

# Preserving history in Holme Circle

By William Kenny Nov. 13, 2013

In the beginning, all that Elsie Stevens wanted to do was to clean things up a bit.

But what began as a small neighborhood beautification project evolved into a sizable historical preservation campaign for Stevens and the community group she leads, the Holme Circle Civic Association. On Nov. 3, civic leaders joined descendants of two of Pennsylvania's earliest colonists in celebrating months of labor at the Holme-Crispin Cemetery.

The long-neglected burial ground is the final resting place of Thomas Holme, who as William Penn's surveyor-general laid out the now-familiar grid of Philadelphia streets. In the late 17th century, Holme maintained an estate, the Well Spring Plantation, in Lower Dublin Township near Pennypack Creek (called Dublin Creek at the time), not far from its confluence with the Delaware River.

Today, the site is part of the Holme Circle neighborhood. Holme's family burial ground has survived the centuries and occupies a quarter-acre parcel of land along Holme Avenue just west of Convent Avenue, in the shadow of Pennypack Park and next to the Crispin Gardens Athletic Association fields.

"I only wanted to erect a flagpole," Stevens said during the re-dedication. "But my good friend Fred Moore said, 'You have to have a ceremony.'"

According to Stevens, the cemetery was hardly distinguishable from the surrounding growth of wild grasses and park foliage last fall. Tall weeds obscured all but the tallest grave markers, such as Holme's centrally positioned obelisk. Thousands of cars would pass the site daily with nary a clue about the history buried there.

Historians have counted 92 graves, although identities of many of the dead remain unknown. They include Holme's daughter, Hester, and her husband, Silas Crispin, who was the son of Penn's first cousin, William Crispin.

Silas and his father first sailed for America in November 1681 after Penn had named the elder as a commissioner of the new colony. William Crispin was Penn's first choice as surveyor, but he died during the voyage.

Penn next chose Holme, a fellow Quaker, to survey the colony. Holme and his daughter arrived in America in August 1682. Hester married Silas Crispin the following year. They settled in Lower Dublin.

Thomas Holme died in 1695. As executor of his will, Silas Crispin sold much of his father-in-law's plantation, but divided about 1,200 acres among the Crispin children, while

reserving one acre to establish the family burial ground. Hester was buried there in 1696, followed by Silas in 1711. The rest of the graves are occupied by the descendants of Silas' and Hester's son, Thomas, and his wife Jane Ashton Crispin.

The final burial there took place in 1863, the same year that the Trustees of the Lower Dublin Academy erected the eight-foot monument to Thomas Holme, replacing the simple fieldstone that had marked his grave for the previous 168 years.

“Who would have thought we have all this history in Northeast Philadelphia?” said state Rep. John Sabatina. “I want to thank the Holme Circle Civic Association and Elsie for their pride, dedication and commitment to making this place what it is today.”

After clearing the brush and branches and mowing the grass last fall, Stevens and her cohorts began soliciting for private and public contributors to the rehab project. W.W. Grainger Inc. donated a flagpole. Sabatina donated U.S. and Pennsylvania flags, while Brenda Exon of Partners for Civic Pride gave a Philadelphia city flag.

Home Depot and Lowes each contributed shrubs for planting and other materials. The city, particularly Deputy Mayor Michael DiBerardinis and the Department of Parks and Recreation, supplied park benches along with trees for planting. The Trustees of Lower Dublin Academy donated lighting and security equipment.

The project hasn't been without setbacks. On two occasions, vandals ripped recently planted trees from the ground. Some of the new shrubs died in the ground. Natural threats including snakes and poison sumac made things difficult for volunteers.

But they got the job done in time for the Nov. 3 ceremony, which coincided with the 389th anniversary of Thomas Holme's birth. Pearl Harbor veteran Alex Horanzy presented the U.S. flag. Sabatina's aide, Michael Fagan, presented the state flag. Kathleen Simpson, widow of slain Philadelphia police Sgt. Timothy Simpson, presented the city flag. All are Holme Circle residents.

Exon, who co-founded Partners for Civic Pride in 1998 to promote Philadelphia's founding principles and its motto through educational programs, discussed the symbolism and meaning of the civic flag.

George Crispin, a descendant of Silas Crispin and unofficial family historian, said that many Crispins still live in Southern New Jersey and would be thrilled by the hard work and care shown by volunteers.

Stevens said that the community hopes to protect the cemetery while making it accessible to local folks who are interested in its history.

“We feel like it’s on our watch,” Stevens said.