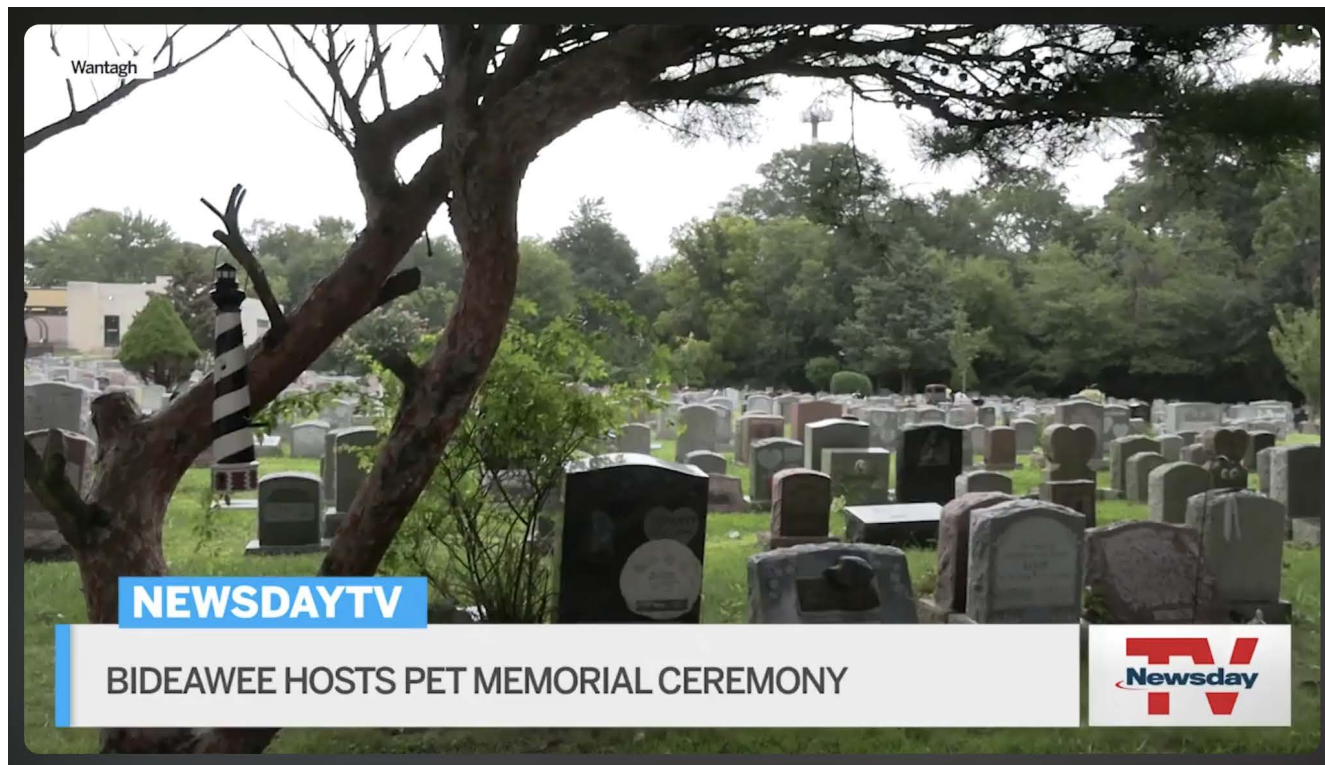


LONG ISLAND / [LI LIFE](#)

Bideawee Pet Memorial Park gives owners place of peace for their deceased animals



WATCH NOW • 2:40

'He wasn't a pet, he was a member of the family'

The Bideawee Pet Memorial Park in Wantagh was the site for a memorial service to honor pets that have died. The cemetery is home to about 45,000 pets, including some celebrities like former President Richard Nixon's dog, Checkers. NewsdayTV's Steve Langford reports. Credit: Gary Licker

By James Kindall[Special to Newsday](#)

Updated September 22, 2023 12:12 pm

 [SHARE](#)

A gray curtain of rain had settled over the Bideawee pet memorial cemetery in Wantagh by the time the organization's president, Leslie Granger, stepped up to the microphone. The crowd in front of her, assembled for a memorial service earlier this month, shifted under protective tents to avoid water that streamed through eyelets in the plastic. And yet, no one left.

They were there to pay tribute to the animal companions that had licked their faces, chirped on their shoulders and purred in their ear that everything was going to be all right. What was a little rain?



Abraham Sanchez, of Queens, holds a photo of his dog, Benji, at a memorial service at the Bideawee Pet Memorial Park in Wantagh earlier this month. Credit: Linda Rosier

“We’ll probably smell like wet dogs when this is over,” Granger said to a ripple of laughter. “But we all know that is not such a bad thing.”

Not such a bad thing at all.

Agnes Cornell, 71, had come up from Webster, Florida, for the ceremony and to visit her seven dogs, who are laid to rest at the cemetery. She said she has driven here three times already this year and plans on coming twice more before the year’s end. All to say hello to Muffin, Cuddles, Buttons, Mollie, Sandy, Dixie and Holly.

Sign up for the NewsdayTV newsletter

From breaking news to special features and documentaries, the NewsdayTV team is covering the issues that matter to you.

SIGN UP

By clicking Sign up, you agree to our [privacy_policy](#).

“I talk to them,” said Cornell. “I try to remember the little things. I’m going to put little scarecrows on the grave for Halloween.”

To the casual observer, all this might appear to be a bit much. After all, they were just some affectionate animals. But the surrounding 11-acre field filled with 45,000 pets has a tail-wagging serenity that seems like a testament to the value of such gatherings.

A wind chime placed on one grave jingles in the distance. At night, the grounds are lit by solar lights in the form of angels. A few owners put up Christmas lights in December.

Some have decided to stay with their animal companions forever. Sixteen people have had their cremated remains buried alongside their pets at the cemetery, an accommodation that became legal four years ago. Forty-one more have signed up for when their time comes.

“People think we’re crazy,” said Janet Zimmerman, an independent registered social worker who provides pet grief counseling services for the bereaved. “They don’t get it. But we get it.”

Longtime tradition

People have been burying animals in various ways for various reasons since ancient times.

The Egyptians mummified cats, which they considered deities. The skeletons of 1,300 dogs, dating from the 5th to the 3rd century BCE, were found in the Ashkelon dog cemetery in Israel. The Cimetière des Chiens, or Cemetery of the Dogs, in France is the oldest pet cemetery in Europe and is the resting place of Rin Tin Tin, a Hollywood canine hero who appeared in 27 films in the early 1900s. A pet cemetery in Mississippi is dedicated to coon dogs, while one in Oklahoma City is reserved for rodeo animals. A former governor of Maine, Percival Proctor Baxter, had all 14 of his Irish setters and a horse placed in a private pet cemetery on Mackworth Island.

The Hartsdale Pet Cemetery in Westchester County is the nation’s oldest and largest. Founded in 1896, it started when a sympathetic Manhattan veterinarian let a grieving client bury his dog in his apple orchard. The ground now is the resting place of more than 80,000 animals, including a 425-pound tiger, which police discovered being kept in an apartment in Harlem.

A half dozen pet cemeteries exist on Long Island, the most elaborate being Bideawee (Scottish for “stay awhile”). Its 68,000 gravesites make it the second largest pet burial ground in the United States, the population split between its two locations in Wantagh and Westhampton.



Linda Ortado, of Massapequa Park, visits the graves of her 12 dogs, buried at Bideawee's cemetery in Wantagh. Credit: Linda Rosier

Socialite and animal welfare activist Flora D'Auby Jenkins Kibbe started Bideawee in 1903 as a nonprofit animal shelter in Manhattan, patterning it after a no-kill animal refuge she observed in Paris. She and a group of her female friends set up the shelter in Murray Hill next to the East River, since that was where people went to drown unwanted dogs and cats.

Kibbe acquired the Wantagh cemetery, which was formerly a farm, in 1915; the Westhampton site was opened in 1955.

Burials and cremations at Bideawee cost between \$1,500 and \$2,000, depending on the size of the pet and the plot. Owners can request private viewing rooms.

Last Hope, a separate nonprofit pet adoption and animal rescue organization, rents space on the grounds from Bideawee, which also takes in animals and gets them ready for adoption.

The animals buried at the park in Wantagh include ducks and parakeets, a cricket, monkeys, a ferret, a pet mouse, skunks, snakes, raccoons, rabbits, a caiman alligator and more, including Gary the grasshopper and "Birdie Sanders." The tributes written on the graves run from saccharine to sanguine: The site where the founder's dog, Beau, is buried states: "No heaven will ever heaven be unless my dogs are there to welcome me." Meanwhile, a commemorative plaque in a patio area states simply, "See you later, dood."

"When we get a pet, we usually don't realize they probably are going to go before we do," said Zimmerman. "Having a pet can be heartbreaking, but it's worth it."

Celebrity connections

One of the most visited sites is a large rock embedded with a bronze plate honoring Sarge, a Belgian shepherd who was a scout in the brutal assault on Monte Cassino, a hilltop Catholic abbey in Italy, during World War II.

A favorite of the staff was an adopted stray cat named Red, who wandered onto the grounds and took it upon himself to accompany every family to their graveside service.

“Red was our professional mourner,” said Bideawee’s chief financial officer, Ray Cushmore. “He knew where he was needed. Pets have an understanding that we don’t.”

The organization holds walking tours on occasion and a stroll through the area can reveal famous tidbits of history. A rose-colored marble gravestone in the center of the park contains the remains of Checkers, the family pet and historical prop of former President Richard M. Nixon.



The grave of Richard Nixon’s dog, Checkers, who died at the age of 12. Credit: Linda Rosier

Nixon had been picked by future President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952 to be his running mate but ran into trouble when the press discovered his backers were reimbursing him for campaign expenses. Knowing his place on the ticket was threatened, Nixon held a televised broadcast detailing his modest lifestyle, but vowing he would not return one political gift — a black-and-white cocker spaniel beloved by his daughters, Julie and Tricia.

The “Checkers Speech” was labeled emotional pandering by pundits, but it generated an outpouring of sympathy. Nixon remained on the ticket to become vice president. Checkers, who died in 1964 at age 12, stayed at other Nixon residences and never actually occupied the White House.

As far as celebrity status, a tour of both the Wantagh and Westhampton sites could almost be arranged titled “Departed Pets of the Rich and Famous.”

Comedian and political commentator Jon Stewart had his pit bull mix buried at Bideawee, while composer Marvin Hamlisch laid to rest three dogs. Film and Broadway star Nathan Lane had his French bulldog Mabel cremated at Bideawee — she was the pampered pup in his book “Naughty Mabel.” Singer Roberta Flack placed her Shiba Inu named Koiko at the Wantagh location.

English writer and humorist P.G. Wodehouse takes the prize for celebrity-associated pet interments. After moving to Southampton in 1952, he and his wife often took in strays and contributed to a local animal shelter. He had 10 cats and dogs buried at Bideawee.

During an impromptu excursion along the headstones in Wantagh, Cushmore gestured at one with the image of an iguana embedded on its face. He pointed to its name.

“The people of Tokyo can sleep well tonight knowing we have Godzilla here,” he said.

A moment later, he stopped at a rose-colored monument with four names on it — Nancy, Fanny, Buddy and Pepper. It was time for a round of “Jeopardy!,” the animal category.

“Guess what kind of pet is buried here,” Cushmore said.

According to the inscriptions, the four mystery pets lived about 20 years each, so that probably ruled out cats and dogs. Obviously, it wasn’t the cricket, a favorite insect buried nearby at the behest of a scientist. Nor the tortoise named “Speed Bump,” interred not far away, who lived to the ripe old age of 65. Parrots? Lizards? What?

Cushmore gave a triumphant smile.

“Miniature horses,” he said.

‘A part of our family’

The memorial park is a familiar location for Cornell, the now-Florida resident who regularly visits her seven dogs. Her father, a tinsmith, made canine coffins at a company in Freeport.

“I grew up with dogs and cats,” she said. “My grandparents had a farm in Merrick and we learned to respect them and love them and make them a part of our family.”

Brooklyn resident Maureen Gangaram comes at least twice a year to be with her two dogs, both buried in the same coffin. After the commemoration service, she tidied up the gravesite, added some flowers and

straightened the faux grass. She is still grieving Oreo, a black Yorkie-Shih Tzu mix with a shaggy, expectant face that could have been used in a dog commercial.



Maureen Gangaram, of Brooklyn, tends to the plot of her dogs, Oreo and Mickey, at the Bideawee Pet Memorial Park in Wantagh. Credit: Linda Rosier

He died a year and a half ago.

“The pain is too much,” she said. “You develop a special attachment. When they hurt, you hurt.”

On a meditative stroll eight years ago while visiting the site, where she buried seven dogs, Beverly Poppell began wondering whether she could make Bideawee her own final destination. Poppell, 74, of Bay Shore, is a former radio journalist who later became an attorney and now is the executive director of the Pet Safe Coalition outreach program, which helps people make preparations for their pets in emergency situations.

This was back in the time before such arrangements were legal. But to Poppell’s surprise, Cushmore told her several people were already on a waiting list. She added her name to it.

“No one knows what happens when we die, whether we go to a spiritual place or wherever,” Poppell said. “But I figure we have to go somewhere. And I thought there’s no better resting place than with my pets.”

Her mother is 106 and Poppell is hoping that, considering her genes, her wish will not be fulfilled for quite a while. Most everyone in her family is on board with the decision, Poppell said. Her husband is still considering it.

“He hasn’t ruled it out,” she said.