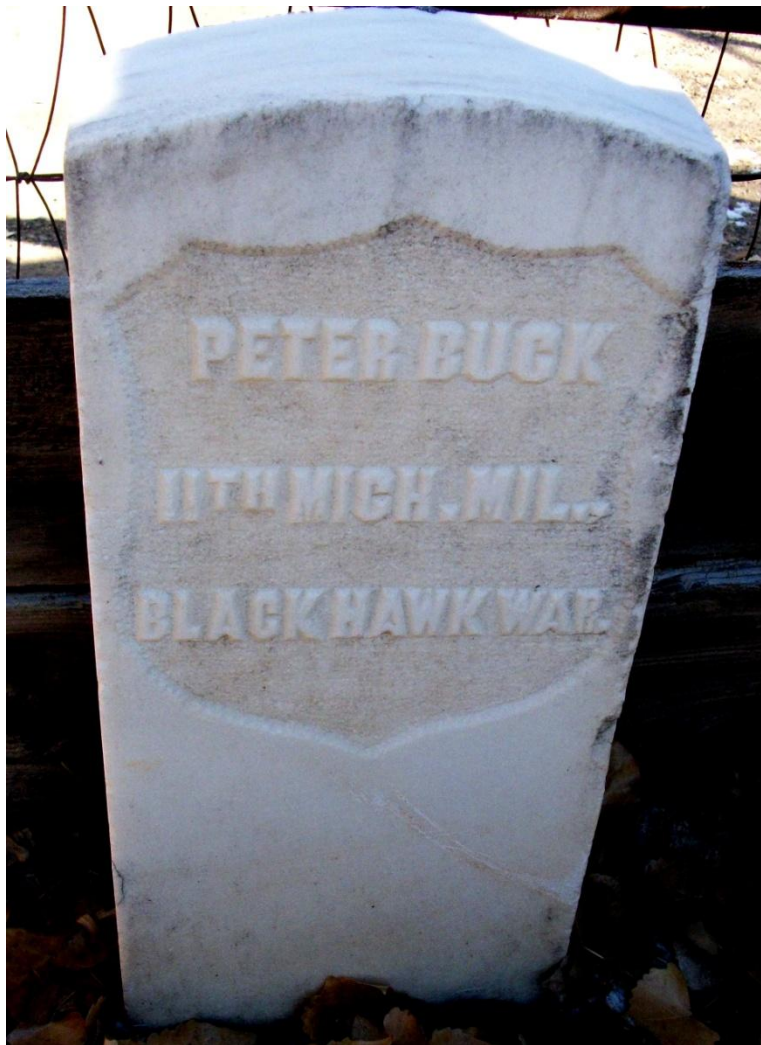


Unearthed headstone leads columnist on trail of history mystery

By Kathy Jordan

The headstone read: "Peter Buck, 11th Michigan Militia, Black Hawk War." Neither date of birth nor date of burial was etched into the stone. There were 30 foot markers, perhaps left accidentally by the town undertaker, along with it.

The headstone and grave foot markers were unearthed several years ago in the southeast section of Grand Junction's original town square mile, when they were discovered buried under a layer of cement.



Peter Buck's headstone was unearthed several years ago in the southeast section of Grand Junction's original town square mile. Teddy Jordan photo

The owner of the headstone and foot markers, who wished to remain anonymous, phoned recently and asked if I would like to take a look these stones and see what I could find out about them. Not one to pass on a mystery, I agreed.

This is what our research team was able to dig up--no pun intended.

According to a story in the May 4, 1896, Daily Sentinel, Michael Sullivan, ditch rider for District No. 2, was riding the ditch bank when he noticed something lodged under the wires crossing the ditch at what is now Horizon Drive and 26 ½ Road a short distance above the A.B.Hoyt ranch.

He had discovered the body of Peter Buck.

Hoyt helped Sullivan pull the body to the bank, and then Sullivan rode into town to notify the coroner, Dr. L.F. Ingersoll.

Ingersoll returned to the scene with H.C. Bucklin, the county undertaker.

The only clothes on the victim were a vest and shirt. Hoyt and Ingersoll searched the shirt and vest pockets and found \$56 in an inside vest pocket along with an envelope containing a U.S. pension certificate for Pete Buck, private of Captain Stewart's Company of Michigan Volunteers dated April 14, 1893. The envelope was addressed to Peter Buck, Stergus, Michigan. The Michigan address had been crossed out and readdressed to Peter Buck, No. 2134 Central Ave., Wichita, Kan.

The pension information apparently led the members of the Grand Army of the Republic to assume that Buck was a veteran of the Civil War.

Ingersoll determined that Buck had gone into the canal to take a bath, apparently had suffered cramps and had been unable to get out of the canal. He decided an inquest was not necessary.

Buck's body was taken to H.C. Bucklin's undertaking establishment and according to the Sentinel report buried that same afternoon.

Ingersoll set-about contacting people at the addresses they had found on Buck hoping to find some next of kin.

A few days after Buck's body was found William Bertholf stepped forward. He told a Sentinel reporter that he knew Buck and that Buck "was a well-to-do and respected citizen and property-owner of Sturgis, Mich., where he has a wife and son".

The next information on Buck arrived May 11, 1896, in a letter to Ingersoll from A.H. Waite of Sturgis, a nephew of Peter Buck. Waite informed Ingersoll that Peter Buck had one child, H.C. Buck, living in Wichita, Kan. The letter also informed Ingersoll that the disposition of the body of Peter Buck would be decided after Waite heard from Peter Buck's son.

The next day, May 12, the Sentinel printed a letter that H.C. Buck, son of the deceased, had sent to Ingersoll, He requested all the information about discovery of the body and the cause of death, if known.

The younger Buck wrote that his father had left on April 3, headed to Wolf State, Ore. He said his father had left Wichita, Kan., and he had with him baggage, a gold watch and chain and around \$80.

On May 20, 1896, Ingersoll received another letter from A.H. Waite telling him that Buck was not an old Civil War soldier. Waite wrote that Buck had served in the Indian War of 1832-36, but when the Civil War broke out he went west to mine.

So how did Peter Bucks's tombstone end up as part of a sidewalk at a house downtown with no indication that his grave was located at the same place?

Garry Brewer, the local authority on the Grand Army of the Republic, checked the GAR pension records and could not find a record of where Buck had been buried. He said that Buck would have been entitled to a headstone from the GAR despite the fact that he had not fought in the Civil War. Perhaps the GAR ordered the headstone then decided not to have it set at his grave because he didn't fight in the Civil War.

There is no record of Buck being buried at the Orchard Mesa Cemetery. So perhaps his body was exhumed and shipped to Kansas, and the headstone was then useless.

The property was owned by the Grand Junction Town and Development Co. No record can be found on what was located on the property before being sold in 1921 and a house was built on it.

Probably we'll never be able to solve this mystery.