

From the historian's desk

## More grave moments: Finding history on cemetery markers

By Alice Begley

Sixteen years ago, this historian wrote an article for *The Altamont Enterprise* (Aug. 8, 1996) about three wandering gravestones that had been discovered on acreage off State Farm Road (Route 155) up a steep winding driveway. We decided to revisit those century-old stones that have been stored in the Town of Guilderland Water-Treatment Plant, and tell new residents their story.

The earlier newspaper story starts like this:

"An interesting piece of Guilderland history was 'unearthed' in 1973. On the south side of the Western Turnpike near the Prospect Hill Cemetery 'modern progress' was taking place as bulldozers pushed their way up to a small green and white cottage. The domicile listed on the 1866 Beers map was to be razed to make way for a new shopping center and condominiums. The unidentified house had been vacant for 10 years.

"Members of the newly organized Guilderland Historical Society, at that time, sought to investigate a rumor circulating that the cellar floor of the house was paved with gravestones. The rumor proved to be true. Lying face down and butted together, the stones were talismans from the old McKown family burial plot near Fuller Road and Western Avenue where William "Billy" McKown ran his famous tavern in the early 1800s.

"The first stone overturned on the small cellar floor was that

of William McKown who died in 1843 at the age of 80 years; McKown had been the supervisor of Guilderland from 1813 until 1824.

"An astute businessman, 'Billy' McKown from Londonderry, Ireland erected his tavern where he learned that the Great Western Turnpike was to be built. Rabid wolves roamed the new thoroughfare as farmers driving their herds of cattle to market in Albany, stage coaches, western-bound pioneer families, and a few wandering Indians would stop at McKown's Tavern to enjoy Billy's unique hospitality.

"Also in the house to be demolished were headstones for other members of the McKown family and one for Peter Hilton, father of Henry Hilton, another town supervisor.

"The age of all the stones ranged from 1786 to 1853. How the gravestones arrived in the house to be demolished is pure supposition.

"When Esso Oil Company bought the Fuller Road and Western Avenue property in 1920, the remains of the McKown family buried in the family plot on that location were moved to Prospect Hill Cemetery; the gravestones did not follow.

"Although a new gravestone was placed in Prospect Hill Cemetery reading, 'In memory of the memory of the McKown family removed from the family burial grounds,' the original Billy McKown gravestone roamed the hills and dales of Guilderland for another several decades."

Later, this historian received a phone call from the people who had purchased the State Farm Road property. They said that several broken gravestones were found on their land, and they were concerned that they were missing from a cemetery.

Artistically engraved with weeping willows, the William McKown stone reads:

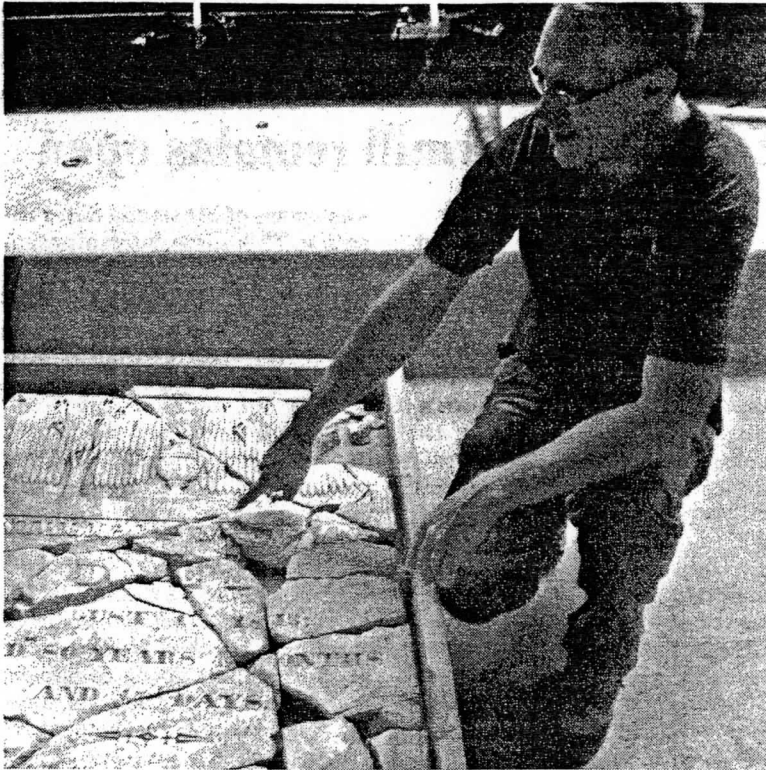
William McKown  
died August 1, 1843  
age 80 years,  
4 months  
15 days

At length it's finished.  
Yes, the conflicts o'er,  
And pain and sorrow  
shall molest no more.

Oh, blissful state  
when joys that never end  
reward this father,  
dearest friend:  
Self love be silent,  
dare not to complain  
Compare your loss  
with his eternal gain.

The 169-year-old broken talisman still marks the life of one of Guilderland's historic leaders. Guilderland student classes and others have visited the place where the stones have been kept respectfully by Ted Ausfeld, Peter Letko, and Dean Sims.

*Historian's note: Additional historic information on William McKown and Henry Hilton may be researched at the Guilderland Public Library.*



The Enterprise — Michael Koff

*Dean Sims, water operator at Guilderland's water treatment plant, points out the McKown name on the cemetery stone he and Peter Letko rescued. The stones are now respectfully preserved at the treatment plant.*

The McKown family burials were moved in 1865, shown by the Prospect Hill register. The property of the McKown Hotel was not sold to Esso or anyone else in 1920; it remained property of the Witbecks until 1954, when the part where the Hotel had been was sold and became King's Shell gas station