

COLCHESTER MAN UPDATING STATE'S CEMETERY RECORDS



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"I'M PERSISTENT. I've been doing this for a long time ... I've got a quarter-million names," says Ed Laput, 68, of Colchester, above, as he documents the headstones at First Church Cemetery in East Haddam. Below, one of the many headstones Laput has documented.

GENEALOGY

IN PURSUIT OF PAST

By SHAWN R. BEALS | sbeals@courant.com

On a sunny day, you'll usually find Ed Laput in a Connecticut cemetery, walking row by row, stone by stone, snapping pictures and recording names in his notebook.

On cloudy days, he'll be in the cramped basement office of his Colchester home, painstakingly categorizing hundreds of photos he's taken of gravestones around the state.

He's working on a unique and highly ambitious project - to update the bible of state genealogy records, untouched since 1934. Laput, 68, has made it his mission to modernize the Charles Hale Collection of



Connecticut cemetery records, which lists the names of people buried in 2,269 cemeteries in the state.

The idea came to him after he retired in 1998 and decided he would like to research his family history. Most of it was easy to trace, but there was one relative - his grandmother's sister - whose history eluded him.

"I only knew that she moved South," Laput said. "I was browsing online records and I came across an old cemetery reading taken in 1940. The name popped out at me. This woman, she had a very unique name."

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CEMETERY RECORDS

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It turned out that his relative, Virginia Zogel, an immigrant from Russia, died in 1939 in West Virginia.

"I would have never, ever found this person if not for that reading someone had done in 1940, so I said to my wife that I should go out and do something like this," he said.

So Laput started with the cemeteries near his home, figuring he could record the local names and help out anyone looking for their family in Colchester. But once he got through the 15 or so Colchester cemeteries, he realized there was a huge need for an update to the Hale Collection.

Laput maps each cemetery the same way. He starts by getting a copy of the Hale list for the town he's in, and goes down the rows snapping pictures of each gravestone. He loads the images onto his computer and records the names, birth and death dates, maiden names and birth and death places.

Since 2006, he has record-

ed more than 200,000 names in more than 350 cemeteries.

Laput is on the board of trustees at the Godfrey Memorial Library on Newfield Street in Middletown. The library specializes in genealogy, and will store the project as it is updated.

Carolyn Picciano, a reference librarian at the Connecticut State Library's History and Genealogy Center, said the cemetery project supervised by Charles Hale was initially aimed at trying to find veterans' graves. The state received federal funds and more than 80 people were eventually involved in the creation of the Hale Collection.

"It's great that Godfrey Library is working on bringing this project up to date because there are so many headstones that aren't recorded," Picciano said. "Having the Hale Collection updated would be a great resource for researchers."

She said the Hale project uncovered cemeteries that were long forgotten. In one case, a town clerk told Hale there were nine cemeteries

in the town, but Hale found 95. Most of them were small family plots, but the burials were still marked and included in the study.

"I want to be able to see other people get where I got because of this," Laput said. "Hopefully somewhere down the line somebody will be able to get some information that helps them."

Laput estimates that an average size cemetery takes about 30 hours to fully catalog, from the time he walks row by row taking pictures until he enters the data for the last gravestone.

"I probably put in 10 hours a day, every day," he said. "To me it's like a full-time job."

He and other volunteers even record cemeteries when they go on vacation, so a collection of out-of-state records is included in the list.

James Benn, director of the Godfrey Memorial Library, said family history seekers can access the records that have been entered through the library's website, www.godfrey.org. There are about 315 Connecticut cemeteries and 27 out-of-state

✦ ON THE WEB

For more photos of the project, visit courant.com/cemeteryrecords.

cemeteries currently indexed at the library.

"If you're looking for Connecticut-based records, this will be a gold mine for genealogists," Benn said. "We often will find a lot of names that weren't included in the Hale Collection and nobody ever knew they were there."

If other similar projects are discovered, the Godfrey library will try to get them included in its databases.

Benn said any of the library's records can be viewed free at the library, but memberships are needed for online viewing. A basic membership costs \$45 and includes the cemetery records.

He said the library has started seeking donations of funeral logs that funeral homes are no longer using. Those burial records often have detailed information, including family history and birth records.



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ED LAPUT photographs gravestones at First Church Cemetery in East Haddam as part of his effort to update the state's written cemetery records. He also is a major contributor to the online cemetery database www.godfrey.org.