

Transcription of Video Audio:  
**Intro: Piscataway Burial Ground**

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Middlesex County has a rich history of courage, innovation, conflict, and resilience. Those stories have shaped our character and identity as a community. Unfortunately, most of us only know about stories connected to our immediate family and culture.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** In this meaningful place, Piscataway Burial Grounds, we get to find other stories and stories of who take care of them. I'll let our guide Walter Stotchell from Edison Greenway's group take it from here.

**Walter Stochel:** Let me start from the beginning here.. I was in the burial ground in 1976 during the bicentennial, and my sister, who was at an elementary school, gave gravestone rubbings with her elementary school art teacher. So that was like my first time there, and it was all overgrown.

And then in 1995, the Edison Greenways Group, which I'm a board member, decided to sort of adopt the burial ground and do it once a year, twice a year cleanup. And that involved cutting a lot of the vines and the brush that were growing and the plots that have fences around it.

And, you know, just keeping the place as clean as we could, because the town does mow the grass and take care of any big branches and stuff that's about all that we can do. So that's how I got into it.

And then I started doing the research, you know, and finding out who's buried there. And over the years, we've either Edison Greenways or the Metuchen Edison Historical Society got grants to do research.

The Historical Society got a grant to do a research on the commons, which is the entire property and the burial ground and the part behind it. And we did that in 2009 and established what the boundaries were at colonial times.

And then we did an inventory of all the graves in 2015. In between 2009 and 2015, we did a metal detector search of the park, not the burial ground. And then 2015 we did the inventory of all the graves. And they are, of all the graves that are there and buried, there are hundreds of burials that are there that do not have headstones.

We did that in the hopes of finding the pattern of burials which they start from one corner to 1693 to rest or were they scattered around? And that research, we hope that location would lead us to the townhouses.

Our theory was that the townhouses would be right where the oldest graves were. That they would've started there. Because the townhouses were the federal government and the churches at that time.

So we did that research and we also wanted to see any spike in deaths. Like if there was an epidemic we would see if a lot of people died all at one year, we could probably say that's an epidemic.

And we wanted to record all the veterans graves so that we had a list of all the veterans buried. So that was in 2015 and that is online on the historical website as of 2009.

And then in 2020, the county had a grant available and Edison greenways applied for that to do the ground penetrating radar. And that's where we found the colored burial ground in 1995.

The graves there and the school foundation were found there and the graves in the front of the burial ground where the soldiers were buried and townhouses.

And a year later, 2022, we did the GPR in 2021, and in 2022 Archaeological exhibition test kit where the school house was and up the front where we see the townhouse was. We found school house artifacts where the school was and possible building materials where we think the townhouse was but we didn't find the foundation of there.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** I was fortunate enough to speak to Walter Stochel myself. Here is our interview.

#### Interview

**Alevia R-Plyam:** In your opinion, what distinguishes the Piscataway Burial Grounds as a site of unique historical importance compared to other cemeteries in New Jersey?

**Walter Stochel:** The burial ground is one of the oldest in NJ. It was established in 1695, but there were earlier burials. It is a community cemetery, was and is a community cemetery. Not just for one religion. And when they established it, it was dedicated to the people of Piscataway.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Well, a follow up question would be.. Any specific passings, individuals or events you are particularly fascinated by?

**Walter Stochel:** Well, I've always been finding out things about the burial ground. In 1995 when we were starting our clean ups on the site. Some of the old plots were really overgrown with vine and brush. We cleared the plot for Thomas Swords and found out he was a civil war general and then 4 years later, I was on vacation in Santa Fe New Mexico staying at Le Fonde Inn and they had a historical brochure about the hotel and they said during the Mexican war a Captain Sword stayed there and I found out his name and that it was Thomas Sword and that it was the same guy so that was really an exciting connection!

**Alevia R-Plyam:** That is really exciting! Well; Based on the Ground Penetrating Radar study from 2021, the site is still uncovering history. The findings on Grid 1- "Colored Burial Ground"- and Grid 2 "Piscataway School House" seems particularly exciting. Can you elaborate on the significance of those findings?

**Walter Stochel:** Yes! The color burial ground was identified in 1880s by Dr. Ezra Mundy Hunt of Metuchen. Who did an inventory of those burials of at that time. SO it was known and burials have continued since then, it is of the south west corner of the burial ground and up until the

early 2000s the township department garage was just south of there. So that part of the cemetery was kind of ignored so when they took the parks department garage down it visually opened up a portion of the burial ground. So you could see it from the park, and we wanted to find the extent of the color burial ground and see how many burials there and if they were any vacant spaces and the JPR showed that they were 95 graves there and the whole area still installed with graves are in line with the rest of cemetery.. North to south with the bodies facing east to west and sort of lines like the rest of the cemetery shows that they werent randomly buried there.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** I gotta ask, are there any excavation plans?

**Walter Stochel:** Uh, we don't have any plans to dig up anybody in the burial ground so today people are still being buried there so some of the family plots still being buried there. If we did something in the future where the townhouses in the front, north east corner, but outside the fence, closer to Woodbridge avenue, that's one of the primary's. Or where the school house was which is outside of the burial ground. And you asked about Grid #2? The School house. I remember seeing the school house in 1971 when I was a kid and I knew about it, and I read the articles when it burned down in 1985 and after the parks department had fenced in that area and kept jumping in equipment there and that was all removed in the early 2000s when the demolished the parks garage so we wanted to find that foundation and see if they were any wells or out houses near by the school because they might be an artifact if we did a dig there. So, we did do a JPR we did find the foundation of the school house that burned down in 1985 and that ran north and south to the building I saw in 1971.

The surprise was that we found another foundation that ran east and west that was a intermix with this foundation and then we did research and found it was an 1830 school house on the site and if they said it was in the commons. We found that research and it burned in 1892, and they said when they rebuild the school house in 1897 it was build of the same site. So when we did the logical thing in 2022 we dug down and found burned bricks from the 1837 school house and artifacts from 1897 so that was pretty exciting. So if we are going to do a excavation I would dig up the foundation, to go down to where they are and dig around there so you'll explore more artifacts and new information.

But, no digging in the graveyard!

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Fair! Wouldn't want to dig myself. Besides its rich history, the Piscataway Burial Grounds has fed popular stories or myths, Are you familiar with some or any of those myths?

**Walter Stochel:** Yes, the Mary Moore story is the most popular and asked about in all of our tours.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** So, Exploring different sites, including news sites, I was able to identify three interesting myths: Mary Moore, Thomas W. Harper and the death of a boy who stole a headstone. What do you know about those stories?

**Walter Stochel:** Okay so Mary Moore is the witch. Thomas Harper was killed during the Tornado in 1835; the story is that he stood in front of the tavern and he said he wouldn't go in unless he felt the wrath of God, and said bye to the beam and was killed. That 1835 was the

worst Tornado in NJ, it went from Franklin Town to Piscataway to Woodbridge to Staten Island. The boy who stole the gravestone was killed on Route 1 as we've heard those stories. So some people bring them up on the tours.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Are you familiar with any group(s) embracing those myths and visiting the site?

**Walter Stochel:** Not that I know of but you'll see them mentioned in NJ. People write some for 'Weird NJ.' In 2022 I was interviewed about the Burial Ground and Mary Moore and they specifically asked if I knew anything about Mary Moore. SO the crew that did the segment knew about her so they must've heard old stories. I don't run into people during tours or cleans up who are looking for Mary Moore. They must come there at other times. And I haven't heard of any ceremonies for Mary Moore.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** So, How do you make sense of the community embracing and developing a fascination about those myths?

**Walter Stochel:** Well, these Myths are based on stories and folklore and they may have some truths to it and people like to believe in these myths. Its a good story.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Fair who doesn't love a good story, well I do know the Edison Greenways Group develops tours of the site, do you make any references to those or other myths at those tours?

**Walter Stochel:** Yes, we do mention Mary Moore, sometimes Harper getting killed by the church or the Hooper brother who got killed by eating mushrooms.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** yes I did hear about that too, and you can find all of these Gravestones except for Mary Moore?

Walter Stochel: Yes, and Harpers, haven't found Harpers.

In 2022, News 12 called me, saying your with the History Society? Do you know anything about the Burial Ground and I said Yea so I met with the News crew out there and they did a story about her and interviewed me and talked about Mary Moore the Witch.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Yes, she is very well known!

**Walter Stochel:** Yes Mary Moore has been a lot in Weird NJ Various issues in NJ. And the myth of Mary Moore, my guess starts in the 50s, and I've done tours with people and they swear they know where her gravestone was and different people put it in different places. And you know the story, Mary Moore was accused of being a witch and she was either burned at the stake here in Edison, where in the Witch trail: the mount holly, and in the 1950,60,70,80s, or 2000s, because i've seen it referenced recently, a boy finds her headstone and knows the story of Mary Moore and the legend is if you walk their stones or two times back or chanting her name or some abbraration shows up so he takes her headstone and puts it in his closet and then the next

day walking to his HS he is killed crossing Route 1. After the funeral cleaning up the house, cleaned up his bedroom, finds the stone and smashes it into bits so that there's no stone.

**Walter Stochel:** No you can't find her stone but there is another Mary Moore there too.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Interesting and they are totally separate?

**Walter Stochel:** Yep, totally separate. She would've been in the early 1700s.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Do you personally believe in the Mary Moore?

**Walter Stochel:** Let's put it this way.. I do not believe.. Just like many Folklore stories maybe there was a woman who dressed in black. But also a lot of people dressed in black back then. Don't believe there was a lot of colorful clothing back then. The legend is that she would walk by animals and they would do strange things. One story was that one of the settlers felt this heavy weight upon his chest and Mary Moore was walking by. So, I don't know. I don't believe that someone stole her gravestone. I've looked that up.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Do you believe Mary Moore is haunting the Burial Ground?

**Walter Stochel:** Uh, not really.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Why do you think people tend to spread that information around?

**Walter Stochel:** It's a good story! It's a good story.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Fair.

**Walter Stochel:** Maybe they see things that I don't, maybe, that could be. Some people's brains are developed differently than mine and they can feel these things and see these things.

In fact we do mention the Mary Moore story: In fact one of the walks we did we had someone dress as Mary Moore and just appear one day.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** (Laughs) How did that go?

**Walter Stochel:** It was funny, because we were around the front of the burial ground, the west side, and she was hiding behind the church and I told them to look around to a certain point walking out and the crowd like that.. I told them that some days people say they see her wondering about the burial ground and they started pointing! There she is! And I turned around saying I don't see anything.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** I do have one final question for you, How would you like the community to see and embrace Piscataway Burial Grounds?

**Walter Stochel:** I would like them to see as a history site as it is and I would like to see the little spots in the cemetery filled in and the gravestones straightened up and cleaned to make it look more less decrepit.

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Any last final thoughts on the Piscataway ground? Or anything you'd like to share.

**Walter Stochel:** Well lets see, the east side if you go out there there are some old stones and I think it is 'Sarah Stell', her headstone, birth and death, on the bottom it says "As I am now, you must be, prepare for death, and follow me."

**Alevia R-Plyam:** Sounds haunting.

**Walter Stochel:** And general sword, the general, the other side of the burial ground, the west side there is 'Fielding lukas' who was a confederate soldier in the war. So we have those two sides. Veterans of every war to the Vietnam war. And only one burial from there was killed on active duty and that is 'Christian Conwell'

#### **Conclusion:**

**Alevia R-Plyam:** That was our interview, and I believe the message that should be learned was that.. You do not need to know of someones story to be kind, to pay your respects, to take time to visit past loved ones, or visit ones who may not know they are loved. & I suppose maybe Piscataway Burial Grounds isn't as haunted as it seems. Although I did see many crows there when I visited the cemetery. Maybe that's just their home, and now, it's the home of middlesex residents as well. Thanks for listening.

#### **Funny Clip:**

**Alevia R-Plyam:** I know that there is, this is going to sound funny, but there is a Psychic little place across from Piscataway Burial Ground you think that if I should ask if they *see* anything?

**Walter Stochel:** Thats a good one! Thats a good one!