

Year of the Veteran

When following a 'trail of breadcrumbs' leads to interesting stories of service

by Bill Jeffway

Editor's note: This is part of a year-long series of articles by town, village and city historians about the World War 1 era as Dutchess County recognizes "The Year of the Veteran" with the Dutchess County Historical Society. If you have information relating to the time around WWI in Dutchess County, call (845) 471-1630 or visit dchsn.org.

To many local historians like myself, there is great joy in following the "trail of breadcrumbs" (hints and clues) that might have been left intentionally or unintentionally by prior historians, or inadvertently or incidentally as individuals led their lives in the past. With so much now easily discoverable online, the breadcrumbs can lead to a clear picture of an individual from the distant past.

This past weekend there was a culmination of two such personal pursuits which I had started 15-years ago. It was appropriate that it was Veterans Day weekend, because my discoveries eventually related to persons who served our country, albeit in different ways and different centuries. One man found his name added to the Town of Milan's Honor Roll; the other individual, a woman, earned a memorial headstone at what had been her unmarked grave. Let's start with her story first.

The 'discovery' of Susan Elizabeth Frazier (1864—1924).

What was generally known about Andrew Frazier (1742—1846) in local history books was that he was a person of color who served in the Revolutionary War, in close service to Graham family siblings who had inherited land in what is now Pine Plains. He settled in what is today Milan around 1810. He earned an 1833 veterans' pension and became a large landowner with his children in Milan.

His remains, his remarkable 1846 headstone, and those of other family members were removed from the burial plot on their farmland on Milan's Willow Glen Road to the Rhinebeck Cemetery, c. 1921, when the farm was sold outside the family.

With 11 children, some of whom had

many children themselves, we knew less about subsequent generations. Almost entirely through the use of online research tools, I discovered Andrew Frazier's great-granddaughter, an unmarried woman named Susan Elizabeth Frazier, became an extraordinary individual of national reputation. Born and raised in New York City, she chose to be buried with family members across four generations in Rhinebeck.

According to newspaper accounts at the time, she was given full military honors at her funeral held at the 369th Regimental Armory in Harlem in 1924. Miss Frazier's coffin was draped with the American Flag, taps were played, and commanding officers delivered powerful eulogies.

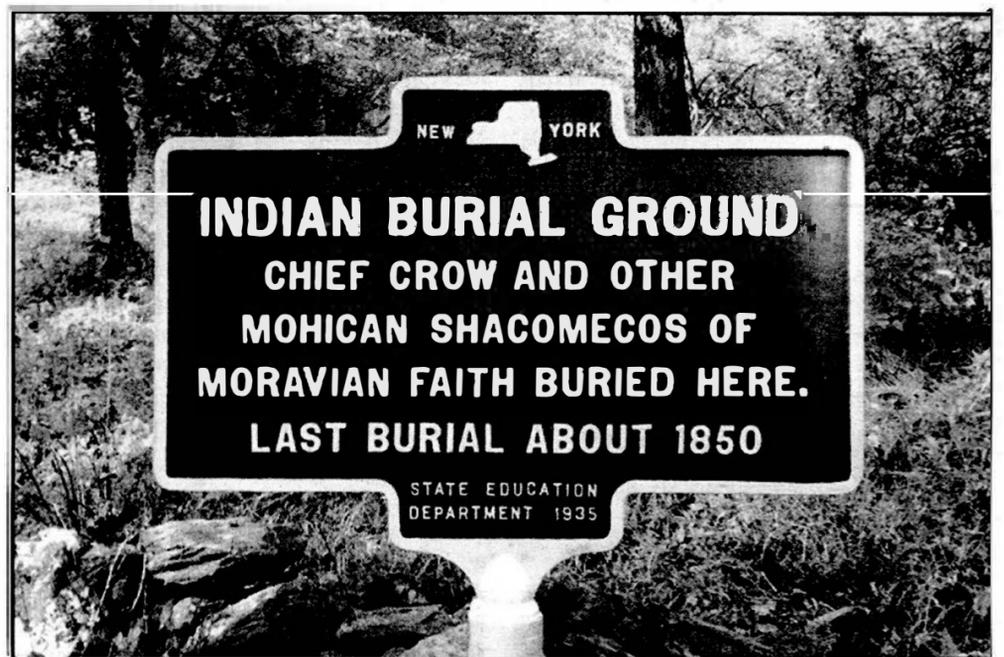
She earned those honors because she was the early organizer and President of the Women's Auxiliary to the so-called Harlem Hellfighters, the highly decorated African American combat group, the 369th Infantry.

It was in this role, in the spring of 1919, that Miss Frazier presided over an event of 1,200 people at the Lenox Casino in Harlem. A letter addressed to her personally from former President Theodore Roosevelt was read aloud, after which she accepted the former President's gift of a large silk, American flag.

She had been a New York City public school teacher all her professional life (more on this in a moment). In the fall of 1919, she was voted "favorite teacher" in a contest run by the "Evening Telegram," the prize being a trip to the battlefields of Belgium and France.

The headlines upon her death, however, led with none of the above. The headlines noted that she had become known nationally by becoming the first person of color allowed to teach white students in New York City in 1896. She did so not easily, but through a court case that she lost, but that publicly shamed the city into appointing her. So, the prize of "favorite teacher" and tour of battlefields was a wonderful testimonial to her professional and volunteer efforts.

On this past Saturday November 10 at 11 a.m., a small group of people assembled at



A 1935 historic roadside marker refers to the burial of an Indian Chief that is either fiction or folklore. This African American burial ground was used between the 1840s and at least 1927, and is the resting place of Jacob Lyle and his wife, who initially owned the land. Photo courtesy of the Dutchess County Historical Society

the Rhinebeck Cemetery to celebrate the installation of a memorial headstone at what had been the unmarked grave of Susan Elizabeth Frazier, just behind that of her parents, grand-parents and great-grandfather.

Now two great patriots have permanent memorials.

The "discovery" of Jacob Lyle (1762—c. 1844).

In 2003, former Milan Town Historian Barbara Thompson republished articles she had written in the 1970s in a book called, "Out to Milan." That's how I came to read her suggestion that the burial ground on Milan's Turkey Hill was more likely an African American burial ground than the burial ground of Native American "Chief Crow," as was stated by the classic, 1935 NY State blue and yellow historic marker placed there.

She argued that the first burial was likely Jacob Lyle, a person of color and the initial landowner of this 1-acre lot. She suggested he was buried on his home lot, just as Andrew Frazier initially was, a common practice especially before New York's 1847 Rural Cemetery Act.

We have since found that Lyle served in the Revolutionary War out of his hometown and home state of New Jersey. He and his wife Betsy moved to what is now Milan by 1811, around the same time as Andrew Frazier. After the burial of Jacob and his wife Betsy in the 1840s, this sliver of land would accommodate the burial of at least a

dozen African Americans (likely more), until at least 1927, with the burial of Lemuel Jackson. Jackson's obituary explicitly references burial in the "private cemetery for colored people at Turkey Hill."

When veterans and residents gathered this past Monday, Nov. 12 at Milan Town Hall, they gathered near the town's recently updated Honor Roll. One of the many additions to the Honor Roll was the name of Jacob Lyle, an effort to bring appropriate recognition to his service.

In summary, while it may be reasonable to wonder if there is any more history to "discover," I can assure you there is. Perhaps less so among the names of Henry Hudson, the Livingstons or Roosevelts, there is plenty of room for discovery among the many everyday, local individuals who lived extraordinary lives. And a chance to memorialize their lives and actions to be more accessible to future generations.

Bill Jeffway is the Executive Director of the Dutchess County Historical Society, Milan Town Board liaison to the Milan Bicentennial Committee, a trustee of Historic Red Hook, and a researcher and speaker on topics of local history through a consultancy called, "History Speaks." More information about Miss Frazier at www.historyspeaks.us/sefrazier



The new Susan Elizabeth Frazier memorial is near that of her great-grandfather (right) who served in the Revolutionary War. Photo courtesy of the Dutchess County Historical Society