

NEARBY HISTORY

Louise
Pettus



Graves inspired editor's musings

*Grist sought stories
behind etchings on
York's tombstones*

In 1931 and 1932 the editor of the Yorkville Enquirer, A.M. Grist, every week published a personal column he titled "Just A-Rolling Along the Way." Arriving in a different community each week, he would manage to locate an "old-timer" to guide him.

Grist made it a practice to seek out old cemeteries and would copy some of the inscriptions from the oldest and quiz his companion about the history behind them.

In July 1931 Grist visited "Old Blackstock" cemetery in Fort Mill township. His guide was Maj. W.W. Boyce, who lived only a few hundred yards away.

Only the foundation of Blackstock church was left, the church building itself having moved to a site on what is now U.S. 21 to serve as an AME Zion church. Blackstock was named for the first pastor, the Rev. William Blackstock, in 1793.

But the old cemetery was still there. Grist described it as "... beautifully shaded with pines and oaks and mimosa trees, surrounded by a well kept and substantial stone fence, the work of master workmen."

He described the gate as made of mulberry wood and put together with pins or pegs, no nails being used.

From numerous headstones, Grist collected the names of Boyce, Miller, Scott, Query, Harris, Knox, Whitesides, Jackson, Parks, McClellan, Kimbrell, Alexander, Stewart, Adams, Kerr and Barr. The Scots-Irish names were a tell-tale sign that it had been a Presbyterian congregation.

Grist was struck by the grave of James Knox, one of the first elders of the church: "Stop careless youth and read and when you read consider. The worms are long may feed on you and I together ..."

On the other side of the stone wall was another cemetery, "the ground matted thickly with periwinkle." Although there were no headstones, there were "small unchiseled stones and occasionally is found a grave that is caved in." It was an old slave cemetery. There was no marker but the periwinkle which is found in numerous abandoned cemeteries, white as well as black.

Periwinkle (Vinca minor or myrtle) is a ground cover with glossy green leaves and blue flowers that was often planted on graves before the 20th century. Old herbal books say that periwinkle was an "anti-evil eye."

Sometimes periwinkle went by the name "cemetery plant." It did not have to be mowed, and cows won't eat it or walk over it.

Research about two old slave cemeteries in Mecklenburg County, the Alexander and Neely cemeteries, described typical slave burials.

Because the slaves worked in the day, burial took place at night with pine torches to light the way. There was a procession headed by pall bearers carrying the coffin, followed by the deceased's family. Next came members of the master's household and then the community at large. The funeral service was later.

An African custom was to place on the grave some personal item. Often it was crockery such as the last plate or bowl the person ate from. The body would face east with "eyes facing Africa."

Near the two cemeteries, Maj. Boyce showed Grist a "bold spring" which ran 12 gallons of pure crystal water per minute. Around the spring Boyce had built a rock garden and set out "mountain laurel, rhododendron, azalea, ferns, cactus, willows, etc." There were also two lily ponds. "Truly a beautiful and restful spot," concluded Grist.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.

