

### Dorchester Pioneer Cemetery – **Not a Restoration, a Resurrection**

*By André Veniot, Freelance Writer*

Photo: Rob Stears

**T**he 223 gravestones of the Dorchester Pioneer Cemetery – the oldest dating from 1781 – today stand tall, straight and gleaming white in the September sunshine.

Located adjacent to Dorchester Penitentiary and Westmorland Institution on a half acre of sloping land overlooking the Memramcook Valley, the cemetery had literally fallen down over the centuries. Parts of it were broken, some were gone. But then months of restoration began in 2001. When it was all done, the awards started coming in, the most recent and most important from the Heritage Canada Foundation.

The Foundation's Achievement Award to "honour the efforts of individuals or groups for recent heritage conservation work in their province" was given to the inmates and staff of Westmorland, and presented during a special ceremony on September 10, 2004 to Warden Mike Corbett.

To Alice Folkins, president of The Westmorland Historical Society, who nominated the inmates and staff of institution, it only made sense. "What those men did is just wonderful. Just wonderful!"

Back in 2001, 70 inmates at Westmorland decided that in restoring the cemetery, they would be giving back to a community, maybe not the one they came from, but giving back nonetheless. It was to be part of a restorative justice program at the institution.

"It was in real bad shape," says Duncan, a Westmorland inmate and one of only two of the original group remaining who worked on the project. The rest have finished their sentences and left. In a few months, Duncan will be gone as well. But they have all left their mark on the place.



**On September 10, 2004, New Brunswick Lieutenant Governor Herménégilde Chiasson (left) presented a Heritage Canada Foundation Achievement Award to Westmorland Institution Warden Mike Corbett for work done by inmates and staff in restoring the Dorchester Pioneer Cemetery.**

"Some stones were covered in lichen and moss," says Duncan as he surveys the work he and his friends accomplished. "Others had fallen over. You couldn't read the lettering. Some had just disappeared into the ground."

Warden Corbett remembers how it all happened. Jim, an inmate, had come up with the idea as part of the restorative justice program. At the same time, Corbett felt the need to improve relations between the institution and residents of nearby Dorchester.

“The proposed project presented an opportunity to put restorative justice principles into action,” the warden recalls, “and to do something for the community that they could not achieve themselves.”

Corbett brought the whole inmate population into the gym, about 220 inmates to, in his own words, “make the pitch about the cemetery. I explained to them that they were all going back to their community at some point and if they wanted to become part of the free community, they had to start contributing. I told them that if they took advantage of an opportunity to make amends to a victim or a community, they would be able to hold their heads higher when leaving prison. Finally, I pointed out that this project, suggested by one of their own, offered them the chance to do both.”

About 70 inmates signed up. “A pretty good percentage,” says Corbett. “We now had the manpower and we – inmates, staff and citizens’ advisory committee – decided ‘Let’s do it.’ Very quickly a working relationship was established involving our institution, the Dorchester Historical Society, and the local United Church.”

Over the spring and summer of 2001 they worked. First they set up a planning committee, mapped out the cemetery, and catalogued and numbered every stone, then decided on which sections to begin.

“Jim had worked as a stonemason and is quite bright. He knew what we needed to be done, what chemicals to use. You had to be gentle with the stones because they are old,” says Corbett.

The inmates used an acid wash, cleaned the stones with wire brushes and steam, used dental picks on the lettering, and finally coated them with a clear epoxy as a preservative. In many cases, steel rods were drilled through the stones to hold them together, while in other cases the bases had to be completely redone so they could stand upright once again.

Five inmates worked full time during the day while the rest worked evenings and weekends – more than 2000 hours over a six-month period.

“You could sense a change in many of the offenders over time. At first it seemed like just another work project,” says Corbett. “But as we went along you could see them go through a whole slew of emotions. There was sadness, as they cleaned the stones of children who died young. Many of them have children of their own and they’d ask what had happened to cause these deaths. There was reverence because they felt they were working on something sacred. And there was legitimate pride in what they had done.”

In the fall of 2001, the village of Dorchester honoured the inmates in Westmorland’s gym. “It felt like the whole village was there,” says Corbett. “The Historical Society gave each inmate a Heritage Circle Award and the inmates, in return, gave them a compact disc and a book outlining the whole project. There was a sense of sharing, of belonging.”

Mrs. Folkins says the Heritage Circle Award from the province is special. “It was a personal award to each of them for what they did. I’ve been volunteering for 28 years and I don’t have one,” she laughs.

Since then, inmates have done other projects in the village such as the restoration of St. James Church and turning it into a textile museum. “They supplied the labour, the staging and the ladders. It looks better than it has in the last 32 years,” says Folkins.

“The payoff has been more than I foresaw,” says the warden. “We’ve re-established a meaningful, continuing relationship with the village and the inmates bought into the restorative justice program. They made a significant contribution to Dorchester’s rich history, and to the physical fabric of the community.”

As he looks over the graveyard, inmate Duncan is thoughtful. “I never dreamed of doing something like this. I enjoyed it. You know, these people were someone’s loved ones. So we gave these stones a little more TLC [tender loving care].”

At the end of the compact disc production that they prepared for the village, the inmates wrote the following: “The cemetery work will never end but our time here is done.”

“You know,” says Alice Folkins, “one of the people in Dorchester said, ‘This isn’t a restoration. It’s a resurrection.’ And it’s true.” ■