

Grave of 'a true American hero' discovered here

Shepherd was one of North Royalton's founding fathers

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For more than 160 years now, one of North Royalton's best-kept secrets has been buried along the western edge of Municipal Cemetery.

His name is John Shepherd and when he died in 1847, he was 117 years old.

Given the time in history in which he lived, Shepherd's long life is nothing short of remarkable. Still, his true claim to fame is not his age, but his life story — one that not only centers around the birth of the United States, but the advent of Royalton Township, now known as North Royalton.

Except for the modest stone that marks his grave, which happens to be off by one year given a calendar change that took place during Shepherd's lifetime, little information was known about the old soldier buried in the plot until earlier this year. That's when Charles Phebus, a genealogist and descendant of Shepherd, unearthed his fourth great-grandfather's story.

"It continues to amaze me that most people living in North Royalton even had a clue that this man, this true American hero, is buried there," Phebus, who lives in Texas, said. "By many accounts, he is one of the most historic participants in the American Revolution and an individual with a history like his is something few towns can duplicate."

Born in Pennsylvania in 1729, Shepherd served under George Washington during both the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. He was one of a handful of soldiers who lived to tell the tale of Braddock's defeat during the Battle of Monongahela, near Pittsburgh, in 1755. There, the army was defeated by French and Indian forces, and Washington led the few remaining soldiers, including Shepherd, who was 26 at the time, back to Virginia.

Nearly 20 years later, when Shepherd was nearly 50, which was considered elderly by conventional standards at the time, national records indicate he again took up arms as part of the American Revolution. Again, he fought under Washington and was by his side at the battles of Brandywine, Germantown, White Marsh and Monmouth. He also is said to have suffered with the general at Valley Forge during the frigid winter of 1777.

Shepherd, who was widowed and had a young daughter at the beginning of the Revolution, was ultimately discharged from the army in 1781 after he was wounded in battle. He remarried a woman named Elizabeth Gould in the 1780s and, together, the couple had nine more children.

The Shepherds moved from Pennsylvania to Ontario County, New York in 1805. In 1816, again a widower, he moved to Royalton, Ohio with his daughter, Margaret



Shepherd's headstone shows the wrong age and spells his name differently, but Phebus said the stone is incorrect and will likely be replaced as part of the ceremony in June.

Engle, and her family. According to early records, Phebus says, Shepherd drove the first team of oxen into Royalton and he and the Engles were among the first settlers in town.

But the history lesson doesn't stop there. In addition to being a part of the birth of a nation, Shepherd was also an eyewitness to the city's birth, says Mayor Robert Stefanik.

"On Nov. 9, 1818, the 88-year-old veteran sat in the home of his daughter and son-in-law, Robert Engle, with whom he lived, and likely witnessed the first election of town offices in North Royalton," Phebus said. "And he lived to see the town prosper."

Shepherd spent the last years of his life as a resident of Royalton Township, where his earthly remains were buried right in the heart of town.

Because of the role he played in history, both nationally and locally, Phebus has been working with city officials, the North Royalton Historical Society and the Western Reserve Historical Society to organize an official John Shepherd commemoration ceremony to take place here next summer.

The event, which is tentatively sched-

uled for June 26-27, is expected to feature a proper burial ceremony and American Revolution battle re-enactments at Memorial Park. Also in consideration as part of the event, which is being organized by Phebus, are an ox roast, parade, costume ball and shooting contest and more.

More details, including times and places, will be announced as plans finalize, Phebus says.

"My thought is that this could eventually come to be an annual event," Phebus says, adding that history buffs regionally as well as nationally would be drawn to the event. "Something like this would definitely put North Royalton on the map."

And rightly so, say historical and genealogical societies nationwide.

According to Edward Jay Pershey, vice president of special projects and exhibits for the Western Reserve Historical Society, the organization's mission is to preserve and interpret the history of Northeast Ohio, to which Shepherd played a critical role.

"A section in the northeast corner of what in 1803 became the state of Ohio was so reserved. Connecticut promptly sold the land to a private group of investors, The Connecticut Land Company, that surveyed

and sold the land in parcels via a lottery system," Pershey said, noting this is the likely reason Shepherd and his family relocated. "The first residents of this part of Ohio were, therefore, largely from Connecticut including war veterans."

Already supported by a number of patriotic societies, historic sites, and organizations such as The Society of The Cincinnati, The Society of Colonial Wars, The National Society of The Colonial Dames of America and various 18th-century re-enactment groups from Virginia to Ohio, Pershey says the event also has the support of the Western Reserve Historical Society.

Similarly, James Bartlinski, director of Carlyle House Historic Park in Alexandria, Va., says he, too, supports the festivities.

"John Shepherd's life story compels me, not only as the Director of Carlyle House but as an historian and an American, to support the June 2010 programs honoring this remarkable man," Bartlinski said. "Shepherd was not only a witness, but a participant in two defining events in American history — the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. Through his long service, sense of duty and patriotism, he left behind a legacy that merits remembrance. By honoring Shepherd we also honor those countless unknown patriots who pledged their lives, fortunes and honor for liberty."

Bartlinski says the commemorative programs planned for June 2010 to honor Shepherd's service to the cause of American Independence will put into action key initiatives to educate the public about the French and Indian War and the American Revolution.

"An additional motivation for supporting the planned activities in North Royalton is that they will have a positive impact on the town's economy by attracting new tourist dollars to the community, as well as making the public aware that North Royalton is home to one of the most historic graves in America," he said.

Tom Jordan, the city's community development director, said the city is in the process of having Shepherd's gravesite designated as an historic site by the state of Ohio. He said the city has already submitted the application and is awaiting a response.

If and when the approval comes through, Jordan says the gravesite will be designated with a historic marker honoring Shepherd's military service. He said the site was marked with a brass star honoring his years of service at one time, but over the years, the star was either destroyed or stolen.

"The city's longtime cemetery workers say that the stars used to be placed near the graves of all veterans, but slowly, they've been disappearing over time," he said.

Because of this soldier's historical significance, Phebus says he's looking to construct a more permanent tribute to Shepherd as part of the commemoration.

"This man and his earthly remains have gone largely unnoticed by everyone for far too long," Phebus said. "It's time that changes."