

The Voice of Vale Cemetery

Established 1857

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Fall 2025

Schenectady, N.Y.

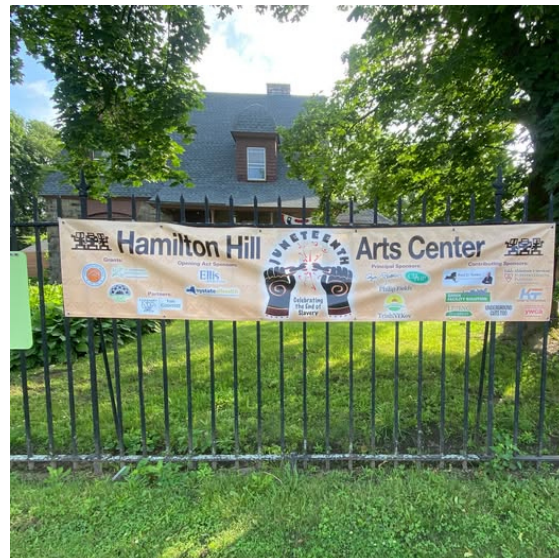
Vale Cemetery 2025 Tours and Events Recap **by Paul Contarino:**

Vale Cemetery hosted another successful year of tours and thanks all those who conducted them from May to October. It commenced with Sue McLane's Victorian Lady in Mourning followed by Betsy Henry's Nature Walk through Vale Park, Scott Haefner's Rural Cemetery Movement, George Steele's Birding at Vale, Mike Diana's Schenectady and the American Revolution, Chris Hunter's Giants of Industry, Jeff Austin's Schenectady and the Civil War, Sue McLane's Notable Women and Paula Lemire's Of the 1857 Vale Map. Meanwhile, this year's Juneteenth commemoration paid a special tribute to the late Walter Simpkins with the assistance of the Hamilton Hill Arts Center and Community Fathers. The ice cream social continues serving as a focal point as well. The cemetery truly appreciates all efforts to promote its history and natural beauty.

Vale participated in several events aimed at sprucing up the cemetery's grounds as well as in and around Vale Park. These included Caring for Your Cemetery Day sponsored by the New York State Division of Cemeteries (5/11), KeyBank Neighbors Make the Difference Day (6/4) and a Union College workday (9/28) for trash, branch and leaf clean-up. Melody Howarth held her gravestone cleaning and repairing classes (5/3 and 10/4) while Paula Lemire conducted a class of cleaning several headstones in the First Reformed Church plot (6/22.) Everything is beginning to transform but more work needs to be done. Next year, we hope to get some of the tipped stones placed upright again along with graffiti removal and the repair of damaged monuments and vaults.



KeyBank-Neighbors Make A Difference Day-Christopher, Frederick, Karen, and Nancy-cleaning of Section B



Annual Juneteenth banner provided by the Hamilton Hill Arts Center listing sponsors

A letter from the President: **Preserving Our Past, Enriching Our Future**

As president of the Vale Cemetery Association here in Schenectady, I am often reminded that cemeteries are more than resting places—they're reflections of our community's story. Each headstone marks a life lived, a family remembered, and a chapter in our shared heritage.

This year, we've been working with Vale Cemetery Preservation Inc. to enhance both preservation and public engagement. From restoring aging and damaged monuments to hosting walking tours that highlight notable figures and forgotten tales, our goal is to make history accessible and meaningful.

We're also exploring new ways to involve residents and visitors to Schenectady in educational programming that brings these stories to life. I invite you to visit, volunteer, or simply take a quiet stroll through the grounds. You'll find beauty, peace, and a deeper connection to Schenectady's roots.

Together, we can ensure that this sacred space continues to honor the past while inspiring future generations.

Thomas Ciantetta
President, Vale Cemetery Association

Vale Cemetery's Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) Plot - A Brief Overview and Future Rehabilitation Plans

by Jeff Austin:

Historic Vale Cemetery is home to hundreds of war veterans. They can be seen everywhere, uniting the cemetery with their sacrifice. Many are buried with their wives and family, often with private headstones denoting their time in the military.

Other veterans are buried together in specific areas dedicated to their service. The American Legion Plot near the main entrance is one example. Another is Soldiers Plot, located in the northwestern part of the main cemetery in Section N.

Also known as the G.A.R. Plot (Grand Army of the Republic), it is a dedicated area on a slight rise, replete with towering flagpole. Most of these men died after completing their military service. Many were from the 134th and 30th Regiments, indicating they enlisted in the Schenectady area. This plot also offered final rest to soldiers who had moved to Schenectady after the war. Their stones are as varied as their service to our country. Their lives are worth remembering.



Photo of Norman Cook taken by Jeff Austin

Captain George Grecheneck, born in Hungary, served with the 72nd NY Infantry, Third Regiment, Excelsior Brigade. He died in May 1862 from wounds received in battle at Williamsburg, Virginia.

Private Franz Amend enlisted in NYC as a member of Morgan's Rifles in October 1861. He was released in May 1862 on a disability discharge, only to die five months later of consumption (tuberculosis). Roughly two-thirds of all Civil War soldiers' deaths were due to disease.

Private Isaac Bauder, born **Isaac Bander**, enlisted in 1861 in Canajoharie, reenlisting as a veteran wagoner. He was carried on their roster as **Isaac Border**. Misspelled

names were common errors at the time, making research more difficult. He died in 1910.

Corporal Norman Cook was an NCO in the 115th New York Infantry, "The Iron-Hearted Regiment". He was taken prisoner and paroled two weeks later in September 1862. In February 1864, he was wounded in action in Olustee, Florida before mustering out with his unit in June 1865. He died in 1910.

There are between 20 to 29 Civil War veterans buried here. Unfortunately, it is hard to be certain. As the years have passed, the G.A.R. Plot has fallen into disrepair, making it difficult to determine everyone's names and locations. Some headstones have fallen over; others are missing entirely.

Enter the **Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War**. One way this organization shows their commitment to the memory of our Union Army War Veterans is through maintaining the monuments and gravesites of our honored dead. Department of NY Commander Richard Straight confirmed that time and money have been approved for repairs to the Plot. These include a solar light for the flag atop the center flagpole. By law, US flags must be illuminated at night.

The Union College ROTC has also pledged their time to help realign, repair and replace these headstones. Work is scheduled to begin in the Spring. Anyone interested in preserving Vale's historical treasures is encouraged to call the Main Office.

The Woman In The Iron Coffin

by Paula Lemire:

The coffin arrived at our crematory on October 27, the antique rusted iron contrasting with the sleek gray modern hearse that delivered it.

The cast iron coffin - containing the remains of a woman - had been discovered during excavation work on Westover Place.

Westover Place had previously been known as Cemetery Street as there were burials grounds there in the early to mid-19th-century. One was the almshouse cemetery, the other two were associated with the city's Baptist and Catholic congregations.

The coffin is a Fisk Patented Metallic Burial Case. These cast iron coffins were designed and patented by a stove designer, Almond D. Fisk, after his brother died of a contagious illness and his remains had to be transported home from Mississippi to New York for burial. Production began in 1848. Fisk died shortly after his patented coffins began production, but the coffins were produced until 1888.

The iron coffins were virtually airtight and thus practical for transporting bodies that were not embalmed (embalming did not become common in the United States until the Civil War made it necessary as families brought their fallen sons home from the battlefields and

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Army hospital cemeteries). They also proved popular for bodies being transported home from the West during the Gold Rush and its aftermath.

The tightly sealed cases were also recommended in cases of contagious diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera, but became fashionable for the middle and upper classes when high-profile individuals such as Dolley Madison and Daniel Webster were laid to rest in them. Iron coffins were considerably more expensive than wooden ones; the latter could be as inexpensive as \$2 and the former could cost over \$100 in the mid-19th century.

Fisk coffins are very distinctive; they feature sculpted drapery over crossed arms, an inset area for a name plate, and a glass window with a sliding iron cover over the face to allow families a final look at their departed loved ones.

The Westover Place coffin was brought to Vale for interment. Prior to the burial, I had a chance to view the coffin along with representatives of the Schenectady County Coroner's office, the NYS Museum, Schenectady County Historical Society, and the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation.

The coffin contains the body of a woman; this was determined from fragments of clothing visible through the damaged portions of the case; a dark-colored sleeve with a white ruffle at the wrist and the hem of a dress with a ribbon-like leather trim.

The coffin itself was heavily rusted. The bottom portion was broken exposing the feet and there was a hole in the mid-section. The sliding cover over the face was sealed by corrosion, but decorative elements were visible; a flower surrounded by a wreath of laurels. This design indicated that the coffin was an early model. The name plate, unfortunately, did not survive.

Garnet-like droplets of oxidized iron were visible along the edges of the damaged areas and a crystalline white fungus had begun to form due to exposure to air. There was also a distinctive odor of rust, mold, and earth.



Photo of coffin taken by Paula Lemire

We will likely never know the identity of this woman. Was she laid to rest in this special coffin because she came from a family of some affluence or did her cause of death necessitate being sealed away or perhaps both? The area of Hamilton Hill where she was originally buried was home to a mix of residents including African-Americans, immigrants from Europe, and residents of the Almshouse.

We were allowed to photograph the coffin provided that no images showing the exposed portions of the remains are shared publicly. Following the viewing at the crematory, the remains were transported out to the Cemetery grounds for burial by members of our grounds crew.

The Grave Stone Cleaning Classes offered by Melody Howarth:

A grave stone cleaning class is offered in partnership with SUNY Schenectady's Community Archaeology Program as an elective within their two-year certificate. It runs as a one-day seminar in both April and October. The next one is scheduled for April 11th, 2026 from 10:00am-2:30pm through the college.

The course covers gentle cleaning methods specifically designed to protect historically significant stones, such as marble, limestone, shale, and sandstone—many of which can be found at the Vale Cemetery. We also address cleaning granite, a denser material commonly used today, using a similar process.

By the end of the seminar, students gain the skills needed to safely clean family gravestones or participate in preservation projects, without causing further harm to compromised stones.

To register, please keep an eye on the Workforce Development section of the SUNY Schenectady website or call 518-595-1101. Melody's contact info is below for any further questions.

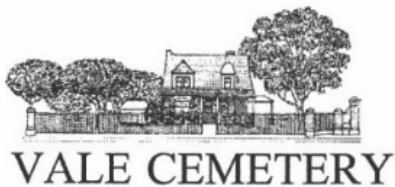
MB Restorations LLC
Gravestone Care and Repair
Phone: 518-441-4068
Email: melzbellesrestorations@gmail.com

Final Notes:

Vale would like to also thank those who have gone through the cemetery to pick-up trash as well as report any incidents to the staff. Your efforts do not go unnoticed and contributes to the idea of Vale Cemetery being a safe place to walk through and visit the graves of loved ones.



Scan the QR code for our website
and social media



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Please contact Vale Cemetery by phone or email for the following:

- To receive your newsletter via e-mail (Vale continues its efforts to go green)
- Had a change of address or e-mail?
- Know someone who would like to receive the newsletter?
- Unsubscribe to the newsletter
- Volunteer opportunities
- Have an idea for a tour or event? (there is a tours/events committee that meets)
- Would like to advertise your business in our newsletter

