

## Local

GENESEE COUNTY

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# Finding the forgotten graves of Civil War vets

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Len Thomas walks into Sunset Hills Cemetery the same way he walks into all cemeteries — with a shovel in his hands.

The cemetery sprawls among rolling hills. Birds chirp in the giant pines that offer shade among the headstones and make it feel the way an old cemetery should. But those pines are also a problem for Thomas. They shed their needles that carpet the ground, quickly decomposing into dirt.

That's why he needs the shovel.

"We had to dig 4 inches of soil off of here," he says, wandering the ground, looking for someone he's already spent months of his life finding once — someone buried more than a century before. Samuel L. Arner, 1847-1932, like all the people Thomas searches for, served in the Civil War.

Thomas, 74, spent his career in schools, first as an elementary teacher and later as an administrator in Flint. So, he knows something about rules. But when asked what someone — for example, the superintendent of the cemetery — might say if they saw a man wandering around the graves with a shovel, he just shrugs. They're not usually around most of the time, anyway.

And besides, he's got work to do — important work. Never mind no one's asking him to do it. It's his calling, the way he spends the days (and dollars) of his retirement.

It is Wednesday when he walks through Sunset Hills, five days before Memorial Day, but that doesn't really matter. Memorializing is what he does almost every day of his life.

Thomas finds Civil War veterans, specifically those whose headstones are not marked as such, or those who have no headstones. He and his wife, Sharon, have walked every cemetery in Shiawassee, Genesee and Lapeer counties.

Their method has evolved into something scientific. They start at opposite ends and walk toward each other, looking at dates of births and deaths, noting any names that fall in that time frame when people serving in the Civil War would have been living. Or dying.

Then they check each other's work, making sure they haven't missed anything, and Thomas goes home to his office where he checks those names against his database of more than 9,000 people from those three counties who had served, seeing if anyone is not being eternally recognized for playing their part in the war.

It happens. He finds them.

Since 2002, he's found more than 100. Sometimes, there are headstones marking the person but not their service.

In that case, Thomas plants a bronze flag holder, a kind specifically made for veterans. He is thorough. He noticed after a time that groundskeepers would sometimes move them to mow around headstones.

"They'll end up by graves of babies and all kinds of places," he says.

Not his. He pours concrete into half a coffee can that he stakes the holder in, then buries the concrete. The flag holders don't go anywhere.

In other cases, there is



Len Thomas sticks a flag in the ground next to the grave marker of a Civil War veteran whose headstone didn't recognize his service at Sunset Hills Cemetery in Flint.

(Katie McLean/MLive.com)



Len Thomas looks through his research Wednesday in Flint.

no headstone at all. He can quote President Abraham Lincoln, who decreed that all Civil War soldiers will be honored with marble or granite.

And then he carries out that decree. A program through the federal government provides, at no cost, upright granite or marble headstones, but it doesn't pay for installation. Thomas pays as much as \$230 per headstone to have them placed.

In the case of Arner, his grave had simply been covered with soil over time. Without Thomas, it likely would have stayed that way, nestling deeper into the dirt as more pine needles fell.

He shovels away some dirt that's accumulated and clears away the rest with a brush — another part of his tool kit.

He is working toward making sure the more than 100 unrecognized graves he has found have headstones or flag holders. He's up to 67.

It's hard to get him to answer why. It's something that needs to be done. There are many fights to fight. His fight is memory.

It's time to move on to another cemetery, but first he has to do something. There is no American flag near Arner's grave, but that's not a problem. Part of Thomas' supply kit is a cache of flags. There are some rules about placing flags at Sunset Hills, the particulars of which Thomas is not quite sure. Or maybe he just doesn't care. Before returning to his van, he walks back under the pines and forces a flag into the earth.

## HOW IT STARTED

Len Thomas knows where he and his wife will be buried.

There are two headstones with their names on them waiting in Elmwood Cemetery in New Lothrop. In 2002, Thomas decided to make a full transcription of the cemetery, something that hadn't been done since 1965.

He was told there were no Civil War veterans there. He found 48 — 10 of whom weren't recognized for their service.

"I said, 'If there are 48 in this small cemetery, how many more are there?'"

There were more.

He decided to limit his search to Shiawassee, Genesee and Lapeer counties. It began what turned out to be the work that would define the latter part of his life.

Every Tuesday, he drives from his Swartz Creek

home to the Argus Press, an Owosso newspaper, to go through post-Civil War obituaries, a task made harder by the fact that in those days, obituaries were not gathered in one spot, but scattered throughout the paper.

It's a lot of sifting through information, but now and then he notices things, incongruities with the various available records that give him leads.

His work is not limited to just the burial of soldiers. Nor is his search limited to men.

He once came across the name Lucy Blanchard, a Civil War nurse who lived in Fenton only four years but had left her mark.

Thirteen years following her death in 1911, members of the local chapter of the Daughters of Union Veterans named the group after her. But nowhere in Fenton could he find Blanchard.

"That prompted me to do some more work," he said.

He'd found the records of her burial and noticed that Fenton's Oakwood Cemetery, where people believed she'd been buried, was crossed off, replaced by the name of a cemetery in Syracuse, N.Y.

He and his wife made the trip. They went to the home for senior women where she had lived and the places her short-term husband had lived and worked.

"The more you find, the more you want to find," he said.

He went to the library, where the staff found four obituaries of the elusive Blanchard, one with her picture.

They found where she was buried at a Syracuse cemetery in a grave with no headstone. In 2010, Thomas made sure she got one. Blanchard had been dead 99 years.

The way he talks about her, it's as though he knew her, or she was a close relative, as though any gaps in information aren't so much a matter of historic record, but memory.

"I wouldn't be surprised that Mary Lincoln and Lucy Blanchard met, because they served at that same college hospital," he said, then went on to talk about the woman they worked for and all the reasons the military men couldn't stand her.

His efforts to recognize lost soldiers recently earned him the Abraham Lincoln award from the Michigan chapter of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War — the highest honor the group gives. It's also led to speaking engagements that keep him busy at libraries and museums. He doesn't take money for the speeches, not even to offset the price of placing granite headstones or bronze markers (\$30, up from \$27 a few years ago, he said).

What he likes is doing

it, finding the people from a time he's afraid is being forgotten.

## 'WORK IS NEVER DONE'

"Oh, bless their hearts, they've been here," Thomas says as he pulls into Bendle Cemetery in Clayton Township, his last stop on his outing Wednesday. Flags can be seen throughout the small cemetery, and Thomas is commenting on the volunteer Marines who have come by to put flags in the bronze holders near all the veterans' gravestones.

Or at least, it's probably all of them. And if he's finished with this cemetery, there are many others.

"The work is never done," he said. "Many of them were buried in mass graves."

But there are those he can find, and he's not done looking.

He gets out of his van and walks to the headstone of Alanson Personius.

Thomas found a 1970s transcription of the cemetery that noted only a flag holder was placed by Personius' wife. He used that information and found Personius originally was buried in a mausoleum elsewhere that was torn down. The bodies from the mausoleum were reinterred throughout the county, sometimes without family members knowing.

Among Thomas' tools is a probe — an object he can stick into the ground to detect objects. He went to Bendle, stuck the probe in the ground and detected a large object next to Personius' wife's grave. That, along with the transcription he'd found, was enough to convince the township clerk, whose records showed he was not buried there. (According to Thomas, that's not uncommon.)

He ordered the headstone.

"People need someplace," he says, "somewhere to be able to grieve."

He looks around the cemetery, at all the flags. Some of the names he knows. Others he has to think about. The keeping of memories is a tough job, even for someone like Thomas.