

First city-owned burial ground rich with history

Beech Grove Cemetery about 150 years old

By **BETTY HARRIS**
For The Muncie Star

Visitors who drive through the various sections of Beech Grove Cemetery during this Memorial Week will find reflections of the area's past.

These include the angel in stone on the Garst monument, the obelisk marking the family plot of historian-physician G.W.H. Kemper; the headstone of artist J. Ottis Adams and the names on the 35 mausoleums — names which read like a Who's Who of Muncie and Delaware County.

This history of the cemetery — which dates from a land purchase just more than 150 years ago — can also be seen in a publication expected to be done this fall.

Delores Rench, a passionate genealogist, is chairman of the Delaware County Historical Alliance genealogy division book project. Rench and committee members began research for the book in 1986.

When it is published, the book will list names, dates and other facts about those buried in the old part of the cemetery.

A fire in the 1860s is said to have destroyed many early records so there is no exact count of how many people are buried at Beech Grove. The number has sometimes been estimated to be as many as 70,000.

The late Mima Keener, who retired in 1958 after being office secretary 32 years, reported in 1941 there had been 20,000 burials. Now, 51 years later, Rench estimates the

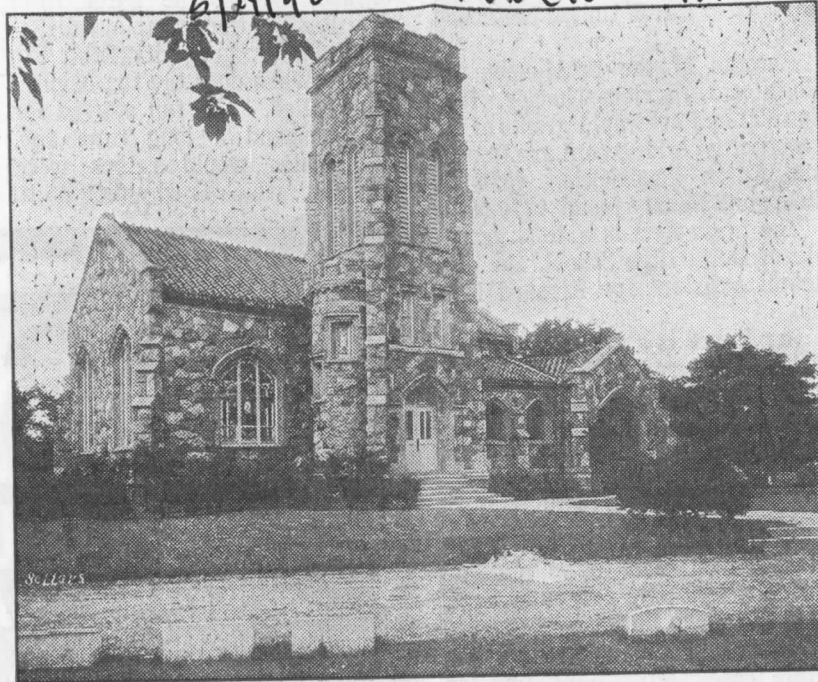


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THE BEECH GROVE CHAPEL WAS BUILT IN 1908
Fire destroyed the structure and it was razed in 1955

Beech Grove Highlights

December 1841 — First land purchase

1906 — Stone arch built

1908 — Old Chapel built

1921 — Gate House office built

1950 — Old Chapel burned

1954 — Pedestrian gate built

1955 — Old Chapel razed

1969 — Home of cemetery superintendents razed (built about 1859, had been home of Civil War veteran Maj. Thomas Waterhouse)

1974 — 120-crypt mausoleum built

1974 — Enclosure of porch added 50-seat chapel to office

1991 — Chapel/office remodeled

horse could be left unattended by its driver.

Single graves cost \$4 to \$10, the cemetery board reported in 1906. To open, close, tamp and sod a grave cost \$5. The charge for perpetual care of lots was set at 25 cents a square foot, \$10 for a single grave or \$50 for a family plot.

Reddish field stone in the cemetery wall is like the stone used in the Kilgore Avenue entrance arch and the chapel/office. As it does match, it probably all came from the grounds because the 1906 book-

let says that was the source of "the rough stone" used to build the arch.

Today, seven workers mow (an endless job in the spring), fill in low and settling spots, clean, prune and do other kinds of grounds upkeep, repair foundations, put in foundations on which companies place monuments, and set government markers.

Vandals overturned more than 20 headstones Tuesday night, creating more work.

More work is needed on the chapel/office, but a new furnace, a dropped ceiling, a new rug and interior decoration were part of the \$100,000 remodeling completed last summer. The red tile roof was redone so it no longer leaks, and some pointing was done on the field stone exterior.

Visitors this week will find flags flying on the graves of more than 2,500 veterans in observance of Memorial Day.

Memorial Week at the cemetery will include a tribute to veterans at noon Monday by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and a program by American Legion, Unit 19, on Saturday. A color guard and gun salute will be presented at 10:50 a.m. Saturday by Legionnaires at the Grand Army of the Republic section set aside for Civil War soldiers. The veterans will then walk under the railroad bypass to the American Legion section to repeat the ceremony there 20 minutes later.

The front gate is open 7 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. The office is open 8 a.m.-noon and 1-4 p.m. weekdays.

number of burials to date at 40,000.

Rench is vice president of Beech Grove's five-member board of trustees, which is appointed by Muncie City Council and is headed by James R. Terry, president. Other board members are George Eastman, Linda Barton and John Landers. Donna Morrow, who has worked at Beech Grove since April 1972, is office manager.

The first city-owned burial ground, Beech Grove began in December 1841 when "Munseytown graveyard trustees" bought 1½ acres of land from Moses Eby for \$75.

The land was bought because the graveyard previously used by the city, located on Adams Street west of what now is Ball Corp. headquarters, was too small.

Beech Grove was given that name "because several beech trees lined the river bank at that point," according to a 1906 booklet. The area had long been known as Beech Knoll, and Delaware Indians, who once lived here, used it as a burying ground.

Two Revolutionary War soldiers, Sewell Gilbert and John McConnell,

are among soldiers from many wars buried at Beech Grove.

The 1½ acres bought in 1841 contained enough burial room until 1867. Then the city bought 7 acres from Thomas Kirby for \$367.50 to enlarge Beech Grove, Rench said.

After that, the city bought land from Volney Wilson and the Kirby brothers and the John S. Moore and Bishop farms. Since 1941, the cemetery has included 160 acres.

Until 1905, when a five-member board was instituted, the cemetery was under direct control of the city council. Much of the money cleared by the cemetery until then went into the city's general funds and was used for other city improvements.

Now, the cemetery budget is about \$309,000 a year, 46 percent of which comes from property taxes. The remainder comes from cemetery operations, interest from trust funds and other sources. Gilbert (Gib) Greene is current superintendent.

Rules in 1906 said no vehicle could be driven faster than a slow trot within the cemetery, and no