

# The Novato Historian

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Novato Historical Guild and the Novato History Museum  
*Preserving Novato's History*

## Feature Section

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## Novato's Pioneer Memorial Cemetery From Neglect to Restoration, 1861–1976

By Margaret A. Coady

“In a way Novato died in the 1930’s — what with the depression and agriculture going badly—this cemetery reflects that death.”—a 1968 description of Novato’s Pioneer Memorial Cemetery.

Weeds, poison oak, and litter had taken over what, for many years, had been a peaceful and pleasant place.

Vandalism, deterioration and neglect began their relentless match in the early 1950’s.

There were those who tried to get someone interested in saving the cemetery. But, it was Alton Lerch, Novato historian in the 1950’s and Chamber of Commerce president in 1958, who first called it Pioneer Memorial Cemetery. His idea was that a restored cemetery could be used by school children to help them learn of Novato’s history. Today, almost 20 years later, Lerch’s idea and dream has come true. Adults, youth groups as well as students are constant visitors.

The cemetery had its beginning almost 115 years ago. On November 6, 1861, Mrs. Charlotte C. Haven, was laid

to rest at the crest of the cemetery knoll. Hers was the first known burial. Her memorial was also the first of two spires that dominate the top of the gently sloping knoll.

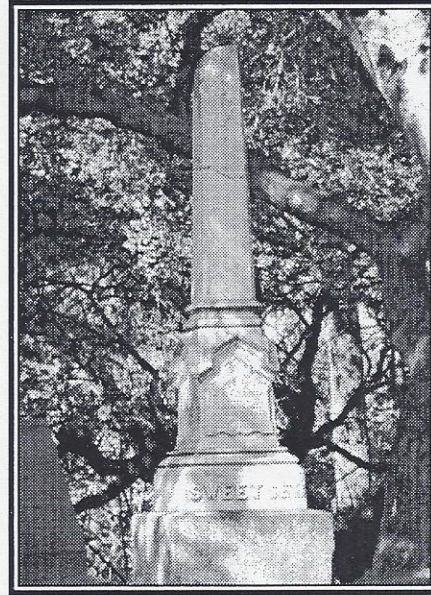
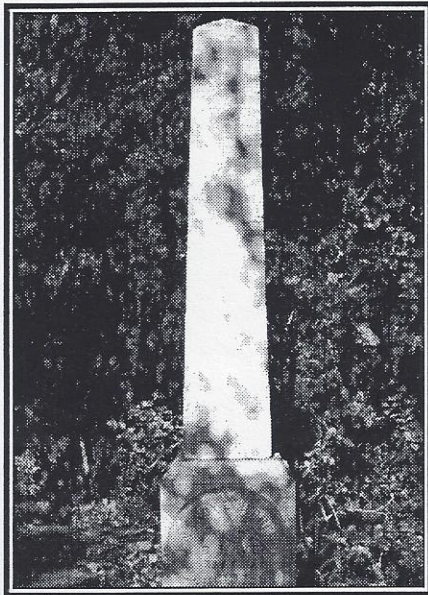
In the 1800’s and early 1900’s wooden copings and markers were sometimes used. Weather, time and vandals

removed all but one of those at Pioneer—a child’s grave. Only the wooden coping remains. The name unknown.

Joseph Bryant Sweetser and Francis DeLong, who had purchased the Novato Rancho in 1856-57, set aside the knoll, with its panoramic view of the Novato Valley — for the burial of family and friends.

Francis DeLong died at his home, now owned

by John Novak. No one knows why he was not buried at the Novato cemetery. A clue as to where he is buried was found in the Marin Journal of February 12, 1885. That issue had this item: “Mr. Francis DeLong died at his residence, Novato Rancho, at 10 o’clock forenoon, Wednesday, 11th inst ... Funeral services will be held at the home... when the remains will be taken east.” Mr.



*The two oldest monuments in the Pioneer Memorial Cemetery. On the left is the Haven monument and on the right the Sweetser monument. All of the photos in this article were taken by Mike Clancy in October 2005*

DeLong was born in Cornwall, Addison County, Vermont.

The second spire to be erected at Pioneer was in memory of Maria Ingalls Sweetser, who passed away May 27, 1876. She was the wife of Joseph Bryant Sweetser.

Both memorials, Haven and Sweetser, have withstood weather and time, but vandals have permanently left their mark. Evidence of numerous repairs are plainly visible. Sweetser descendants, the late Mrs. K. M. C. Neill and her daughter who passed away in 1973 paid for the first repairs of the spires in 1968. They resided in Oregon.

In 1882 Sweetser moved to Switzerland, Florida after selling his share of the Ranch to DeLong. He lived only four more years, dying April 13, 1886. His body was returned to Novato for burial in the family plot. The Sweetser family has two plots on the knoll – one marked by the spire and one that simply says, “F. D. Sweetser”—Frank DeLong Sweetser, who died March 1, 1885 at Winnemucca, Nevada where he had a cattle ranch. There are seven other members of the Sweetser family at Pioneer.

Some time in 1898 the Novato Cemetery Association, a corporation, was formed. Records available indicate that some of the members of the Association were – John W. Atherton, when it was formed and secretary-treasurer in 1905 and 1913; John Robert Sweetser, president 1903; Francis Sweetser, president 1906 and 1922; James Black Burdell, 1932; Josephine Sweetser Burdell, president 1933 and Harold R. Hayes, secretary 1958.

A plot map of the cemetery was surveyed by G. A. Atherton and filed in the county recorder's office December 28, 1898.

From 1861 to 1900 records show only sixteen burials that can be still located today. Some are, in addition to those mentioned: John G. Haven, 1874; John MacKenzie, 1890; Mattie J. Scott, 1893 (she was the first wife of A. D.

Scott who owned Scott's Hall and the store which was reportedly built in old town (south Novato Blvd.) and later moved to the corner of Grant and Sherman Avenues, where it is today.)

As was the case until 1900, the reader will associate street names and civic involvement with the names of some of those laid to rest through the 1930's.

Some are: John W. Atherton who died June 21, 1911. He was a county supervisor from 1877-85 and California assemblyman from 1885-91. His home is now owned and occupied by the Frank Pinheiro family; George Louis Blodgett, died in 1907. The Blodgett family had owned a large ranch at the foot of Mt. Burdell adjacent to San Marin Drive.

Manuel A. Nunes purchased the ranch in 1908. The Nunes family has operated it as a dairy ranch ever since.

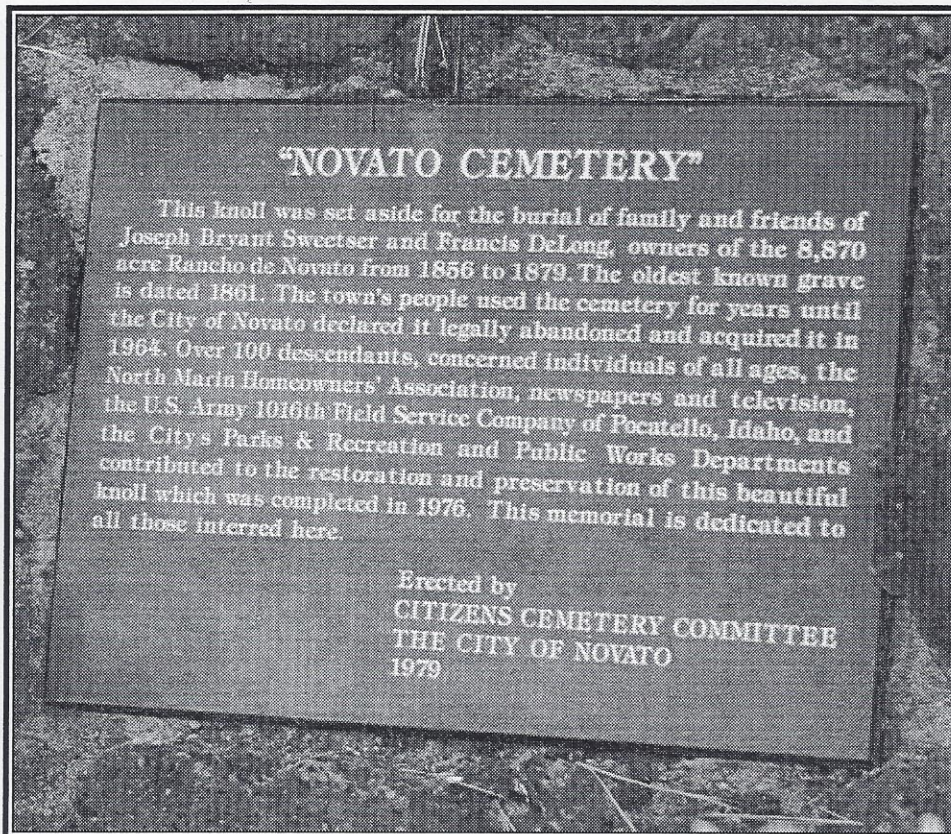
There are several members of the Gage family (Gage Lane) buried at Pioneer. They are relatives of the Busher family, another prominent Novato name. Dr. Walter Busher, a veterinarian, was one of the first group of Novato fire Commissioners.

Lane is another well-known name. The Lane plot has always been faithfully cared for by members of the family, even during the years of the worst vandalism.

Starting in the late 1950's the newspapers regularly gave publicity to the condition of the cemetery.

The Novato Advance quoted a nearby resident, Oscar Houge – “The cemetery has become nothing more than a day and night playground for children, teenagers and horseback riders.” Pieces of heavy rope were found on the knoll leading to the speculation that horses and ropes were a method used to topple headstones.

Theron Newell used his turn in the Independent Journals “Reporter's Notebook” column, beginning in the early 1960's, to emphasize the conditions at the cemetery.



It was also in the early 1960's that members of the Novato Seventh Day Adventist church worked on the knoll repairing and replacing headstones.

On October 3, 1963, the Novato City Council took up the matter of the cemetery's condition. They asked then Mayor, M. E. "Babe" Silva, to get information on ownership and responsibility. At that time councilman, Everett Pozzi, urged that the city take it over.

The next month, city attorney Clark Palmer outlined to the council the necessary procedures to acquire the cemetery. He also told the council that the cemetery had been owned by the Novato Cemetery Association.

Early in 1964 during a Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission meeting, director E. O. Mahaney, reported all the pros and cons of acquiring the cemetery and adjacent land. It was logical, from his past interest, for Commissioner Alton Lerch, to move that the city council take all necessary action to acquire the cemetery in "order to preserve it as a Memorial Park." His motion carried.

On September 8, 1964 the city council unanimously passed a resolution to take over the cemetery, having declared it abandoned.

That same year the council was awarded a \$6,593 contract to have 98 dead or dying trees removed and another 150 trimmed.

The next year the Novato Jaycees and the North Marin Youth Council co-sponsored a public clean-up campaign to be held Memorial Day weekend. As they had done for four years previously, Boy Scout Troop 73, tidied up grave sites before that Memorial Day.

It was in 1967 that Parks and Recreation director, Ed Adams, applied to the Federal Government for matching funds to be used for park acquisition and development. \$13,000 of city funds had been earmarked for the cemetery area. Notice that the Federation grant request had been approved was received in June.

1967 was also the year that the city contracted with

East Bay landscape architects, Ribera and Sue, for a "Program and Preliminary Development Cost Estimate for Novato Parks." That report was published in December. It said, "Pioneer Cemetery is suffering from years of neglect and most of the old gravestones are overturned or misplaced. Because of this problem, it is proposed that a number of the gravestones be combined in a sculptured memorial area at the crown of the hill..."

Too often citizens do not pay attention to what is going on in or planned by their government. That was the case with the plans for Pioneer Cemetery. It was not until late June, 1968 that a group of five Novatans "woke-up"

to those plans. They met July 11, to discuss what might be done to re-store and preserve, and thus save, Pioneer Memorial Cemetery — so that markers and grave sites would not be obliterated forever.

One of the first acts of the Committee, then known as Citizens to Preserve Novato's Historic Landmarks, was to go before the P & R Commis-

sion to ask, "Who is going to choose which markers to be used, in the 'sculptured memorial'? Do you want that job?"

Now eight years later the Committee, which grew from five to a membership of over 100 families, can see success in the very near future. Pioneer Memorial Cemetery is rapidly nearing the Committee's goal of total restoration with the end result of permanent preservation. The accomplishment has been economically satisfying, also. Some estimates of the cost of restoration were much higher, but the Committee was successful in accomplishing its goal and still stayed within the framework of the \$26,000 budget.

The eight years have not been easy or always smooth. Progress was slow. There were many meetings of the P & R Commission and city council to attend; fund raising to be done; dozens of letters to be written and hours of research to find as many descendants as possible. The Committee had become that "someone" interested in saving the cemetery. Because funds were raised for the



*The Sweetser family plot with the original monument in the rear of the photo.*

preservation campaign the committee members (Mrs. Betty Machado, Frank Galli, Will Lieb, the late Jack Burgi and Mrs. Margaret Coady) no longer had to assess themselves for Committee expenses.

The interest generated by the Committee's efforts resulted in gaining the support of, in the early 1970's, the city council and city manager, Charles Brown.

Brown offered his assistance in acquiring the old cemetery records from Gooch. In July, 1970, Gooch gave all the records he had to the city which have been a valuable addition to the information collected by Committee members.

In October, 1971, broken and loose headstones were removed from the cemetery to the city's corporation yard. Mrs. George Barnwell had made this suggestion because another Halloween was approaching. They remained there until October, 1973 when major volunteer work began.

In June, United States Army Reservists from Idaho did much work on the knoll over a period of nearly two weeks. Members of the North Marin Federation of Homeowners, under the presidency of Al Rivasplata, worked weekends in August and September. City employees also volunteered to assist them. Both groups participated in returning and replacing the headstones to the correct locations. William Ghirardelli, a genius at matching bases and headstones, was of incalculable assistance in this.

The restoration effort received Bay Area-wide newspaper and TV coverage because of the presence of the Reservists.

All of the hundreds of hours spent by volunteers towards restoring the cemetery resulted, also, in the project

receiving a special award for "Best Public Project in 1973" at the city's fourteenth birthday celebration held January 19, 1974. Then mayor, Fred Ruegg, presented certificates of appreciation to Mrs. Coady, committee secretary and Will Lieb, project chairman. Donald Greenhalph, Plan Review Committee chairman reported that the cemetery project was also "overall winner for 1973."

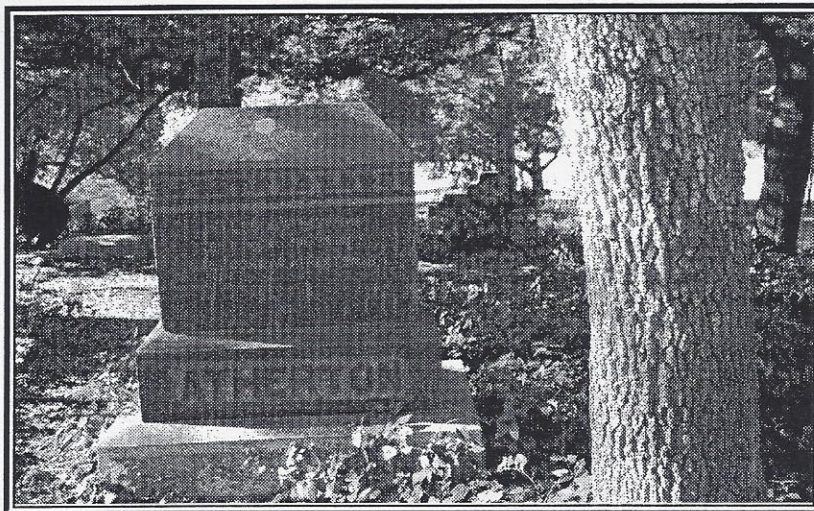
Since the citizens committee, now called Citizens Cemetery Committee, began the project in 1968 it has lost, by death, some of its staunchest supporters—John Irons, Mrs. K. M. C. Neill, Mrs. Marjorie Helms, Hansten M. Warner, George Tharsing, Joseph Tobin, Elmo Tognoni, Eugene Tracy, Jack Burgi, Madeline

Hirabarren York, Mrs. Charles Riddle Leiser and perhaps others not known of.

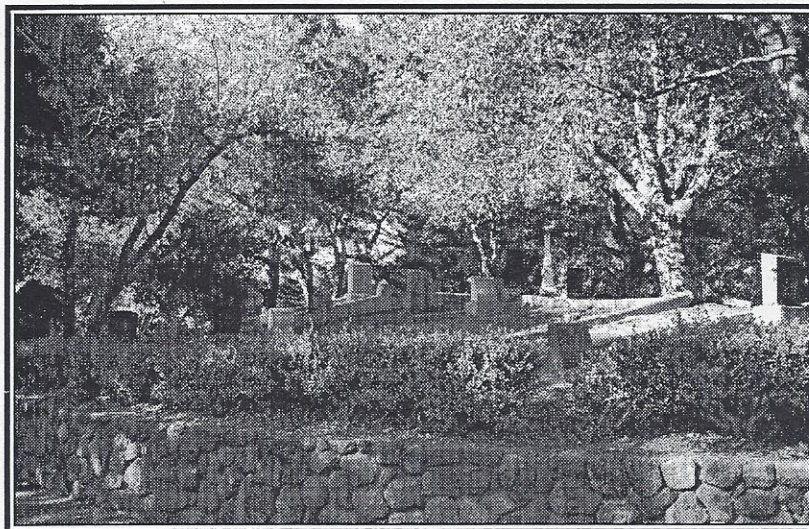
The restoration and preservation of Pioneer Memorial Cemetery is dedicated to them as well as all Novatans — past, present and future — and, to the belief that determination, perseverance and patience can, will and does work for what may seem a miracle.

As a last act the Committee will work with city staff on a suitable memorial which was voted on February 2, 1976, by the city council under the mayorship of Dorothy Young. It is hoped that the inscription will include "restoration completed 1976" as a contribution to our country's bicentennial celebration.

The feature story was written in 1976 and was published in "Old Marin—With Love," a book commemorating the bicentennial year with stories by Marin County writers. We thank Margaret (Peg) Coady for permission to reprint it.



*Many familiar names are found on monuments in the cemetery.*



*Looking north toward the top of the knoll. The cemetery is in a well kept and attractive condition.*

