

TOP STORY

In Tyringham woods, archaeology brings a vanished Shaker community back into view

By Jennifer Huberdeau, The Berkshire Eagle

Jun 22, 2026



University of Richmond archeology professor Elizabeth Baughan, left, examines a grave marker in the Tyringham Shaker Cemetery with sophomore Avery Burgess. Volunteer Tom Barenski, center, and Douglas Winiarski, professor of religion and American studies, lean in for a closer look.

JENNIFER HUBERDEAU — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

**This story was made possible by
contributions made to the Local**

Contributions made to the Local Journalism Fund.

Berkshireeagle.com/donate

TYRINGHAM — "Do you have an 'M.P.' from 1841?" a voice calls out in the forest.

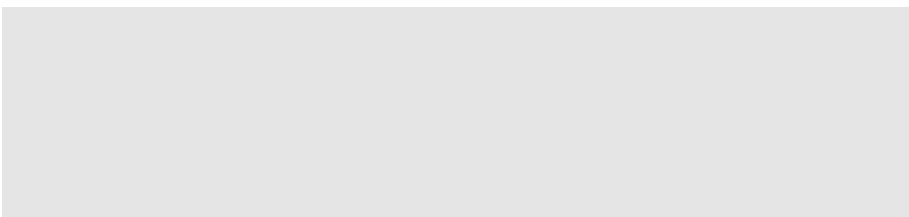
Avery Burgess, a sophomore at the University of Richmond, flips through burial records as members of the survey team kneel beside a 12-by-12-inch white marble cemetery marker, uncovered after being buried for perhaps a century.

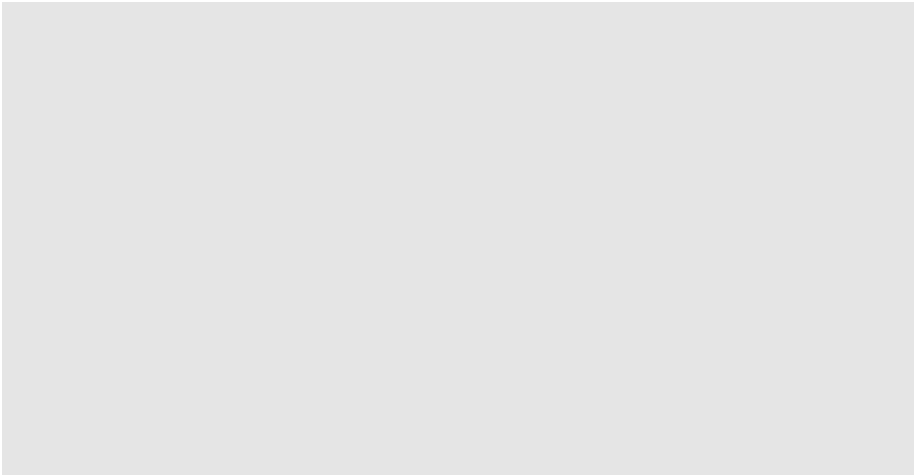
"Yes. Mary Patten. June 10, 1841," Burgess says.

The exchange unfolds during a three-day archaeological survey of the Tyringham Shaker Cemetery, where University of Richmond students, professors and local volunteers are locating grave markers. They're verifying historical records using ground-penetrating radar and building a GIS map of one of the last surviving pieces of the former Shaker settlement known as the City of Love.

Patten is one of 96 members of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, better known as Shakers, buried here, according to a necrology of the site — a register of the deceased.

Researchers hoped to find 96 markers, though they were uncertain what remained after more than a century of overgrowth.





Walter Wheeler, a senior architectural historian with Hartgen Archeological Associates Inc., points out details about the marker stones at the Tyringham Shaker Cemetery, one of the few Shaker cemeteries with original gravestones intact.

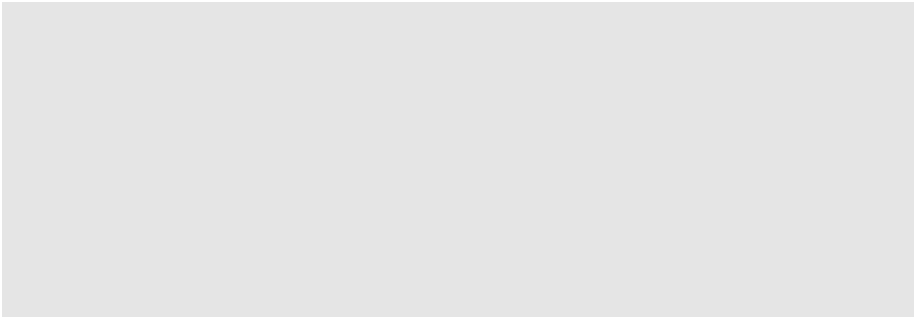
STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

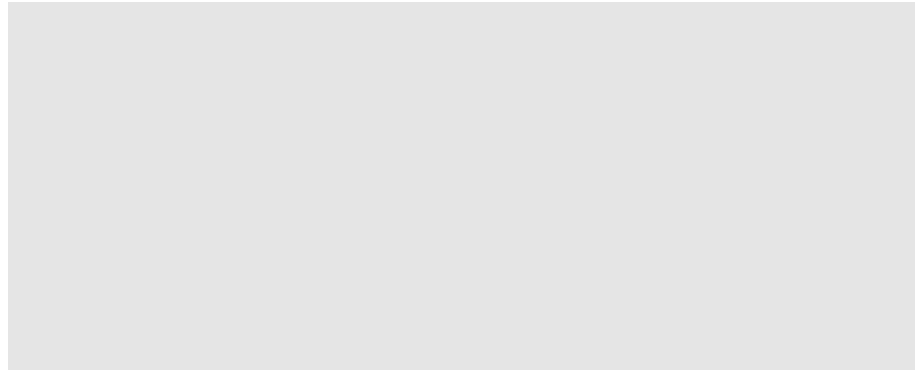
The cemetery's flat marble stones have largely vanished beneath the forest floor. Local lore holds that a townspeople absconded with some years ago.

"We know the names of everyone who is buried here, but we don't know if all the stones are here," said Douglas L. Winiarski, professor of religion and American studies at the University of Richmond.

An initial sweep of the grounds, he said, identified some 70 stones. One goal is to unearth the markers, document them, map them with LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) sensing technology and rebury them.

The cemetery is the last parcel of the Tyringham settlement still owned by the Shakers. The survey team is there with the blessing of Brother Arnold





Beth Zizzamia, director of the Spatial Analysis Lab for the University of Richmond, lifts a grave marker at the Tyringham Shaker Cemetery.

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

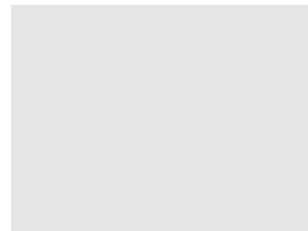
Hadd, trustee and elder of the three remaining Shakers at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, the last active Shaker community.

For Winiarski and his colleagues — Elizabeth Baughan, professor of archeology; Stephanie Spera, professor of geography and Beth Zizzamia, director of the university's Spatial Analysis Lab — the trip's goals are twofold.

"There's the straight archeology and history part of it — just the knowing what we can know about this site which has kind of been lost and the documenting of it," Winiarski said. "But then, there's a great learning experience for our students. You can see they are super motivated. They're learning the basics of archeology. They're learning high-tech archeology. They're running basic mapping techniques. They'll be doing geospatial analysis."

Researching this particular cemetery presents a unique opportunity.

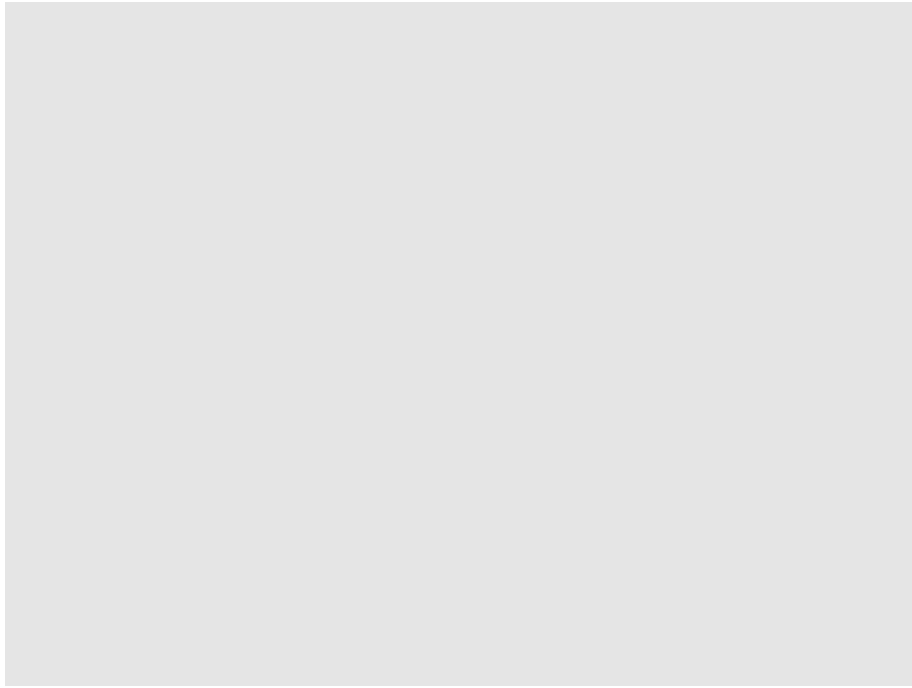
"This cemetery still has its individual markers," he



Ben Heckman, project manager at Hartgen Archeological Associates Inc., surveys the Tyringham Shaker Cemetery with ground-penetrating radar.

JENNIFER HUBERDEAU —
THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

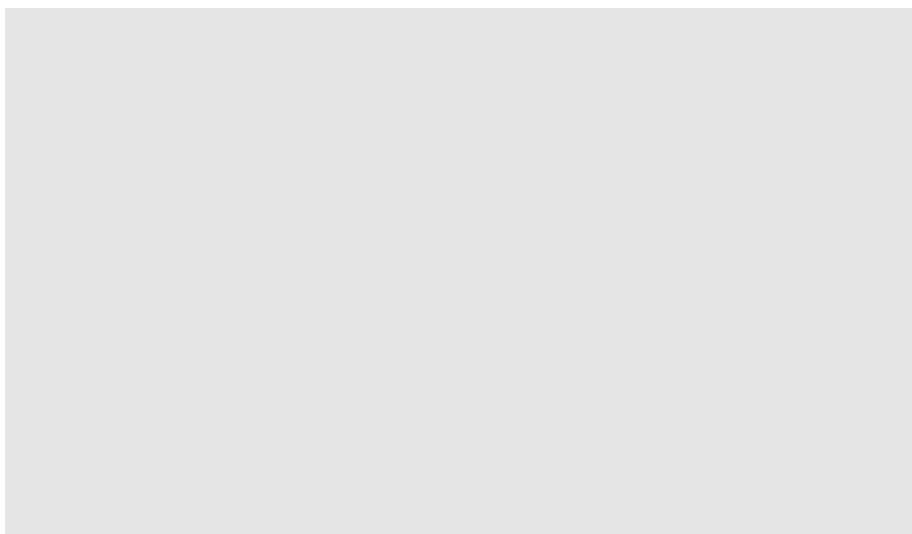
said.

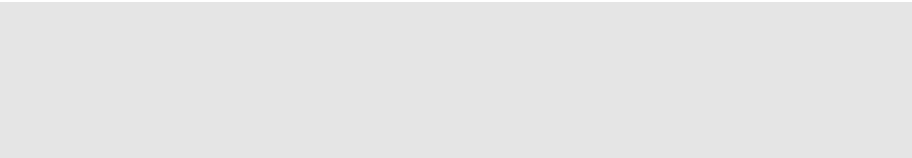


Volunteer Peter Martin carefully removes dirt from a marble gravestone in the Tyringham Shaker Cemetery.

JENNIFER HUBERDEAU — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Most Shaker burial grounds have a central marker, similar to the one in Hancock Shaker Village's cemetery on Route 20 in Pittsfield. That's because, in 1942, a directive was sent out by the central ministry at Mount Lebanon, N.Y., that any operational communities take down the individual headstones and erect a single marker. The idea was to have their final resting places represent how they lived — as a community, not as individuals.





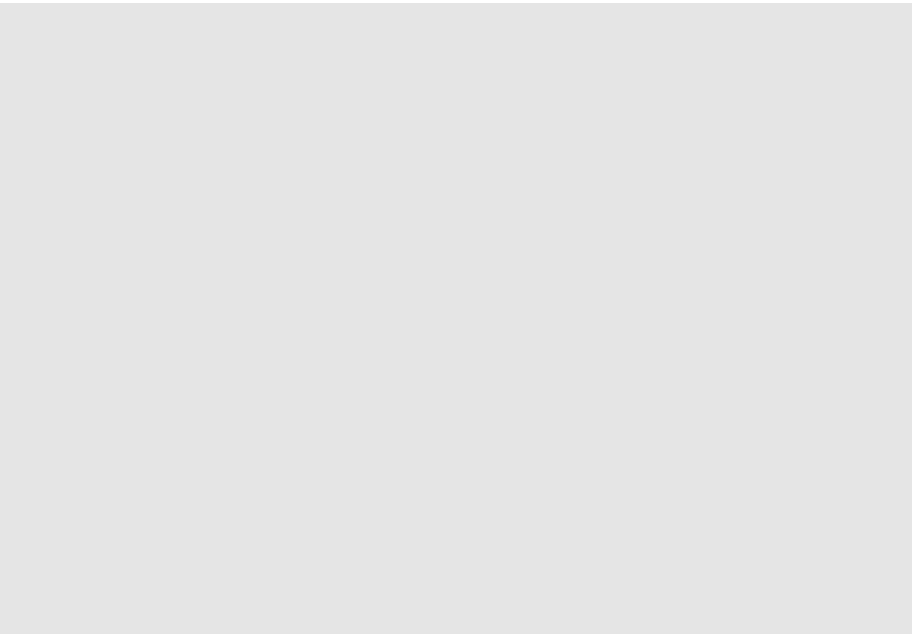
The grave marker for William Clark, the first Shaker to settle in Tyringham, is among the grave sites in the Shaker cemetery on Jerusalem Road.

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

"Tyningham closed in 1875, so the individual stones were never removed," he said.

However, the Tyningham Shakers did remove the original slate headstones with individual names and dates — a few of which could still be found in and near the graveyard. The removal is consistent with other Shaker burial grounds, such as the one in the town of Harvard, which moved to a system of "lollipop" iron markers, with just initials and dates, around 1873.

"We've found that this cemetery, based on the markers, seems to be separated with the brothers on one side and sisters on the other, which is really unusual," said sophomore Katie McCrary. She is spending the summer analyzing the survey's results, looking for patterns that align with or stand out from the other Shaker burial sites.



Matt Kirk, an archeologist with Hartgen Archeological Associates Inc., sets up a light detection and ranging scan to record a 3D image of the ground surface of the Shaker cemetery in Tyringham.

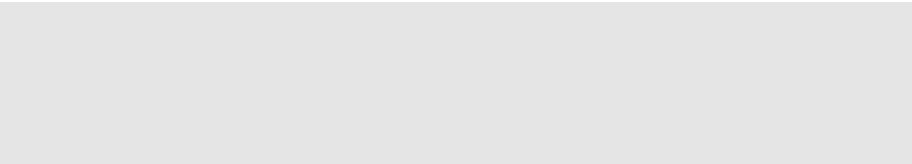
STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

While some students unearth the marble markers, others stretch ropes across the ground, laying out a grid at measured intervals for the ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey. A separate group moves through the cemetery mapping tree locations.

"We're mapping the trees for the GPR, but also because we want to know what the area looked like before the cemetery was here," said Burgess, who is majoring in anthropology and environmental studies.

"We're looking at forest successions, based on the history of the Shakers using maple for making candies and syrups. The lack of maple growth and old-growth maples in this forest is kind of confusing. So, we're looking at what is going on with the forest makeup.

"We're also trying to make a GIS map with the labels of everybody's name, date of death. Any information we have about them will be digitized and mapped."



Two marble grave markers, prior to being cleaned, in the Tyringham Shaker Cemetery.

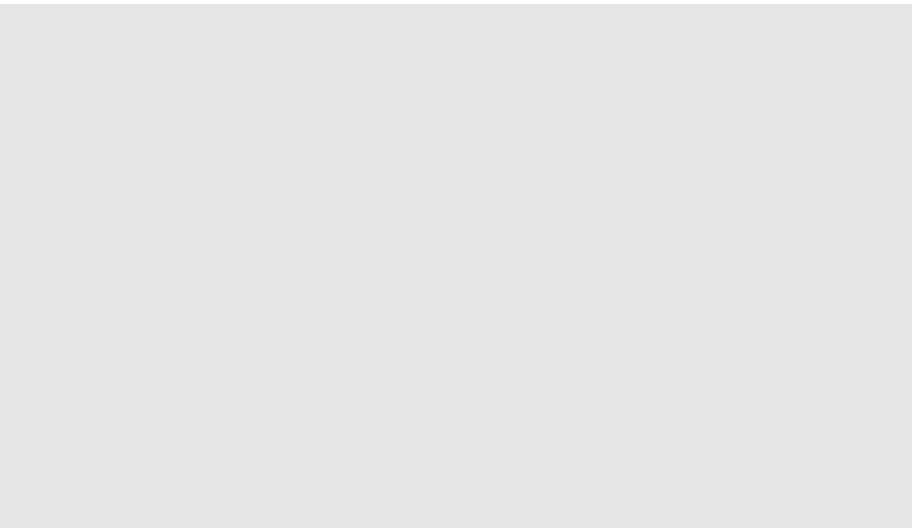
JENNIFER HUBERDEAU — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

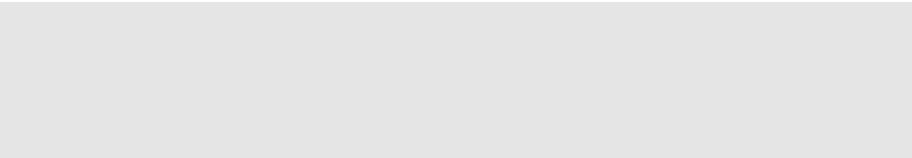
As Ben Heckman, project manager at Hartgen Archeological Associates Inc., prepares to scan the field with the GPR, he pushes a small box mounted to a barrowless wheelbarrow frame across the ground, explaining how the machine works and what he is looking for on the readouts.

“Basically, it reads the density of the material beneath it,” he said. “So, if it’s a very dense object, it will bounce back quicker, just like sonar. We can tell if there are subterranean features, like a grave shaft. It’s probably going to have looser soil with it, less compacted. We’ll see the looser soil within the broader, denser soils. We’re looking for those little changes.”

From the spacing of the stones, Heckman expected to see the grave shafts line up in a similar pattern.

But by the third day of the survey, those expectations were overtaken by the GPR findings.





Sophomore Katie McCrary records data as two members of the University of Richmond archeological survey team take measurements at the Tyringham Shaker Cemetery.

JENNIFER HUBERDEAU — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

Walter Wheeler, senior architectural historian with Hartgen, brought over the GPR results, showing that the Shakers were not buried in neat rows, but directly next to one another.

“The shafts are lined up with the walls very close together. The Shakers do not believe in the resurrection of the body, so how they were buried wouldn’t matter to them. That probably means these stones were probably all installed at once,” Wheeler said, pointing to the now-visible rows of parallel white marble stones.

That's all part and parcel of an archeological dig, Winiarski says, noting there are some areas outside of the cemetery walls that could be grave shafts. There's also a second cemetery site associated with the Shakers that he hopes to document in the fall.

The markers, 93 in all, will be reburied by the end of the day — a part of the archeological survey team's philosophy of "leave everything the way you found it."

But, for others, it's a way to preserve what's been found.

"Are there resources sufficient to protect this sacred ground? If there aren't, then it's best left in peace, don't you think?" says Peter Martin, a volunteer who serves as a site steward for several spots along the

Jennifer Huberdeau is the features editor at The Berkshire Eagle. She can be reached at jhuberdeau@berkshireeagle.com or 413-496-6229.

Tags

- TYRINGHAM SHAKER SETTLEMENT HISTORIC DISTRICT
- SHAKERS
- DOUGLAS L. WINIARSKI
- TYRINGHAM, MASSACHUSETTS
- TYRINGHAM
- SHAKER COMMUNITIES
- BEN HECKMAN
- PETER MARTIN
- HARTGEN ARCHEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATES INC.
- AVERY BURGESS
- TYRINGHAM SHAKER CEMETERY
- ARNOLD HADD
- UNITED SOCIETY OF BELIEVERS

Jennifer Huberdeau

Features Editor