

Volunteers restore Revolutionary War-era gravestones

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Connor Long

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[Connor Long](#)

As America approaches its 250th anniversary, volunteers in South Jersey are restoring Revolutionary War gravestones, carefully cleaning centuries-old markers to preserve the region's earliest history.

Across cemeteries in Atlantic, Cape May and Cumberland counties, including Head of the River Church in Upper Township, Zion United Methodist Church in Egg Harbor Township and smaller burial grounds in Port Republic, members of the Daughters of the American Revolution are taking on the slow, methodical work of cleaning headstones that in many cases have not been properly maintained in generations.

“It’s our history. It’s where we come from, who we are as a people. I’m very proud to be part of it,” said Jeannine Holt-Ingento, of Galloway Township.

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For Barbi Harris, of Upper Township, the work began with curiosity during walks through a cemetery near her home.

“I saw some really cool stones and I like the artwork on them, so I started researching the artwork,” she said. “One thing led to another.”

That interest eventually led her to DAR preservation work focused on Revolutionary War-era graves and early American burial sites.

Before any cleaning begins, volunteers say the process is grounded in caution and respect for the age and condition of each stone.

“The first thing you need to do is get permission. Then you need to test the stone. You need to know if it’s sturdy because the last thing you want is for it to fall apart,” Holt-Ingento said.



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The Harold J. "Whitey" Swartz Valor Awards and service recognition ceremony will be held at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Anthony "Tony" Canale Training Center in Egg Harbor Township.

From there, only approved methods are used. Harris said household cleaners are never an option.

"You can't go using Clorox and Windex and stuff like that," she said.

Instead, volunteers rely on preservation-grade solutions such as D2 and similar environmentally friendly products along with soft brushes and non-metal tools designed to avoid damaging fragile stone surfaces.

"We only use plastic or natural scraping tools," Harris said. "Metal can damage the stone permanently."

Harris also noted that older practices, such as making "rubblings" of gravestones — placing paper over a stone and rubbing it with charcoal or wax to capture the inscription — can cause lasting damage and are no longer recommended.

“That practice is damaging to stones and should never be done,” she said.

The cleaning process is slow and layered. Stones are first cleared of debris, then treated with solution and left to continue breaking down biological growth over time.

“It keeps cleaning for up to about a year or more,” Harris said.



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Depending on condition, a single gravestone can take 30 to 45 minutes to clean, Holt-Ingento said, with more elaborate markers requiring even longer.

“Some of them are just in such bad shape, cracked and broken,” she said.

Results are often not fully visible right away, but improve over time as the solution continues working.

“You can see it right away, but the better results are about a month later,” Harris said.

Beyond technique, volunteers say one of the biggest challenges is the condition of many older burial grounds, where time and neglect have left stones weathered and overgrown.

“There’s a lot of neglect,” Harris said. “Some of these graveyards used to belong to churches, and now you don’t even know who maintains the graveyard.”

The work also highlights South Jersey’s often overlooked role in the Revolutionary War. While the region did not host large-scale battles, it saw dozens of skirmishes and raids tied to control of the Delaware River and surrounding communities. One of the most notable was the Battle of Chestnut Neck in 1778, when British forces destroyed a Patriot privateering base in present-day Port Republic, underscoring the area’s strategic importance during the war.

Still, the work continues, driven by a shared belief that the history preserved in these stones remains worth protecting.

For them, each cleaned gravestone is a way of restoring visibility to early American lives and ensuring those names are not lost as time passes.

GALLERY: Volunteers clean Revolutionary War-era graves









Barbi Harris of Upper Township and Meredith Czarnek of Absecon pose at Zion United Methodist Church in Egg Harbor Township, where volunteers are working to preserve historic headstones across South Jersey.



Cheryl Knabe, of Galloway Township, cleans a Revolutionary War-era headstone at Zion United Methodist Church in Egg Harbor Township.
Provided



Colonial English gravestone at Trinity United Methodist Church Cemetery in Marmora.

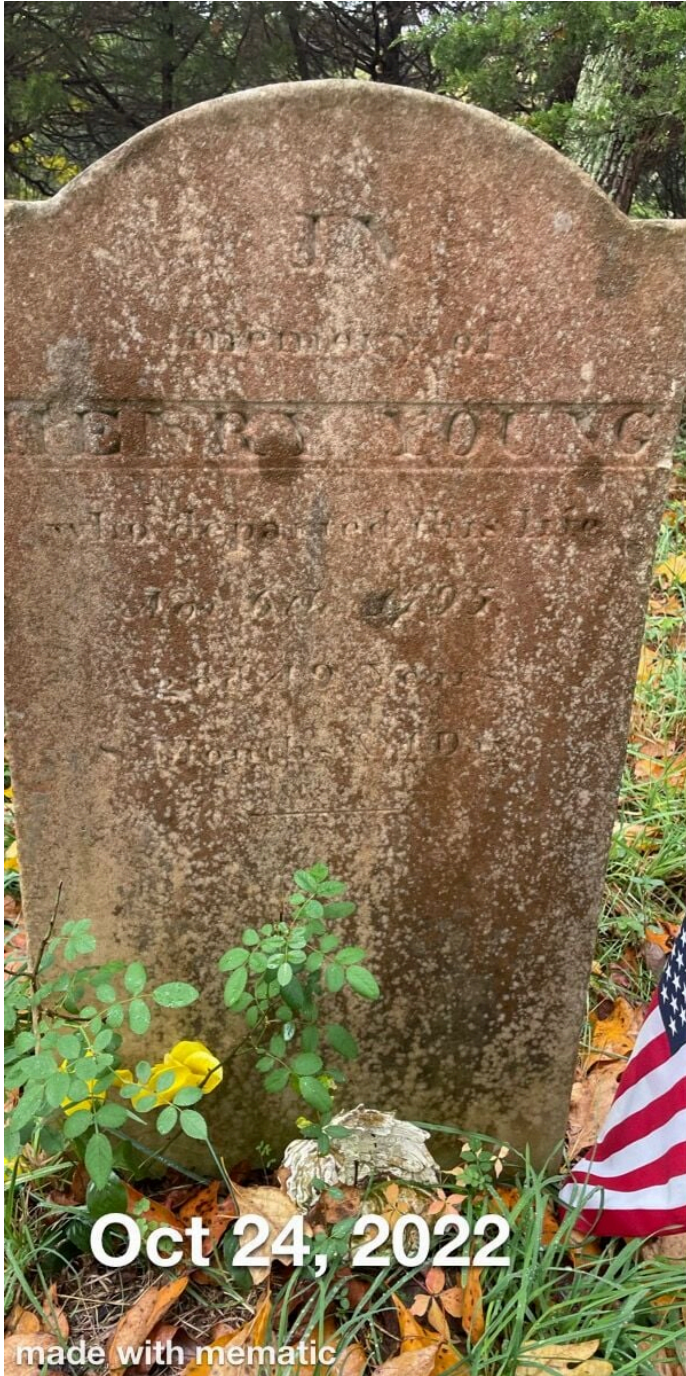


Barbi Harris of Upper Township carefully cleans a historic gravestone using preservation-grade, environmentally friendly cleaning solutions as part of an effort to protect centuries-old markers across South Jersey.



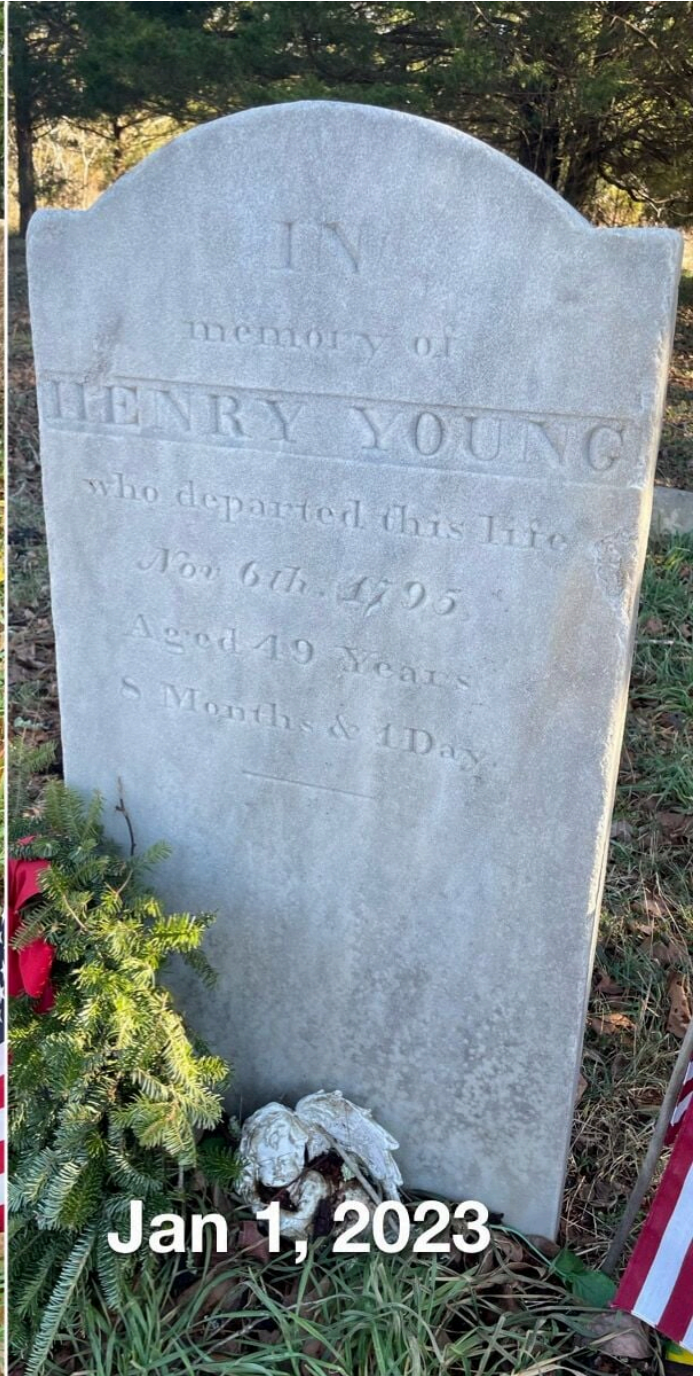


Jeanne Crevina of Egg Harbor Township and Barbi Harris of Upper Township pose at Zion United Methodist Church in Egg Harbor Township while showing the supplies used in the preservation of historic graves across South Jersey.



Oct 24, 2022

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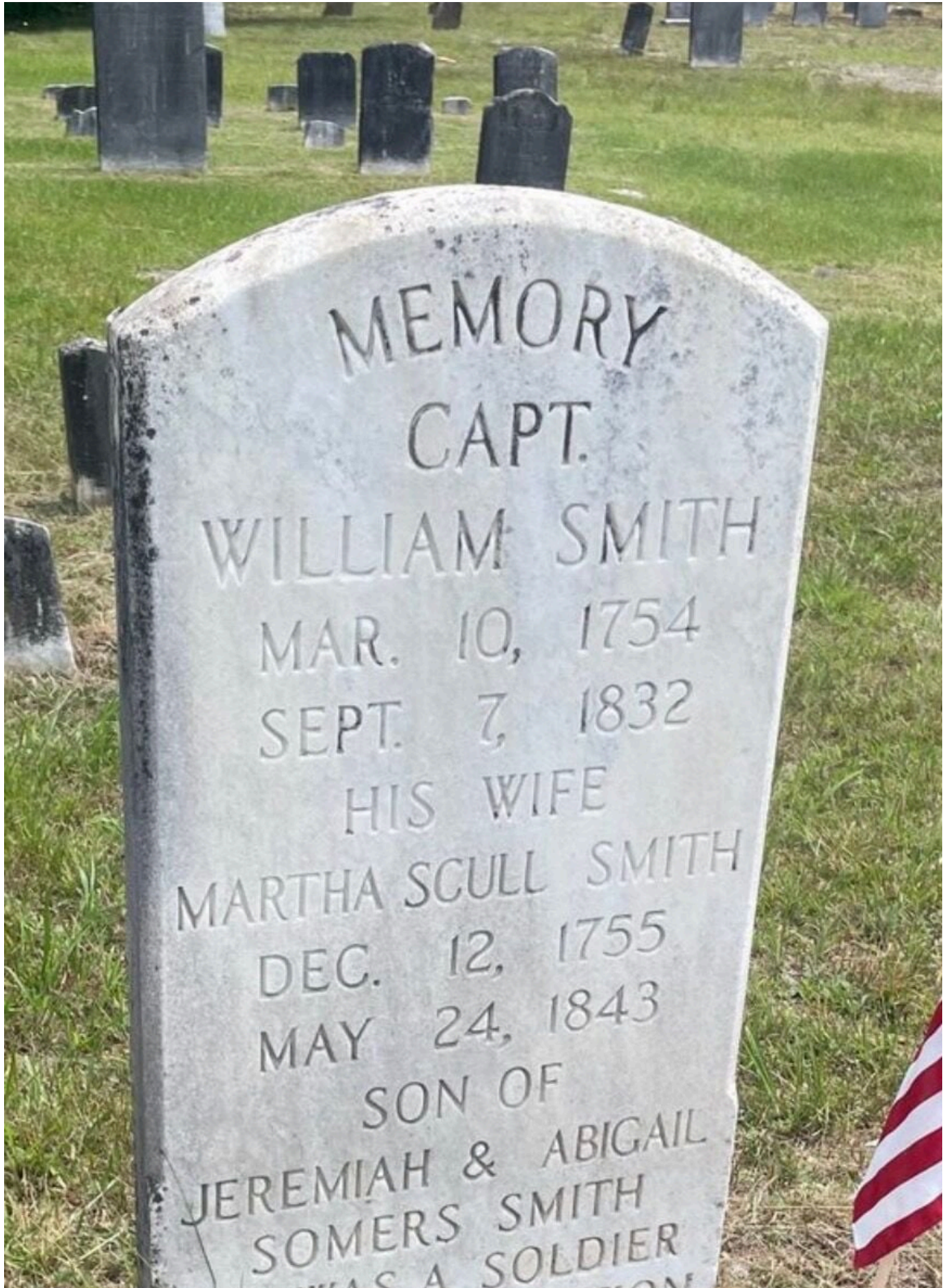


Jan 1, 2023

Before and after photos of the gravestone of Henry Young at Head of the River Church in Upper Township.
Provided



screenshot



MEMORY
CAPT.

WILLIAM SMITH

MAR. 10, 1754

SEPT. 7, 1832

HIS WIFE

MARTHA SCULL SMITH

DEC. 12, 1755

MAY 24, 1843

SON OF

JEREMIAH & ABIGAIL
SOMERS SMITH

WAS A SOLDIER



Gravestone of Capt. William Smith (1754–1832), a Revolutionary War soldier, at Head of the River Church Cemetery in Upper Township after being cleaned as part of ongoing efforts to preserve historic burial sites in South Jersey.

(screenshot)



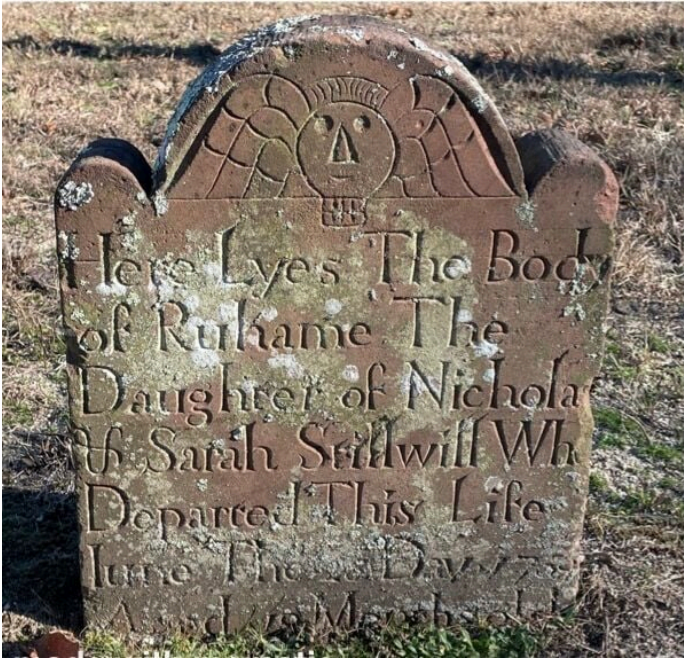
Gravestone of Revolutionary War soldier Henry Young, buried at Head of the River Church Cemetery in Upper Township.



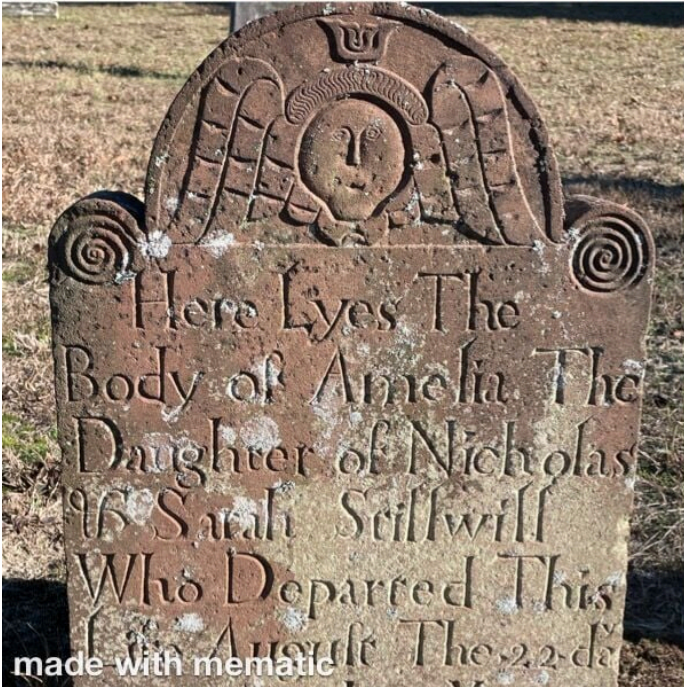
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Screenshot



Colonial English gravestone at Trinity United Methodist Church Cemetery in Marmora.



Colonial English gravestone at Trinity United Methodist Church Cemetery in Marmora, reflecting early settlement-era burial traditions in South Jersey.



Colonial English gravestone at Trinity United Methodist Church Cemetery in Marmora.

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