

DEMISE OF THE CRAIG STREET PIONEER

BURYING GROUND

By John Boh

General Background: The Craig Street Burying Ground

After the Revolutionary War and the establishment of the Northwest Territory in 1787, settlers moved on to virgin land in the Ohio and Licking River and Banklick Creek watersheds. As deaths occurred the deceased were interred on farmland property. The Ohio River ferry operator Thomas Kennedy acquired his farm in 1801 at the Ohio and Licking rivers. He, however, later sold some 200 acres to John Stites Gano, his brother Richard Gano, Thomas D. Carneal, and James Bryson, partners in the "Covington Company." They pledged to plat the property for a new Town. Later two deeds, or indentures, listed John Stites Gano, his brother Richard Gano and Thomas D. Carneal as purchasers of the farm.¹ Officially recorded in August 1815, the plat of the original Town of Covington set the city limits on 150 acres. The western boundary was on the east side of Washington Street and the southern boundary at the north side of Sixth Street.² The other fifty acres of Kennedy's farm lay beyond the Town of Covington. Many local citizens came to be interred west of the Town border in the Craig Street Pioneer Burying Ground. The earliest court reference to the Craig Street Burying Ground is found in a deed book dated January 11, 1823 (Courthouse in Alexandria). It involved the heirs and representatives of the Gano family.³

A court later determined that when Thomas Kennedy sold his farm to the proprietors of the Covington Company, the Craig Street (pioneer) Burying Ground was not included in the purchase. The burying ground fronted on the west line of Craig's Road, or later Craig Street, in Covington. The cemetery on the outskirts, however, eventually became exposed and vulnerable, as the Town and City expanded westward and grew around it. In 1831 the Town was expanded beyond Washington Street and in 1832 beyond Craig's Road (street). Maintained by the city, Covington's pioneer cemetery, certainly by the 1870s, looked obsolete and out of place.⁴

The City Oversees the Burying Ground

On February 24, 1834 the Kentucky General Assembly made the Town of Covington into an incorporated city. On January 6, 1835, Covington passed an ordinance regulating burials at the graveyard and created "the office of Sexton." Later that year the Committee on Internal Improvements was instructed to find the exact boundaries of the graveyard.⁵ The problem of maintenance, however, was ongoing. Over thirty years later in May 1869, it was reported that the fence around the cemetery was in disrepair. Hogs were getting in, and one can imagine what hogs do rooting around in a cemetery.⁶

The cemetery's boundaries once were "loosely" described as facing on Craig Street between Willow (now Kentucky Street) on the north and Bremen (now Pershing Street) on the south; further convoluted references were made to the boundary at Johnston Street and at the east end of the West Sixth Street Market. Its boundaries were reexamined in 1876 with a survey by Ellis and Yates, Civil Engineers, who describe the burying ground as more confined:

*Beginning at a point on the West line of Craig Street, 64 feet South of the intersection of Craig Street and Willow Avenue, running thus Southwardly along the West line of Craig Street 169-½ feet, more or less, thence Westwardly 29-1/4 feet, more or less, thence Northwardly 171 feet, more or less, thence Eastwardly 288 feet, more or less, to the beginning.*⁷ The 1877 Covington Atlas shows that a row of residential lots separated the newly defined boundary and Willow Street and the same between the opposite boundary and Bremen Street.⁸

Major changes came for the Burying Ground. A hurried request appeared in a newspaper on May 5, 1872:

To the Citizens of Covington- You are requested by order of the Council, to remove the body or bodies of your relatives from the Craig Street Burying-ground. Council, seeing the total neglect and wanton desecration which is constantly occurring in that resting place of the dead, have purchased a large and desirable lot in Highland Cemetery, which is dedicated to the Pioneers of Covington. And all bodies remaining in the Craig Street Graveyard after the expiration of two months from this date will, with due honor and respect, be removed by the City Council to the lot reserved for that purpose in Highland Cemetery. (The new Highland Cemetery in Ft. Mitchell was dedicated in 1869.)

The notice was signed by four members of a committee, N. Bartlett, John Marshall, Geo. W. Howell and W. W. Mosher, Covington, Ky April 29, 1872.⁹ The request, however, involved more than would be accomplished.

The deadline to relatives for removal in two months looked unreasonable. The order from the city council resulted in scenes of a ghoulish nature. In July 1872 the newspaper report was graphic. Prematurely, it might seem, laborers were said to be preparing the burying ground for a public park. The work seemed to include removing dirt for leveling the grounds to street level. Bones uncovered are "placed in a numbered box." With headstones missing or broken "it is impossible to place any identification on them whatever." The wood coffins used forty or fifty years ago have rotted away. The remaining bones "are blacked and decayed to mingle with mother earth." The remains of a child estimated to be two years old was well preserved, but hair was separated from the skull. Relatives and friends by then had only removed a some of the remains. "By far the larger portion still remain in the ground."¹⁰

Officials counted 317 "dead bodies" removed by August 15, 1872.¹¹ Removing the remains from the Craig Street Burying Ground was an adventurous project. A portion were removed to decades-old Linden Grove (1845). Gravestones usually prove that pioneers and notables from the Craig Street Cemetery were buried in Linden Grove to the south - and still in the heart of their city. They include Thomas Kennedy (1741-1821) and wife Dinah, owner of the farm where the original Town of Covington was developed. Today thirty-four or more tombstones are said to date before 1835 but it is not known just how many in Linden Grove came from Craig Street.¹²

Many people stopped by to witness the "ten or twelve" uncovered and removed daily. An iron casket was found. Previously an iron casket had been claimed by "a man named Shera" from Oregon stating that it contained his wife's remains "buried there twenty-seven-years ago."¹³ In September 1872 an invoice for \$897 from the Highland Cemetery for reinterments from the Craig Street Burying Grounds was considered by city council.¹⁴ On October 4, 1872, city council was presented with another bill of \$484 for labor, that is, for the "hands at work in Craig street cemetery."¹⁵

By November 22, 1872, 1,789 were claimed to have been removed. Over 100 were believed still to be uncovered.¹⁶ On January 23, 1874, the project was still ongoing. The city treasurer reported a seemingly lucrative receipt of \$1,472.25 from a sale of dirt from the Craig Street Burying Ground.¹⁷

Then on August 8, 1874, the newspaper reported a fantastic reversal of course by a waffling city council. It had ordered the discontinuation of the project! The property was to be fenced, and burials in the Craig Street Cemetery were again permitted! "The city has no power to divert the property to any other use. An outcome to be regretted."¹⁸ The reasoning was suggested in another newspaper article on November 28 of that year. Even though the city, it was claimed, had paid "\$18,000" by then for removing bodies and grading the lot, city council feared that IF the Burying Ground overseen by the city for a graveyard could legally be used for only that, the city had to leave a few bodies there to protect its interests - "to keep the heirs of the grantors from pouncing on it."¹⁹ For a few days in 1877 belligerent boys were reported digging around in the cemetery. And they had uncovered "several bodies."²⁰

Industrial and Commercial Development

After the Civil War the American economy grew rapidly. Covington saw developments in its own industrial and commercial infrastructure. Industrial and commercial development accomplished by powerful regional and national forces often wiped-out local pioneer sites and landscapes. Proposed by the early 1870s was construction of rail bridge to reach the Cincinnati railyards. Local citizens would also enjoy "free" pedestrian and vehicular travel across the same bridge. The Burying Ground, however, was located near where the tracks were to be laid to the new bridge. A commitment to the railroad project would help decide the fate of the Burying Ground. Since the 1850s the tracks of the Kentucky Central Railroad had terminated around Pike and Seventh street. Now under C & O control the tracks would be extended northward. The Craig Street Burying Ground became a small impediment for the powerful C & O Railroad.²¹

Around seven years after the cemetery boundaries were defined and around five years after disinterment in the cemetery was halted, the Appeals Court in 1879 confirmed the city's right to remove the cemetery. The removal of bodies was resumed and soon considered accomplished. In 1883 the C & O Railroad right of way was dedicated through this area. It passed from the Pike Street business district across westside Covington to a new bridge. The new railroad bridge at the north end of Main Street opened in 1888.²²

Final Resting Places

Despite the City stating that the new burial site would be “dedicated to the Pioneers of Covington”,²³ only a small marker in Highland Cemetery, shown in an accompanying photo, presently marks the mass burial site. The Kenton County Historical Society has proposed that a more substantial marker and monument honoring the place of the reinterments be installed, and has received a positive response from the Highland Cemetery General Manager.

1. Allen Webb Smith, *Beginning at 'The Point,' a Documented History of Northern Kentucky and Environs, the Town of Covington in Particular, 1751-1834*, printed locally, 1977, pp. 32-36

2. Town limits on the plat described concisely by Joseph F. Gastright, in “Covington,” *The Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky*, p. 233

3. Smith, cited above, p. 44,

4. Smith, cited above, p. 91, 97

5. O. J. Wiggins, “History of Covington,” *Dailey Commonwealth*, 10th in a series, June 7, 1884

6. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 5, 1869, p. 7

7. Smith cited above, p. 44; Ellis and Yates’ property description taken by Smith from Charles S. Adams, “Old Covington Cemeteries,” *Christopher Gist Papers*

8. *City Atlas of Covington, Kentucky*, Mt. Vernon, Indiana: Windmill Publications, Inc. reduced by 75 %, reprinted, and sponsored by the Covington Economic Development Dept., 1993, p. 22

9. “To the Citizens of Covington,” *Cincinnati Commercial*, May 5, 1872, p. 5

10. “Craig-Street Grave Yard,” *Covington Journal*, July 20, 1872

11. *Cincinnati Commercial*, Aug. 15, 1872, p. 7

12. Burials in Linden Grove have included such notables as B. F. Howard founder of the African American Elks, U. S. Congressman and Judge William E. Arthur, Industrialist Alexander Greer and U. S. Congressman William Wright Southgate. With public offices and schools closed and hundreds in attendance in 1910 renowned Kenton County born statesman and wife Mary Jane were interred in Linden Grove after his remains were taken from New York City the place of his last residence; John Boh, “Linden Grove Cemetery,” *Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky*, p. 554; “Carlisle, John G.,” p. 154

13. *Covington Journal*, August 24, 1872, p. 3

14. *The Evening Star* (Cincinnati), Sept. 11, 1872, p. 1

15. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Oct. 4, 1872, p. 7

16. *Cincinnati Commercial*, Nov. 22, 1872, p. 6

17. *Cincinnati Commercial*, Jan. 23, 1874, p. 3

18. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Aug. 8, 1874, p. 7

19. *Courier Journal*, Nov. 28, 1874

20. *Cincinnati Daily Star*, July 21, 1877, p. 3

21. John Boh, “Northern Kentucky Railroads and Bridges, Crossings, Intersections, and Stations,” Bulletin of The Kenton County Historical Society, Sept-Oct. 2013

22. John Boh, cited above

23. *Cincinnati Commercial*, May 5, 1872, p. 5