



A SHORT HISTORY OF TURNER CEMETERY

3424 Beechwood Boulevard, Pittsburgh, PA 15217

- ❖ Turner Cemetery is located in the middle of a busy block of Beechwood Boulevard in the Squirrel Hill/Greenfield area of Pittsburgh near the intersections of Beechwood Boulevard, Hazelwood Avenue, Brown's Hill Road and Saline Street.
- ❖ The half-acre graveyard, dating back to 1785, has a history that far outweighs its size, for it is believed to be the second oldest cemetery in Pittsburgh after Trinity Burial Ground on Sixth Avenue in Downtown Pittsburgh and maybe the third oldest in Allegheny County after the Beulah United Presbyterian Cemetery in Wilkins Township.
- ❖ Originally the cemetery was the burial plot of the Girty-Turners' farm. The land was owned by John Turner (1755-1840), who made a good living selling crops to the garrison in Downtown Pittsburgh. He called his 154-acre estate "Federal Hill," remembered today only as the small street beside the graveyard. When John Turner died, he willed the cemetery to the local community. It was never a church graveyard, although a series of Methodist churches was built adjacent to it on land that John Turner donated for that purpose.
- ❖ John Turner was born in 1755, in the days when England and France were vying for dominion in North America. Settlers from Europe were moving into the western Pennsylvania wilderness. The Native Americans found their traditional way of life threatened and their lands taken from them. The result was violent clashes. Surprise attacks were common and deadly.
- ❖ John Turner's mother was Mary Newton (c. 1720-1785), an Englishwoman who married a hunter and trapper named Simon Girty and had four sons. They lived in central Pennsylvania. After Girty was killed by Indians, Mary married John Turner Sr. They had a son and named him John. While John was still an infant, Indians captured the family, murdered his father and divided the rest of the family among them.
- ❖ Political developments enabled Mary to reunite her family when John was about ten. Mary came west to Fort Pitt to find John, who was brought there when he was freed by the Indians. The Girty-Turner family blazed a claim to many acres of land on Squirrel Hill and cleared the land for farming. Mary decided to keep her last name as Girty, since four of her sons bore that name. One of her sons was Simon Girty Jr., who gained notoriety by defecting to the British during the Revolutionary War.
- ❖ Turner Cemetery holds the remains of many of the early settlers of Squirrel Hill. The first person believed to be buried in the graveyard was Mary Girty Turner, who died in 1785. The location of her grave is not known. The first burial on record is that of Mrs. William Craig, which took place in 1804, but no tombstone exists for her.
- ❖ The oldest tombstone in the graveyard is that of Nancy Redding (spelled Reading in other sources), who died in 1816 at the age of 15. The most recent tombstone is that of Edward Schenley Ebdy, who died in 1880 at the age of 23.
- ❖ Turner Cemetery is much older than the Mary S. Brown Memorial-Ames United Methodist Church adjacent to it, which dates to 1908. Some members of previous churches on the site were buried in the graveyard, but not Mary S. Brown and her family. The Brown family lies in Allegheny Cemetery with the exception of Mary's youngest son, W. Harry, who is buried with his family in his well-known pyramid mausoleum at Homewood Cemetery.
- ❖ One thing you'll notice when you look at Turner Cemetery is that the placement of the tombstones looks odd. Through the years, many of the tombstones were moved, probably several times. The cemetery suffered through periods of neglect when it became overgrown with weeds and shrubs. When the new Mary S. Brown Memorial Chapel was built in 1908, the cemetery was cleaned up, and many of the tombstones were rearranged to make the graveyard look more pleasing to Victorian sensibilities.
- ❖ At least 50 people are believed to have been buried in Turner Cemetery, most in the first half of the 1800s. Today it is difficult to determine exactly how many people are buried there. Lists of burials were compiled many years after the last burial took place, but no original records have been found. Also, some of the deceased were later moved to new, larger cemeteries such as Homewood and Allegheny by their descendants.
- ❖ Turner Cemetery holds the remains of at least seven and maybe as many as thirty military veterans, mostly from the Civil War. The seven veterans known to be buried in the cemetery are John Turner, who fought in various campaigns against the Indians; Abraham Boother--Revolutionary War; William Craig--War of 1812; Henry Brewno--Mexican-American War; and Samuel Fowkes, William Nelson, and J. P. Clark--Civil War. Only the tombstones of Samuel Fowkes, William Nelson and J. P. Clark remain in the graveyard. Recent information indicates that more Civil War veterans might be buried in Turner Cemetery, so research is ongoing.

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