Ray Hylan—AVIATION PIONEER
By Adriana Natali

Ray Hylan was born August 7, 1906 and died May 27, 1983 at the age of 76. He was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery with a mausoleum erected in his memory. His mausoleum in Range 10, Lot 5, is a large, modern-style structure with personalized decorations, showing that those who had erected the monument cared about preserving his memory. Flanking the HYLAN name on the front of the mausoleum are two commercial airplanes, reflecting his pioneering accomplishments in American aviation.

Ray Hylan was born in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, but ran away from home at the age of 14. Early in his career, Hylan established himself as a skilled pilot. In fact, Hylan has been described by his associates as one of the best pilots they had ever known. As shown in the accompanying photographs, his monument was erected with commercial airplanes as the central focus, which serve to preserve his memory as an aviator.

As one of America’s early aviators, Hylan founded the Ray Hylan School of Aeronautics on a 215-acre plot south of Rochester, which is now Marketplace Mall. The school became one of the first aviation schools in the country, making a name for Ray Hylan as one of the pioneers of aviation. The land for the school was purchased from about six farms, and approximately 100 acres of the real estate was marshland. The Hylan...
airfield was complete with three grass runways and a few small buildings located on the west end of the property. The airfield was home to flying lessons for civilians and World War II civilian pilots. When property taxes were raised in 1971, Hylan could no longer afford the operating costs of the flying school at Jefferson and West Henrietta roads and moved it to the Rochester/Monroe County Airport. During his days of teaching aviation skills, Ray Hylan experienced a few hardships with students, with a barnstorming accident as possibly one of the most detrimental. At the age of 21, Hylan was teaching a flying lesson to 18-year-old Stephen Peters, Jr. The student was said to have had an appetite for adventure, and to satisfy this hunger, Hylan attempted a tailspin on one of their lessons. However, he was unable to maintain control of the aircraft, causing the plane to crash and leaving Hylan severely injured and Peters dead. This, however, was not the end of Hylan’s flying career. After recovering, he continued to teach at the school for aeronautics until it was moved to the Rochester/Monroe County Airport.

During his years as an aviator, Ray Hylan became a close friend of the Wilmot family. Teaching the young James Wilmot how to fly, Hylan left James with many memories. One in particular was how during their lessons, Hylan would often go to sleep and allow James to take over control of the aircraft. James stated that he would occasionally have to wake Hylan up to avoid getting lost. Being the skilled aviator that he was, Hylan was able to get the plane back on course, often by following railroad tracks. Hylan and James Wilmot were also partners in owning the Lafayette School of Aeronautics, which was a primary school for Air Force cadets. During his flying days and business ventures with James Wilmot, Hylan also became a close friend of Gerald Wilmot. Gerald Wilmot and Ray Hylan became business partners, and they worked on many real estate ventures together. One of their most notable business ventures was the building of Marketplace Mall in Henrietta. In addition to Marketplace Mall, the two partners also invested in the Pittsford Plaza Shopping Center, making quite the name for themselves in shopping mall ventures. In addition to his projects with Wilmot, Hylan also invested money in the Genesee Brewing Company. Hylan did, however, miss out on a few investment opportunities. For example, Hylan wanted to buy stock in Xerox, but his offer was declined. Claiming he didn’t see a need to ask twice, Hylan did not pursue the issue. Initial investors in Xerox, of course, became rich. Nevertheless, his investments and business ventures left him a very wealthy man at the time.
of his death, with a financial worth of between $20 million and $30 million.

In addition to his business ventures, Hylan also donated a lot of money anonymously to different groups, meaning that his name did not come up often in stories or interviews involving local fundraisers. He indicated that he did not want to be solicited to donate money, pointedly telling interviewers “It’s my money, I’ll do what I want with it.”

One of Hylan’s notable contributions was the donation of several hundred acres of land off Jefferson Road to the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in the 1970s. In addition to RIT, Hylan also made contributions to the University of Rochester. With his contributions, he became a member of the University of Rochester President’s Society, and the university named a building on their campus in his memory. In addition to these gifts to universities, Hylan also donated his Boeing F4B4, which was a bi-winged Navy fighting plane, to the Smithsonian in the 1960s. The plane is the only one of its kind known to still exist and which has since been moved to the Air Space Museum in Washington D.C.

Ray P. Hylan ran away from home in Fitchburg, Massachusetts to settle in Rochester. As one of the pioneers of aviation, Hylan touched the lives of many people as a flying instructor. He also was successful in many of his business ventures, building an empire for himself in Rochester. Rarely seen without a baseball cap or cigar in his mouth, Hylan left a lasting impression on the people around him. Toward the end of his life, Hylan was battling cancer for nearly two years. In poor health, Hylan entered Strong Memorial Hospital Thursday morning, May 26, 1983 and passed away the next day on May 27, 1983.

(Editor’s Note: The author, Adriana Natali, is a student at the University of Rochester and prepared this essay as part of the course requirements for Religion 167, Speaking Stones, which is taught by Professor Emil Homerin, who is also a trustee of the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery.)
At about 1:00 o'clock in the morning of June 3, 1872, Rosetta Douglass Sprague, daughter of Frederick Douglass, was awakened by the smell of smoke in the house, which was home to Frederick Douglass, his wife Anna, and their daughter, Rosetta, as well as her husband, Nathan Sprague and their three children. All of them were at home sleeping, except Frederick Douglass, who was in Washington, D.C. on business.

Out of the window of her bedroom, Rosetta saw a bright light that she quickly realized was coming from the nearby barn, just a matter of feet away. It was totally engulfed in flames. On waking her husband, Nathan, and their three children, Rosetta immediately realized that the house in which they were standing was also burning.

The Douglass house stood at what is now 999 South Avenue, site today of the James P. B. Duffy School No. 12. In 1872, it was the southern edge of the city, and the Douglass house had a barn and outbuildings, with a horse and a cow housed in the barn.

Nathan Sprague managed to get Anna Murray Douglass (who was 59 years old) and the two older children, all of whom had been sleeping in upstairs rooms, out of the house safely. Then, he rescued the youngest child, an infant who had been sleeping in a crib in Rosetta’s and Nathan’s bedroom. The child, however, suffered smoke inhalation and nearly suffocated. Nathan then hurried to the barn to save the horse and cow. He managed to get the horse out safely, but the cow perished in the blaze.

Someone, perhaps a neighbor, ran to Fire Box 17 and sounded the fire alarm. Lack of water at the site prevented the fire trucks themselves from being useful in putting out the fires. But the firemen were helpful in saving some contents of the house.

The barn had apparently been set ablaze first, so the fire there advanced ahead of the one in the house. The carriages, sleighs, farming implements, harnesses, and such were all destroyed.

Neighbors, who arrived before the firemen, removed the piano from the house and with the help of firemen a little later, managed to save the bulk of Frederick Douglass’ extensive and valuable library. Some important documents and papers, however, were burned. Losses were estimated at $7,000, a substantial figure in 1872. Insurance paid $2,750 on the house, $750 on furnishings lost, $250 on the barn, and $250 on its contents. The arsonist was never caught.

When Frederick Douglass arrived home in Rochester from Washington, D.C., it was late at night. His family, he had learned, was being accommodated at the residence of Mrs. George Huntington Mumford at 266 South Avenue. Ann E. Mumford’s husband had died the year before in 1871, and she welcomed the Douglass/Sprague
family to live with her after fire destroyed their house and until permanent living arrangements could be made.

Frederick Douglass, born of a black slave mother and a white plantation overseer father, however, thought it was too late to impose himself on Ann Mumford’s hospitality at that hour of the night, so he decided to find a room in a downtown hotel. He first went to Congress Hall where the night clerk told him that all of the rooms were occupied. Douglass then asked if he could be furnished a cot and sleeping space anywhere in the hotel until morning. The clerk then said that Douglass should know better than to ask for any accommodations in that hotel.

Frederick Douglass had been a resident in Rochester since 1847. He was very soon known to the 30,000 people living there and made a positive impression on the community and was highly regarded by the populace for his antislavery efforts. It was hard to believe that a local hotel would refuse him a room in his own city where he had lived and worked with such distinction for 25 years.

Douglass then proceeded to the Waverly House to ask for a room there. Again, the night clerk informed him that there were no rooms available. Douglass told the clerk that his home in Rochester had burned, so he had no place to return to. Having read about the fire, the hotel clerk then suddenly asked, “Are you Frederick Douglass?” With an affirmative answer from Douglass, the clerk quickly discovered that there was indeed a room left that Mr. Douglass might occupy. But Douglass had had enough. Saddened by the glaring rejection from two hotels in his hometown, the internationally famous leader of America’s first civil rights movement, the abolition of slavery, walked out.

In reporting this event, the Rochester Daily Union and Advertiser concluded: “We can scarcely believe that any hotel proprietor of Rochester would be guilty of such meanness and injustice in this situation.”

After leaving the Waverly House, Douglass walked down South Avenue to No. 266, and awakened the sleepers inside. Douglass moved his daughter and son-in-law and their children to a house he bought in the South Wedge at 271 Hamilton Street. Douglass and his wife Anna moved to Washington, D.C., in anticipation of his receiving a government appointment.

In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed Douglass United States marshal for the District of Columbia. In 1881, President James Garfield appointed him recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia. In 1882, his wife Anna—a fine homemaker, mother, and supportive wife for 44 years—died. In 1884, Douglass married Helen Pitts, his secretary in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds. Pitts was born in Honeoye, south of Rochester in Ontario County. She was a college-educated white woman of 46, he was 66. In 1889, President Benjamin Harrison appointed Douglass U.S. minister and consul-general to the Republic of Haiti. He and Helen moved there and became popular with the Haitians, who had established the first free black republic in the western hemisphere. The Haitian government appointed Douglass as Haiti’s commissioner at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

On February 20, 1895, Douglass attended a meeting of the National Council of Women in Washington, D.C.. When he returned home a little after 5:00 p.m., he collapsed and died of a heart attack. He was 77 years old.

(Note: Frederick Douglass, Anna Murray Douglass, and Helen Pitts Douglass are buried in Mount Hope Cemetery, Section T, Lot 26. Nathan Sprague and Rosetta Douglass Sprague are buried in Range 2, Lot 200. George Huntington Mumford and Ann E. Mumford are buried in Section V, Lot 38.)
West Main Street was where Colonel Nathaniel Rochester, founder of our city, and other early pioneers were buried until 1859 when their bodies were transferred to Section R of Mount Hope Cemetery.

What we failed to point out was that in 1851, Nathaniel Rochester’s family purchased a lot in Mount Hope Cemetery and moved his remains to Section R. In 1859, the other burials in the Buffalo Street Cemetery were removed to Section W of Mount Hope Cemetery. When Jonathan Child died in 1860, he was buried directly in Section R of Mount Hope to lie beside the Rochester family. Child had married a daughter of Nathaniel Rochester. By 1860, the Buffalo Street burial grounds were completely gone to be replaced by the first city hospital.

1865, August 24: A committee chose, submitted, and approved between half and three-quarters of an acre known as the Grove for burial of soldiers. Also, a repair fund not to exceed $50,000 to be set up and used forever for the repair of the cemetery. Discussed and sent to Charter Amendment Committee.

Part of this plot of land in Section BB became known as the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) lot, and another part became the Civil War plot.

1870: Water pipes have been installed so that cold spring water is carried to all of the then existing parts of the cemetery.

1870: The wooden observation tower on the pinnacle of the Section I has been removed.

The observation tower, known as the Fandango, stood at the top of Section I, near the Gideon Cobb obelisk. Although it was made of wood, its surface was scored to look like blocks of stone.

This observation tower was known as the Fandango. It offered an unobstructed view of Rochester, Lake Ontario, Bristol Hills, and surrounding farmland and was highly favored as a destination for a leisurely walk.

Although the first Mount Hope Avenue railway opened in 1862, this photo was taken after the stone gatehouse at the north entrance was built in 1874. The gatehouse is seen in the background. In the days before electricity, trolleys were pulled by horses or, in this case, a donkey.

In 1931, the Elmwood Avenue gate to the cemetery was completed. The photograph was taken soon after construction was complete, evidenced by the presence of construction debris. In the distance is the University of Rochester library, visible because the trees in the cemetery are still too young to block the view.
American school children continue to be taught that DeWitt Clinton, governor of New York State, built the Erie Canal. Schoolbooks contend that it was called “Clinton’s Ditch”, which indeed it was. But it was a pejorative that many folks opposed to the canal applied to the finished product. However, a new book published by the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery challenges the schoolbook assertion and tells the illuminating story of the man who did more than any other person to promote, plan, and construct the Erie Canal. The book answers many other questions as well. What was higher education like in America when Myron Holley went off to college in 1795? Did you know that Myron Holley and Frederick Douglass were taught oratory by the same teacher?

Did you know that Ontario County, when Myron Holley became its county clerk, encompassed an area from Lake Ontario to the north, Pennsylvania to the south, Seneca River to the east, and Lake Erie to the west?

How could a murder end Myron Holley’s law career?

Do you know why the fledgling United States went to war against powerful Great Britain and how it won the War of 1812? Do you know what happened to the hundreds of American refugees when the British burned Buffalo, Black Rock, Lewiston, and Youngstown?

Did you know that Myron Holley was elected to the New York State legislature to persuade the state to finance a canal across the state? Did you know that he was appointed one of four commissioners to plan and accomplish the Erie Canal, and then was made the treasurer and superintendent of its construction? Here was the man who was pretty much in charge of everything. It is a fascinating story.

What were the Freemasons doing that Myron Holley strongly felt was destroying democracy in America? And what did Holley do that resulted in reduced Masonry membership by 82% in Ontario County and similar results statewide and nationally? It is a dramatic story.

Why did Myron Holley and a few of his friends found a national political party that scared the wits out of the Whigs and Democrats? And what was it that Myron Holley accomplished that caused Frederick Douglass, when he moved to Rochester in 1847, to honor him with the statement: “The ground here has been prepared for me by the labors of others, notably by the Honorable Myron Holley.”

You will be rejuvenated and rewardingly informed by reading this biography, Myron Holley: Canal Builder/Abolitionist/Unsung Hero. It is $20 well spent and is for sale at the Landmark Society, at the Mount Hope Cemetery office, and at www.fomh.org.
Published by the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery, Rochester, NY 14620, a nonprofit member organization founded in 1980.

© 2014 The Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery

Richard O. Reisem, Editor
Ron Brancato, Graphic Design

Basic annual membership is $20.
Call 585-461-3494 for a supporter application.