Landscape of the Past:
A Brief History of the Prince George Municipal Cemetery

By Gary McKivett

This paper was released in a 1999 bound volume entitled “Prince George in Context”, which contains University of Northern British Columbia student papers from the HIST 407: Local History and Methodology course. This paper was written in 1998 by Gary McKivett, who graduated from UNBC with a B.A. in English and History. Gary McKivett passed away on May 9, 2009.
Geography has always played an influential role in history, as demonstrated by the site chosen for settlement that would later become the City of Prince George. The confluence of the Fraser and Nechako rivers in the Carrier nation territory seemed to explorer Simon Fraser a likely location for the establishment of a North West Company fur trading post, especially since the local natives were already occupying a seasonal village on the riverbank. Their settlement was known as Lheith, "where the two rivers join." The Hudson's Bay Company, having learned the value of locating where trade routes would facilitate commerce with indigenous people, maintained the site after the 1821 amalgamation of the two fur trading enterprises. As early as 1870, Sanford Fleming had designated the location as part of a "natural route" recommended by his preliminary surveys for the Canadian Pacific Railway. By the turn of the century surveying for the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway line was under way in earnest, and Fort George seemed a logical choice for a station and town site.

History, aside from personal events, is frequently ignored or overlooked by the lay person, often with the observation that its relevance is only for the dead. That statement's obvious paradox is usually lost on those who utter it: that the dead are already part of the family, social, national, military or chronological history we research and study. Death is a fact of life and part of a natural cycle. Where people live they inevitably die, and the cemetery plot is sometimes the first permanent, immovable site established in a new community. Graveyards usually outlast many "boomtowns" whose only claim to longevity are the dead dreamers and speculators left behind. However, while death ends individual lives, it does not necessarily end their histories. As Stephen Leacock has reflected:

I never realized that there was history too, close at hand beside my very own home. I did not realize that the old grave that stood among the brambles at the foot of our farm was history.

The Prince George cemetery, like final resting places everywhere, reveals much about the lives and habits of not only those interred, but also those who live enough to bury their dead. The fortunate survival of some of the earliest Prince George cemetery records are a historical legacy providing the modern researcher with invaluable information.

The first recorded non-native deaths at Fort George occurred in the summer of 1823 when two HBC employees, alone at the compound, were killed by local natives in a dispute.

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6 Foremost among these few surviving primary source documents is the Corless family funeral/cemetery ledger, maintained by Richard and Mary Ellen Corless and covering the years 1916-1931. The ledger was donated to the B.C. Provincial Archives by their daughter Ida.
attributed to abuse of a Carrier woman. Presumably, these men's remains would have been buried when discovered, but the first account of a Euro-Canadian funeral here took place in early September, 1862, when Eustace Pattison, a member of the goldseeking Overlanders from eastern Canada, died from a combination of injuries and exposure due to a rafting mishap in the Fraser rapids upriver from the fort. An Overlander named Wade recorded: "A small canoe was split and shaped into a coffin, there being no boards." The actual burial plot is unknown, but likely lies close to the old Indian burial ground near the Hudson's Bay slough. It would be a little over half a century before death again deserved notice here, when the settlement became the scene of a speculative real estate boom promoting three separate town sites: Fort George, Prince George and South Fort George. The choice of the river confluence by the GTP as a major divisional point in 1908 started the influx of settlers and speculators who would swell the population of the competing towns until the actual arrival of the first train in 1914. Incorporation of Prince George followed within a year, and local history entered its modern era.

Ironically, the first published death for the new community is that of a non-resident, a Ft. George citizen's brother who passed away in New Zealand. Local deaths were not far behind and soon became worthy of report in the fledgling newspapers, whose primary function was publishing land and mining claim notices. Death by drowning in the unfamiliar currents of the Fraser and Nechako seemed a frequent sad occurrence. The lack of civic authority and a reassuring bureaucracy was keenly noticed by the new settlers; subsequently, in response to the growing population the provincial government appointed Ft. George's first district registrar under the births, Deaths, and Marriage Act on January 1, 1911.

Plans for a cemetery by some level of government might have been expected shortly, but the competing town sites on the western shores of the Fraser and Nechako could not wait for Victoria to act. The problem of providing a final resting place for the deceased caused the citizens to pre-empt a portion of Crown land that may have already seen limited use as a family burial ground. Later, the Fort George Herald records: "the death in the Neckako town last week brings us face to face with the fact that there must be a proper buryial [sic] place appointed hereabouts". This unofficial cemetery lay west of the settlements, between the road leading from town to the Backwater River and Quesnel, above the Roi homestead. The Roi farm was established in the mid-1890s, and it is possible that the family may have buried their dead on the bluff prior to 1911. The site overlooked the rolling Fraser River, and at the time no doubt seemed far enough away to dispel fears of midnight hauntings, while ensuring eternal peace. Plans to appropriate the land saw publication on the same day as a fatal logging accident. An early map of

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7 Charles A. Bishop, “Kwah: A Carrier Chief,” in Sa Ts’e, 20.
8 Runnalls, History of P.G., 50-1.
10 Fort George Herald (hereinafter FGH), 1 October 1910, p. 2, “John A. Cowie.”
11 Reverend F.E. Runnalls, A History of Knox United Church—Prince George, unpublished manuscript, 1946, Local History Archives, Prince George Regional Library.
12 Fort George Tribune (hereinafter FGT), 7 January 1911, “D.F.M. Perkins.”
13 FGH, 22 April 1911, p. 1.
the town sites reveals the designated area: the south-east corner of lot 1432, adjoining lot 925.\textsuperscript{15} The sandy composition of the soil at this location\textsuperscript{16} suggests the residue of a wide glacial stream which at one time flowed into a much larger Fraser River.\textsuperscript{17}

The area's earliest suicide is detailed next to a story of yet another drowning, with the dramatic headlines: "Loaded His Pockets with Rocks and Jumped into the Fraser River," followed by, "Meets Watery Grave in Giscomb Rapids."\textsuperscript{18} The first published record of a burial in the cemetery (four months after its designation) is accompanied by a public demand to make the site official.\textsuperscript{19} The provincial government delay likely hinged on which townsite would reap the status reward of a Grand Trunk Pacific Railway station site, thereby guaranteeing future development. Close examination of early funeral records reveal that this intense competition persisted after death, with separate sections of the cemetery allotted for each town site.\textsuperscript{20} Despite this quasi-urban snobbery, a single centrally-located cemetery seems always to have served not only these sibling settlements, but most of the outlying villages as well. An early entry in the Prince George Citizen informs us, "The remains of Mrs. Joseph Westman, of Hutton, were brought to the city yesterday and laid to rest in the local cemtery [sic]."\textsuperscript{21} As the settlements developed, circumstances of weather and distance often precluded some families from utilizing the Prince George cemetery. Ms. Patty Dahl recalls the story of two children who passed away during the 1918-19 flu epidemic and were buried on their farm near Chief Lake. Trees surrounding the gravesite were left uncut as a memorial in the midst of cleared fields, but as time passed and the property changed hands, the trees were removed and all trace of the tiny graves lost.\textsuperscript{22} Occasional human remains found in the wilds were usually buried on the spot. The following excerpt from the Fort George Tribune is typical: "A body was found in the Nechaco [sic] river, near the camp of Logan and Company, contractors, early in the week. There was nothing to identify it. The remains were interred on the river bank."\textsuperscript{23} Post-mortem investigations seem to have been superficial at best and, with the nearest coroner residing in Quesnel autopsies were rare, as this example reveals: "Provincial Constable Gosby visited the scene of the accident and reported the matter to coroner Barlow in Quesnel last night."\textsuperscript{24} It would seem that only obvious foul play or the death of a prominent citizen would prompt the Quesnel coroner to visit the growing settlements. The lack of a strongly-rooted population is reflected in the fact that the deceased were as often shipped home from Prince George as they were buried here. A Herald

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\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 29 April 1911, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{16} Gary McKivett, telephone interview with Jack D. Corless, April 6, 1998. Mr. Corless confirmed that the cemetery site had been chosen primarily because the earth was easy to dig at this spot, unlike the predominant heavy clay and gravel common in the area.
\textsuperscript{17} Runnalls, History of P.G., 1-5.
\textsuperscript{18} FGH, 20 May 1911, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 10 August 1911, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{20} Corless family funeral/cemetery ledger, 1916-1931, B.C. Provincial Archives, Victoria. Various entries until 1919. See Appendix I.
\textsuperscript{21} Prince George Citizen (hereinafter PGC), 19 November 1918, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{22} Gary McKivett, taped interview with Ms. Patty Dahl, March 12, 1998. Ms. Dahl is a senior citizen and local amateur historian who assisted in compiling a published history of Fraser Lake, B.C.
\textsuperscript{23} FGT, 12 July 1913, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{24} FGH, 22 April 1911, p. 1.
social announcement reminds fellow Masons, "Members of the order are requested to gather at the lodge Sunday morning at 7:45 and escort the body to the train." Jack Corless remembers that the first embalming assignment completed by his parents as undertakers involved the body of a young man sent home to New York State for burial. The deceased's parents wrote a touching letter of appreciation to accompany their paid invoice.

One might expect the establishment of other cemeteries in the three original town sites, or even churchyard plots, but such is not the case. There are small, overgrown, no longer used community graveyards in Willow River, Aleza Lake and Hixon, as well as still-functioning cemeteries in Vanderhoof and Fraser Lake. The existence of confusing graveyard references in the early issues of the Fort George Herald seem to be only malicious name-calling resulting from the town site rivalries, and not discussion of an actual cemetery. Herald editor J.B Daniell of South Fort George intensely disliked George Hammond, promoter of Fort George, who later won a libel suit against Daniell. Officially, the only other legitimate burial ground comprised the native cemetery on Fort George Reserve No. 1, as noted in the Herald: "There were two burials in the Indian cemetery this week. Both were infants."

Finally, B.C.'s Lieutenant-Governor signed an order-in-council Nov. 12, 1917, granting the crown land occupied by the cemetery to the city, specifically and only for cemetery use. The city was growing, and the cemetery layout reflected the "boomtown" haphazardness of development. The early section of the cemetery, or "old burial ground" as it is known, contains many graves devoid of surface markers. This circumstance is most likely due to the original erection of wooden markers or crosses which have since fallen and decayed.

The growth of Prince George led in turn to more community organizations and fraternities, churches, and a developing social order, all of which were reflected in the death notices and obituaries of the time. In 1921 city council passed a by-law to set aside separate sections of the cemetery for different-religious denominations.

26 J.D. Corless interview.
27 FGH, 17 December 1910, p. 3: The mail—weekly—came in Monday night at fifteen to six. Went over to the Cheechaco graveyard and turned around and came back at nine—"; 7 January 1911, p. 4: “Of course, [the mail] went over to the beautiful graveyard and honeymoon rendezvous.”; 13 May 1911, p. 1: “The graveyard, though, is at Central, under a new light complexioned [sic] caretaker.”; 30 November 1912, p. 4: “It is reported that the Bronger pre-emption on the Nechaco [sic], opposite the graveyard, has been sold.” The malice implied in these reference is typical of the animosity between Herald publisher Daniell and Ft. George promoter Hammond. The appellation may originate in the fact that the road to out of Daniell’s South Ft. George base was also the road to the cemetery, or to the fact that Daniell considered Hammond’s town site dream a dead end.
30 Crown Grant No. 202-396, Cariboo District, G.1, Government Agent, Prince George.
31 See Appendix II.
32 PGC, 18 January 1921, p. 7, “Civic Record... By-Law No. 114.”
Prince George recorded forty-six non-Native fatalities as a result of the influenza epidemic of 1918,\textsuperscript{33} despite appeals for precautions to prevent spreading the disease.\textsuperscript{34} The small burial ground west of town was filling up and expansion became necessary. The city invited tenders for a contract to clear trees from the site to make room for projected need,\textsuperscript{35} as increasing inhabitants led in turn to an increasing cemetery population. An ever-growing numbers of graves led to the first surveying and numbering of plots in 1919, an effort to bring order and method to this significant community structure. At the same time, Mayor Carney appealed to the public for assistance in identifying those unmarked graves which were already becoming a bureaucratic problem.\textsuperscript{36}

As the Prince George Municipal Cemetery became a fixture of the community it also began to establish its own history. The 1930s were busy times. In 1933 the casually employed grave digger/handyman hired by the city was arrested, tried and convicted of grave-robbing. The Citizen newspaper of the day seems to have exercised self-censorship in this case with scant details of the crime, most likely in consideration for recently bereaved families.\textsuperscript{37} Media accounts emphasize that only indigent graves were rifled, but Patty Dahl recalls that rumours circulated about a box discovered beneath the perpetrator's bed that contained jewelry, a sheriff's gold badge, and even gold teeth that the thief been unable to dispose of locally.\textsuperscript{38} According to Jack Corless, the exposure of the grave-rober came about in the following manner. A resident named Charley Pine passed away and was buried in a new suit purchased by his wife. Two or three weeks after the funeral, on Third Avenue in broad daylight, Mrs. Pine encountered the handyman and recognized not only the new outfit she had selected, but also her late husband's ring on the grave digger's finger. An outraged hue and cry followed with the individual sentenced to three years in the penitentiary.\textsuperscript{39} His family moved away, never to be heard from again.\textsuperscript{40}

Prince George's second airfield, located across the road from the cemetery, created new hazards for resting in peace. There are apocryphal tales of small planes lifting off over the road, cemetery and river, flying just low enough for the landing gear to occasionally clip a headstone. The story may simply be a more romantic explanation of the vandalism beginning to be observed in the cemetery. City council appointed a committee to deal with criticism regarding upkeep of the grounds. Jack Corless asserts that through the 1930s until the late 1940s\textsuperscript{41} the cemetery was a disgrace that the city administration routinely ignored. One of the committee's first recommendations was a by-law to regulate headstone height, so perhaps the airplane story has

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\item \textsuperscript{33} PGC, 8 November 1918, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 1 November 1918, p. 6.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 13 August 1919, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 20 August 1919, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 14 December 1933, p. 6.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Patty Dahl interview.
\item \textsuperscript{39} PGC, 7 December 1933, p. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{40} J.D. Corless interview. The previous Citizen citations identify the convicted graverobber, but I have omitted his name from this article in order to avoid confusion or possible embarrassment for current Prince George residents with an identical surname.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
some basis in fact. Complaints about the graveyard maintenance continued. A Mrs. Walls wrote a long letter to the editor published under the caption, "City's Shame Upbraided," but it was not until Carrie Jane Grey and Tom Carmichael took over the committee that real changes came about. They promptly hired a full time caretaker, implemented a grounds maintenance program, and endorsed the idea of flat grave markers to facilitate grass cutting.

Art Garrett, cemetery caretaker from 1956-1971, encountered many problems during his tenure at the cemetery. The installation of the first water sprinkling system, circa 1960, revealed quite a number of unmarked graves, since the heavy moisture content caused the ground to settle, leaving noticeable depressions in the surface. Mr. Garrett conscientiously avoided digging wherever an unmarked site was indicated. Winter burials were marked with an upright identifying stick until the ground was secure enough (mid-summer) to support a stone.

Expansion of the cemetery away from its original site meant the soil was no longer loose and sandy, but increasingly composed of dense clay and gravel. Perhaps the most interesting practice before the cemetery acquired a backhoe was the method of digging graves in this difficult ground, whether winter or summer. Four regularly-spaced holes would be drilled in the new plot and dynamite would be lowered into the holes. Traffic on the adjoining road had to be halted until the explosives could be safely detonated. Once the gravesite was blasted open, traffic could resume amid the lingering echoes of what must certainly have been enough noise to wake the dead. Jack Corless recalls that in the 1920s and 1930s, graves would be dug during the autumn in anticipation of possible winter interments.

Mr. Garrett also engineered the difficult transfer of the remains of four or five bodies from one of the two rural Willow River cemeteries in the 1960s when that property changed hands and the new owners wanted the gravesite removed. A special dispensation had to be obtained from Victoria in order to accomplish the move. As caretaker, Mr. Garrett was also approached by the Chinese Benevolent Society in the 1960's regarding permanent markers on some of their older plots which lacked and identifying stone. Mr. Garrett cast a simple squared marker in concrete, then overcame his inability to write Chinese when he placed a sheet of paper, with the required lettering already done, over the wet cement and punched holes through the paper, into the soft surface of the marker. With a few finishing touches, the epitaphs were completed before the concrete could harden. Mr. Garrett is remembered as an innovative problem-solver who epitomized the adage that necessity would give birth to invention. This double row of markers may be viewed in Section "P" of the cemetery.

The formal preparation of the deceased and their interment is vital in a community, since it enables the residents to come to terms with death and accept it as a social reality that is part of the natural order of things. There appeared to be no shortage of undertakers in the early days, but it was obviously a profession that required a supplementary career, due to the relatively low residential population and death rate. Henry Gross, a druggist by trade, operated an embalming

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42 PGC, 17 February 1944, p. 1.
45 Corless interview.
46 Ibid.
service as well.\textsuperscript{47} As early as March of 1912, J. W. Sandiford is advertising his cabinetmaking and furniture business, followed two years later with the announcement of a partnership to open a funeral parlour.\textsuperscript{48} The Fort George Undertaking Co. opened to the public shortly afterwards. Henry Wapshott was listed as manager and licensed embalmer, with Sandiford's furniture making experience likely supplying the caskets.\textsuperscript{49} By December of that year Sandiford was in business for himself, as "Undertaker and Funeral Director."\textsuperscript{50} When Sandiford left after being unable to keep pace with the ravages of the 1918-19 flu epidemic, Richard and Mary Ellen Corless assumed control.\textsuperscript{51} Later there was a brief competition from the Saywright firm headquartered in the Okanagan, but since most of the locals seemed to prefer Corless, Saywright eventually withdrew. 'Lanky' Saywright apprentice, Harold Assman, became the Corless assistant and purchased the business from Mary Ellen Corless after her husband left the family, seeking amorous adventures elsewhere.\textsuperscript{52} Assman, a sincere and serious person who remained dedicated to the concept of community service all his life, had always wished to become a physician, but possessed neither the funds nor the time to pursue that career. Instead, he parlayed an interest in medicine into the field of undertaking, determined to provide the best possible service for bereaved families.

Harold Assman established his first funeral home on George Street November 1, 1936. Assman's Funeral Chapel was a small house remodeled to include a show room for casket display, a preparation room and business office.\textsuperscript{53} At this time funerals still retained a traditional tone and were treated as legitimate social events. The funeral was an opportunity to acknowledge the life of someone remembered and mark their death in relation to one's own life. The funeral home was utilized for preparation of the body. Full memorial services in church preceded the actual funeral, which involved a gathering of friends and relatives both in church and at the grave side ceremony. Today, much of the significance of the social statement is lost since the bodies are usually removed from the hospital and taken directly to the crematorium.

Assman's funeral home was a self-sufficient family business. Mr. Assman frequently made caskets (especially before World War II), and his wife Doris would sing hymns at funerals. Mr. Assman took care to assist the mourning family to choose not only caskets but grave sites as well. For the first twenty-five years of operation, the lack of good roads to outlying communities meant Assman was compelled to rely on the railways to extend service to areas such as Vanderhoof, Burns Lake, McBride and the north. He would load a casket and portable embalming equipment on the train, travel to the town in question, prepare the body and remain for the funeral, then return to Prince George. By the late 1940s it became more economical for Assman's to order coffins from the manufacturers rather than build their own. In 1952 a new Assman's Funeral Chapel opened at 5th Avenue and Brunswick Street. Besides all the features of

\textsuperscript{47} FGH, 27 June 1914, p. 1, “Man Found in Fraser.”
\textsuperscript{48} FGT, 28 March 1914, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, 20 June 1914, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{50} FGH, 12 December 1914, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{51} PGC, 30 April 1919, p. 2., and Corless interview.
\textsuperscript{52} Corless interview.
\textsuperscript{53} PGC, 19 December 1986, pp. 42-3, anniversary advertising feature.
the George St. parlour, the new building featured a chapel, carport and residential quarters. The opening of the more spacious facility included a new hearse which had been purchased in Edmonton. The addition of a chapel reflected a trend whereby funeral services were now often carried out away from the church, though still with the participation of the clergy.

Cremation was also becoming a preferred final option, although this choice only became available in Prince George in the late 1960s. Some of the reasons advanced for cremation include a relatively transient population, combined with a fairly recent mixture of ethnic and cultural origins which have not yet established any traditional funeral rituals. The elderly of the Prince George region frequently retire elsewhere. Perhaps the most overlooked factor in the choice of cremation is the influence of Carrier native traditions. Before conversion to Christianity in the 19th century, the Carrier always cremated their dead. Until 1968, bodies from Prince George were shipped by train to Kamloops or Vancouver for cremation. The remains were returned here for service and interment, an added expense for the bereaved. In that year Harold Assman built the Fraserview Crematorium on the grounds of the municipal cemetery, in response to the increasing number of requests for this service. With the exception of a crematorium in Terrace, Fraserview serves northern B.C. as well as the Yukon territory.

Harold Assman also served Prince George for many years as an alderman, but it was in his role as funeral director, with the attendant skill, caring and dignity he provided, that he was awarded a solid brass key to the city by mayor and council in 1980. He remains the only recipient of such an award in the city's history.

In the Prince George Municipal Cemetery single and family plots generally face east at an angle opposed to the straight lines and patterns established by the 1919 survey. The more organized modern layout appeals to the logical minds of the city's engineering department, who are presently responsible for cemetery maintenance. The deceased in the old burial ground section are interred facing east in accordance with an established Christian tradition which believes that resurrection will begin in Palestine, Christ's birthplace. Thus, in death, devout Christians wished to face the second coming of their Savior. Christian church construction itself was once oriented in this manner, with the altar at the church's east wall. In the past half century it has become customary to forego this practice, and no particular attention is paid any longer to the compass. In the modern surveyed sections of the cemetery, graves in fact face southeast, a compromise from the spiritual world to technological expediency. The present system is a more economic and efficient way of burying the dead, since more final resting places may be accommodated side by side, in even, regular rows. As the cemetery has had to expand over the years, those sections designated for burials have increased in size.

54 PGC, 19 December 1986, pp. 42-3, anniversary advertising feature.
55 Patty Dahl interview.
56 Runnalls, History of P.G., 6-7.
58 See Appendix II.
Accurate, detailed records are the foundation for any successful historical research. Unfortunately, the municipal cemetery records that survive in the Prince George City Archives are scanty, poorly kept, lacking in detail and often confusing. The archives contain four ledgers of records that pre-date the assumption of municipal maintenance in 1958. The most detailed of these, the Cemetery Register, is a massive tome the size of a small end table, with nineteen categories for entering information regarding each burial. They are: plot, lot, section, name of plot owner, name of deceased, sex, where born, where died, date of birth, date of burial, age, cause of death, name of doctor, religious denomination, marriage state, amount paid for lot, amount paid for digging, total paid, and remarks. It is frustrating to discover there are only thirteen complete entries in the book. The vast majority contain only name, date of burial and plot number. The different handwriting styles in these ledgers would indicate a succession of clerks who were probably too busy or too indifferent to note full details of an individual's death. Early ledger entries include brief notations, such as "infant", "gov't" (pauper), or "suicide". A few of the notes reveal startling human interest information, such as the postscript added to the burial date June 4, 1946, "suicide after stabbing to death Mrs. Waters Teacher at Ferndale." A crosschecking of local newspaper files of the day confirms the incident. Some notations reveal social prejudices of the time, such as two entries which do not provide names but merely read "Chinaman." Another listing identifies the deceased by name while also making reference to racial identity. The date of interment is not recorded for Walter Wyatt, but the label "colored" is appended.

Clearly, if cemetery research was dependent solely on the Prince George City Archives, there would exist huge gaps in our statistical and social knowledge, despite the value of those scant records. Fortunately, the Corless undertaking enterprise ensured that a stable funeral business would be in operation for more than a decade, providing records that impart interesting information about life as well as death in early Prince George. Richard Corless dabbled in more than one business venture, but his furniture craftsmanship resulted in a sideline preparing coffins for J. W. Sandiford. In 1918, the overwhelming numbers of deaths due to the influenza epidemic caused Sandiford to give up in despair. When Sandiford left town, he abandoned his embalming books and equipment, and the Corlesses were in business on their own. That first winter in the business would test their mettle. Jack Corless remembers his mother stating that at one point there were fourteen frozen corpses stacked, "like firewood," in the shed behind the funeral home.

Although not the only undertaker operating in Prince George at the time, Corless was the major business, and the records kept are the only detailed, consistent ones to survive. According to her son Jack, Mary Ellen Corless was a woman of character with a strong sense of

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60 City of Prince George Archives, Cemetery records.
61 Ibid, Ledger 2 1R, many references.
62 Ibid, Cemetery Register, 122, entry: Section Z, Block 8, plot 12, June 4, 1946, Joseph Polack.
63 PGC, 8 June 1944, pp. 1, 3.
65 Ibid, Cemetery Register, 88, entry: Sec. X, Blk. 5, lot 11.
66 J.D. Corless interview.
responsibility, and it seems likely that her sense of doing a job right ensured this legacy of meticulous records. The entries in the Corless ledger are handwritten and, for the most part, almost always complete. More importantly, the records are entirely legible, a reflection of penmanship as an integral aspect of the era's education. In addition, the legibility underscores the fact that since handwriting was the primary means of communication for small businesses, easy comprehension was a necessity. High education standards become apparent when one realizes that the ledger covers fifteen years and a few different recorders, yet the handwriting style remains constant and, to the layman, almost indistinguishable regarding identity. There are some partial entries that may indicate haste or indifference on the record keeper's part, such as during the flu epidemic, or regarding the deaths of Asians or Aboriginals. However, the speculative explanations for the partial entries or omissions are in themselves a telling comment on the social history of the time.

By examining historical community documents such as a funeral or cemetery ledger, we learn much about life in the early stages of Prince George’s formation and development. For example, the name of the deceased can provide information regarding ethnic origin or gender. Ages supply statistics for estimating population demographics, infant mortality rates, etc. To illustrate, the Corless funeral/cemetery ledger reveals a record of 162 deaths from 1916-1920: eighteen in 1916, nineteen in 1917, eighty in 1918, twenty-eight in 1919 and seventeen in 1920. The peak year, 1918, is obviously due to the flu pandemic, with over fifty of the deaths occurring in November and December. Of those 162 burials, 88 were males, 53 females, and 21 remain unidentified as to gender. Thirty-nine deaths were aged two years or less, an infant mortality rate of almost 25%, or twice the national average at this time. In contrast, only twelve deaths were registered for children aged 3-15, while young adults ranging from 16-35 years accounted for 64 deaths, or approximately 40%. The Corless establishment did not discriminate regarding race, since twenty-one deaths are identified as Indian and four as Chinese. The four Chinese deaths were all male, with three of the occupations listed as cook and one as railway worker, a reflection of historical immigration statistics regarding gender and labour.

"Occupied" is a somewhat confusing term that appears frequently in the old City Archives ledgers; that is, confusing until the realization that it refers to the discovery of an unknown grave in a newly-dug plot. The fact lends credence to the theory of burials taking place on the site prior to its semi-official status beginning in 1911, and also raises the possibility of unauthorized burials, perhaps by families who found the cost of a funeral prohibitive. The existence of unmarked graves leads to cryptic entries, such as "someone in this Mac says 16/5/44." "Mac" would likely be the same "J. C. Mck." who acknowledged testing other plots for "occupation" in the same year. In some cases the note "occupied" is followed by a page reference to the "Old Book," a volume which no longer seems to exist.

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67 See Appendix I.
69 P.G. Arch., Cemetery Reg., p. 49, entry: Sec. N, Blk. 4, lot 11.
The Prince George cemetery shares characteristics and trends common to burial sites everywhere, transcending both societies and generations. Information carved into headstones can sometimes provide more than the date of birth and death. Often included with the statistical data are personal references or quotes which remind the spectator that the deceased actually lived and left their mark, however humble, upon the world. Headstone inscriptions cause us to ponder and reflect upon our own end. Sometimes the words seemed designed to inspire emulation of the deceased's virtues, but more often than not they are simply Biblical references. The phrase "Someday We'll Understand," appears on the markers of both suicides and children.

Styles in headstones change like other fashions. In early years, it was customary to see vertical headstones as well as a concrete slab covering the site. Small fences or curbs were not uncommon, especially around family plots. Somewhat more elaborate headstones were popular in the 1920s, often featuring recessed carving or detail. In the 1930s the block stone became popular, a piece of granite with the top cut at an angle to receive chiseled lettering. Plaques level with the ground were present during these decades, likely for those who could not afford granite or marble stones, which had to be freighted in to the city. By the late 1940s and early 1950s these plaques became common for all, reflecting a general lack of funeral ceremony in society. The denial of death prevalent in our culture at this time suggests that those who passed on should remain unseen as well as unheard. Horizontal plaques facilitated maintenance of the cemetery grounds. The city was quick to take advantage of society's mood and passed a by-law forbidding vertical monuments: "The only installations of any kind that shall be permitted on any grave in the 'New Section' shall be flat headstones, 12 inches by 20 inches set flush with the ground."71 However, times change and in 1985 a new by-law designated a special section for vertical headstones, but the prohibition against mausoleums, vaults, and interment above ground remains in effect.72 Special distinctive characters carved on headstones are helpful clues in historical research. Symbols can inform us the deceased was a member of a particular social organization (Masons, Oddfellows); religion (Christian cross, Celtic cross, rosary, star of David); or if they were veterans of the armed forces (maple leaf).73 Artwork sculpture is common on older headstones (circa 1920s), especially on children's graves where a lamb is usually carved to represent purity and innocence.

Monuments were at one time the bread and butter work of artists. The pyramids come to mind, as well as the Taj Mahal and Michelangelo's La Piata in the Vatican. As artistic sensitivity moved into impressionism and abstraction, funeral commissions were left to commercial artists who established pragmatic patterns that were repeated again and again. Plainness and simplicity replaced elaborate artistic expression. Cemeteries reflect the fact that society's attitude towards death has changed from a ritual event marked with custom and beauty to one often ignored, as if insignificant. Cultures and societies at times experience cycles that occasionally deny death.

71 City of Prince George By-law No. 732, December 21, 1953, paragraph 21.
72 Ibid, By-law No. 4079, regulation 5.4.14
73 British Columbia Genealogical Society, Cemetery Recording Instruction Booklet, Richmond, B.C. Research Committee, 1980.
The early years of the Prince George cemetery found the living's strictures and prejudices reflected in the village of the dead. Section "P" was set aside for Chinese burials, away from the cemetery entrance and below the reserved sections then in use. Beyond the Chinese, a narrow strip of land (section "X") was allotted for those without family to pay for their funeral, or who were simply too poor. While the city maintains the cemetery, it is usually left up to families to care for individual plots. Many older headstones have badly deteriorated, broken apart, or sunk into the ground. Some of these monument's faces have been damaged by pollution and the natural aging that weather inflicts. These factors have resulted in once beautiful headstones crumbling, with their inscriptions fading. In addition, the concrete slabs covering many of the old graves have tilted or are sinking into the ground. Borders and curbs are overgrown with grass and weeds, sometimes making discernment of the actual grave difficult.

The Prince George cemetery not only reflects changing styles and social prejudices over the years, it is in fact the community in microcosm. Like the city, there are streets, sidewalks, and symbolic private property, since each plot in effect belongs to the person buried therein. Old family plots with only one burial within their reserves echo the transient nature of Prince George's population. Segregation according to race and social rank is common before W.W.II. At one time there were separate sections for Protestants and Catholics, but religious distinction becomes blurred in the cemetery as it does among the living in the city, and denomination is no longer a factor in determining where one is laid to rest. The entire cemetery is considered consecrated ground, as opposed to particular sections. Burials of those who served in the military were also previously assigned their own preserve. The only positive aspect of segregation within the cemetery is that it makes it easier for social historians to conduct research. As for the bitter town site rivalry that in past years demanded distinct, separate quarters in the same graveyard, the 1918-19 flu pandemic effectively obliterated those differences, at least after death. There were simply too many bodies for the overworked undertakers to care who lay beside whom.

The Prince George cemetery, situated on its bluff overlooking the Fraser River, is a peaceful but persistent reminder of the past and an indicator of the future. The cemetery is a statement that history is not for the dead, but a legacy for the living. Even in this brief study one is interested by trends, surprised by facts, amused by anecdotes and finally, impressed by the influence of social mores and conventions on a community's history. The cemetery's place in our society reminds us that the social fact of death is not merely a personal history, it is an extension and reflection of the community itself, an undeniable physical representation of our geographical and historical landscape.
Appendix I

The first page in the Corless funeral ledger. The third entry lists residence and place of death as Prince George, with burial in Fort George. The second entry lists residence and burial as Fort George, suggesting townsite designations within the cemetery. Source: British Columbia Provincial Archives.
Appendix II

Enlarged view of the Prince George Cemetery—"Old Burial Ground"—showing early patterns of interment with graves facing east.

Source: Engineering Department, City of Prince George.