SHAWSHEEN CEMETERY - Civil War Monument

Today we gather again to honor all those who have served our country and those who have sacrificed their lives, but here we pay special tribute to those who served in the Civil War.

Shawsheen Cemetery was originally dedicated in 1849, shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War, in order to replace the Old Burying Ground, which became greatly overcrowded in the many years following its establishment in 1729. Shawsheen Cemetery was modeled on Mount Auburn Cemetery, which was the nation's first rural park type cemetery. This granite monument honoring those who died in the Civil War was a gift to the town from the Ladies Aid Society, which during the war had worked to assist soldiers and to comfort the sick and wounded, and it was dedicated on Memorial Day in 1874. More recently, in 2007 the National Park Service listed this original portion of the cemetery on the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of its significance.

Shawsheen Cemetery is the final resting place for veterans that have served this nation in every war, from the Revolutionary War up to the present day. It was the focal point of Memorial Day ceremonies from its initial observance until after WW2. Ceremonies appropriately shifted elsewhere in town to honor those who served in WW2 and in subsequent conflicts, but because so many Bedford citizens who served their country are buried here, it is appropriate that we continue that tradition here.

Each year following this ceremony, another is held at the Old Burying Ground where the names of Revolutionary soldiers buried there are read. I would note that two Revolutionary soldiers' remains were moved here from the Old Burying Ground, so they are never mentioned. Stephen Lane was a member of Bedford's militia company that answered the alarm on April 19, 1775, and he continued to serve thereafter. The other Revolutionary soldier buried here is Peter (Stearns) Freeman. He was the freed slave of Rev. Josiah Stearns, and he enlisted alongside John Stearns, one of Rev. Stearns' own sons. Peter was at the crucial battle of Saratoga, along with two other black soldiers from Bedford, Cambridge Moore and Caesar Prescott.

Our nation is currently observing the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, where over 600,000 men lost their lives. From early May to early July of this year marks the anniversary of 2 of the agonizing months of that entire war in terms of lives lost. In May 1863, exactly 150 years ago, at Chancellorsville VA, General Lee's heavily outnumbered Confederate troops nevertheless defeated the Union army, which lost 17,000 men (¼ of its total) in that single battle. During the same month General Grant laid siege to Vicksburg MS in order to gain control of the entire Mississippi River and to cut the Confederacy in half. By the time the city surrendered two months later on the 4th of July, about 50,000 men had died – mostly Confederate soldiers. And the single greatest battle of the war occurred on July 1, 2 and 3, 1863, at Gettysburg PA. Both armies were dreadfully mangled, with the casualties totaling about 50,000 more men in those 3 days. After the Gettysburg battle a Quaker nurse wrote, "There are no words in the English language to express the sufferings I witnessed today." Many of Bedford's Civil War soldiers served in the Massachusetts regiments that were engaged in those battles, and they both experienced and bore witness to that suffering as well. So today I close with the final words of Lincoln's Gettysburg address,

"It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us-that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion-that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain-that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom-and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."