

David A. Poirier

# In Perpetuity

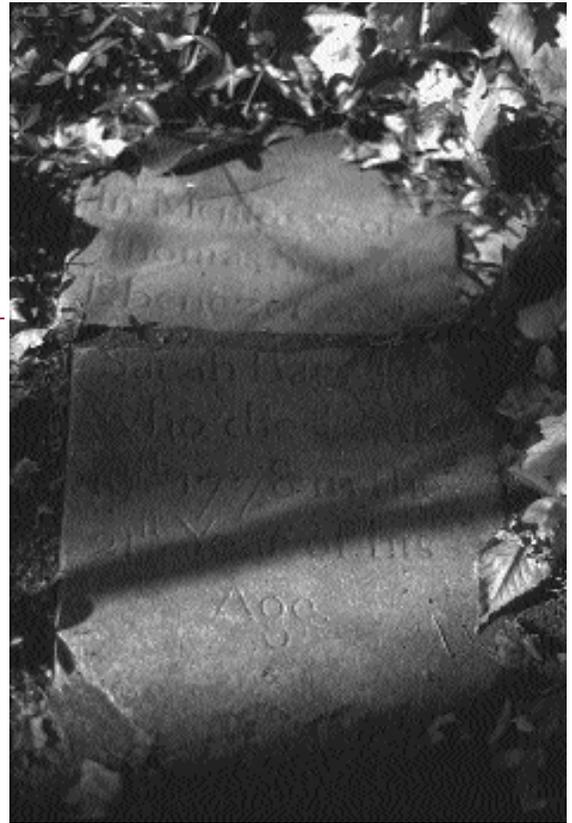
## The Northrup Cemetery

*Vandalized 18th-century gravestone from the Northrup Cemetery. Photo courtesy Phenix Environmental Inc.*

A small hardscrabble parcel, bordered by a seldom used rail line and a lesser traveled town road, the Northrup Cemetery was a forlorn half-acre. Although the oldest burying ground in Brookfield, Connecticut, the Northrup Cemetery was barely recognizable as sacred ground. The few surviving gravestones had been vandalized, knocked over, and were on the verge of being reclaimed by the surrounding soil. Incomplete strands of barbed wire fencing marked the cemetery's border with the railroad tracks; an adjoining, privately-owned sand and gravel operation threatened to undermine one side of the cemetery. This rural, family burial ground was poised to become another forgotten and abandoned historic site.

Despite its near-terminal appearance, the Northrup Cemetery was identified through extensive cultural resource research associated with the proposed construction of a buried natural gas pipeline through areas of New York and western Connecticut. Consultation among the Connecticut State Historic Preservation Office, the Office of the State Archaeologist at the University of Connecticut (Storrs), and the Iroquois Gas Transmission System revealed that alternate route alignments were not feasible. Parallel routing with the extant rail line posed unresolvable safety issues; other route variations would seriously impact sensitive wetlands or the nearby 20th-century United Jewish Cemetery. Iroquois was literally caught between a railroad and a wetland, rather than a "rock and a hard place."

Proposed narrowing of the pipeline construction right-of-way from the standard 75 feet width to 24 feet was examined as a possible solution. However, uncertainty existed as to the possible presence of historically unmarked graves. Previous research in Connecticut has revealed that, among others, infants, paupers, Native Americans, and African Americans were often interred without gravestones. In an attempt to resolve this important concern, Iroquois Gas Transmission System conducted a ground penetrating radar survey throughout the Northrup Cemetery. The GPR study identified several anomalies which appeared



to represent potential grave sites along the proposed narrower construction right-of-way. The archeological excavation of the proposed pipeline construction zone, the professional disinterment of any effected grave, and subsequent reburial elsewhere within the cemetery was considered a viable course of action in light of the complexity of the situation.

After considerable analysis of its options, Iroquois decided that disturbance of this historic cemetery was an untenable solution. In that the GPR study indicated that bedrock occurred between 40 and 120 inches across the cemetery site, the surprising preferred option was to bore through the bedrock beneath the cemetery and install the pipeline within a rock tunnel. The corporate consciousness and flexible decision-making of the Iroquois Gas Transmission System ensured the perpetual rest and continued sanctity of this otherwise neglected late-18th-century colonial cemetery in rural Connecticut. Of equal importance, the Northrup Cemetery is a powerful reminder that creative insights deserve full exploration with respect to the sensitive treatment of other threatened burial grounds.

*Dr. David A. Poirier is Staff Archeologist and Environmental Review Coordinator for the Connecticut State Historic Preservation Office.*