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Cemeteries Hold Local Histories

by Ruth Mascari

Cemeteries usually do not conjure up happy thoughts. Instead, emotions tend toward sadness and mourning. But try as we might, while we whistle past each and every one, some day we will not pass by the final one and we will not be whistling.

Most of us will be fortunate enough to select where our final resting place will be; others not so lucky. And almost none of us will decide when to take up our eternal residence. Be that as it may, the histories of and information from cemeteries are remarkable for what they reveal about a community and its citizens. The word "cemetery" is from the Greek word for "sleeping place" and often is interchangeable with graveyard and less frequently burying ground. Graveyard, however, is associated with a church while burying ground may be associated with a family plot or farm.

Cemeteries in more urban areas soon were deemed to be harmful and undesirable and by the early 1800s were banned from most dense city areas. In more rural areas such as ours, we do not see large cemeteries but instead graveyards adjoining the local churches or a family's burying ground carved out of the farm land. If a family did not have its own burying ground, it could use one associated with its local church or some extended family.

Unlike city dwellers who had turned the task of funerals over to undertakers and morticians, rural families tended to their dead in their own homes often burying them right on their properties and farms. One concession was the purchase of the wooden casket. In reading through inventories and employment records, one soon learns that a local cabinetmaker was also the local casket maker.

Normal subsidence

There are several well-known family burying grounds in northern Baltimore County and many more that probably can no longer be located due either to normal subsidence or demolition for development. The prominent Merryman family, with its holdings of thousands of acres, established a site in the middle of what is now a horse pasture. Boxed in by a stone-fenced rectangle, it is visible from the York Turnpike on the former Hereford Farms.

(Please respect the graveyards noted in this article and not visit those on private property.)

The Hoffman family located its burying plots near the center of its mill holdings in what was called Hoffmanville in the far northwest corner of the county. This site also is visible from a public road.

Off of Troyer Road is a small area (not visible from a road) fenced in by handsome and period iron fencing for the interment of members of the Sparks family. On Shepperd Road, east of the intersection with Monkton and Manor roads, is the site of a reputed burying ground used by the Benjamin Merryman family in the very early 1800s for enslaved workers.

The Spindler family, near Mt Carmel Road, and the Gorsuch family, in Glencoe, both maintained plots for their families' burials. Regrettably, as is the case with many family cemeteries, headstones have slipped under soft green blankets of earth along with any information about their interrees.

Only Such in Area

Information from church graveyards is sometimes easily found as with names, dates and epitaphs easily readable and their histories draw us to them.

Dover United Methodist Church's quaint plot lies on land given by Richard Johns in an original grant dating to 1808. Curiously, this Johns is an ancestor of the Hopkins hospital and university family (the bequeather was given his mother's maiden name) and owned large amounts of land at Butler.

In the center of Butler, the Black Rock Baptist Church in 1828 received the land for its burying ground from Evan Davis who owned the early plow factory across the road. To the south east of Butler, Methodists and Quakers had established graveyards at their churches -- Bosley United Methodist (earlier called Cole's Meeting House) and the new (1821) Friends Meeting House. Many of the same family names may be seen at both, including Matthews, Bosley, Cole and Ensor.

In the far northern reaches of the county, Gunpowder Baptist Church graveyard site was known as Union Cemetery at Union Meeting House on land donated by Enoch Dorsey. His request was that all who wished could be buried there -- rich, poor, black, white, north or south. Probably the only such in the area.

Lovingly Maintained

Segregated graveyards existed in the rest of our area. St Luke's United Methodist (U.M.) for African Americans rests across a small country road from Foster's burying ground for whites only. Foster's is named for John Foster who originally donated the land on Hereford Road by 1797 for the log Methodist meeting house there. A small burying ground was set up generally for members of the church. The church moved but the graveyard remains.

Historic African American congregations, such as Gough U.M., on Cuba Road, and Mt. Joy AME and Union Chapel U.M., on Troyer Road, have church graveyards with burials dating to before the Civil War, making it quite likely that there may be enslaved

members buried at those sites. At least one soul at Mt. Joy volunteered to enlist for the Union cause in 1864 as a soldier in the colored troops.
Further north near the Mason Dixon line, the Gorsuch family burying ground, (not to be confused with the Glencoe Gorsuches) near Gorsuch Mills, was sold as part of a residential lot some years ago. Fortunately, the owner has lovingly maintained the small plot and ancient headstones with its original stone fence as a memorial garden.

A Consequence of War

West Liberty U.M., pre-1800, and Stablers U.M., about 1810, also boast graveyards. Another very old site is that near Shaw's Chapel on Wesley Chapel Road on land given by Joseph Shaw, original lot 83 of My Lady's Manor. While research is not complete on this site, it may well be the only other burying ground where African Americans and Caucasians may be interred together.

Some churches have large graveyards, well maintained and in use -- St James Episcopal, Clynmalira U.M., Monkton U.M., Mt. Carmel U.M. among several others. One last graveyard worth mentioning tells a sad story of an unanticipated and unintended consequence of war. Two sisters from a local farm heard that a troop train would bring soldiers down the Northern Central Railway from the North to fight against the South. The girls raised chickens and collected the fresh eggs to sell for spending money. Seeing an opportunity for a few pennies, down to the train they went just off the farm to sell fresh products to the strangers. Unbeknownst to them, they were exposed to a fever and died within a few weeks of each other. They are buried next to each other at Jessop Church on the peaceful green hillside overlooking the York Turnpike.

Grave Stones Evolved

Turn to a different aspect now and consider that graveyards, whether urban or rural, public or private are our most public form of family history, art and architecture. Their designs, carvings and messages define their history, their interrees and even their visitors.

In the 1820-30s in rural areas, families began to bury their loved ones in church yards. Grave stones evolved from very simple unadorned markers with name and death date to elaborate obelisks.

This change followed in part the architecture of the local residences in the country as a whole. The traditional north county home was plain, vernacular and unadorned in style. Most early tombstones were as well.

But by the mid-1800s, styles began to change and more stones could be seen with decorations, three dimensional designs and even fraternal and employment information. One stone at Vernon U.M. graveyard pictures a tractor for its farmer interree.

'So Will You Be’

Space on the stones expanded so that more family information could be inscribed. Stones were hand crafted by masons in Cockeysville and sometimes York County. This change also provided invaluable information to historians and genealogists.

A search of family graves in Clynmalira U.M., Monkton U.M. and St. James' Episcopal churches reveals the burials of numerous members of the same family scattered among the three sites over hundreds of years.

Capsule eulogies carved into stones provide even more insights into the past. Some were original and obviously tailored to the interred -- especially those of children. Children's graves often had small lambs carved on them.

Some were certainly unoriginal and possibly suggested by the mason or later the undertaker. The most hackneyed: 'As I am now, so you will be; prepare for death and follow me.' A little harsh, perhaps, but not strange in a time when death was so prevalent, often too early and always unpredictable.

TAGLINE
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'As I am now, so you will be; prepare for death and follow me.'