

EagleTribune.com, North Andover, MA

January 27, 2012

A tall order

Giant crane trims trees at historic Pentucket Burial Ground

By Mike LaBella

mabella@eagletribune.com

—
HAVERHILL — Local landscaper Erik Peterson has been helping to maintain the city's historic Pentucket Burial Ground for years.

Along with his family members and his employees, he has donated his time and resources mowing the grass and removing trees and limbs that fell during storms, and in some cases, damaged delicate old gravestones.

On Wednesday, his 46th birthday, Peterson got the present he's dreamed of when Mayor James Fiorentini, state Rep. Brian Dempsey, Southern Essex Registrar of Deeds John O'Brien, members of Haverhill's Brightside, private supporters, and others gathered at the 17th century burial ground to kick off the long-awaited removal of dead, decayed and hazardous trees.

Peterson was smiling as workers from Mayer Tree Service of Essex began a planned three-day project that is being paid for with a state grant.

Workers brought in one of the largest cranes of its type in the state to assist in this delicate operation. Workers looped heavy lines around sections of tree they cut with a chainsaw and the crane lowered each piece safely to the ground.

"This is our seventh year here volunteering and I can't handle these trees," Peterson said.

Two years ago, he removed a section of a tall oak tree that snapped off during a storm and fell to the ground.

"It was a healthy oak yet it crushed seven headstones, including members of the Duston family," Peterson said. "We have another oak and if it snaps it could take out the head stones of Sam Adams' great-grandparents."

Peterson said the goal of removing more than a dozen trees is to make it safer for the public, including school children, to visit the burial ground and learn about the history of Haverhill.

"It really wasn't safe to walk around," he said.

Established in 1668, the Pentucket Burial Ground is one of the original burial sites of the earliest settlers of Haverhill, including members of the Ward, Kimball, Ayer, Whittier, Dustin, Rolfe and Bartlett families, city officials said.

The site is under city custody and is surrounded by the private Elmwood Cemetery.

"Removing these hazardous trees will save the grave markers here of the city's settlers and make it much easier for the city, Brightside volunteers and neighbors to take care of this property," Mayor James Fiorentini said.

Jeff Thomas, project manager and arborist for Mayer's North Andover office, said his climbers use wireless headsets to communicate with the crane operator as to where to set their slings to make each cut.

"The crane then picks and rotates the piece around and lowers it to the ground," Thomas said. "The beauty of a crane like this is because of our limited set up area, we can pick in a 100-foot circle then move to another area."

Private access for the crane was granted by abutters Pentucket Furniture Restoration and several Eastern Avenue neighbors, according to the mayor's office.

The effort to make the Pentucket and the Bradford Burial Ground safer and more accessible began two years ago when Haverhill's Brightside and the mayor's office applied for a state grant.

Last year the city received a \$127,297 state Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities grant funded by the Massachusetts Division of Conservation Services. The grant includes over \$20,000 to pay for the removal of trees that threaten the ancient grave markers in this inactive cemetery.

The grant will also be used to help create George Washington Landing Park, planned for the Bradford side of the river, as well as remove dead trees and create handicap access at the Bradford Burial Ground on Salem Street.

Brightside President Doug Edison said matching funds valued at \$60,000 were provided through donations from Trinity EMS, Pentucket Bank and the Tenney Family Association, as well as through in-kind services from the city and Brightside volunteers.

Fiorentini credited Dempsey, chairman of the House Ways and Means committee, for helping to obtain grant funds, and thanked Registrar of Deeds John O'Brien for his work in finding the historical documents the city and Brightside needed to apply for the grant.

"Part of the application process required us to prove who owned the property," Edison said. "The problem with Pentucket, and especially with Bradford, was that we had to go way back in time to locate the deeds."

O'Brien said workers in his office found what the city needed to prove ownership.

"We went into our basement and pulled out our historic deeds," O'Brien said. "We went back to the original Indian deed."

Andrew Herlihy, the city's assistant director of community development, helped with the grant proposal and said the land that became Haverhill was originally deeded by Native Americans to the original settlers, and that the Pentucket Burial Grounds parcel has never changed hands.

"That parcel was part of the original deed," Herlihy said, noting the importance of having to prove ownership.

Fiorentini said the care of Haverhill's ancient burial grounds is one of the primary objectives of Brightside, the city-chartered volunteer beautification group.

Fiorentini and Edison thanked volunteers for their advocacy of this project, in particular Erik Peterson, who along with his wife Leslie have essentially 'adopted' the Pentucket Burial Ground at great personal expense and effort.

You can view a copy of the original deeds by visiting saalemdeeds.com/newwebsite and clicking on the link to "Native American Deeds Collection."

As noted on the website, Haverhill was originally settled as Pentucket, was named after the original inhabitants, and encompassed the lands bounding Haverhill, Merrimac and Amesbury. The deed was recorded twice, once at the Ipswich Court and again at a Norfolk County Court. The original Norfolk County (1643-1677) abutted the north side of the Merrimack River from Haverhill up to Exeter, N.H.

• • •

Join the discussion. To comment on stories and see what others are saying, log on to eagletribune.com.