



Cortland Rural Cemetery

110 TOMPKINS STREET • CORTLAND, NEW YORK 13045

AUTUMN 2009

THE GIBSONS' LEGACY

By Christine E. Buck and Andrew Palm

Before Cortland Rural Cemetery's chapel was built in 1922-23, the cemetery buildings consisted of a Superintendent's home on the cemetery grounds and, behind it, a barn. A horse and cow were stabled in the barn, along with the cemetery's equipment. There was no cemetery office; the Trustees met in various downtown Cortland meeting rooms.

The cemetery's first twentieth-century structure was the chapel. In July of 1921, Trustees discussed the matter of a new chapel "at length." Given credit as the chapel's chief promoter was long-standing Board President Judge Joseph Eggleston.

A committee of Trustees was appointed to seek plans for the chapel. They contacted a New York City architect noted for ecclesiastical designs. The architect was Cortlandville native George W. Conable.

Conable's plan called for the chapel to connect with an existing hillside vault. The new building would stand at the base of the cemetery hill. This framed it in a picturesque location near the cemetery's entrance.

In May of 1922, bids were opened; the contract was awarded to the Marshall Company of Syracuse. Specifications called for light-colored brick, Gouverneur marble trim and foundation, and slate for the chapel's roof.

The builder completed the chapel in less than a year. The minutes of the Trustees' March 31, 1923 meeting gave a full financial accounting. The chapel's total cost, including furnishings, was \$31,615.37.

The Cortland Rural Cemetery's chapel was a shining jewel. Its Gothic arches, elegant stained glass windows, and oak woodwork prepared it to host funerals and committal services. No longer would mourners and clergymen stand at graveside in the snow and rain.

Committal services and funerals were held in the chapel for several decades, but over time, funeral homes became the public's choice for such ceremonies. The beautiful chapel sat unused, and



Charles Gibson

gradually its maintenance was deferred. The cemetery's shining jewel tarnished. Rather than an asset, it became a liability.

In 1964, Charles Gibson was elected to be one of the nine Trustees of the Cemetery. Serving as a Trust Officer at the First National Bank of Cortland, Mr. Gibson continued a long association between the two old Cortland institutions – the bank and the cemetery.

Over the years, Mr. Gibson became deeply involved in the governance and support of a number of other important Cortland non-profit organizations including the Cortland Memorial Hospital, Cortland Memorial Hospital Foundation, SUNY Cortland Foundation, 1890 House Museum, Grace Episcopal Church, the Franziska Racker Centers, and the Cortland County Historical Society. Widely admired, Charles put a strong effort behind every community endeavor he became involved with.

Meanwhile, Charles became well acquainted with the Cemetery's financing and operations as he served diligently as a Member, Assistant Treasurer and Treasurer of its Board of Trustees. Always a keen observer and a strong steward of historic buildings, the plight of the chapel did not escape his notice.

Gibson Legacy (Continued)

Fast forward to 1997. At the November 10, 1997 annual meeting of the Cemetery Trustees, Mr. Gibson was elected the President of the Board of Trustees.

Finally in a position to use his knowledge and leadership skills, Charles Gibson unrelentingly drove to restore the chapel and put it to good use in a very different time than at its beginnings.

First, money needed to be raised, since the Cemetery itself was living hand to mouth, as most old cemeteries in small communities do. No stranger to fundraising, Mr. Gibson sought good advice and made numerous personal solicitations resulting in funds, starting with his personal leadership contribution, sufficient to install a heating system, fix the ceiling, paint the interior, and install new flooring.

Additional fundraising resulted in monies to install new doors, repair and re-point the brick exterior walls, and erect a protective glass cover for the stained glass window on the east. Later contributors funded full restoration of that large and original jewel-hued window. Cremation niches and an indoor public mausoleum were installed in the chapel. Among the donors Mr. Gibson personally solicited was the J. M. MacDonald Foundation, and they proved key in the funding of the niches and mausoleum.

Over the remaining years of his life, Charles worked and watched as the improvements unfolded. In his final act of support for the Cemetery, Mr. Gibson left a generous donation in his will which was used to kick-off the Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation's Endowment Fund drive. Mr. Gibson's desire was to be inurned in the planned glass-fronted cremation niches in the Cemetery chapel. As a result, he left a provision with his donation that the monies could be used to pay for the installation of the glass front niche units. By then, other funds were available, and the niches were installed without using his donation. Mr. Gibson is now permanently inurned in the glass niches in the chapel restored by his vision and drive.

After the passing of Charles Gibson in August of 2006, there was a real need to move forward with significant long-term fundraising using Charles' willed donation as a starting point. The Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation developed a plan to undertake an Endowment Fund Drive, and it was decided that Charles' sister Margaret should be contacted. Charles and Margaret were the two youngest of six siblings and had supported each other's community interests



Margaret Gibson

closely, as Charles lived in Cortland and Margaret lived in Ithaca.

Meeting with several members of the Cemetery Foundation Board, Margaret was excited and honored to be asked to help support one of Charles' favorite organizations. Showing her own deep understanding of the needs of the Cemetery, as well as the skills of fundraising she had honed as the first Director of Publications at Ithaca College, Margaret immediately offered to match Charles' donation with an equal one of her own.

Margaret has served on the Board of the Franzisca Racker Center since 1975 and on the Board of the McGraw House in Ithaca for many years. Modest and self-effacing, Margaret has proven to be every bit her brother's equal in fundraising and friend raising for the organizations she supports.

As children, Margaret and Charles moved to Cortland from Ontario, Canada when their father purchased the Cortland Tennis Racket Company, later to become part of the Wilson Sporting Goods Company. Through their actions, the Gibson parents demonstrated the virtues of charity and support of their community. The children learned well. Thriving in their own professional lives, they have given deeply and generously to their communities.

To recognize the support of both Charles Gibson and Margaret Gibson to the Cortland Rural Cemetery and the Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation, the Cemetery Trustees will dedicate the 1922 Cemetery chapel as the "Gibson Chapel" in their honor. With great pleasure, a dedication ceremony and reception for the public will be held on October 4, 2009. 🌿

WHO WAS GEORGE W. CONABLE?

By Christine E. Buck

It's no surprise that George Willard Conable was chosen to design the chapel at Cortland Rural Cemetery; his roots ran deep in Cortland County.

Two Conable couples, Fabius natives, came to Cortlandville in 1854. They settled on the McGraw Road about a quarter mile east of the Port Watson Street bridge. The farm they shared was vast and productive. The men were brothers, Frederick and George Conable.

The Conables were farm partners for twenty years. When the adjoining farm to the west came up for sale, George purchased it and expanded the family holdings. While each brother then had a farm, all their lives they worked with brotherly love and mutual helpfulness. Both Conable families were active in the Methodist Church, the women with missionary work and church suppers, and the men holding office. Each man served the Cortland Rural Cemetery as Trustee. Frederick had a stint as Cortlandville's Highway Commissioner. Their farm homes still stand; most of the fields now have been developed for commercial use.

Our subject, architect George W. Conable, is from the next generation. He was born in 1866, just after the Civil War, to Frederick and his wife Fidelia. Young George W. grew up on the farm with his brothers, sister, and two cousins. After graduating from Cortland Normal School, he continued his education at Cornell University. He studied architecture and graduated in 1890.

When it came time for a wife, George chose a local girl, Grace Ford. Their 1895 marriage produced two children, son Walter and daughter Mildred. By 1900, the family lived in Manhattan, where his profession was architect.

Working in several prominent New York firms enhanced the young man's skills. He worked with architect Ernest Flagg on New York's Singer Building, in 1908 the tallest building in the world. He collaborated on twenty buildings for the New York State Health Department. Eventually, he forged professional business partnerships with other architects.

Along with office buildings, Conable's special interests lay with churches and hospitals. Included on his long list of credits are churches in Manhattan, Philadelphia, and Schenectady, and on Staten Island

and Long Island. The Kingston Avenue Hospital in Brooklyn was his design, as was the Chamber of Commerce Building in Jamaica, New York, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

By 1922, when the Cortland Rural Chapel was built, Conable was a well-known New York City architect. He hadn't forgotten Cortland, though, having designed some of our community's buildings. The Cortland Democrat building on Central Avenue - Richardson Romanesque style - and the Cortland Central School, made into the County Office Building, are credited to Conable. His name is mentioned with other local projects: Presbyterian North chapel, First Methodist Church parsonage, the Beard Block remodeling job, First Baptist Church heating plant, and an apartment house at the southwest corner of Church and Port Watson Streets.

In a 1928 Cornell University exhibit, Conable's work was included. Featured were photographs of notable buildings designed by alumni.

Conable died in St. Petersburg, Florida at the age of 66 after a successful architectural career. He had suffered from heart trouble for several months. His body was brought back to Cortland for burial. The funeral was held that January day in the beautiful chapel he had designed. He was laid to rest in his family's hilltop plot at the Cortland Rural Cemetery.

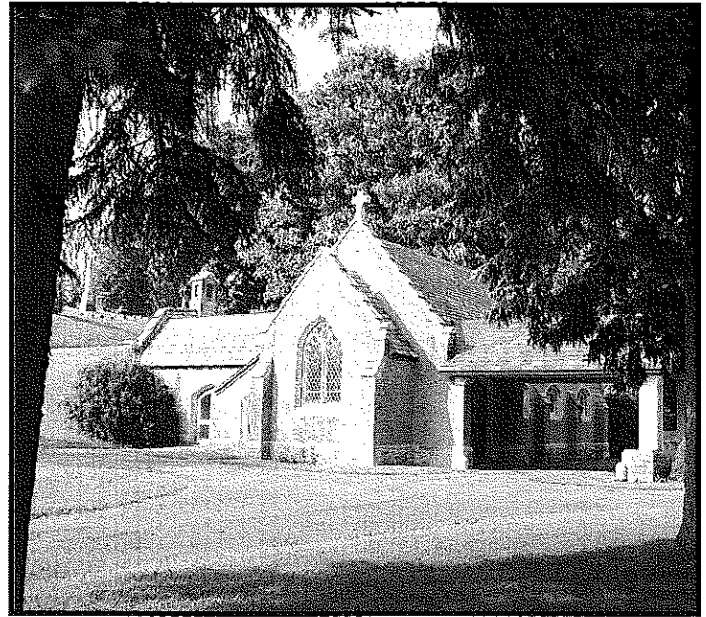
While Conable's business life took him far away from his childhood home, he remained a loyal supporter of Cortland County. He maintained connections and warm friendships from his earlier days. His design, the cemetery chapel, stands as testament. 🌳



George W. Conable

-You are Invited-
to
the Chapel
Dedication Ceremony
on
Sunday, October 4, 2009
at
2:00 P.M.

Refreshments - Tours - Ceremony



*The Chapel is being named in honor of
Charles and Margaret Gibson.*



Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation
Post Office Box 288
Cortland, New York 13045-0288

