



Life and Death on the Prairie

The Mount Hope Cemetery tour was a great success; over 150 people enjoyed the tour and visiting with the "residents." PACA would like to thank our tour organizer, Liz Davis; our tour guides: Allen and Elaine Avner, Catherine Barbercheck, Perry Morris, Alice Novak, and Kathy Reeves; our graphic designer, Kent Snodgrass; and our ticket sellers: Neil and Marsha Lasater, Suzanne and Tedra Ashley-Wannemuehler. In addition, a very special thanks goes to the C-U Theater Company for their great presentations of cemetery residents. A standing ovation to: Albert Burnham (Bob Weber, Phil Strang), Julia Burnham (Diane Pritchard, Cara Skot-tene), B.F. Harris (Todd Lykins), Tina Smith (Gina Lykins), Capt. Thomas Smith (Dale Mueller, Chris Harris), Ella Wilber Paul (Michele Long), Judge Cunningham (Michael Thomson), David Johnson Family (Mikki Kendall, Patrick Thicklin, Malcolm Kendall), Nurse Munhall (Linda Marcum), and the Cunningham orphans (Taylor Lykins, Tess Strang, Libby Mueller). PACA also appreciates the help and support of Jim Hudson and Mount Hope Cemetery and Memorial Traditions.

History

The early days of Champaign-Urbana may conjure images of rolling waves of grain, horse-drawn carriages and cozy log cabins, but to the pioneers living on this lonesome prairie the conditions seemed anything but romantic. Accidents and child-birth were common causes of death, especially with few doctors and supplies within traveling distance. Epidemics struck on a regular basis. Perhaps it is not surprising that early in the lives of Urbana and East Urbana (renamed "Champaign" in 1860), a need for a place of burial was needed. As a result, Mount Hope Cemetery was incorporated in 1856, thanks to the efforts of Jesse Burt, an Urbana farmer known for his philanthropy.

LIFE AND DEATH ON THE PRAIRIE

A TOUR OF
MOUNT HOPE CEMETERY
611 EAST PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE, CHAMPAIGN

OCTOBER 17 1-5PM

TICKETS:
PACA MEMBERS AND SENIORS: \$5.00
GENERAL PUBLIC: \$8.00

SPONSORED BY:
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CHAMPAIGN-URBANA THEATER COMPANY

The cemetery's nature-based street names and landscaping with abundant shade trees suggests it may have been patterned after garden cemeteries, which had become popular at the time of Mount Hope's founding. In an era before public parks, cemeteries had become recreational spaces—places for Victorian-era residents to stroll and picnic. Mount Hope also contains a "potter's field" along the northwest corner overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue. A potter's field was where the poor, the unknown, criminals, and suicide victims were often buried.

As Champaign-Urbana has grown, several smaller cemeteries have relocated to Mount Hope. The area's oldest pioneer cemetery, the Old Urbana Cemetery, was once situated where Leal Park now stands. It was the first burying ground for early pioneers and Civil War soldiers, and local legend claims it was also a Native American burial ground as well. Once Mount Hope was organized, the old cemetery was used infrequently until 1903 when the land was deeded to the Urbana Park District. Descendants of those interred at the Old Urbana Cemetery were given the option of moving their loved ones to

Mount Hope or to have the stones laid flat and buried over. Some chose reinternment, but other early residents remain in Leal Park. The brick gazebo in the park stands as a memorial to the early settlers and Native Americans that made the Old Urbana Cemetery their final resting place.

The Old Jewish Cemetery, that was once located just east of Cunningham Avenue near the present site of East Lawn Burial Park, was moved to Mount Hope and can now be found in the Mount Sinai Hebrew Congregation Replat in Block 24, just west of the G.A.R section. Roselawn, or New Mount Hope Cemetery, was founded when another cemetery association purchased land from Mount Hope in 1906. Mount Hope also played a role in a 1950s Illinois Supreme Court case regarding whether residents should be allowed to vote on a proposed merger of Champaign and Urbana. Attorney H.I. Green contended that a vote should not be allowed because the boundaries of the proposed merger would leave Mount Hope and Roselawn out of the city limits and thus not eligible for city services. Attorneys W. Lee Summers and Don D. Richmond, arguing for proponents of the merger,

dryly noted, "It may positively be stated that those in the cemetery are quite dead, and those taken in the future will be." The vote on the merger took place on October 6, 1953, and was rejected by a majority of voters. Following are short vignettes of some of the "residents" featured on the cemetery tour.

Albert and Julia Burnham

Together, Albert (1839-1897) and Julia (1839-1894) Burnham's generous spirits helped shape the built environment of Champaign. After serving as a teacher, Albert moved to Champaign where he studied law and became a junior member of the firm of McKinley and Burnham. In 1866, he married New York native Julia F. Davidson. The Burnhams are most remembered for their philanthropy, and two prominent features stand as tributes to this: the original Champaign Public Library and Burnham Hospital. In 1895, Albert donated \$50,000 to build and maintain a public library for Champaign residents. The National Register-listed Classical Revival style building stands at 306 West Church Street and is now the Meyer Capel Law Offices. Burnham Hospital was born from a meeting of the Woman's Social and Political Science Club, of which Julia was a member. By the next club meeting, Albert had offered \$10,000 to fund a hospital in Julia's name. The cornerstone of the hospital was laid on August 23, 1894. Julia died unexpectedly on October 28, 1894 in New York City, just six months before the Julia F. Burnham Hospital opened in 1895. In 1920, the hospital became Burnham City Hospital and served the local community's health care needs for nearly a century.

B.F. Harris

Born on a farm in Virginia, Benjamin Franklin Harris (1811-1905) had farming in his blood. "Frank", as he was known to friends, became famous for prizewinning cattle herds; in 1856 his most famous herd was paraded through Chicago. After the Civil War, he pursued banking and founded the First National Bank of Champaign. B.F. led not only an exciting professional life but an interesting personal one as well. During his lifetime he was married five times. After his first wife, Elizabeth, perished in October 1845, he was left alone to care for their 1½ year old son, as well as a neighbor's daughter they had taken in, and a young African-American boy. He married his second wife, Mary Jane in 1846; they had eight children, only

one of whom lived to reach adulthood. After Mary Jane died, he remarried for the third time to a woman named Mary. Local geneological records don't give a last name for her, and perhaps for good reason: she attempted to poison B.F. He offered her \$20,000 if she would leave and apparently she accepted, for the couple divorced in 1887. After that, he married Sarah Young Miller in 1887, who died of a stroke, and Carolyn Nobel in 1895. B.F.'s grandson, Newton Harris, married Mary Bruce Burnham, the daughter of Albert and Julia Burnham.

The Harris family left behind quite an architectural legacy in the community as well. B.F.'s grandson, B.F. II, built a mansion at 809 West Church Street that is now part of The Pavilion. The 25-room mansion was built in 1904 at a cost of \$200,000. Prof. and Mrs. David Cole later bought the property and remodeled it into Cole Hospital. B.F.'s daughter, Rebecca also left an architectural legacy; her former home on Church Street was converted to the McKinley YMCA.

Capt. Thomas J. and Tina Weedon Smith

Perhaps the most romantic story is the love affair between a dashing young Yankee officer and a feisty Southern belle. In 1863, as he chased Morgan's Raiders through Tennessee, Capt. Smith and his regiment set up camp near the Weedon's farmhouse where Tina lived with her widowed mother. Unbeknownst to the captain, several of his men raided the home and carried off the Weedon's food; after realizing this, he went to the house to personally apologize. After she vowed her hatred of Yankees, the captain offered a peace offering of all the coffee he had. Later that evening he wrote her a letter and sent it messenger. A year later, the captain crossed enemy lines to marry his rebel love. Throughout their lives they were intensely devoted to each other, and after her death in 1903, he offered the University a substantial donation for a lasting memorial to her: Smith Memorial Hall.

Ella Wilber Paul

The only daughter of Robert Wilber, Ella was a "middle-aged spinster" when her family built the Wilber Mansion on University Ave. Ella's father had a storage and transfer business on North Market Street and later expanded to sell seeds, farm implements, and coal. The house was built when she was in her mid-30s, and

some historians speculate that it might have been built to ensure she had a roof over her head, as she showed no signs of marrying. Others believe Mr. Wilber may have been trying to attract suitors to his only daughter when he built the 22-room mansion.

Wilber died in 1910, and three years later Ella married William Paul, a partner in a downtown shoe store. She spent much of her life, both when she was single and after she married, in a third-floor studio at the mansion where she painted and fired china in a kiln. The china sets included as many as ten different sized plates, tureens, platters, two-handled soup bowls, bone dishes, and individual salt and pepper shakers.

Her financial difficulties occurred after her husband mortgaged the house to buy a dairy farm on North Market Street. When he couldn't make the payments, the bank claimed the house. The couple moved to a farmhouse. Ella was very concerned about the move and how her china had traveled, so she unpacked it and put it on shelves in the farmhouse's pantry to keep it out of the way of the movers. But in the middle of the night, the shelves came crashing down—the walls were apparently infested with termites. The next morning, a family friend and Paul dumped the china down an abandoned well. Only two pieces of her extensive china collection have ever been found: a china powder box and a candlestick; both are signed, "E. Wilber." Some of her ceramic tiles also surround fireplaces in the Wilber Mansion and bear the date "1907."

Little is known about the couple after this. They both began to suffer health problems in the 1930s and moved to Peoria in 1938. Mr. Paul died there in 1945 at the age of 77 and Ella died in 1949 at the age of 81.

Judge J.O. Cunningham

Joseph Oscar Cunningham, better known as J.O. Cunningham, is remembered for many things, including being a friend of Abraham Lincoln's, the owner of the first newspaper in Champaign County, and an original University of Illinois board trustee, but perhaps he is most remembered for his generosity to the community. Several landmarks today bear his name, including Cunningham Township, Cunningham Avenue, and the Cunningham Children's Home. He was born in 1830 and until the age of 18, he attended school

in a log cabin. While attending Oberlin College Preparatory School, he fell in love with a fellow student named Mary McConoughey; they married in 1853 and moved to Urbana that same year. Just one month after arriving in Urbana, he became one of the owners of the *Urbana Union*, the predecessor of *The News-Gazette*. Early in his law career, he met another young lawyer from Illinois who quickly became his friend and colleague. Many an evening, J.O. and Lincoln would dine together, and Lincoln would tell stories of his escapades in the courtroom that day.

After donating their home for an orphanage in 1894, the Cunninghams moved to a frame house at 1102 West Green Street, Urbana. J.O. added a brick wing to the home to serve as his private library, which was mostly an extensive collection of history books about Illinois and the midwest. He chose brick as the construction material to protect the collection in case of fire. True to his benevolent spirit, he willed his books to the Urbana Free Library. Judge J.O. Cunningham died on April 30, 1917, which was also the fifty-eighth anniversary of the opening his first law office in Urbana.

Cunningham Orphanage

On Thanksgiving Day in 1894, Joseph and Mary Cunningham donated the home they had lived in for 25 years, known as "The Cedars," and 15 acres of surrounding property to the Women's Home Missionary Society of the Illinois Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church to be used as a home for orphaned and needy children. The estate was located along Cunningham Avenue in Urbana, where the current Cunningham Children's Home now stands. An elaborate two-story brick residence, the house was constructed

in 1864 in the Second Empire style with a prominent tower in front and a mansard roof. It had 14 rooms, plus an ice house, a three-room gardener's cottage, several barns, three wells, and a windmill. A duck pond welcomed visitors to the estate. The orphanage opened in 1895 under the name, "Cunningham Deaconess' Home and Orphanage" but the name was changed in 1910 to "Cunningham Children's Home" after the deaconesses were no longer able to staff the facility. The original home was demolished in 1938 and, over the years, has been replaced by numerous small cottages and office buildings on the original grounds. In its 109-year history, Cunningham has been home to over 3,000 children.

Nurse Munhall

Within a week after the fall of Fort Sumter, local attorney John S. Wolfe organized the first volunteer infantry in Champaign County. They camped and drilled at the fairgrounds. In June 1861 the group was mustered into federal service as Company A, 20th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, with Wolfe named its commander. It was the first of many raised in Champaign County. Approximately 200 local residents, or 10 percent of those who served, perished in the Civil War. Most deaths were caused by disease or injury, but local historians estimate about 5% died in Confederate prisons.

Although some question the accuracy of the Munhall incident, the story is that sometime during the Civil War, a train of Confederate prisoners of war passed through Champaign. The train was on the way to the Rock Island Arsenal where the prisoners were to be housed. By the time the train entered Champaign, most of the prisoners were near death from disease. A

woman named Munhall (and there was a Munhall family in town) sent word that she would like to be given custody of the soldiers. As they were so close to death, she apparently felt sympathy towards them. Ten soldiers were handed over to her care, and they are all said to have been buried in the Munhall family plot.

Johnson Family

David Johnson was an African-American Union soldier who began life as a slave in Missouri. About 1848, he married Harriet Harbison, and they became the parents of 13 children. Johnson subsequently moved to Illinois and rented and worked on farms near Mattoon and Neoga. He and his family came to Champaign in 1863. During the Civil War, Johnson was a wagoner in the Union Army. At the end of the war he returned to Champaign and worked as a laborer, and after the death of his first wife, married Anna Washington. Johnson died on November 9, 1908. The funeral was held at the Second Baptist Church in Champaign with burial at Mt. Hope Cemetery. The life of a black soldier was usually a hard one. Poor food, little or no medical care, hard labor, and uncaring or hostile white officers all contributed to a high death rate. Many black regiments were used primarily as laborers on such construction projects as fortifications and roads and saw little or no fighting. Others, however, saw a great deal of combat and suffered many battle casualties. If captured, the black soldier and his white officers were usually subjected to harsh treatment. In some cases, captured black soldiers were executed or sold into slavery.

This article was based on information supplied by Liz Davis for the PACA Mt. Hope Cemetery tour.

P.A.C.A. MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY

- Adult \$15
- Student \$10
- Senior Citizen \$10
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Additional Contribution _____

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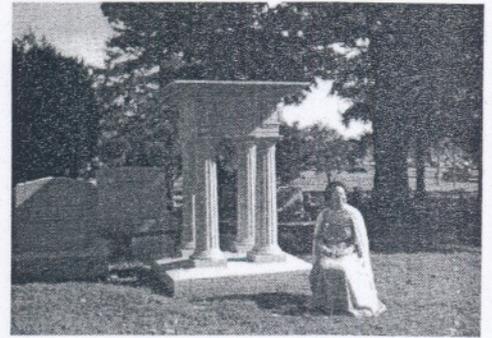
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Albert & Julia Burnham (played by Bob Weber and Diane Pritchard)



Captain Thomas & Tina Smith (played by Chris Harris and Gina Lykins)



Ella Wilber Paul (played by Michele Long)



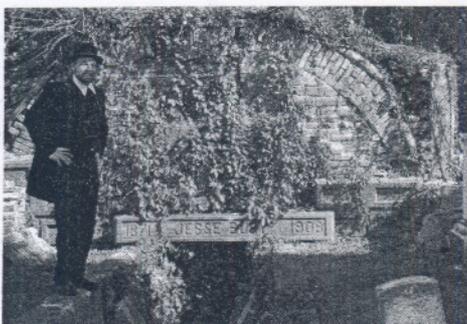
Benjamin Franklin Harris (played by Todd Lykins)



Judge J.O. Cunningham (played by Michael Thomson)



Cunningham Orphans (Taylor Lykins, Tess Strang)



Jessie Burt (played by Chris Harris)



Johnson Family (played by Patrick Thicklin, Mikki Kendall, and Malcolm Kendall)



Nurse Munhall (played by Linda Marcum)

*Photos by Susan Frobish and Rich Cahill
A special thanks to the C-U Theatre*

National Register of Historic Places Web Site

Visit the National Register of Historic Places web site to find something new each week. It is an easy site to navigate and information can be found quickly, such as the weekly list of properties and listings from the National Register Information System. You can also visit historic places across the country with the *Discover Our Shared Heritage* travel itineraries and *Teaching with Historic Places* lesson plans. Check out www.cr.nps.gov/nr.

Remember to send in your Heritage Award nominations by January 15.

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PACA Newsletter

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