



Cortland Rural Cemetery

110 TOMPKINS STREET • CORTLAND, NEW YORK 13045

JANUARY 2003

The Final Resting Place of New York State's Last Upstate Governor

By CHRISTINE BUCK

New York State's 2002 gubernatorial election brought references to Nathan L. Miller, who bested incumbent Governor Al Smith to be elected in 1920. Some 82 years later, Miller remains New York State's last Upstate candidate to be elected governor.

That's Nathan Lewis Miller, a Cortland County native, son of a tenant farmer, born in the Town of Solon in 1868. When Nate was five years old the family moved to Groton where he started school in a little country schoolhouse. He moved rapidly through the grades while at the same time performing farm chores at home—pitching hay, picking apples, husking corn, and milking the cows. Miller entered Cortland Normal School at age 15 and excelled at Mathematics and Latin. Graduating as a teacher with the class of 1887, he then taught in Burdett, Brooklyn, Blodgett Mills and McLean for a total of three years.

But Miller was determined to become a lawyer and studied law during those years of teaching.



The Nathan Miller Family

(Photo courtesy of Cortland County Historical Society)

At age 21 he joined the law firm of Judge A.P. Smith of Cortland as a clerk and was admitted to the bar in 1893. He began private practice of the law where his fine speaking and thinking abilities advanced his position. He was elected school commissioner and worked to advance the interests of the Republican party. He married a Marathon girl, Elizabeth Davern,

in 1896 and at the turn of the century became Cortland's corporation counsel. After several short-term housing situations, he and his family settled into their home at 44 Tompkins Street, Cortland.

His work in the Republican party brought his appointment to the vacant post of New York State Comptroller in 1902, and

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to the New York State Supreme Court in 1903. After 12 years he resigned from the bench to practice law in Syracuse, saying that Mrs. Miller and their seven daughters were eight reasons why he needed more income than his judicial salary.

He became a prominent Syracuse attorney, representing Solvay Process among others, and lived with his family in a James Street mansion. He attended the 1920 Republican convention as one of the founders of the Liberty League, and was drafted as the Republican candidate for governor. His Cortland County supporters expressed their pride by forming the "Miller League" to support his candidacy. They established a Cortland headquarters, and Mr. Miller was greeted enthusiastically when he visited Cortland just prior to the election.

Before he met with Cortland's citizens at the Cortland Theatre, there was a community parade described in the *Cortland Standard*:

"From the D.A.R. boulder led by Marshal H. S. Hakes on horseback and Stanton's band, Judge Miller's car with its escort and the four other cars followed by a long line of citizens made the march through Church Street, to Port Watson to Main, to the Cortland theatre. Main Street was one mass of cheering people and the whole length of it was brilliant with red fire and fireworks.

The theatre by this time was packed to the doors, all standing room being occupied. Those in the line of march had seats reserved for them on the platform which they reached through a rear door, and the meeting then proceeded."

After opening comments by other politicians, Candidate Miller stepped to the podium to the cheers of the Cortland folks. His platform included reducing expenses to deal with the State's problem of living beyond its resources; providing assistance to farmers; and working as a team with the legislature.

Voting on November 2 was heavy; Miller dominated the Upstate vote and rode the crest of the Republican election wave, which included presidential and congressional successes. Miller gave incumbent Alfred Smith the first defeat of his political career.

During his two-year term as governor, Miller was noted for his businesslike approach to state government and was credited with straightening

out New York City's transit system; providing child healthcare clinics; promoting the use of water power for electricity; and bringing industry to the state prisons.

He ran again in 1922 against Alfred E. Smith, only to be defeated. Even though prohibition was a federal law, Smith had used it as an election issue against Miller. Miller had also offended the New York League of Women Voters during their annual dinner speech when he declared, "There is no proper place for a League of Women Voters, precisely as I should say there was no proper place for a League of Men Voters..." He felt that political activity should be confined to organized political parties.

He joined a Wall Street firm in 1923 and continued as senior partner until 1939, with such clients as U.S. Steel and Bethlehem Steel. Despite stepping down from politics, the State called on him for assistance from time to time.



Governor Miller was buried on Lot C2-174, joining his mother, father and brother. His wife and three daughters were later interred on the family plot.

Miller died in New York City at age 84 on June 26, 1953. He was survived by his wife; seven daughters; and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Funeral services were held in New York. On June 30 he was buried on the hilltop at Cortland Rural Cemetery, with a stately display best described by the *Cortland Standard*:

"Back to the scenes of his boyhood and early teaching and lawyer days came the body of Nathan L. Miller, former governor of New York State, today. Arriving by train from New York, where a funeral

service was held yesterday, the body was taken to the Cortland Rural Cemetery for interment.

The brief committal service was conducted by Rev. John F. Lynch, pastor of St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church, Manlius.

Gathered around the family plot, marked by a large granite block simply engraved "Miller," were Mr. Miller's widow, the former Elizabeth Davern, of Marathon, his seven daughters, their husbands and 11 grandchildren, in addition to a number of other relatives.

Members of the Cortland Bar Association turned out in a body to honor the former Cortland attorney. Local police and state troopers provided a guard of honor.

On hand at the Lackawanna station as the train rolled in from Syracuse at 9:01 a.m.—exactly on time—was a large gathering of local lawyers, county and civic officials and members of some of Cortland's most prominent families.

Members of the Miller family arrived in a special Pullman car from New York. After the family descended, the train was moved forward and the highly-burnished casket was removed to the waiting hearse of the Beard Memorial Home.

Paced by two state trooper cars, the entourage of automobiles wound slowly along Central Avenue to Church Street, through Port Watson Street and along Tompkins Street to the cemetery.

Under the canopy of an almost cloudless sky, the body of the man who rose from a farm background to governor of the nation's most populous state and then legal counsel to one of the world's largest corporations, was laid to rest."

The article goes on to list by name all who gathered at the gravesite: family, friends, dignitaries, lawyers, seven state troopers and five local policemen.

He is remembered locally by the name of SUNY Cortland's Miller Administration Building and by a portrait recently donated to the Cortland County Historical Society by his former Wall Street legal firm, still in business with more than 1,000 employees.

Sources: *Book of Biographies (1898)*
Cortland City Directories
The Cortland Standard
The Syracuse Post-Standard

Your Donations Needed

The Cemetery Foundation needs you to continue your generous support of our efforts to maintain roads, plant trees, repair buildings and educate others about our beautiful, historic Cemetery.

Gifts can be made in the name of a family member or friend you wish to honor. Our new tree plantings are usually provided for that way. Large trees can be planted for a \$300 donation and ornamental trees for a \$250 donation.

Road repair is expensive, but long lasting and it generally costs about \$20,000 for each segment of work we do. Many contributions go into each repaving project and we all benefit from those repairs. Any size donation is helpful in road repair.

We could use a donation of a good used Pentium II class (or better) computer or two also. Call the cemetery office at 607-756-6022 if you would like to make a tax deductible computer donation.

Checks can be addressed to the Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation at P.O. Box 288, Cortland, NY and are fully tax deductible.

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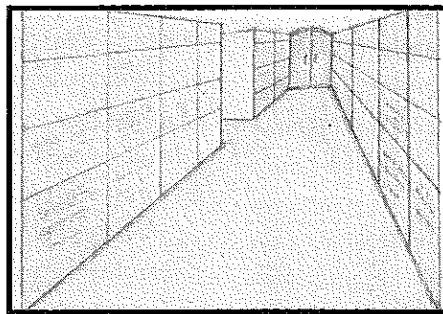
New Public Mausoleum Coming

The Cortland Rural Cemetery has received approval from the New York State Division of Cemeteries to construct a new Public Mausoleum in the rear annex to the Cemetery Chapel. The first phase in a series of planned mausoleum construction projects, this mausoleum will allow the public an affordable option for permanent entombment above ground. This is a first for the Cortland area.

Designed by Schopfer Architects of Syracuse, a firm well experienced in the mausoleum construction field, the first phase will contain 36 crypts and initial construction is slated to begin during the

winter of 2002-03.

The second and third phases of the mausoleum will contain cremation niches along with more crypts for casket interment. And the Cemetery already offers cremation niche spaces for sale inside the beautiful historic Chapel. The Cemetery, while historic in origin, is providing a



Artist's rendering of interior



Exterior of new mausoleum

full range of contemporary choices for your loved one's final resting place.

If you are interested in the purchase of a mausoleum crypt, or a niche, or would like more information, please call Cemetery Superintendent Andrew Palm at 607-756-6022 for an appointment.



Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation

Post Office Box 288

Cortland, New York 13045-0288