

NH's first natural burial ground opens in Benton

BENTON — The first natural burial ground in New Hampshire has opened in Benton, located in central Grafton County.

Natural burials eliminate concrete or fiberglass vaults, employ simple cooling techniques instead of chemical embalming, and use only shrouds or caskets made from biodegradable materials instead of imported rainforest woods, metals, or synthetic fabrics.

A small group of volunteers in the Plymouth region spearheaded the effort by forming White Mountain Conservation Burial (WMCB), a cemetery nonprofit required by the State for operating a cemetery in New Hampshire.

The 28.9-acre property in Benton Flats has been donated to the nonprofit for the purpose of public burial and conservation by Benton residents Gil and Laura Richardson, who are widely known throughout NH as the leading pioneers in the sustainable energy movement in New Hamp-

shire.

“We look at life through a sustainability lens. Less embedded fossil-fuel energy. Less trash. Less pollution. More natural,” says Laura. “Having our last act blasted with gas for a few hours, as in cremation, or pumped full of formaldehyde, or encased in concrete, no thank you. That’s just not who we are. And we think there are a lot of other people who think similarly.”

The nonprofit is led by Plymouth resident Lee Webster, well-known advocate for natural burials with experience leading the Green Burial Council and Conservation Burial Alliance, both national organizations dedicated to furthering sustainable burial practices, along with NH Funeral Resources.

“Laura and Gil’s gift of land, and this parcel in particular, is helping us build a blueprint for others around the state who want to create conservation projects supported by natural burial



near them,” states Webster.

An experienced group of volunteers have been hard at work this past fall mowing and clearing space in the Meadow, and removing tree limbs throughout the Grove, both burial areas that are available for immediate use. Future phases will include additional acreage devoted to burial, plus recreational trails, across the Oliverian Brook.

Steve Whitman is also a trustee of WMCB, a well-known figure in Plymouth public service and throughout the state as a community planning expert. He’s known Laura and Gil for years through their work in Plymouth Area Renewable Energy Initiative (PAREI) and other sustainable energy projects.

“I’ve been interested in natural burial for a long time. We’ve been waiting for the right property and the right moment, and to have Gil and Laura donate their land makes it all the more meaningful for lots of people in the area,” Whitman said.

cemetery Oliverian Everlasting Burial Ground, a combination of the Oliverian Brook (named for “a Mr. Oliver who fell into it” according to the 1886 Grafton County Gazetteer) and one of the many native flowers that grows wild in the meadow, known as the Narrow-leaved Everlasting Pea.

Most cemeteries in New Hampshire are run by municipalities and churches that usually restrict their use to their own taxpayers or congregants. Oliverian welcomes anyone who chooses burial in a natural setting.

As an independent cemetery, pricing is all-inclusive, covering the purchase of the burial right, a flat marker, all fees, and full graveside service. A significant portion goes to dedicated endowment funds for long-term care and to support conservation and restoration efforts to preserve the land in perpetuity.

Care for the land is top of mind. Burials take place

on a portion of the protected land, with less than a quarter of a conventional vault cemetery burials occur in that area. Fewer burials means contained disturbance of soil and animal habitat, keeping the emphasis on conserving and restoring land that is host to hikers, hunters, and other outdoor enthusiasts.

The property abuts the White Mountain National Forest and is adjacent to other parcels already under conservation easement with the State of New Hampshire. The Oliverian acreage will continue to protect documented conservation values that include scenic vistas, wildlife corridors, open spaces, and a significant boulder belt of glacial erratics left by ice sheets during the last ice age.

Oliverian is also in close proximity to Owl’s Head Cliff, a unique rock formation popular with climbers north of the hamlet of Glencliff. It is the location used by the Audubon Society to release fledgling

Peregrine Falcons in the late 1980’s and is still a monitored nesting location for wild breeding pairs.

“Our goal is to provide accessible burial for people whose values reflect a deep connection to New Hampshire’s historical reliance on the land for its economy and culture,” says Webster. “This location speaks to New Hampshire natives and visitors who come here to enjoy the Whites or the Lakes. Here’s your opportunity to spend extended quality time in the place you love while giving back to the planet.”

To learn more about Oliverian Everlasting Burial Ground and White Mountain Conservation Burial, go to www.whitemountainconservationburial.org and select Find a Burial Ground.

For more information about natural burial and efforts to open natural burial grounds throughout the state, go to Natural Burial New Hampshire at www.naturalburialnh.org.



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Laura has put her stamp on the project, naming the