



Cortland Rural Cemetery

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Historic Chapel Restoration Project

By IDA M. PEASE

The 75-year-old chapel at the Cortland Rural Cemetery on Tompkins Street would be reopened to the public after a two-year renovation, if funds for the \$150,000-project can be raised, a cemetery official said.

"We are not just restoring the building to have it sit there and shine," said Andy Palm, superintendent of the cemetery.

He said winter burials were held at the cemetery this year, but it can be difficult on families on cold, blustery days on top of the hill. With the restorations, including a heating system, the chapel can again be used for committal services and even funerals, Palm said.

The cemetery superintendent said no services have been held in the chapel for ten years or so. Over time, the chapel was used less for funerals and committal services as funeral homes took over that market, Palm said.

The Wilkins Foundation has contributed \$3,000 toward the chapel repairs, estimated at \$150,000, said Palm. John Kimmich, chairman of the Wilkins Foundation, said his group gives about \$100,000 a year to various tax-exempt organizations in Cortland County.

That \$3,000 will be used to install a forced hot air heating system, said Palm. The Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation will be starting a mail campaign in a couple of months to raise more money. They also plan to open the chapel on Memorial Day weekend to attract potential donors.

Other repairs Palm said are needed include exterior masonry work to fix water leakage between bricks, and protective coverings on the stained-glass windows, especially over one with a couple of broken panes. Inside, some plaster needs repairing, and new floors are needed. Also Palm would like to replace the covered entrance that was removed in the 1970's or 1980's.

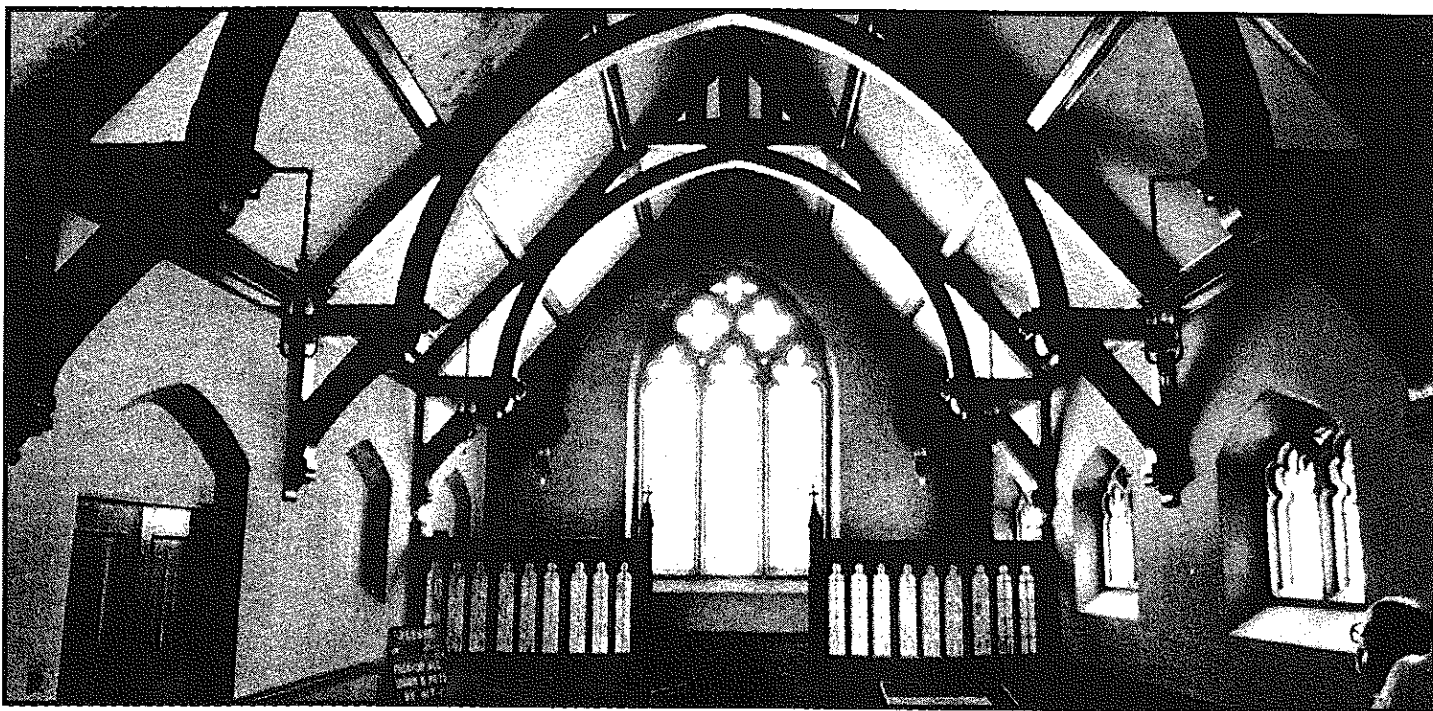
The chapel was designed by architect George Conable of New York City, formerly of Cortland. The Marshall Company constructed the brick and stone chapel with a slate roof in 1922-23 for \$26,000, according to a *Cortland Standard* article from the period.

Conable had designed several buildings in Cortland, including the Cortland Democrat building on Central Avenue that housed the weekly newspaper for many years, and the Cortland High School, which is now the Cortland County Office Building.

When Conable died on January 6th, 1933, his funeral was held in the chapel, and he was buried in the Cortland Rural Cemetery.

Palm said chapel restoration will probably take two years. The only significant repair work since the chapel was built was roof repairs a couple of years ago.

The cemetery itself was established in 1853 on a wooded hillside about a mile from the center of the then village of Cortland. In November of 1853 a group of men met in the Presbyterian Church to form an association to purchase and hold land for a cemetery. Thirteen of the men present contributed fifty dollars each toward the purchase of the site.



Message from The President

After serving on this Board for over 30 years, I accepted the Presidency with a great deal of enthusiasm.

In earlier years, we did not have the problems with cash flow that we have been faced with over the past three or four years. Due to increases in all expenses of running the cemetery and the authorized charges we collect, we now are faced with a deficit operating budget.

There are several things that have happened during the past few months that we hope will change this situation.

In late 1997, we hired a new Superintendent, Andy Palm, who immediately started economizing. In just a short period of time, his leadership with the staff and his own hard work has shown a marked improvement in the general appearance and upkeep of the grounds.

Another very important event happened in 1997 and completed in 1998—the establishment of the Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation. I would like to assure the members of the Foundation that I, as President of the Trustees, will help this new organization in any way I can, as will all the other Trustees.

With some anonymous gifts in 1997, the Foundation was able to put in a new road leading up the main hill and a new drainage system at the foot of the hill. This helped the look of the approach; now we need more road work up through the other areas of the cemetery.

I have one project that I have been trying to get done for years, and have asked the Trustees and the Foundation for permission and help with this endeavor—the restoration of the Historic Chapel, which is located just to the right of the main entrance. This is a gem and should be restored. With the help of the Foundation and some individuals, this project will be underway by Spring 1998. Watch for announcements and progress reports. The additional funds for this project are coming from private foundations, and some fundings for Historic Preservation through grants that have been applied for. The Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation will also be soliciting funds for this project.

The Trustees have established a long-range plan for the continuation of Cortland Rural Cemetery for many generations to come. The purpose of this plan is to implement some new innovations that other aggressive cemeteries have used so that medium sized cemeteries can continue to be run independently and be run with a balanced budget. This will take several years to develop and, as this development unfolds, the public and the lot owners will be informed.

The purpose of the Cortland Rural Cemetery Trustees and the Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation Directors is to keep the cemetery in good condition, both grounds and buildings, to be a place that our community can be proud of. We all want to be assured that the final resting place for our family and loved ones will be a place of beauty—well-groomed and with peaceful surroundings.

Respectfully submitted,
Charles A. Gibson, *President*

Chapel Restoration OPEN HOUSE

Saturday, May 23, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Sunday, May 24, from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Monday, May 25, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation Members

Mrs. Carol Brewer Fenton
President

Mr. William S. Brewer
Vice President

Mr. Robert C. Howe
Secretary / Treasurer

Mrs. Linda D. Hoffmann

Dr. R. Paul Higgins, Jr.

Mrs. Donald H. Beard

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Helen Hart, *Secretary / Treasurer*

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Andrew Palm, *Superintendent*

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Christine Buck

John Folmer

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Stephen Robinson

Richard Letts

A Letter from The Foundation President

We are pleased to announce the creation of the Cortland Rural Cemetery Foundation and our purpose is the following:

The Foundation was established by some interested citizens of Cortland who saw the need for help and the importance of this Historic Landmark. It has taken much time and effort by many people to finally obtain the IRS's determination that all funds from individuals, corporations, and other foundations are tax exempt, charitable contributions. I cannot thank all the people individually, but you know who you are and thank you very much for all your help. Now that this phase of the Foundation has been completed, we are ready to start some fund-raising projects to aid the cemetery so that it can be improved both in care of grounds by plantings and road improvements, update needed equipment, and some long-range plans which will hopefully put the cemetery in a much improved financial condition.

Cortland's Earliest Graveyards and A History of the Cortland Rural Cemetery

by CHRISTINE BUCK

In the earliest days of settlement at the beginning of the 1800's Cortland Village was a part of the Town of Homer and was referred to as "Lower Village." Associated with its growth and progress was the transition of its graveyards.

The first burials in our community of just a few families took place on the hillside behind today's 50 and 60 Tompkins Street, very likely begun as a family burying ground on the Hubbard farm. Within a short time an additional graveyard was established near the intersection of what is now Homer Avenue and West Main Street in conjunction with the First Baptist Society of Homer's meeting house, the first religious organization formed within the boundary of the present Cortland County.

As the community grew to several hundred people and other churches were established, Jonathan Hubbard, Jr. offered land for a municipal graveyard at the edge of the village, now Courthouse Park. This transaction occurred in 1824.

Each of these three graveyards was owned commonly for use by the community it served, would have been rectangular in shape, simple with no landscaping plans, would have contained mainly small rectangular gravestones with an occasional obelisk or box tomb, and would have been maintained sporadically, if at all.

Beginning in the United States in the 1830's, and gaining momentum in the 40's and 50's, was the architectural phenomenon of the "rural cemetery." This concept was to provide for a calm, beautiful city of the dead. Winding paths, hillside location, landscaped greenery, well-kept lawns, and imposing funereal monuments all added to the atmosphere. The word "cemetery," which derives from the Greek word for sleeping chamber, replaced the previous "burying ground" and "graveyard" terms.

Not only did the atmosphere of the cemetery change, but so too did the attitude of the living, reflected by their choice of monuments. The calm dwellings of the dead were thought of as perpetual homes for community members and provided for social differentiation—size of the monument, location of the grave, size of the family plot, and additional trappings such as railings and fences to mark family plots. For the first time lots were actually owned and deeded, and lot owners took their responsibility seriously, travelling to the cemetery with picnic lunches on Sundays to enjoy their rural property and provide for maintenance and decoration.

Along with many other communities of any size, Cortland was eager to have its own rural cemetery. On November 7, 1853, just two days after Cortland Village was incorporated by a vote of 130-102, a meeting was held at the Presbyterian Church in Cortland for the purpose of forming an association to purchase

land for the establishment of a cemetery. Thirteen of those present at the organizational meeting contributed \$50 each for the establishment of the cemetery, to be known as The Cortland Rural Cemetery, and a Board of Trustees was elected: Joseph Reynolds, Morgan Webb, Abram Mudge, William Barnard, Timothy Rose, Henry Stephens, Horace Goodrich, David Fisk, and Anson Fairchild.

12.26 acres of land were purchased on the Dryden Road (Tompkins Street) from David Hubbard for \$1,478.50. This hilly site was perfect for the rural cemetery concept—it was truly a rural location where farmland was available to purchase, it was not considered a desirable area for housing, it was on a good transportation route, and good drainage was available, also necessary for cemeteries.

The Cortland Rural Cemetery grounds were surveyed and mapped for a cemetery by F. E. Knight prior to December 6, 1853. The deed committed the Trustees to building and maintaining a fence between the cemetery and remaining Hubbard property. The land was graded and removed of excess timber, and dedication services were held August 11, 1854. With a population of approximately 1,500 people, Cortland Village now had a cemetery to rival that of any other urban area, with winding drives, lovely landscaping, and imposing monuments.

By 1867 the three earlier graveyards had been abandoned, with many of the remains exhumed and removed to the Cortland Rural Cemetery. When Cortland first observed Memorial Day in 1869, the procession marched from downtown to the Cortland Rural Cemetery for ceremonies honoring soldiers who died in the service of their country.

Cortland's population continued to expand well past its village boundary through the valley floor, and by 1900 when the city's population was more than 9,000 the cemetery's holdings had been increased to over 30 acres through purchases of contiguous property.

As the cemetery matured impressive structures were constructed—a public vault, a chapel in 1922 designed by Cortland native George Conable, an office and maintenance building, and in 1928 a brick Superintendent's home to replace an earlier residence on the grounds.

The Cortland Rural Cemetery continues to serve the community 145 years after its founding. In addition to providing for modern-day needs it is truly a treasure from the past. Original gravestones commemorating Cortland's earliest settlers can be viewed along with monuments, sculptures, and remembrances ranging from Victorian, to art deco, to current styles. The vault, chapel, office and residence still stand as originally constructed. The winding roads and grassy hills provide a respite in an urban setting. Fortunately, cemeteries are finally being recognized for the important community resource they are.

Superintendent's Report

Cemetery management practices have changed considerably in the 145 years of Cortland Rural Cemetery's existence. Where families used to take care of their own lots, today the Cemetery staff does it all. Where we used to dig graves and mow lawns by hand, we now have large, expensive power equipment to do it faster and easier.

One thing hasn't changed. That is the amount of money we collected decades ago when we sold lots. The Trustees and Superintendents of those bygone days could not foresee how much more it costs today to maintain lots sold fifty or a hundred years ago for a few dollars a grave. They also could not foresee how the cumulative effect of decades of inflation have increased costs for labor, equipment, materials and utilities tremendously while conservatively invested funds didn't keep pace in value. This is the problem that today's Trustees and I have to deal with.

In the past, half the Cemetery grass was cut one week and the other half the next. While the Cemetery never looked particularly good this way, we simply don't have the staff to mow and trim the whole Cemetery every week. Starting this year we are mowing the whole Cemetery every week, and then trimming as much as we can. When we get our Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) workers through the County Job Training & Partnership Act (JTPA) office in July and August, we hope to be able to completely trim the whole Cemetery every week.

The JTPA program, funded by the federal government,

provides extra help at no cost to us while giving its participants successful work experience. The Cemetery has been participating in a similar way with Green Thumb Inc. for the past year as well.

Last fall and again this year, the State Department of Corrections has sent us a work crew from Camp Georgetown, a minimum security prison. These prisoners, under supervision from experienced correction officers, have done a tremendous amount of work. We have also had a crew of workfare workers from the County Department of Social Services, and the County Alternatives to Incarceration office has kindly sent us a number of very good folks needing to perform community service. All of these no-cost sources of labor provide us with the extra hands we need to keep the Cemetery in good condition.

Finally, we have increased the range of services that the Cemetery provides (and charges for) and increased lot prices to levels more appropriate to provide enough income to maintain those lots for perpetuity.

Cemetery usage and burial practices have been changing for some time now (increased cremation, for instance) while Cortland Rural Cemetery has slowly been slipping behind. Over the next few years I believe you will see significant and exciting changes here that will please both current and prospective lot owners. I fully expect to see Cortland Rural Cemetery become a progressive, well-maintained place of final rest and visitation for many generations of families to come.

