

Girls make connections across the centuries

PATRICIA LONGORIA, Correspondent 11:39 a.m. EDT October 22, 2015



(Photo: GAYLE TURKE / PROVIDED PHOTO)

Olivia Turke and **Niya Schell** almost gave up.

It was a hot August afternoon. The 10-year-old friends had been searching for a gravestone at northeast Ithaca's Pleasant Grove Cemetery for almost an hour. They were sweaty and thirsty. Olivia's mom, **Gayle Turke**, and Niya's dad, **Joel Schell**, doubted that the grave still existed.

But in the shade of a tall evergreen, the girls noticed the name "Caroline" at the top of a domed tablet stone. Olivia and Niya, students at South Hill Elementary and Cayuga Heights Elementary, respectively, had read the 1869 diary of Ithaca teen **Carrie Manning**. They knew that Carrie's mother's name was Caroline. They studied the gravestone carefully. Below Caroline's name, they made out the inscription: "Carrie L., Dau. of T. & C. Manning, Died Jan. 21, 1875, Aged 18y 11m 9d."

All of the details matched what they knew about Carrie's short life. The four-foot-tall gravestone was not what they expected.

"We were looking for a little stone lying on the ground because of the time period and because she was so young," Olivia said. "I was surprised that she didn't have her own stone."

"I was excited and thrilled to find Carrie Manning's grave," Niya added. "You could barely read it because it was so old."

But she felt sad as well imagining how terrible Carrie must have felt when she was ill.

Nineteenth century farm life

Carrie's ancestors — the Manning, Owens, Drake, Bloom, and Brown families — had settled in Tompkins County in the late 1790s and early 1800s.

In 1870, Carrie's parents **Thompson and Caroline Manning** owned a 109-acre farm just south of Lansing, in what is now known as the Village of Cayuga Heights. The family grew wheat, corn, oats, buckwheat, barley and potatoes. They also sold wool and butter. The farm produced hay and clover for livestock feed.

Niya and Olivia had learned about Carrie's life on the Manning farm at The History Center's Eight Square Schoolhouse camp in mid-July. Each day, the campers read excerpts from Carrie's diary, which had been preserved by Carrie's family and then donated to the DeWitt Historical Society (renamed The History Center in Tompkins County).

The diary is a vivid story of the everyday life of the young farm girl four years after the end of the Civil War. Carrie went to school in an ox-drawn wagon in the winter, did farm chores by candlelight, sewed clothes and pieced quilts, and popped ears of corn for snacks. Carrie wrote about her 20-year-old sister Mary's social life, going to dances and picnics and staying overnight with friends. She described going to school with her sister Emma, who was four years older than Carrie.

Carrie mentioned many funerals and wrote about them "like it was a normal thing," Niya explained.

The cemetery was an inviting community space in Carrie's day.

"Em Brown, Katie and I went over to the graveyard today noon," Carrie wrote in her diary on May 10.

Perhaps they ate lunch there. Nineteenth century residents often enjoyed picnics in the open, park-like community cemeteries.

The two young history sleuths were intrigued by Carrie and wanted to learn more about her. **Carole West**, program coordinator for the Eight Square Schoolhouse, told them that the diarist was buried at Pleasant Grove Cemetery but didn't know exactly where the grave was.

"We wanted to find her for Mrs. West," Olivia said.

Connecting with local history

Studying the gravestones for clues helped the young historians see Carrie and her relatives and neighbors as real people.

“Reading the names and dates helped them make the connection that people once walked around here, buried their loved ones here,” Gayle Turke noted.

Indeed, families have erected memorials at Pleasant Grove Cemetery for more than 200 years. The earliest grave in the cemetery is that of **Joanna Brown**, who died in 1805 at 81 years old. Other early gravestones mark the families, like Joanna Brown’s, who came to the region after the Revolutionary War.

Over the centuries, Pleasant Grove Cemetery has evolved as the surrounding farmlands became a university suburb. Views of death have changed as well, and gravestone designs and symbols at the cemetery capture these shifts.

On their quest to find Carrie Manning’s gravestone, Olivia and Niya forged a closer link to a girl like them but born more than a century and a half ago. They discovered that a simple stone marker can document not only a life but a family, a community, a history. That’s a powerful and enduring legacy for a young woman and a small community cemetery.

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