial ground. My search is on to find out where the bodies of the first settlers of the Moffat Station era were buried." If we believe *The Daily American* wrote the truth about an old and new Monteagle Cemetery, then we need to seriously find the old one.

Can the reader think of any parcel of ground more fitting for the early burials of Moffat/Monteagle? I have done extensive deed searches to find any Grundy County deed that mentions any land that borders a cemetery in that area. One of Son Thomas' children said her father's land boundary stopped below the cemetery. I find that interesting also. No one owned the land; several Monteagleans wanted to own it. Children loved that old hill, but no one any longer wanted to bury loved ones there. Why?

It was a lonely place. Why? Everyone, except possibly one, had been moved away to a new resting place. Now children were free to romp, play and bring life, not death to the little parcel of land, being careful not to hurt themselves in the sunken places in the soil.