



## Survivor of Custer's Last Stand honored in South Deerfield with veteran grave marker nearly 100 years after death

Published: Saturday, May 07, 2011, 3:16 PM Updated: Saturday, May 07, 2011, 7:19 PM



**Brian Steele, The Republican**

By



[View full size](#)

Brian Steele / The Republican

Dennis Picard, left, director of Storowton Village Museum at the Big E, and others dressed in the post-Civil War uniforms of the 7th Regiment of the U.S. Cavalry. They unveiled Smith's new veteran marker, covered by the flag, after a memorial service Saturday in South Deerfield.

**DEERFIELD** – Almost 100 years after his death, an area man was finally honored Saturday with a bronze grave marker acknowledging his service beside Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer during the 19th-century Indian Wars.

A memorial service was held at Brookside Cemetery for Pvt. William E. Smith, who lived in Shrewsbury before enlisting with Company D of the **7th Regiment of the U.S. Cavalry** in 1875. He died in South Deerfield in 1918 at the age of 64.

Smith fought in the **Battle of the Little Bighorn** in 1876, also known as Custer's Last Stand.

"Custer and his immediate command may have been all killed, but not all men with Custer died at the Little Bighorn on that day," said C. Lee Noyes, editor of the **Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Association's** newsletter, before the marker's unveiling.

"Over half the 7th Cavalry who participated in the battle lived to fight another day," perhaps because Custer divided his regiment into several units, he said.

Smith fought in another unit, avoiding the utter defeat of Custer's men by the Sioux Indians of modern-day North Dakota.

After leaving the service, Smith married, raised four daughters and worked as a shoemaker in Maine and Massachusetts before finally settling in South Deerfield as a farmer, Noyes said.

Douglas B. Tierney, chair of the Deerfield Memorial Day Committee, said, "We recognize service and we're so happy that we had that opportunity today."

But that "long, long overdue recognition" was hard-won, said Dennis Picard, director of **Storowton Village Museum** at the Big E. He spearheaded the efforts to get Smith a veteran marker, rather than the simple civilian stone he has next to his wife's.

"Over the past three years, I have been periodically delving into the apparent quagmire of trying to appropriately mark the last resting place of William E. Smith," Picard said.

Government officials told him that since Smith's grave was technically marked, they would not provide a veteran marker; he then spoke to local veterans groups, who all denied it was their responsibility, he said.



[View full size](#)

Brian Steele / The Republican

The Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Association purchased this plaque for Smith from a private source. Picard had been trying to obtain one for several years.

up and bought Smith a plaque from a private source.



[View full size](#)

Brian Steele /  
The Republican

C. Lee Noyes, left, a leading historian and Custer scholar, and Douglas B. Tierney, right, chair of the Deerfield Memorial Day Committee.

On Memorial Day in 2009, he personally placed a flag and other military regalia on Smith's grave, he said.

After bringing his request to military and veterans affairs officials all over the east coast, including to **Fort Drum** in New York and Washington, D.C., "not one of them was able, within the area of their power, to help me. Many seemed frustrated themselves, especially the executive officer at Fort Drum."

The Custer Battlefield Historical & Museum Association then stepped

Noyes said that regardless of one's opinion of the Indian Wars, it's important to pay tribute to those who served their country.

Ralph Healy, the cemetery's superintendent, said he and his staff have updated records to identify any veterans who may not have the proper markers. They have made that information available to local veterans groups, he said.

"Occasions like this where we get to recognize the work of the common trooper, people come out because, who are they?" said Tierney. "They're us."

© 2011 masslive.com. All rights reserved.

(c) 2011 The Republican Company. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

We wish to thank reporter Brian Steele and the *Springfield* (Mass.) *Republican* for permission to reprint this article in the CBHMA *Battlefield Dispatch* and to post it on the CBHMA website.

C. Lee & Michele A. Noyes, Editors, *The Battlefield Dispatch*

[http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2011/05/survivor\\_of\\_custers\\_last\\_stand.html](http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2011/05/survivor_of_custers_last_stand.html)