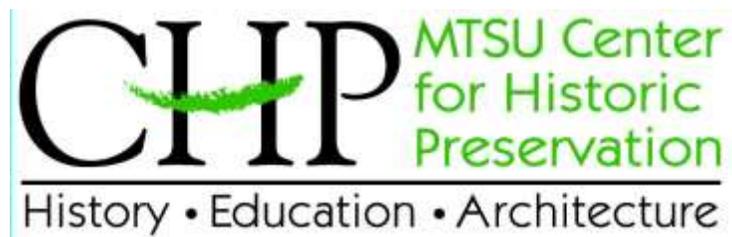


Mars Hill Cemeteries: Site Visit Report

Cornersville, Tennessee



By

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Site Visit Report

On April 9, 2021, Dr. Michael Fletcher, a Cemetery Specialist representing the Center for Historic Preservation (CHP), and CHP graduate and volunteer, Nancy Adgent, conducted a site visit to the Mars Hill Cemeteries. Carrie Riner, Secretary of the Mars Hill Cemetery Association, initially contacted Dr. Fletcher by email on March 27, 2021. In that email, Mrs. Riner asked about possible grants to help in renovating the Mars Hill Presbyterian Church, now decommissioned. Unfortunately, we can be of little assistance in that case.



The c. 1885 church building and the cemetery's south-east corner.

The Mars Hill church was constructed in 1885, with the first cemetery burials also dating from that period. During a follow-up phone call, Riner revealed the existence of a second cemetery property about a quarter mile to the north; the original location of Mars Hill church and cemetery, dating to 1815. Mrs. Riner then asked if we could arrange a site visit as her father, Association president Gary Boatwright, had some questions concerning cemetery preservation. The meeting was arranged following consultation with Dr. Van West, director of the Center for Historic Preservation.

Mars Hill sits on several acres of a knoll on Wright Road, north of Highway 129, in western Marshall County, Tennessee. The current cemetery (cemetery 1) is still in use and wraps

around the north, east, and western sides of the church building. Based on the available space, the cemetery could be in use for many more years.



Looking north-east.



Looking north.

The graveyard is in wonderful shape. There are a few broken and fallen tablet stones, but nothing beyond the wear and tear one would expect from a cemetery of this age. Mr. Boatwright informed us that the Association has adopted some best practices guidelines for the maintenance crew. He noted that they keep a careful eye on the crews. This strategy seems to work as the standing stones show no sign of chipped corners and damage typical of mower collisions and weed eaters. After a cemetery walk-through, we decided to visit the earlier graveyard and the original church's site.

The older graveyard, dating to 1815, is also located on Wright Road, about a quarter mile north of the current church. It sits at a bend in the road in a copse covering at or close to an acre. Mr. Boatwright remembers when the grounds were almost clear of trees. Large, much older trees mark the property corners. Bounded by the road to the south, it is surrounded on three side by agricultural fields. This is also the location of the original Mars Hill church but given the placement of the graves (the cemetery is quite full), the church building probably sat just outside the cemetery boundaries.



Though the sign gives us an 1825 date, the earliest identifiable burial is from 1815.



Looking north-west.

Judging by the prodigious root systems of various trees and vines, the cemetery was in an overgrown state for some time. The unchecked growth of saplings to mature trees within cemetery grounds underscores the fact that this property received little attention for years. The undergrowth, mainly *Vinca minor* and other vines, has been cut away recently leaving a mass of root systems just at or above ground level in some places. Unfortunately, though our visit was early in the Spring, higher than average rainfall resulted in knee-high grasses and undergrowth already obscuring our view of the cemetery's northern third.



Looking north.

Overall, ground clutter made it difficult to estimate the total number of graves, but there are easily over 100. The earliest grave is that of infant Andrew Patrick, who died in 1815 at the age of 9 months. This pushes back the traditional date of the cemetery, which itself was based on another grave of 1825, by ten years. The latest identifiable burial dates from 1888.



Andrew Patrick, died 1815. The earliest identifiable grave.

Breakage at ground level seems to be the most common form of headstone damage. Again, however, *vinca* root clutter and overgrown cemetery sections make it difficult to differentiate between fallen stones and unmarked graves.

The Mars Hill Cemetery Association are aware of the cemetery's condition and the steps they need to take to repair and preserve the site. Some of their plans include safely removing a number of trees inside the cemetery grounds as well as clearing the ground clutter of vine roots. To prevent erosion, they are going to seed the cemetery with grass. In the long term, they hope to reset broken or fallen stones. After a conversation about their long-term goals, we determined that, since they have a solid preservation plan in place, there is little else the CHP could offer. They simply needed reassurance that they were on the right track in terms of best practices. At the conclusion of our visit, Mrs. Adgent presented the group with a copy of Strangstad's *Graveyard Preservation Primer*. We encouraged them that if they had any further questions or issues to contact the CHP.



Two slab markers and two damaged box tombs.



At least three slab markers in the overgrown north-west corner of the cemetery.