

# Grave Changes over the Decades in Pittsburgh

When a family commits their loved one to a grave, it is expected that the grave will remain undisturbed without end. That is not always the case, as shown by the exhumation of graves in the churchyard of Trinity Cathedral, Pittsburgh.

Thanks to the indefatigable work of the late Helen Harriss, genealogist, and her book *Trinity & Pittsburgh—the History of Trinity Cathedral*, we know the names of many persons buried around Trinity Church, now Cathedral. We also know the names of some of the graves that had to be relocated, including those of the notable parishioners of (Old) St. Luke's Church, Brig. Gen. John Neville and his wife Winifred.

In the years preceding 1753 and the start of the French (British) and Indian War, native Americans buried their dead in a tumulus mound near the point of Pittsburgh's three rivers. In 1754 the British started to build Fort Prince George, soon replaced by the French Fort Duquesne..

The French chaplain at the Fort maintained a register of major rites, including funerals and interments at "the place set aside for burials," which was the Indian mound that was approached from the Fort on a path named "L'Allee de la Vierge Marie," later renamed Virgin Alley. That mound became the churchyard of Trinity Cathedral, and a plaque outside the Cathedral states that some 4000 burials were made over the decades. The earliest legible headstone is for Captain Samuel Dawson, September 6, 1779.

In 1787, the William Penn heirs gave grants of land to the trustees of the German church on Smithfield Street, and to the Presbyterian church and the Episcopal Protestant Church on Sixth Avenue. Amazingly, in 1805 the first building for Trinity Church was on another lot at Liberty, Sixth and Wood streets, which was purchased from Isaac Craig, the husband of Amelia Neville. Of interest also to us was the marriage there of Presley Neville, and a Miss Kerr, July 28, 1818. The Joseph Harvey pipe organ, a later gift to (Old) St Luke's Church, arrived from London in 1823 and was used in the church. Due to population growth in Pittsburgh, it was decided to build a larger church on the Penn grant land on Sixth Avenue. In order to build the second church, graves had to be moved. The building was completed in 1825.

In 1835 a Lecture Hall, which included a free public library, was built at the corner of Carpenter's Alley and Virgin Alley. Lots were purchased for additional graves.

Between 1835 and 1846 there were burials between the church and Carpenter's Alley, a 10 feet wide boundary of the commercial lots facing Smithfield Street. (The new Trinity Church was spared the devastation of the massive Pittsburgh fire, April, 1845. The church caught

fire in 1849 and again on June 18, 1967.)

In the 1850's two non-denominational cemeteries were started: Allegheny Cemetery and Uniondale Cemetery. Families began to ask that their family graves be moved to the new cemeteries. All of the graves in the Presbyterian site were moved, and further burials in Trinity's site were halted. In 1852, Trinity Church initiated the construction of St. Peter's Church at Grant Street and Diamond Way, and another building for (Old) St Luke's Church, Woodville, where burials already existed and were continued in the churchyard.

It was decided in 1869 to build the third Trinity church plus a chapel. However, it would mean the moving of graves again, either to the newly expanded churchyard, or to one of the two new city cemeteries. Many families chose relocation to the new cemeteries. The new church was completed in 1872. In 1895, a real estate company sought to rent part of the burial ground beside Carpenter's Alley. Since graves would have to be moved, it was declined. A hotel owner wanted to rent the unused Lecture Hall for a laundry. It, too, was declined.

In October, 1900 George T. Oliver, and his brother, Henry W. Oliver, proposed leasing for 100 years the 10 feet by 125 feet of occupied burial ground, from Virgin Alley to Sixth Avenue, to erect a 21 story office building. The transfer of graves required family or Allegheny County Court permission. In 1902 the Oliver brothers donated a 10 foot strip for reburials beside the 10 feet strip already owned by the Church. They offered to provide a mortician and mortuary in the Church for this task. By 1904, the transfer of deeds was completed and erecting the Henry W. Oliver building began.

Of interest in Old St Luke's Church history is the transfer of the graves of Winifred Neville, who died in 1797, and John Neville, who died in 1803. Their graves were moved to Allegheny Cemetery in 1902.

In 1904 the City of Pittsburgh notified the Church that Virgin Avenue would be widened to 54 feet. This meant the razing of the chapel and removal of more graves from a part of the Penn grant area near the Alley. The workmen discovered burial bones and carefully removed them. To honor the Oliver family, Virgin Avenue was renamed Oliver Avenue. The new three story Parish House was dedicated on January 25, 1906. The graves that remain today in the Cathedral's Burying Ground have been conserved and restored in an extensive project which was completed in 2009.

#### References:

Helen Harriss, *Trinity and Pittsburgh—the History of Trinity Cathedral*, 1999.

Ronald C. Carlisle, *The Story of Woodville*, PHLF., 1998

Trinity Cathedral, [www.trinitycathedralpgh.org](http://www.trinitycathedralpgh.org)

Old St. Lukes, [www.oldsaintlukes.org](http://www.oldsaintlukes.org)