

**The Lewisburg Cemetery Chapel: A Community
Treasure**
by
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On April 10, 1848, the Lewisburg Cemetery Association was incorporated by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The cemetery began with six acres in East Buffalo Township, purchased from John Chamberlin. It is nonprofit and nonsectarian, governed by a seven member volunteer Board of Managers and a President.

The Lewisburg Cemetery provides a range of services, including traditional casket and mausoleum burial, in-ground placement of ashes, and above ground interment of ashes in columbarium niches. Families often purchase perpetual



Lewisburg Cemetery chapel with columbarium and vault. Nancy Neuman photo

funds for placement of flowers on graves. Those funds are held in restricted investments. Income from these services is not sufficient to support complete grounds maintenance, modern machinery, and improvements in the cemetery.

As a result, the Association relies upon financial contributions from friends of the cemetery to supplement its income.

In the mid 19th century when the Lewisburg Cemetery was founded, a rural cemetery movement spread around the nation during a time of significant urban development. The rural cemetery movement in America was influenced by a romantic style of landscaping that was fashionable among English garden designers. As rural cemeteries came into existence, they served as public parks before municipal parks were common. They offered a tranquil space where ordinary people could enjoy art and sculpture in a pastoral outdoor setting. The Lewisburg Cemetery, once on the outskirts of town, exemplifies the rural cemetery movement. With gentle hills and trees, magnificent monuments, beautiful artwork and carvings, it is intended to be a refreshing place of quiet contemplation for members of the community.

Prior to the establishment of the Lewisburg Cemetery, town plots, family farms, and churchyards typically were used for burials. Church cemeteries began to reach their limits, creating health concerns, and churches wanted the land for new construction.

When the Lewisburg Cemetery opened in autumn 1848, townspeople began disinterring graves, moving remains and headstones to the new cemetery.



McClure monument (ca. 1833) removed to Lewisburg Cemetery from Presbyterian Church graveyard. Nancy Neuman photo

Many of the removals came from the Presbyterian Church on Market Street and the Lutheran Church on South Third Street. Other removals came from small cemeteries located at the corners of Third and Market and Fifth and Market Streets. As a result, burials in the cemetery predate 1848. The remains of early settlers in Union County rest there, including veterans of the Revolutionary War.

Burial plots were laid out in sections, with paths and avenues. The original six acres of the Lewisburg Cemetery include three family burial circles arranged along a winding road that is wide enough to accommodate horse drawn hearses..



Miller Circle, Lewisburg Cemetery. Nancy Neuman photo.

At the main entrance near St. Catherine Street stood a two story arched gatehouse where the sexton lived. Hearses entered the cemetery through the arch. The gatehouse was completed on October 13, 1849. Its location typified the rural cemetery movement because it separated the cemetery from the noisy life of the town into a winding, ascending road that led people toward a quiet, natural landscape. In 1892 the cemetery moved the house to a lot it owned across from the cemetery on the southeast corner of South Seventh and St. George Streets. The annexes did not fit the new lot, but the main part of the gatehouse remains

intact with the arch filled in. In 1963 the cemetery sold the house to Bucknell University.



Lewisburg Cemetery Gatehouse built 1849. Union County Historical Society photo

A small white building with a belfry inside the cemetery grounds became the office and gatehouse. In 2000 a new maintenance building and office was completed in the middle of the cemetery. It is named for William R. James to honor his many years of volunteer service to the Lewisburg Cemetery.

The iron fence along South Seventh Street was erected in 1886, paid for by donations from the second president of the cemetery, Thomas Beaver of Danville, who built Beaver Memorial Church, and D. Bright Miller, son of the Hon. George F. Miller, the cemetery's first president.

As the cemetery ran out of space, it gradually acquired more land until it reached its current size of 38 acres. At its October 3, 1898 meeting when the cemetery was 50 years old and comprised 12 acres, the Board of Managers voted to build a chapel and a vault. The structures were to be located on part of six additional acres purchased in 1878 from Paul Geddes. The land is adjacent to and south of the original six acres. In 1897 the cemetery association set aside 32 by 32 square feet of land near the site of the chapel for the Grand Army of the Republic Post 52 to bury Civil War veterans.

Building the Cemetery Chapel

The Board of Managers agreed to use stone for the chapel and chose red sandstone located in Centre Hall to construct both buildings. The cemetery hired stone mason Chancey Foster for \$1575 to build the outside of the chapel and the adjacent vault. William E. Yoder was awarded \$478 as the contractor for a slate roof, plastering, painting, and woodwork.

In March 1899 the Board decided for practical reasons to put a cellar under the chapel, which Mr. Foster agreed to construct for \$180, not including the woodwork. Additional funds paid to Mr. Foster amounted to \$1178 by April 1899. Monuments built by Chancey Foster in the cemetery exemplify his talent as a stone mason and artist.



Foster grave. Monument carved by Chancey Foster for his wife Enna.
Nancy Neuman photo

The site for the vault was to be directly behind the chapel to the west. Plans included a flat cement roof and an iron door on the front. The vault, or holding crypt, was used to store the remains of deceased persons in winter because graves were dug by hand, an impossible task when the ground was frozen.

In May 1899 the cemetery association paid \$40 for a circular stained glass window with a portrait of Jesus. It bought 124 chairs at \$1 each and \$2 for a table from the chair factory (later Pennsylvania House), paid \$2 for a turned

wood coffin stand and \$4.25 for a stove. In addition, the cemetery bought a Bible, a dozen hymnals, and an umbrella rack. A fountain and garden were placed in front of the chapel. As part of the project, about 100 shade trees were planted around the cemetery grounds.



Chapel interior with original chairs, table, and coffin stand. Greaves photo

The Board placed a time capsule in a box inside the keystone above the front door of the chapel, which bears the date 1899. The box contains three copies of the cemetery charter, bylaws, rules and regulations. Also included are copies of the *Lewisburg Saturday News*, the *Lewisburg Chronicle*, the *Lewisburg Journal* and the *Philadelphia Press* as well as bank statements from the First National Bank and Union National Bank, both of Lewisburg.

With changes in township and borough boundaries, the Lewisburg Cemetery is now entirely within the Borough of Lewisburg. The stone chapel is included in Lewisburg's Historic District as a contributing structure that should be preserved. It is an example of the late Gothic or Gothic revival style of architecture.

The chapel is approximately 25 feet wide and 36 feet long with a 12 foot pitched roof. The sides are 12 feet high and the gable ends are 24 feet high. On each side are four stone buttresses with stone caps that are lighter in color than

the walls. The outside of the stained glass window is also surrounded by light stone accents. Pediments on the ends of the roof each have a different symbol.



Lewisburg Cemetery Chapel, Memorial Day 2012. Paul R. Mauger photo

The vault is built into a hill. It is approximately 14 feet wide, 19 feet long, 11 feet high at the front, and 7 feet high at the back. Its flat roof has a stone



Lewisburg Cemetery vault built 1899. Greaves photo

cornice around the perimeter. A roman style arch made of light colored stone

surrounds the iron door. A decorative stone cross is above the entrance. The stone in both buildings is laid in an ashlar pattern with tooled, extruded rose color mortar joints. Now that graves are dug mechanically, the vault is no longer in use.

Maintenance Issues, Chapel and Vault

The chapel eventually fell into disrepair. For about 25 years it was used as a storage shed for mowers and other equipment. The stained glass window was broken by vandals, probably by rocks thrown from the outside.

Like other nonprofit private cemeteries, the Lewisburg Cemetery did not have sufficient financial resources above what is needed for regular care of the cemetery to provide costly maintenance of the building. As funeral homes began to offer comfortable space for services, the chapel, with neither heat nor electricity, was no longer an attractive place to rent for funerals.

In 1985, thanks to a \$10,000 bequest from Brown R. Dunkle, and funds from cemetery reserves, the chapel was completely renovated by CVC Contractors. The bequest was the catalyst to begin restoration. It was left in memory of Dunkle's wife Anlyn and his parents Charles F. and Laura M. Dunkle. CVC contractors and William and Carol Metzger were instrumental in ensuring that sufficient additional funds and the necessary labor were available to complete the project.

William Metzger found the interior of the chapel a shambles when he started the project in 1985. The old chairs were stacked up and the caning ruined. Oil stains and smells permeated the space. Glass shards from the stained glass window were scattered on the floor. The walls were damaged from water that had seeped in from the outside.

The exterior stone was re-pointed and contractors installed a new ceiling and carpeting. Wainscoting, the altar table, and casket stand were restored, and the original chairs were re-caned.

Rick Wolfe, owner of Watsonstown Glass, agreed to repair the stained glass window. Metzger had saved what he could find of the broken glass. It took 10 months to restore the window. Wolfe had to create matching pieces of glass,

some painted, and some stained, to replace missing pieces. Frank Weidman of Lebanon Stained Glass assisted Wolfe in this delicate endeavor. A transparent cover now protects the window on the outside of the chapel.



Cemetery chapel stained-glass window damaged by vandals (left) and restored in 1985 (right).
Rick Wolfe photo



Paul R. Mauger photo

The cemetery contracted for a new roof in 1997. The original stove was discarded and replaced in 1998 by a black cast parlor stove manufactured by the Central Foundry of Lewisburg and patented in 1875. The stove is on permanent loan from the Slifer House Museum, once the home of Eli Slifer who served on the cemetery Board of Managers from 1858 to 1886.

Burial customs are always evolving. Many families now choose cremation over traditional casket burials; the Lewisburg Cemetery expanded its services to accommodate people's needs. In 1995 the Lewisburg Cemetery completed its first columbarium with niches for urns in front of the chapel. The area was completely enhanced and improved in 2012, thanks to the vision and generosity of DeOnne and Robert Gronlund. The original columbarium was incorporated with additional columbaria into a stone circular structure surrounding a new fountain. The area, including the chapel, was landscaped with new plants and trees. Overgrown trees around the chapel entrance were removed because they were forcing rainwater into the roof and chapel walls. Benches were installed for visitors to enjoy the peaceful surroundings and the restful sound of water. The

Gronlunds also contributed to renovations on the outside of the chapel with repairs to the chimney, roof and gutters.

Today people rent the chapel for funerals, weddings, memorial and worship services. Recently it was used as a staging area for a film about a cemetery caretaker. It seats about 90 people, is heated, well lit, and has a working pump organ. For many years, David Arndt has donated his services by painting the chapel woodwork and maintaining the white gatehouse.

A topic of fascination during cemetery tours is the spelling of “resurrection” in the stained glass window. It is spelled “resurection.” Was it always spelled with one “r”? Rick Wolfe’s photograph of the window before it was restored tells us that it was---a second “r” was not lost on the chapel floor.

Time is never kind to the old stone chapel. Money and vigilance are necessary to prevent it from again falling into disrepair. The Lewisburg Cemetery Association depends upon the financial support of the community and the generosity of families like the Gronlunds, Dunkles, Metzgers and those who came before them to supplement what the cemetery can provide in financing major improvements.

The red sandstone on the chapel exterior requires special grouting and expertise; several areas are cracked and deteriorating. When water freezes in the cracks it damages the mortar joints. The gravel walkway in front of the chapel and columbarium could be upgraded. The vault, or holding crypt, needs a complete overhaul. With money, imagination, and expertise, the vault could be reconfigured as an indoor columbarium or as a learning space for students of genealogy, local history, and cemetery art.

When the chapel was obscured by overgrown trees, it was almost invisible, even to pedestrians. With improvements to South Seventh Street, the new columbarium, fountain and gardens, the chapel has become a focal point for the town and university. The columbarium is now the centerpiece of the cemetery with the chapel gracing its grounds. Each day visitors rediscover the Lewisburg Cemetery as it was originally envisioned: a beautifully serene location for quiet reflection in an outdoor setting.



Lewisburg Cemetery columbarium, fountain, and gardens as dedicated in 2012
Paul R. Mauger photo

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