



Lynn Fostine, a member of the Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery Preservation Committee, examines an oak tree that had grown around a headstone. The tree fell over the weekend, putting an end to a popular curiosity (CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT)

## Beloved Santa Rosa graveyard oak topples

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A California live oak that had grown to embrace the tombstone of a 19th century farmer fell to the ground over the weekend, putting an end to one of the most beloved curiosities in Santa Rosa's old Rural Cemetery.

But even after toppling over at the roots, the 75-foot-tall tree still eerily kept its grip on the headstone of Henry Mumford Taylor, who died in 1902 at the age of 70.

"It's still in the tree's clutches," longtime cemetery volunteer Sandy Frary said of the old granite marker wedged within the trunk of the oak. "It's like that tree will not give it up to the cemetery."

The oak long has sparked the curiosity of people who like to walk among the gnarly oaks and aged tombstones of the 160-year-old graveyard, the final resting place of many of Santa Rosa's most distinguished early citizens. Seeking light, it grew out at an odd 45 degree angle over the Taylor plot near the crest of the 17-acre hillside cemetery.

"That tree has to be one of the most photographed sites in the cemetery," said Bill Montgomery, a volunteer with the city's Rural Cemetery Preservation Committee. "Now it's going to be a big glaring sunny spot that's been shady and beautiful for years."

John Cushman, the retired pastor of Santa Rosa's Church of the Roses, walks the cemetery several times a week. He said the tree was standing when he walked past it on Friday, but it apparently fell sometime overnight, because on Saturday half of it was on the ground.

He said his photography group recently spent a day in the cemetery and many members trained their lenses on the landmark oak listing over Taylor's tomb.

The heritage tree had at some point grown in two directions, with one massive branch extending out over an adjoining plot, suspended only inches from the ground. Many people used that branch as a natural bench, often pausing there for photos. The city of Santa Rosa, concerned about public safety, put up a warning sign and installed an iron brace to stabilize the branch.

The other half of the tree grew in the opposite direction and appeared to be held up by Taylor's headstone.

"That stone was supporting that branch. Had it not grown onto that gravestone, it would have fallen a long time ago," Cushman said.

Henry Mumford Taylor was one of Santa Rosa's early settlers, having crossed the plains from Missouri in 1852 when he was 21.

An obituary that ran in The Press Democrat on Feb. 7, 1902, described him as "widely known," a lifelong farmer, "an honest man whose every word could be trusted and whose heart was constant to whatever he believed to be right."

Alan Hannum, a professional arborist and volunteer who lends his expertise to the Rural Cemetery Preservation Committee, estimated that the tree is about 80 years old, and probably took root after the city stopped maintaining the old burial ground in 1933. Earlier photos from the 1920s show a cemetery barren of big trees.

Over the decades, the oak slowly engulfed the head of the tombstone, which also bears the name of Taylor's second wife, Annie Gilmore, who died in 1913. Now only the first two letters of the Taylor name are visible.

The tombstone embedded in the tree trunk at the Taylor plot was a key stop on historical tours of the old cemetery, said Montgomery, a retired deputy director of Santa Rosa's Parks and Recreation department.

Hannum said a combination of common root rot, age and the awkward leaning of the tree finally caused it to fall.

"It will probably be removed, and a decision will be made within the committee as to what we can do with the wood," he said. "California oak is horrible building material."

Care will be taken, Montgomery added, to preserve the original Taylor headstone and repair it as funds permit.

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