

ALMOST FORGOTTEN: THE STORY OF BRIDGEPORT CEMETERY

“Summer or winter, whenever you go to it, you find it in perfect order and neat and clean as the lawn of the most pretentious private residence.”

Those words, written by J. Percy Hart in his 1904 book *History and Directory of the Three Towns*, described Bridgeport Cemetery, one of Brownsville’s oldest burying grounds. Hart wrote, “Situated on an eminence on the southeast part of Bridgeport, sloping gently to the north and overlooking the valley of the Nemaocolin and in plain view of the National Pike where it passes over the Brubaker hill, is the Bridgeport cemetery, one of the most delightful plots of ground and one of the best kept cemeteries along the Monongahela river.”

Some residents of the Brownsville area are not aware of Bridgeport Cemetery and know nothing of its significance in the history of the community. For them, there are several questions we can answer.

Where is it located? Was it Bridgeport’s very first burying ground? How did it become the borough’s official graveyard? Who owns Bridgeport Cemetery today? Are burials still conducted there? And what will become of this forgotten silent witness to Brownsville’s past?

It is understandable that many residents of Brownsville, particularly those of the younger generations, may never have seen Bridgeport Cemetery. It is not located along a well-traveled road. A visitor who is traveling



to Bridgeport Cemetery by automobile may begin at the Brownsville Municipal Building, drive up High Street hill to the first intersection, and turn left onto Angle Street.

The motorist then travels eastward on Angle Street past the intersection with Pearl Street, continues around the bend to the “Y” in the road, and bears right onto Cemetery Road. Bridgeport Cemetery lies approximately three hundred yards down Cemetery Road, just beyond the Snowdon Terrace public housing development.

J. Percy Hart’s description of Bridgeport Cemetery’s lovely view of the “valley of the Nemaocolin” was accurate when he wrote it in 1904, but it is no longer true today. At the time Hart was writing, Dunlap’s Creek, as it flowed toward the Monongahela River, split into two channels when it was about one quarter of a mile from reaching the river. These two branches then meandered westward through a wide flat valley that separated two high hills lying to the valley’s north and south.

When the two streams were approximately one hundred yards from reaching the Monongahela River, the northernmost branch curved back southward in order to get past the “Neck,” a peninsula of land that protruded from the northern hills and was parallel to the river. The Neck sat higher than the Dunlap’s Creek flood plain to its east and the Monongahela River to its west. The abrupt southward curve of the northern branch of the creek enabled it to rejoin the southern branch and form a single channel for the final one hundred yards to the river.

On those opposite hills overlooking Dunlap’s Creek valley, two different towns were founded in the late 1700s. On the northern hillside, Thomas Brown founded the town of Brownsville in 1785, a town that later encompassed the “Neck” within its boundaries. On the hillside south of the valley, Rees Cadwallader created the town of Bridgeport in 1794. Separating these two towns was the wide flood plain along Dunlap’s Creek, a stream that was originally called Nemaocolin’s Creek.

With this background in mind, we can reconsider what J. Percy Hart meant when he described Bridgeport Cemetery as “overlooking the valley of the Nemaocolin.” The “Nemaocolin” to which Hart referred was Dunlap’s Creek, and the view he mentioned was of the picturesque twin-streamed flood plain. The western end of that flood plain, the part that lay nearest the Neck, was called Krepps’ Bottom. A visitor standing in Bridgeport Cemetery in 1904 would have seen it by gazing westward toward the Neck.

The panoramic view from Bridgeport Cemetery that Hart described in 1904 changed dramatically twelve years after he wrote those words. In 1916, Brownsville banker Charles Snowdon financed a venture to dump loads of slag into Krepps’ Bottom. This project raised the

elevation of Krepps' Bottom until it was at the street level of the existing Neck shopping district. Snowdon's innovative move created plenty of valuable new commercial property which he owned, land into which the growing Brownsville business district could expand. He named his annex to the business district "Snowdon Place."

The filling of Krepps' Bottom changed the appearance of Hart's "valley of the Nemaocolin" forever. Today the wintertime view from the cemetery includes both the Dunlap's Creek valley and, to the west, manmade Snowdon Square. In 1904, the hillside that led downward from the cemetery toward the "valley of the Nemaocolin" was relatively bare. Today it is blanketed with trees. In the summer when the woods are in full leaf, any view of the valley is now completely obscured by foliage.

We have described the location of Bridgeport Cemetery, and we have explored the fact that it was chosen partly for its picturesque view of the valley, a view that has since changed considerably. Now we can turn to another question that might be posed by anyone who is curious about Bridgeport Cemetery. Was it Bridgeport's first cemetery?

We can start to answer that question by noting that Rees Cadwallader, founder of Bridgeport, was a Quaker, a religious sect that was more formally known as the Society of Friends. When Cadwallader first purchased the land that later became Bridgeport, he originally named his parcel of land "Peace," a name that reflected the pacifist views of the Society of Friends. Nearly every early settler of Bridgeport was a Quaker, and this becomes very relevant in researching the location of the town's first cemetery.

The Bridgeport Quakers built their first "meeting house," or house of worship, on the spot where the Prospect Street School later stood. Adjacent to that meeting house, just south of the building, the Quakers also created the town's first burying ground. Most Quakers do not believe in the use of tombstones, and the graves in that first cemetery were unmarked. Since most, if not all, of the earliest settlers of Bridgeport were Quakers, most of them were buried in that cemetery that lay between Prospect and Cadwallader streets.

In later centuries, on the same site where the Quaker meeting house had once stood, several buildings were built in succession, including Bridgeport High School (which burned down in 1908), Prospect Street School (which replaced it and was torn down in recent years), and now the Brownsville Apartments building. But what became of the cemetery?

It is very likely that the bodies of most of Bridgeport's original Quaker settlers are still there. There is no reason to believe that the

bodies that were buried next to the meeting house were ever removed.

In fact, sometime around the late 1950s, the Brownsville School District, which operated Prospect Street elementary school at the time, wrote a letter to the regional governing body of the Society of Friends (because Brownsville no longer had an active Quaker “meeting” in town by then). The letter requested the Society’s permission to lay asphalt over the old cemetery in order for the students at the adjacent Prospect Street School to have a hard-surfaced playground.

I have seen a copy of the reply that was sent to the school district by the Society of Friends officials. The officials said that in their opinion, the Friends who were buried there many years ago would probably have preferred to have a playground full of laughing children above them rather than the thick tangle of briars and brambles that had overgrown the graveyard. With the blessing of the Society of Friends, the cemetery was paved.

With that background information, we have addressed the question of whether Bridgeport Cemetery was the borough’s first burying ground. It was not. That distinction goes to the original Friends’ burying ground that still lies unmarked between Prospect and Cadwallader streets.

This logically leads to the next question. When did the first burial take place on the grounds where Bridgeport Cemetery is located today? According to Brownsville’s David Gratz, who is the current president of the Bridgeport Cemetery Company, the year when the first body was buried on those grounds is not clear. What can be stated for certain is that in the mid-nineteenth century, Bridgeport Borough council decided that there was a definite need to purchase property for a public town cemetery.

In 1931, Brownsville historian Jesse Coldren spent many months meticulously transcribing faded handwritten minutes of Brownsville and Bridgeport town council meetings, some of them dating as far back as 1814. Mr. Coldren created typewritten copies of the minutes, thereby preserving them for use by future generations. Now, thanks to his efforts, we are able to go back one hundred and fifty-five years into the records and examine the minutes of those mid-nineteenth century Bridgeport Borough council meetings.

We are looking for mention of the creation of a new town cemetery for Bridgeport, and it is in the council minutes of September 14, 1847 that our search bears fruit. In those ancient notes we find the first evidence that Bridgeport council was considering the purchase of land where a public graveyard could be established for use by borough residents.

Next we will extract from those council minutes the details of the

creation of Bridgeport Cemetery. We will also describe the unusual manner in which that purchase was to be financed, and we will seek reader help to determine the definition of a word that I have never seen before and does not appear in a modern dictionary, a word whose meaning is critical to understanding how the money was raised to purchase the land for the cemetery.



THE DECISION THAT CREATED BRIDGEPORT CEMETERY

Brownsville's Bridgeport Cemetery occupies a picturesque, out-of-the-way promontory at the perimeter of what was once Bridgeport Borough. We have described the location of this historic cemetery and established that despite its age, it was not Bridgeport's first burying ground. That distinction belongs to a forgotten parcel of land near the former site of Prospect Street School, a tract that contains the unmarked graves of many of Bridgeport's early Quaker settlers.

In the previous article we also noted that by 1847, Bridgeport Borough council had decided to find land on which to establish a new

public burial ground within the borough. At its council meeting on September 14, 1847, council resolved “that the Burgess and Town Council meet on Thursday next at one o’clock to examine those Lots at disposal, and select upon the most suitable one for a Grave Yard, and report the same at the next meeting of Council.”

The search for a site for the new borough cemetery was quick. At its next meeting two weeks later, council moved to purchase real estate.

“Resolved,” read the council minutes of September 28, 1847, “that the Burgess be instructed to article with Wm. Warf for the two acre Lot selected by Council for a Public Grave Yard.

“Resolved that the Burgess be instructed to make a Dublicate [*sic*] which will be sufficient to raise the sum of two hundred and sixty-five Dollars for the purchase of the Grave Yard and its expenses, fencing etc.”

What cannot be discerned from these council minutes is whether there were any bodies already privately buried on the property the councilmen had selected. Another question involves the meaning of the term “dublicate,” which appears in the minutes of several different 1847 council meetings. The first explanation that comes to mind is that it is a consistent misspelling of the word “duplicate,” yet in the context in which the word is used in these council minutes, it does not seem to mean “a copy,” the meaning that I would normally associate with the word “duplicate.”

Upon researching the minutes of council meetings that occurred a few years later, minutes that were authored by a different town clerk, the word “duplicate” (correctly spelled) is found in a similar context to that in which it was used in the 1847 minutes. In those later minutes, “duplicate” refers to a type of tax or assessment.

If that is the word’s meaning in that era, then the 1847 council resolution “to make a Dublicate which will be sufficient to raise the sum of two hundred and sixty-five Dollars for the purchase of the Grave Yard and its expenses, fencing etc.” implies that council had to seek permission from the borough’s citizens to buy land for the cemetery and to assess each citizen a special tax to finance the purchase.

After the September 28 council meeting, Bridgeport Burgess Samuel B. Page met with William Warf to negotiate a price for the land council had selected, and at the October 18, 1847 meeting, an agreement between Warf and council was finalized.

“The Article of Agreement,” read that meeting’s minutes, “between Wm. Warf and Council concerning the ‘Grave Yard’ was made out and signed.

“The Dublicate which was decided by a majority of the Citizens for

the purchase of said Grave Yd. was made out, and amounted to two hundred & sixty one dollars fifty-seven cts. John G. Gregg was appointed Collector of the ‘Grave Yard’ Duplicate.”

By virtue of that October 1847 council action, Bridgeport Cemetery was born. It is not often that a new public cemetery is created, and Bridgeport councilmen worked for two months to formulate rules and regulations to govern the borough’s new cemetery. At its December 28, 1847 meeting, those regulations were adopted in the form of a resolution. That resolution is printed below just as it appears in the minutes of the December 28 meeting, without correction of town clerk R. K. McLean’s occasional misspellings.

“Council met in persuance of adjournment,” the council minutes read, “and the following members were present: Burgess – Samuel B. Page; John Riley, John Buffington, Aaron Branson, James Gue, Joseph Johns. . . .

“The following ordinance was passed unanimously. No. 57:

“An Ordinance Regulating the Grave Yard.

“A majority of the voters of the Borough of Bridgeport having, in accordance with the Sixth Section of the Charter of said Borough, Authorized the Burgess and Town Council to buy [*sic*] an extra tax to raise sufficient funds for the purchase of a suitable Lot for a Public Grave Yard. They have, in persuance of said authority, levied a tax and purchased a two acre Lot from Wm Warf near said Borough, and by virtue of authority vested in them, do ordain the following rules for the Government of the same.

“It shall be the duty of the Town Council Yearly to appoint a competent person as Sexton, whose duty it shall be to take care of the Lot, and attend to the digging of all Graves that may be required, for which service he shall receive the following compensation, to be paid by the person ordering the Grave – for all persons twelve years of age and upwards – one dollar and fifty cents for each grave; for all persons under twelve years of age – one dollar except when in time of hard frost, when if necessary fifty cents more on



each Grave may be added or charged.

“It shall be the duty of any person wishing to bury in the Ground to apply for the same to the regular Sexton, who alone has the priviledge of breaking Ground; unless he shall waive his priviledge to the person applying, he shall be entitled to the regular fee.

“This Lot shall be forever free to the Citizens of the Borough of Bridgeport for a burying Ground. It shall also be free to Strangers dying or who may die in the Borough.

“It shall be further the duty of the Sexton to ascertain from every applicant for a Grave, whether the person to be buried be a Citizen of the Borough. And if they should not be a Citizen of the Borough, he shall require them to bring a permit from the Burgess for that purpose, or in case of the absence of the Burgess, said permit shall be signed by two members of the Council. The Burgess shall collect for every such permit the sum of two dollars, for which he must acct. to the Treasurer of the Borough, who shall set apart all sums so collected as a fund for making and repairing fences around said Lot.

“It shall be further the duty of the Sexton, as far as practicable, when families may require it, to so arrange the Ground that a space may be allowed for the use of said family not exceeding fifteen feet square; when this is not required, the Graves shall be dug in regular rows, commencing at the most convenient point.

“The Council hereby appoints Stephen West Sexton the ensuing year.

“This ordinance may be altered or amended from time to time – But no such alteration at any time to prevent the right of a citizen from the free use of Said Lot as a burying place.

“This ordinance to take effect from and after this date.

“R. K. McLean, Town Clk.”

Collecting that extra cemetery tax from the good citizens of Bridgeport was sometimes difficult. More than one year after the tax was enacted, the minutes of the March 19, 1849 council meeting read, “Joseph John, Grave Yard Collector, appeared and was exhonerated from collecting tax from the following persons - viz: A. G. Booth 37 1/2 cts; Joel Ball 25 cents; James C. Tuller 25 cts; John Black 25 cs; Robt. Baldwin 62 1/2 cts. . . .”

The list goes on to include a total of thirty-three citizens. The largest tax due was \$1.90 owed by A. Minehart, no person owed less than twenty-five cents, and a total amount of \$26.32 was shown as “exhonerated” from collection, reason unspecified.

The expense of maintaining the cemetery caused subsequent borough councils to regret the generosity of the 1847 council, which had

made all cemetery lots free to citizens of the borough or to strangers who died in the borough. The original 1847 ordinance allowed for later amendment but included the stipulation that the right of a Bridgeport citizen to free use of the cemetery as a burying place could not be altered.

In 1855, eight years after borough council created the cemetery, the mounting cost of taking care of it led council to amend the 1847 ordinance. At its July 1855 meeting, council resolved that any citizen taking a lot in the cemetery after that date for the purpose of using it as a family burying ground would have to pay three dollars, and those who had already purchased lots would be assessed two dollars.

The income, council decreed, would be used for “making and keeping up the fences and keeping the ground in order.” Council suggested having a committee lay out the lots in the graveyard, number them and keep a book detailing who owned each one. To remain in compliance with the original 1847 ordinance, the amended ordinance stated that any person who died in the borough and did not own a lot could still be buried in the cemetery for free.

By 1891, Bridgeport Borough had owned and maintained the Bridgeport Cemetery for nearly forty-five years, but maintenance costs had continued to mount, the physical appearance of the cemetery was deteriorating, and a new fence was needed. Council was anxious to shed the burden of caring for the cemetery, and the councilmen came up with a plan – a plan that created the Bridgeport Cemetery Company, which still operates the cemetery today. Next we will learn more about the people who give freely of their time to operate Bridgeport Cemetery.



Bridgeport Cemetery, 2010 . . . quiet and almost forgotten

WHAT WILL BECOME OF HISTORIC BRIDGEPORT CEMETERY?

In this final article in our series about Bridgeport Cemetery, we trace the beginnings of the Bridgeport Cemetery Company and speculate on the venerable cemetery's uncertain future.

On a spring evening in 1889, several leading citizens of Bridgeport met and formulated a plan to create a stock company that would establish a new cemetery in Bridgeport, one which might include within its boundaries the old 1847 graveyard that was owned by Bridgeport Borough. A year after that initial meeting, minutes recorded in the company's now-fragile old ledger book indicate that these community leaders voted to create a stock company with a capital stock of \$4,000, shares to be sold for \$25 each.

The following summer, the new Bridgeport Cemetery Company bought eight acres of ground adjoining old Bridgeport Cemetery and sent a delegate to seek town council's permission "to remove end and side fence and inside fences and to have the old cemetery to come under same jurisdiction as the new cemetery."

In October 1891, Bridgeport Borough council voted unanimously "that the Council relinquish any and all interest they may have in the Bridgeport Cemetery, to the Bridgeport Cemetery Co., chartered, with the understanding that Said Company fence the same, take it under their management, give it the same care and manage the same by and under the same rules and regulations by which the new cemetery is managed."

On February 1, 1892, Bridgeport Cemetery Company was officially chartered, and the company still operates Bridgeport Cemetery today. The company's original officers were George W. Springer, president; T. S. Wright, secretary; and William H. Ammon, treasurer. Its original directors were Springer, R. C. Rogers, Albert Herrington, George S. Herbertson, Thomas Aubrey, Elgy Chamberlain, and Levi C. Waggoner.

Since the cemetery company's charter stipulated that the association should at all times have at least twenty-five members, the following directors were added: Seaborn Crawford, Dr. John W. Worrell, Samuel A. Lopp, Sr., H. B. Cock, the Bulger brothers, Thomas Axton, S. H. Dusenberry, W. H. Herbertson, Daniel Delaney, Joshua Sphar, R. L. Aubrey, Samuel H. Pearsall, Charles Herbertson and T. S. Wood.

During the year that followed incorporation, the company adopted a constitution and by-laws modeled on those of the Dravosburg Cemetery and hired the cemetery's first sexton, John H. Gue, at a salary of \$250 per year. After that initial flurry of activity, the company's directors settled into a pattern of meeting once a year to handle routine business,

unless unusual circumstances arose.

In 1911, unusual circumstances did arise. The company's directors discovered that a coal company was mining under the cemetery without permission. The directors took on the coal company without hesitation, ordering that "a committee of two be appointed to investigate the coal being removed from under the old cemetery and to start proceedings if they thought it was necessary to protect the Cemetery Co."

The culprit, Champion Connellsville Coal and Coke Company, was mining under the old section of the cemetery. Negotiations between the cemetery's directors and the coal company lasted for over a year before a settlement was reached. The minutes of the cemetery board's February 21, 1913 meeting detailed the agreement.

"The Bridgeport Cemetery Co.," the minutes stated, "agree[s] to take \$1200.00 cash from the Champion Connellsville Coal & Coke Co. for what coal they had taken and damages caused. The Champion Connellsville Coal and Coke Co. agree[s] to mine no more coal under the cemetery, only the part marked in red on the map . . ." The part marked in red included half an acre of cemetery property south and east of the old section of the cemetery.

That type of "unusual circumstance" has been rare during the one hundred and ten years the Bridgeport Cemetery Company has existed. These days the cemetery is struggling to make ends meet, and the current president of the cemetery company, David E. Gratz of Brownsville, works hard to find the company new sources of income in order to pay for routine upkeep of the cemetery grounds.

"Few people are purchasing lots in Bridgeport Cemetery in recent years," I said to Dave Gratz recently. "Is there any particular reason?"

"When Lafayette Memorial Park on Route 40 came into existence in the mid-twentieth century," Dave replied, "its easy accessibility attracted people to purchase burial plots there. While Redstone and Bridgeport cemeteries still have occasional burials, most burials in the area nowadays are in church cemeteries or at Lafayette."

"Does Bridgeport Cemetery rely upon the purchase of burial plots for all of its income?" I asked.

"Bridgeport Cemetery has averaged one burial per year in recent years," Dave said. "Last year was unusual; we had four. But we are still cutting the grass and keeping the grounds maintained while we seek new sources of revenue."

"How are the costs of maintenance met?" I said.

"The cemetery has a modest endowment fund," he replied. "Some of the families of those who are buried there purchased endowments over the years, and with the earnings from that money, we have been able to

keep going.

“But that amount is not great, our budget is very tight, and I am always trying to think of other possible sources of income. You know, if each family whose ancestors are buried at Bridgeport would regularly contribute a modest sum toward the upkeep of their family plot, it would be a tremendous help.”

“Is it still possible to purchase burial plots in Bridgeport Cemetery?”

“Oh, yes,” he said, handing me photocopied literature about the cemetery. “Here are the details.”

The neatly typed single sheet was headed “Bridgeport Cemetery Company – Established 1847, Chartered 1892.” I studied the information on it.

“I see you list your rates here,” I said, reading from the sheet. “You charge \$600 for a single grave lot, and \$3500 for a fifteen-foot square family lot. How do those prices compare with rates charged by other cemeteries around here?”

“I think you’ll find they are much lower than the usual fees charged in this area,” Dave said

“And the lots that are available for sale,” I said. “In what part of the cemetery are they located?”

“Most of them are in the eastern portion of the cemetery, which is the area below the lower drive.”

“Dave,” I said, “there are quite a few folks whose ancestors are buried in Bridgeport Cemetery, and occasionally they come to town seeking information for their genealogical research. What information is available to them, and where can they find it?”

“With a great deal of help from other people, especially the late Margaret Johnson, I have spent the past three years mapping the cemetery and listing the individuals who are buried in each plot where there is a marker,” Dave explained. “I have walked the cemetery and recorded the information that is inscribed on each of the tombstones. That information is available from me.

“There is also a typewritten roster of the original purchasers of the cemetery lots, and we have the original stub book listing those purchasers. Both of those are available to researchers at the Brownsville Free Public Library. Many veterans are buried at Bridgeport, including quite a few Civil War veterans, and I have acquired information on those veterans from the Veterans’ Affairs Office.”

“What kind of information do you have on them?”

“Their names, rank, unit, the war in which they fought, date of enlistment and discharge, date of burial, and usually the lot number

where they are buried.”

“I wish you luck,” I said to Dave as we concluded our conversation. “Perhaps the families of the people buried at Bridgeport will feel an obligation to become conscientious custodians of their ancestors’ final resting place.”



For those who forget, a directional reminder

A walk through Bridgeport Cemetery, weaving among the monuments and reading the names on them, is a history lesson in itself. Many of the names are familiar to anyone attuned to the area’s past. In the 1847 section of the graveyard are stones bearing such surnames as Springer, Richey, Troth, Faull, Crawford, Acklin, Herbertson, Armstrong, Aubrey, Axton, Pearsall, and Rogers, all of them names from old Brownsville, Bridgeport and West Brownsville.

In the post-1892 sections of the cemetery are markers bearing such names as Bulger, Sharpnack, Pringle, Laughery, McIntosh, Theakston, Bakewell, Wilkins, Coldren, Wright, Bar, Delaney, Speer, Thornton, Porter, Shallenberger, Herrington, Waggoner, Taylor, and many more notables from Brownsville’s past.

And the monuments! Some of them are works of art. In an 1892 booklet distributed by the cemetery company to owners of newly

purchased lots, an essayist wrote about the importance of erecting an impressive monument at the center of the family plot.

“Some persons are disinclined to erect a substantial central monument, from sheer modesty,” the essayist wrote. “They fear they will be charged with ostentation and false pride. We think they are mistaken . . .

“The central monument is not intended or understood to be erected to commemorate the worth, the abilities, or the deeds of the proprietor. It is a *family* cenotaph. It is a rallying point for the family, to keep in remembrance the family name, and all that find room are deposited around it. It is intended as a sort of family record on something more imperishable than books or paper. . . .

“The family is one of the most sacred of institutions, and whatever tends to promote its welfare and dignity should not be lightly regarded. The family burial lot, the central monument, on which the names, it may be, of several generations are recorded, become to survivors the objects of intense interest and of a commendable pride; and whenever the head of a family has it in his power to confer such a boon on his posterity, he should not neglect it.”

Here’s hoping that the descendants of the people buried in Bridgeport Cemetery will come to its aid in its time of need. Bridgeport Cemetery is a part of their family history and our community’s history as well, and it must be preserved.