

## A Peek at the Past

### Cemetery Safari: The search for Perry

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**February 23, 2008 - By MATT CONNOR**

How does one misplace a 12-foot tall marble slab commemorating the life of one of the most important figures in American industrial history? It's a question that has plagued local historians for nearly a century, and while there are plenty of theories, so far nobody's been able to come up with a definitive answer to that vexing question.

Our story begins on 1797, the year Benjamin Perry, of Madeley, Shropshire, England, was born. After a brief career as a shoemaker, Perry found greater success and acclaim in the iron business. He was manager of the Pentyweyn Iron Works in Monmouthshire, South Wales, when in 1835 he was contacted by a former colleague in the U.S. and asked to come to Farrandsville to help with the manufacture of iron there.

At the Farrandsville Iron Furnace, Perry made history when he became the first person in America to successfully utilize anthracite coal in the production of iron. He therefore contributed substantially to the industrial boom that swept the American northeast in the 19th century, greatly enriching his own coffers at the same time.

In 1846 he built a fine house near Mackeyville, which according to the Clinton County Historic Sites Survey has an interior that "is probably one of the most architecturally interesting in the Nittany Valley."

He continued to live there while traveling around the state to assist in the development of iron in furnaces in Allentown, Johnstown, Pottsville and Harrisburg.

When he died at age 73 on June 1, 1870, he was buried in the old Great Island Presbyterian Cemetery, at the time located on what is now Bellefonte Avenue between South Highland and Summit.

The cemetery is believed to have been the oldest non-Indian burial ground in the Bald Eagle Valley and, according to a history of the Great Island Presbyterian Church published during the church's 100th anniversary, the cemetery was already long in existence when the first Great Island Presbyterian Church was constructed near the cemetery site in 1792.

That first church, a substantial log building, predated any other house of worship in the area by at least 40 years, according to the church history. It was torn down around 1850, when the congregation moved to a new brick church on East Water Street (now the Jaycee hall) and then, fifteen years later, to its current home on 12 West Water Street.

The move to the new church in 1850 was the beginning of a long, inexorable decline for the cemetery, as it was slowly reclaimed by nature and occasionally beset by vandals.

At one time, as a matter of fact, a total of three adjoining cemeteries filled a huge plot of land between West Bald Eagle Street and Bellefonte Avenue, from Highland Street to Pearl Street. They were the Brown, Lock Haven and Great Island cemeteries, and by the turn of the Twentieth Century, all three were long abandoned and neglected.

In 1901 a reporter for the Clinton County Republican newspaper visited the Great Island Cemetery site and found it to be "much neglected, but it is also a historic spot. There, secluded from the busy haunts of men, sleep many of those who in the past struggled, planned and executed, and as is recorded on the tombstones, died as all must and now 'After a fitful fever they sleep well.'"

And here is where we pick up the story of Benjamin Perry. During his walk through the old Great Island graveyard in 1901, the Clinton County Republican reporter came across a huge gray marble stone, standing about 12 feet high and located not far from one of the cemetery's entrances, under "the spreading branches of a large tree."

The inscription on the monument, according to the unnamed reporter, read, "Benjamin Perry, Born in Madeley, Shropshire, England, in 1797. Died in Lamar Township, Clinton County, Pa., June 1, 1870. Aged 73 years. The deceased was the first iron master that manufactured iron successfully with anthracite coal in America."

Three years after the Clinton Republican's account of the Great Island Presbyterian Cemetery tour, Ben Perry's only child, Elizabeth Gummo, died at her son's home near Mackeyville, in late October, 1904. A Clinton County Times obituary of Ms. Gummo described her father as "a large man physically and mentally" and as "a kind hearted and industrious citizen and would do nothing toward others that he would object others to do toward him."

According to another obituary, this one in the Express, Elizabeth Gummo was interred at Great Island Presbyterian Cemetery (the Clinton County Times lists her interment place at Highland Cemetery) and this may be the last public mention of a member of the Perry family in connection with Great Island Presbyterian.

In the years to come, the Great Island Cemetery would become a point of major contention among developers, community activists and civic and government leaders. As it continued to deteriorate, individuals throughout the community agonized over its future. Should it be converted into a public park? Should it be restored? Should it be sold for development?

For the decade and a half between October, 1904 (when the dilapidated sidewalk running alongside the cemetery was repaired) to July of 1919 (when the headline "Old Great Island Cemetery is no more" appeared in the Clinton Republican) the cemetery's future remained uncertain.

Much of what is known about that period can be found in Bob Schadt's comprehensive digest of newspaper and court materials, "Chronology of the Great Island & Lock Haven Cemeteries," to be published through the Lock Haven Genealogical Society – of which Schadt is a member – and currently available at Ross Library.

By 1910 it was clear that something had to be done about the long-abandoned Great Island and Lock Haven bone yards, which had become an occasional draw for troublemakers, vandals and drunks and was seen by some in the community as an eyesore and a hindrance to future development.

For several years the fate of the cemetery was in legal limbo, as ownership remained in question and nobody – not the city, the county, area religious organizations, the relatives of the deceased interred there or potential developers – seemed willing to bear the cost of removing all of the bodies and gravestones and transporting them to Highland Cemetery or other area graveyards, a task that was believed to cost, potentially, several thousand dollars, perhaps as much as the land itself was worth.

Finally, after years of rancorous public meetings, legal petitions and proposals for future use of the cemetery property, the city council approved an ordinance for the removal of the bodies from the old Lock Haven and Great Island Presbyterian cemeteries in the late summer of 1918.

Families of the deceased buried there were notified by postings in the local newspapers that the remains would be removed to either Bellevue Cemetery in Flemington or a site of the deceased family's choosing.

Lawyers for the city compiled a list of 175 names of individuals they believed to have been buried in Great Island Presbyterian, Lock Haven and Brown Cemeteries, and the list was published in the local papers. This accounting probably underestimated the number of the interred at least by half, according to a later list of burials included in Schadt's chronology, which is also very likely incomplete.

Mysteriously, Benjamin Perry's name was on neither list. No mention of his memorial stone could be found after the 1901 newspaper account.

One hundred bodies were removed from Lock Haven Cemetery, according to a 1918 account in the Clinton Republican, 49 of which were identifiable through grave markers. Due to the mineral content and high water table of the cemetery grounds, some of the cadavers were found to be petrified, the paper reported.

"In some instances only a few bones were found and in other cases no vestige of the dead remained," the newspaper noted. "Two bodies were found to be petrified. In the case of a man buried many years ago the body was solid from the hips up and in the case of a woman interred 18 years ago the petrification was complete, even the clothing and corsage of flowers being in a good state of preservation. The body weighed 800 pounds and much difficulty was experienced in removing it."

A few months later, the Clinton Republican reported that a cursory examination of Great Island Presbyterian Cemetery was conducted and after the headstones were removed, the property was plowed over and buckwheat planted there.

"Several of the graves containing the remains of the persons last buried in the cemetery were opened, but nothing was found – not even bones – and it was considered useless by the inspector and others interested to go on to any further trouble in an effort to find bodies or bones, and therefore the monuments and headstones were removed and the cemetery plowed up."

How many human remains were still interred at the cemetery at that time is an open question, since a thorough inspection was never completed.

"The total left there is not known, but there were a lot," said genealogist Schadt, who has spent fifteen years researching the cemeteries' histories.

According to Schadt's chronology, court records indicated that the Great Island gravestones were deposited in a designated section of the cemetery, where relatives could retrieve and dispose of them as they saw fit.

What became of the grave markers after that point is still a matter of some speculation. The former cemetery land was eventually sold as individual lots and multiple homes were built on what was once hallowed ground.

But over the last 90 years, occasional macabre discoveries reminded residents that a city of the dead once existed where quiet neighborhoods along Bellefonte Avenue stand today.

In 1937, for example, a work crew digging in the cellar of a Summit Street home uncovered a casket and skeleton once buried in the old Lock Haven Cemetery.

Thirty years later, in 1967, the owner of a house on Pearl Street found an 1811 grave marker on his property as he was fixing a backyard walkway. Pearl Street was the westernmost boundary of Brown Cemetery, a section of the old Lock Haven Cemetery.

Thirty years after that, in 1997, a former Great Island Presbyterian Cemetery gravestone was found on Dewey Street in Mill Hall, miles from the old cemetery site. As late as 2003 – and even to this day, according to Schadt – old headstones from Great Island, Lock Haven and Brown Cemeteries continue to turn up in basements, backyards and public areas of the county.

But what of Benjamin Perry, who was among the Great Island Presbyterian Cemetery's most famous occupants, and whose gravestone was among its most prominent?

The massive, 12-foot-tall monolith commemorating the great man's life apparently vanished more than 90 years ago, and nobody yet has come forward to explain with certainty what happened to it.

But it's bound to turn up somewhere, sooner or later.