

Darnestown Cemetery

“The only real equality is in the cemetery.” Old German Proverb

The location of a cemetery is usually quite obvious – by the presence of beautifully crafted tombstones that reveal the life span of the named occupants, carefully selected plants in a well-designed and manicured landscape, and above all else, a placard with the official name of this sacred ground often connected to a local church or a specific family. Such visible, tangible clues were missing at this site. Instead, reliance on oral tradition and archaeology provided the key to recreating the story of this integral part of the Darnestown community.

The name of this town pays homage to the founding family, William and Elizabeth (Gassaway) Darne. Charles Gassaway, who initially bought acreage from Ninian Beall, the largest landowner in the area, willed his land to his daughter and son-in-law, who, in turn, named the property, “Mt. Pleasant.” Darnestown was to be placed at the crossroads of the “Road from Georgetown to the Mouth of Monocacy and the Road to Seneca Mills.” Prior to the Civil War this small village would encompass general stores, a post office, taverns, the services of a physician, blacksmith, wheelwright, carpenter, cooper, and a stagecoach stop. Social institutions included a church and a school – both necessities for this developing crossroad community. Residents in town built homes directly off Darnestown Road, including the Griffith House – considered the oldest domestic residence in Darnestown, based on a construction date of 1820. Julius Griffith acquired this one-and-a-half store log and frame house and operated a general store inside. By the twentieth century, Ace Esworthy owned the house and he would construct a garage in the neighboring lot. Originally known as the Sinclair Service Station, it was also locally identified as the All-American Auto Body because this 1930s rock-faced concrete block structure was painted red, white, and blue. In more recent years the Griffith-Esworthy House was unlawfully demolished. It is on these particular lots, 14001 and 14011 Darnestown Road, that the cemetery was believed to have existed.

In the 1980s, this lot left local hands and was acquired as part of an 18-acre parcel by Landow and Company for private development. Before plans were set in place to develop a shopping center, questions arose as to how this future use of the land would adversely effect this seemingly forgotten cemetery. Although nothing on the surface indicated the presence of graves, the memories of long time local residents revealed this lot was certainly hallow ground.¹ Several

¹ Oral history records can be located in the Darnestown history file at the Montgomery County Historical Society Library in various newspaper articles published in 1994 when the first archaeological excavations were conducted at the cemetery location. Further documentation is also on file with Clare Kelly at the

accounts, including Ace Esworthy, believed members of the Darne family – specifically Elizabeth Darne and her daughter, Mary – were laid to rest at this exact location. The late Howard Carter recalled in 1987 that there were between 20 to 30 stones, of which some of the markers had inscriptions, and some of the graves lacked any identification. Charles Clark, who moved to Darnestown in the 1930s, remembered the presence of six grave stones behind the Esworthy Gas Station, and in fact, some have speculated that these very stones were utilized as building material inside the garage (possibly the foundation). Clark’s recollections were further verified by Dotty Esworthy Magers, who, as a young child in the late 1930s, saw six to eight graves in the area, and perhaps due to their size, speculated were those of young children. Given the high infant mortality rates until the mid-nineteenth century – even in ideal living conditions death occurred between 80 to 100 per thousand births - it is a safe assumption that even the youngest residents of Darnestown had abbreviated life spans.²

Archaeology, performed by Ed Otter in 1994 and M-NCPPC and Montgomery College in 1999, confirmed local suspicions and supported the need for special attention directed to identify and preserve this cultural resource.³ In total, 22 graves were discovered – although the occupants are still unknown. A few marble grave stones were uncovered but lacked any identification – which, according to Eileen McGuckian, was not uncommon – most local residents knew the location of the graves and most likely the occupants. These markers were also void of any ornate detail typically found on Victorian headstones and/or footstones. Such absence was atypical, as Kenneth Ames found in the Victorian era “[w]ords and images were interchangeable parts of a wide-reaching religious comprehension that stretched from the church to the home, from the home to the cemetery, and from the cemetery to the afterlife.”⁴

Perhaps the more revealing Victorian artifact discovered during the 1999 excavation was an elaborate 1895 coffin handle made of Britannia silver (consist of English silver and cooper) and wood. Several years earlier Greg Clemmer found a similar object by using metal detection on this property. By the 1890s, Victorian funerals were viewed more as a “rite-of-passage, the last big important event in a person’s life, on par with marriage and baptism.” Furthermore, for the

Montgomery County Historic Preservation Office, for # 24/19, the Darnestown Historic District. In more recent years it was removed from the Master Plan for Historic Preservation list.

²“Public Health and Technology During the Nineteenth Century,”

<http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/projects/bluetelephone/html/health.html>.

³ Edward Otter, “A Search for Graves at the Proposed Seneca Highlands Subdivision Darnestown, Maryland” (June 1994) and “A Second Search for Graves at the Proposed Seneca Highlands Subdivision Darnestown, Maryland, “ (December 1994); both reports produced for Landow and Company.

⁴ Kenneth Ames, *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992) , 135.

deceased and his/her family, it was an event to display wealth and status in a funeral procession that functioned almost like a parade. No expense was too great for a proper burial. Pallbearers – usually from six to eight in total – wore black gloves if attending to an older individual and white gloves for a younger person, and it was their responsibility to carry the coffin from the house to the hearse, and finally, from the hearse to the grave. These handles made this task easier, and gave invited guests one somber final ornament to examine. It should be noted that the profession of undertaking specialized in the late nineteenth century and it was in their financial interest to promote such minor details, like ornate casket handles, as a necessary expense to truly celebrate death in a grandiose fashion.

Immediately following the funeral, family members left behind began a mourning period, easily identified by the standard black attire often made of silk crepe. Women often wore mementos, such as locket, brooches, and rings, which could contain a lock of hair or photograph of the dearly departed loved one.⁵ Death, because it was so common, was not feared, but was an event as memorable as a birth or marriage. Post-mortem photography seems taboo today, but then, these images, captured with the deceased often in position resembling sleep, provided lasting substitutes that easily provoked thoughts of the individual when he/she was alive and well.

With virtually no markers when this cemetery was maintained and what few recovered revealing no names, the mystery remains, who were the occupants of this graveyard? These suggestions are purely speculative, but with some valid reasoning. Because Darnestown Presbyterian Church had a cemetery that dates from the mid-nineteenth century, it is realistic that community members non-affiliated with this congregation were buried in this likely non-secular graveyard. Equally, travelers whose demise occurred while in Darnestown were possibly put to rest in this lot, unless they maintained local family connections. Finally, because of the lack of tombstones, it could be indicative of patronage by Darnestown residents lacking financial resources for an elaborate burial.

Given the proximity of Darnestown to significant action during the Civil War, it is feasible that some of the unidentified graves were the final resting-place for Union soldiers. One of the more notable artifacts unearthed at this site was an *unfired* 69 caliber lead smooth bore musket shell, a type of ammunition utilized early on in the war. Throughout the four-year ordeal, Darnestown witnessed a continual military presence in the community, yet it was never the center of any actual combat. Despite a lack of bloodshed, volunteers in the 27th Indiana Regiment died

⁵ “Mourning and Funeral Usages,” April 17, 1886 [electronic edition]. *Harper’s Bazaar*, Nineteenth Century Fashion Magazine, <http://harpersbazaar.victorian-ebooks.com> (2005).

of typhoid fever while stationed in Montgomery County and were officially “buried at Darnestown.”⁶ This ailment resulted from the ingestion of food or water contaminated by feces of an infected person. No vaccination was available for this disease in the United States until 1911, when Frederick F. Russell, a military physician, had every soldier in the Army immunized.

Soldiers feared bullets and bayonets on the battlefield, but the greater danger was the invisible presence of bacteria in both the Federal and Confederate camps. By 1865, 620,000 men were casualties of war; the bulk succumbed to diseases like pneumonia, tuberculosis, and dysentery – amounting to 3 out of every 5 Union soldiers and 2 out of every 3 Confederate soldiers dying due to illness.⁷

Medical ailments resulted from unawareness of public health and poor hygiene in soldier camps. Inspection records of Federal camps in 1861 revealed men lived in conditions “littered with refuse, food, and other rubbish, sometimes in an offensive state of decomposition; slops deposited in pits within the camp limits or thrown out of broadcast; heaps of manure and offal close to the camp.”⁸ The medical profession was relatively backward in 1861 - unprepared to deal with these disorders and unaware how infection was spread through unclean hands and unsterilized equipment. In fact, the Union Surgeon General William Hammond recognized the war was fought “at the end of the medical Middle Ages.”⁹ Understandably, Americans were not completely trustworthy of the profession, often relying on self-medication. A Union soldier even noted in his description of Darnestown that the three local country stores supplied “quack medicines” among routine necessities. Such remedies provided direct competition to local physicians, including Dr. Richard Beall, whose property neighbored that of Julian Griffith. By 1865, even though the death toll was high, the medical field had many new advances as a result of combat, such as the use of anesthesia during surgery, better record keeping, and the role of women in the profession of nursing.

Surgeons and physicians in the nineteenth century typically acquired their professional status after graduating from medical schools, where required courses included anatomy. Since 1745, when the first formal course on anatomy was taught at the College of Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania), a demand for cadavers for classroom instruction instigated an

⁶ Jane Haynes, William Sumner, and Jerry Benjamin, “A Very Grave Affair: The Darnestown Square Urban Park, A Search for Graves at the Location of the Proposed Darnestown Square Urban Park” (May 1999) , 4.

⁷ “Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease.” www.civilwarhome.com.

⁸United States Sanitary Commission , *The Sanitary Commission of the United States Army: A Succinct Narrative of its Works and Purposes* (New York: Sanitary Commission, 1864) , 20.

⁹ Donald Cartmell, *The Civil War Up Close* (New Page Books, 2005) , 139.

unethical practice of body snatching. As the number of medical schools increased in the United States, the supply of legally suitable cadavers - mainly executed criminals - could not meet demand. Professors and students alike would pay professionals to rob graves of newly interred bodies. How common this activity took place is unknown, but in his oral history, Howard Carter of Darnestown, recalled that “night doctors” had removed bodies from this very cemetery for medical research. These individuals may have been working for schools located in Washington, D.C. (Columbian/George Washington, Georgetown, Howard) or Baltimore (UMD, Washington, Johns Hopkins). The University of Maryland School of Medicine, where Dr. Beall graduated in 1828, provided instruction in anatomy, and inside Davidge Hall, cadavers were hidden in a “set of small, half-hidden rooms, separate little staircases, and concealed storage spaces and trapdoors” as a means to shield these bodies from antidissectionists raids and allow professors and students a means of escape.¹⁰

While the activity of body snatching was morally corrupt, it equally was *legal* in the eyes of the law. Even today, there is only one federal law on the use of cadavers, passed in 1790, that allows judges the right to add dissection to the sentence of death for murder. By allowing a body to forgo a formal religious burial and instead be dismantled for science, nineteenth century society viewed this practice as equal to one’s body being placed in a public mass grave with no coffin. Opposition to this practice came especially from the ranks of lower sorts, who, in general resented the professionalization of medicine that not only made necessary services more expensive, but also eliminated competition from affordable alternatives to care, such as guidance during pregnancy provided by midwives. The fear of bodysnatching even facilitated the creation of mechanical deterrents, such as grave mines and mortsafes, which made this black market practice not only difficult, but deadly. One of the more notable inventions was the “coffin torpedo” by Philip K. Clover in 1878, which was described that year in the *Scientific American*:

“In consequence of the increasing number of grave-yard desecrations, the genius of the inventor has been incited to devise means for their defeat. Among the most recent patents is one for a coffin torpedo, which consists of a canister containing powder, balls and a firing trigger, so arranged that, on placing the torpedo within the coffin, and finally closing the lid, should any attempt be made to open the coffin the torpedo will be instantly exploded, a noise like thunder ensue, and deadly balls will fly in all directions.”¹¹

His invention came only a few months after the famous grave-robbing of John Scott Harrison of Ohio. As the son of President William Henry Harrison and father of future President Benjamin

¹⁰ Jane Eliot Sewell, *Medicine in Maryland: The Practice and Profession, 1799-1999* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 73-74.

¹¹ *Ann Arbor Democrat* (December 1878).

Harrison, he had notoriety but his lasting legacy became the unconscious act that become of his body following burial. The Harrison family, rightly concerned about the protection of the grave, took several precautions including construction of a cemented brick vault, filling the grave with earth mixed with heavy stones and employing a watchman to check the grave each hour of every night for a week. Even such elaborate measures still did not prevent the illegal exhuming of Harrison's body, that was later found hanging from a rope down a chute beneath a trap door at the Ohio Medical College.¹²

This infamous event facilitated change. Although Thomas Jefferson once declared, "The dead have no rights,"¹³ his logic gave way in the late 1800s when laws were created to protect graves and since the early twentieth century, only unclaimed bodies are utilized in the classroom setting. In 1968, Congress passed the Uniform Anatomy Gift Act which "ensured the right of a donor to bequeath his or her own body to medical science and education."¹⁴

Because of a variety of factors – missing markers, possible grave robbing, neglect over time – this cemetery seemed lost to the ages. The occupants might be nameless, but certainly not forgotten.

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Further Reading

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Schultz, S.M. *Body Snatching: The Robbing of Graves for the Education of Physicians in Early Nineteenth Century America*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 1992.

¹² "Grave-robbing," <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=2701>.

¹³ Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, 12 June 1816. <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library>.

¹⁴ Aaron D. Tward and Hugh A. Patterson, "From Grave Robbing to Gifting: Cadaver Supply in the United States" *Journal of the American Medical Association* 287 (March 2002) : 1183.