

# New veterans cemetery has first occupant

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Nearly two years to the day since construction started on the Surry County Veterans Cemetery, the graveyard has its first occupant.

That occurred Tuesday when Stephen Earl Keith, a 64-year-old veteran who lived in Pilot Mountain, was laid to rest at the cemetery located just off NC 89 west of Mount Airy near Antioch Baptist Church.

The service included an Honor Guard and a 21-gun salute. “They had the whole works of a military funeral,” said Don Holder, an Air Force veteran who launched the cemetery project in December 2012.

Holder owned the hilly, 1.5 acre site, which he deeded to the local Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion groups that own Veterans Memorial Park to provide a resting place for those who have served the country, and their spouses. A number of local businesses and individuals donated heavy equipment and other services, materials and money to help make Holden’s vision a reality.

Tuesday’s burial of Keith, who is believed to have been a U.S. Army veteran, is a prime example of the need that Holder hoped to meet by establishing the special graveyard for veterans.

When Keith died on Dec. 16, his widow faced a crisis in trying to find a funeral home and burial plot for her husband due to financial hardship. The two had moved here from Florida after retirement, Holder said, and originally were from up North.

“it’s really been an ordeal, “he said of the predicament faced by the surviving spouse.

Mrs. Keith sought help for her husband’s burial from the Surry County Veterans Services Office, which referred her to Holder.

“And I said, ‘yeah, we can help you – we’ve got a place to bury him.’” He recalls telling the woman.

The Tuesday ceremony came together through a collective effort of the Honor Guard and others in the community, which included Larry Phillips, a county commissioner who is a reverend, volunteering to lead the funeral service for Keith.

“It’s accomplished it goal right now,” Holder said of the new cemetery helping one person in need, which is expected to continue in the future given the inevitability of death.

Holder is quick to praise those who played major roles in developing the Surry County Veterans Cemetery, through donations of time, money, equipment and materials.

This includes Howard Hull and Billy McCraw, who removed stumps from the property and graded it; Rick Sowers of Sowers Construction; Kester Sink; Ararat Rock Products; Acme Stone; Blue Ridge Concrete; John Springthorpe; and Deborah and Bob Walker.

“It’s just something that I’m proud of,” Holder said of the cemetery project.

“The whole thing has been worth it (so far), because of one woman who didn’t have a place to bury her husband.

**[DLHawkins transcription – 09/17/2020]**