

Back in the Country... Bell Acres Stories

By Debby Rabold

Bell Acres Burials

With special thanks to Martha Chambers at the Sewickley Cemetery & Maria Notarianni at the Good Samaritan Archives.

In 1935, Allegheny County conducted a Veterans' Grave Registration that sent viewers into nearly 400 cemeteries, churchyards and private burial grounds to record both the number of markers and the number of veterans' markers. Four burial sites were identified within Sewickley Township (Bell Acres Borough). Two were former family burial plots. Another is a 150-year-old family plot sitting on privately owned land (right) and the fourth is a century old Catholic cemetery that remains in active use.



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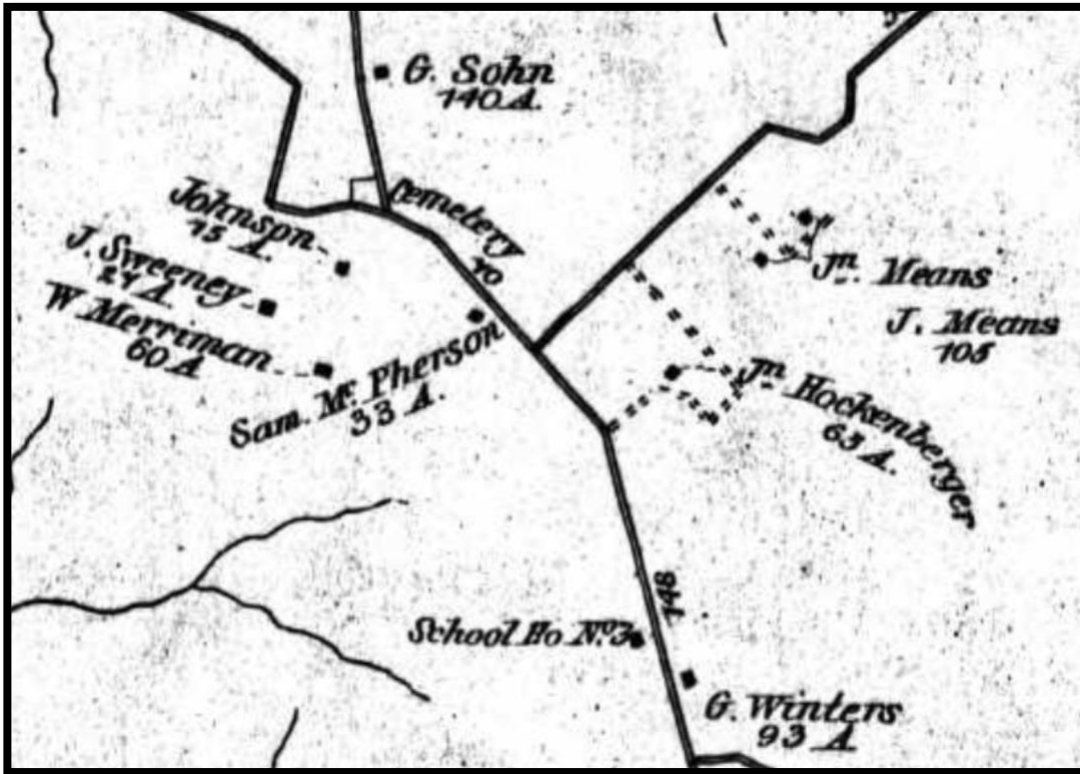
Throughout the 1800s, it was not unusual for families to bury loved ones at home even though churchyards were an option. Modern park like cemeteries did not appear until the second half of the century, but the distance and cost involved could be prohibitive. For many, the family farm was just fine.

By 1809, the McPherson brothers had arrived in Western Pennsylvania from their native New Jersey. Nathan, John and Zachariah settled along the Big Sewickley Creek in what later become Bell Acres and Economy boroughs. At the time of his marriage, Nathan's son Samuel carved thirty-three acres from his father's land for he and his wife Susannah to farm. It was here the family established a burial ground when Nathan passed in 1847.



Located at the intersection of Hitzel Hill Road and the Camp Meeting Road Extension, the site remained active until 1879 when Susannah was the last of the family to be buried there. In 1903, Samuel and Susannah's son Robert had the twenty-one McPherson burials reinterred in the Sewickley Cemetery where the graves are marked with a single stone (left).

The 1935 grave registration also lists an abandoned Hockenberger burial ground, however, no additional mention of this site has yet been found. Johann and Elisabeth Hockenberger farmed 63 acres at the corner of Camp Meeting and Camp Meeting-Duff City roads where they raised ten children. Johann arrived from his native Germany in 1861 and was farming in Sewickley Township by the time of the 1870 census. The same buyer purchased both the Hockenberger and adjacent Jenny farms in 1903. The Hockenbergers are also interred in the Sewickley Cemetery.

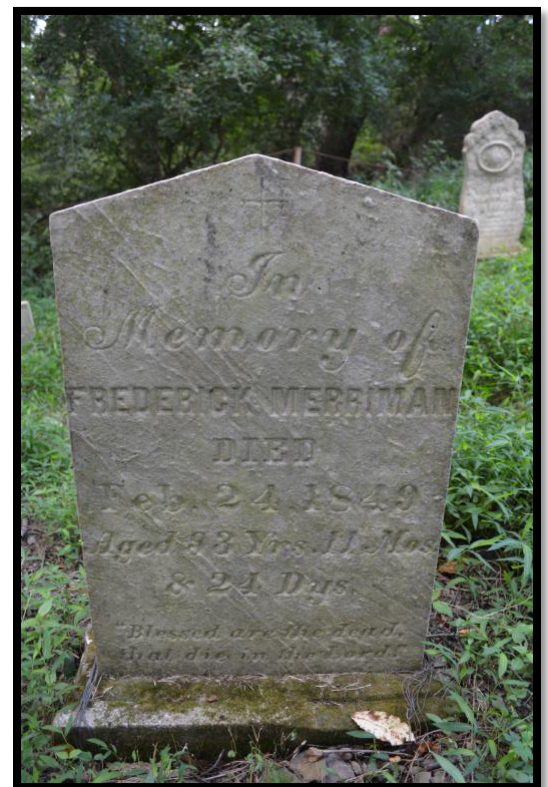


The 1876 Sewickley Township map shows the location of the McPherson and Hockenberger sites in relation to the Jenny schoolhouse that is today the Bell Acres Municipal Building.

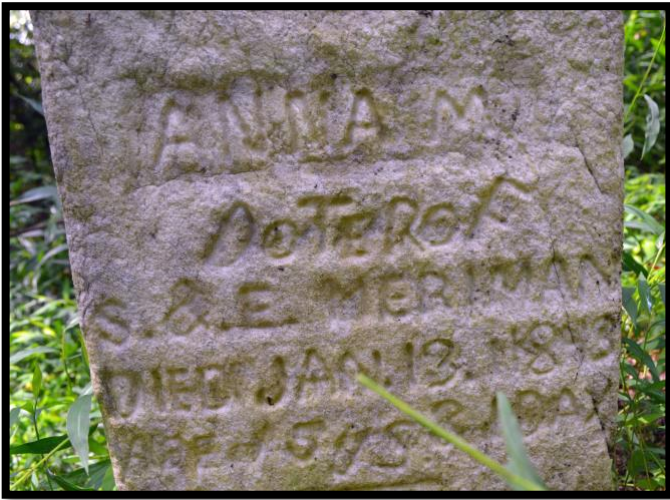
A mid-19<sup>th</sup> century burial ground of nine weathered markers and the possibility of an unknown number of unmarked graves stands at the edge of the wooded hillside overlooking Turkeyfoot Run (shown on page 1). The 400-square foot site was once part of the 300 acre Merriman tract located on Beadnell Drive.

German born Frederick Merriman (1755-1849) served in the Revolution as a shoemaker. He later received infantry training under General "Mad Anthony" Wayne at Legionville during the winter of 1792-93 before taking part in the subsequent Indian wars.

Following the cessation of hostilities, Merriman returned home to the Pittsburgh area and circa 1808, famously purchased land in the hills behind Sewickley with his rifle, a cooking pot and a sled. Merriman fathered twelve sons and two daughters with two wives, both named Mary.



Frederick Merriman's gravestone. "Blessed are the dead, that die in the Lord."



Buried with Merriman are eight others that include his second wife Mary, two sons David and Samuel and two grandchildren Anna and William, Samuel's children. There are also three graves identified by initials whose identities may only be guessed. The oldest stone dates from 1848 and marks the grave of five-year-old Anna, daughter of Samuel and Elizabeth Merriman.

*Anna M  
Doter of  
S & E Meriman  
Died Jan.13.1843  
Aged 5 yrs. 3 day*

As with other Christian burials, the markers and those buried beneath face East in the believe that the dead will rise to face the dawn on Judgement Day. Known burials in the Merriman burial site are:

Row 1:

- Anna M. daughter of Samuel & Elizabeth 1843 age 5yrs.
- S(amuel) Meriman son of Frederick and first wife Mary 1856 age 44yrs.  
*"Farewell my wife and children all. From your father Christ doth call. Mourn not for me it is in [vain]. To call me to your sight again."*
- William A. son of Samuel & Elizabeth 1853 age 3yrs.
- M. M. *"At rest in the Lord"*
- D. M.
- W. A. M.



Row 2:

- David Merriman son of Frederick and first wife Mary 1878 age 79yrs. *"Be also ready and follow me."*
- Mary Merriman second wife of Frederick 1864 age 82yrs. *"Be ye also ready and follow me."*
- Frederick Merriman 1849 age 93yrs. *"Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord."*

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For those who had neither land nor interest in burying the dead on the home place, there was use of the old Sewickley burial ground that once occupied an area on Graham Street near the Quaker Valley Middle School.

An 1877 Sewickley Cemetery history offers this description of the old graveyard on aptly named Graveyard Lane:
"...a perfect jumble of briars and brush and long grass and fallen limbs of trees, and dilapidated head stones, without order or decency. The fence was decayed, and cattle and horses and swine had full range."

The earliest marker dated from 1810 and the last burial occurred in 1860 before remains were moved to the new hilltop cemetery. In all, 342 gravesites were opened between 1860 and 1868. Of those, only 118 were identified. 287 were relocated to the new Sewickley Cemetery while the others were reburied elsewhere. McPherson and Merriman burials were among those moved into the new cemetery.

Another option was the Sewickley Presbyterian Church graveyard on Beaver Road. The church opened a graveyard behind the original brick sanctuary in mid-century where a plot cost \$10 and was available to persons of all faiths. Between 1861 and 1875, 74 burials were removed to the Sewickley Cemetery after a new church was built on the opposite side of Beaver Road and the original property sold.

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Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, before the use of “funeral parlors” became widespread, viewings were generally held at home with a family member or local cabinetmaker providing a simple wooden coffin. In time, cabinet makers began expanding their service to include handling or “undertaking” funeral arrangements on behalf of the family.

*“That was the time when funeral homes were just starting, but we had ours at home. The undertaker would prepare the body and bring it [to the house]. They took care of the wreath on the door. That was a big thing in those days. You put a floral piece on the door. [The undertaker] handled moving the body.”*

*Catherine Schuring Bashaar*

The practice of embalming only came into widespread use during the Civil War. Before then, flowers were used to help cover unpleasant odors while the body was kept on view. Because medical science was not what is today, watch was kept over the body for two or three days to make certain the individual was not comatose. During the “wake”, friends and family had the opportunity to visit and pay their respects.

*“My grandfather and his brother were sitting up with a man who in life had been completely bent over. A brace was placed across his chest to keep him lying flat in the casket. Well, in the middle of the night, the brace broke and the man sat up. Grandpap Pegher and his brother knocked each other over getting out the door and did not stop running until they were a half mile away.”*

*Mary Pegher Richwalls*



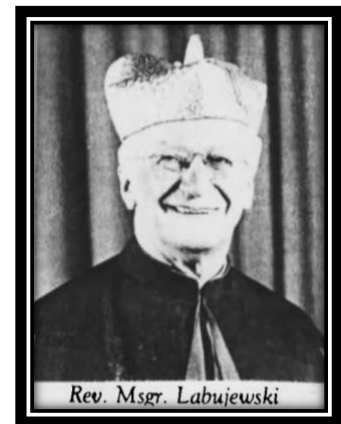
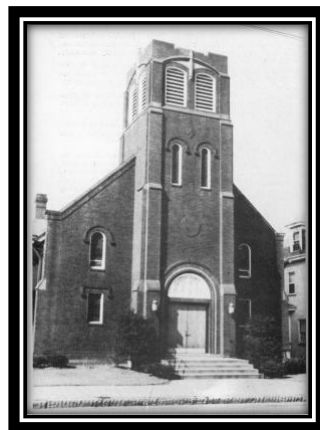
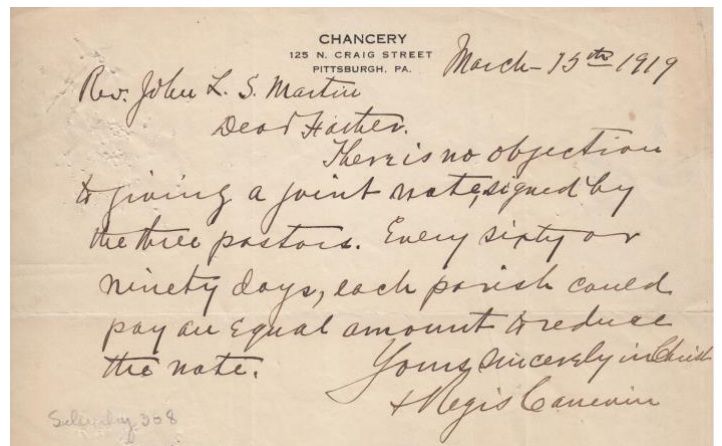
Fairmount Presbyterian burials span 200 years.

The quiet river town of Economy was transformed into a busy industrial center with the arrival of the American Bridge Company in 1902. The area's growing number of mills and factories attracted thousands of immigrant families to the Beaver Valley in search of jobs. By 1924, fifty-four different European and Asian languages were spoken in the re-named town of Ambridge.

Included in the influx of new families were Catholics in need of a church home. The town's first Catholic parish was established in 1904 when St. Veronica was carved from Sewickley's St. James parish. Construction of a church began almost immediately and was dedicated two years later.

Ambridge's Slovak community petitioned the Pittsburgh Diocese for its own church and in 1906, was favored with a new parish, Divine Redeemer. From Divine Redeemer, the Polish parish of St. Stanislaus was formed in 1914.

After burying nearly thirty parishioners during the influenza pandemic of 1918, Fr. Labujewski and his congregation at St. Stanislaus decided on the need for a parish cemetery. At the same time, Fr. Martin at St. Veronica applied to the diocese for permission to purchase land for a joint cemetery with St. Stanislaus and Divine Redeemer. Once permission was received from the bishop (right), Fr. Martin purchased acreage from a parishioner on Big Sewickley Creek Road in nearby Sewickley Township where the first burial took place in the Fall of 1919.



St. Veronica, Divine Redeemer & St. Stanislaus parishes were merged with two others in 1994 to create the new Good Samaritan Parish. St. Veronica (top left) was razed in 1962 while Divine Redeemer (top right) and St. Stanislaus (bottom) were sold to other denominations.



The newly consecrated fifteen-acre cemetery was first known as St. Martin's then as Ambridge Catholic or Fair Oaks Catholic. It was comprised of three separate cemeteries, each under the control of a different parish.

Years later, Fr. Labujewski recalled the events of 1919:

*.... Rev. Father Martin informs me that he had purchased a farm along the Big Sewickley Creek in Fair Oaks....*

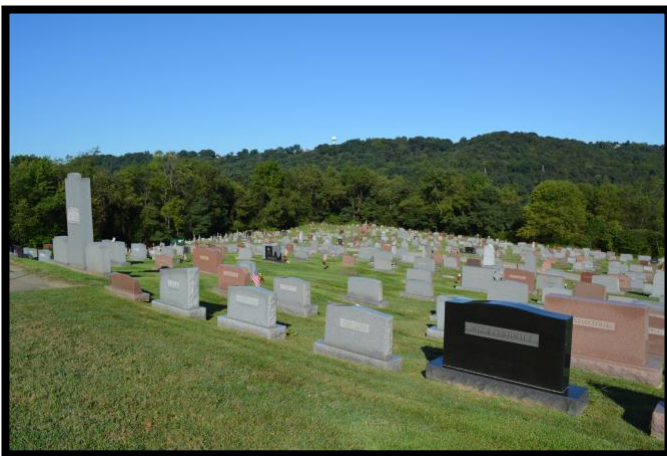
*Oh! What a disappointment. I thought or rather expected to see the newly purchased land on level ground, instead my eyes looked at the proposed Catholic cemetery – a plot of ground, the frontage of which about 500 feet, stretching up the hill, some places quite steep and in another place, almost inaccessible.... this plot of ground containing about fifteen acres.... Too late to protest.... transaction was finished.*

*This ground was to be the burial place for the deceased members of the Catholic parishes in Ambridge, St. Veronica, Divine Redeemer and St. Stanislaus.*

*When the surveyor submitted the blue print, already the partitions were made. All that we Rev. Pastors did was to draw lots [for] which part of the cemetery was to be our portion. I drew the first lot. My portion of the cemetery was to be on the hill. Father Herkel [Divine Redeemer] drew No. 2 and his portion was designated on the front of the plan and going up into the ground on the right side about a thousand feet. The third remaining part of the plan [left side] was the portion the befell to St. Veronica.*

*I was glad to have selected by lot the upper part of the plan because there was a view of the surrounding neighborhood. On St. Veronica's portion, there was six room house and a barn situated.*

In 1994, Ambridge's five Catholic parishes were merged into the Good Samaritan Parish whose new church building replaced St. Veronica. The century old cemetery was renamed Good Samaritan and is managed by the Catholic Parish Cemetery Association located in Pittsburgh. Fr. Martin and Fr. Labujewski are both interred here.



View from the top of the hill.



The 1962 Memorial Day blessing in the St. Stanislaus section.