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Family's search for Civil War vet's burial site leads to an unmarked grave in Delta Township



Rachel Greco

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DELTA TWP. — Civil War veteran Peleg Sweet was 48 when his body gave in to dysentery, the illness he contracted while serving with the 5th Michigan Infantry Regiment.

After returning to Clinton County's Riley Township in 1863 from his service with the Union Army, Sweet died in September 1865, and was laid to rest next to his daughter Lecta, 7, who'd been buried at Hillside Cemetery a year earlier.

In the century and a half that followed, Sweet's burial site was lost.

Grass grew atop his unmarked grave. The township made no record of his burial — and 156 years passed.

Last year, Sweet's relatives, some of whom had been searching for him for more than three decades, finally found his resting place.

This month, a VA-provided marker, available upon request for any unmarked veteran's grave regardless of their date of death, will be placed on Sweet's plot. And with the placement, his descendants will give Sweet something he never received when he died, recognition.

For Leslie Murray of Delta Township, her son Jayden, 14, daughter Camryn, 12, and nephew Landon Myers of Grand Ledge, and Janet Sweet-Sears, Murray's great aunt, finding Sweet's grave solves a piece of their family's puzzle and a closes a long-running mystery.

Her fourth great-grandfather's sacrifice will be remembered from here on out, Murray said.

"This is going to be the first time in say, 156½ years that he is going to be acknowledged for Memorial Day," she said. "It's really exciting."

Collecting details from over a century ago

Before Myers, 24, ever heard about Sweet, a fascination with his family's history kicked off his efforts to research his lineage in 2019.

In the last three years, he's visited an estimated 100 cemeteries in search of long-lost relatives, teaming up with Murray in 2020.

She began researching the family tree with her children after her son Jayden asked a few simple questions she couldn't adequately answer.

"Where did our name come from?" he asked. "Where are we from?"

Murray took over an account at Ancestry.com, a genealogy website, that her mother had opened and they started researching both sides of her family tree.

Myers and Murray discovered Sweet about a year and a half ago.

The paperwork Janet Sweet-Sears gave them, including a copy of his military disability discharge paperwork and his pension liability documents, along with their own research, offered some details about Sweet's life.

"We have a description on his disability paper that says he was 6 feet tall, he had a dark complexion, blue eyes and dark hair," Murray said.

Sweet was born in New York and moved to Michigan sometime before 1845. Then he married, she said. He enlisted in the military in 1861 and was discharged in 1863.

They found out Sweet was a father of seven, a farmer before he served in the Civil War and one of 188 men in the Michigan 5th Infantry, Company D, who passed away from some kind of infection or disease contracted during the war.

But not even Janet Sweet-Sears, who'd started researching Sweet in the 1980s, knew exactly where he'd been buried until last fall.

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Sweet-Sears has been convinced for decades that Sweet was buried at Hillside Cemetery off Delta River Drive.

"She has always said that he was buried out at Hillside and I would tell her, 'No, he's not. They don't have any burial information for him,'" Murray said.

"He's out there," Sweet-Sears would tell her. "I know, he's out there."

But Murray had called township staff, who found no burial records for Sweet. Then Sweet-Sears handed her a copy of ownership documents. They showed Sweet had purchased four plots in the cemetery.

"That was the piece of paper I needed," Murray said.

Once township staff identified the plots Sweet owned, then the ground was probed to confirm Sweet's grave there, said Delta Township Clerk Mary Clark.

There also is no marker for the daughter buried in the plot. The other two plots are empty. Myers and Murray are still researching what happened to the rest of the family.

Myers, Murray and other relatives have been out to the plots Sweet owned several times.

"It's something we put a lot of time into and do care about a lot, but also...he's been in an unmarked grave for 150 some odd years and we're able to actually get a stone there," he said. "People can see that and recognize that he was there."

It was an unusual discovery, Clark said, but it was an exciting opportunity to help locate Sweet's burial site after more than a century and a half.

"The family's just been great to work with and they're so excited about it," Clark said. "This is a pretty cool thing."

In November, township officials helped Murray and Myers submit an application for a Civil War marker to the federal government. They hope to install Sweet's marker sometime this month, Clark said.

Many of Sweet's relatives will be there when it is.

"This was something that we could show," Myers said. "To be able to identify these people and sort of bring them with us to the future, I think is important."

Contact Rachel Greco at rgreco@lsj.com. Follow her on Twitter @GrecoatLSJ.