

Mystery is solved

Private city burial ground started by Gerber family

By J. Earl Ruthardt

Eagle/Times

The mystery of who established an old family cemetery in Reading has been solved by genealogist Michael L. Strauss, 25, of Alsace Township.

The 175-year-old private burial ground is nestled between the West Shore Bypass and Morgantown Road, a stone's throw south of Lancaster Avenue, in the 18th Ward.

It's believed to be the oldest family cemetery in the city and is about 50 yards long and 40 feet wide.

Strauss, a genealogy instructor in Berks and Lebanon counties, is a board member of the Berks Genealogy Society. He and Ralph C. Tobias, of Fleetwood R.D. 2, are partners in Strauss & Tobias, genealogy researchers.

The cemetery was established about 1816 by John Gerber and Daniel Bitting on Gerber's land, according to Strauss. Gerber and Bitting were farmers, friends and neighbors, he said. At that time, the land was part of Cumru Township. Later, it became part of the 18th Ward.

Strauss pored over page after page of old hand-written documents from Berks County Orphans Court — documents with fancy flourishes of script the aver-

age person would find difficult to read.

He found that Gerber died on March 14, 1819, without making a will. So, the court ordered a sale of his property, except the cemetery. The court said the cemetery should forever remain a cemetery.

Later, a piece of property adjoining the cemetery was sold to Samuel Deem, who, in turn, sold it to Ludwig Bitting. Ludwig sold it to Daniel Bitting. Daniel sold it to Jacob Bitting.

And, Jacob sold it on Jan. 17, 1873, to Samuel Fix.

Then, Strauss explained, Fix established his own family cemetery, which bordered the Gerber cemetery. Today, it all looks like one cemetery.

The deed to Fix mentioned a gunpowder house on the southern end of the Gerber cemetery, Strauss said.

It is a small brick structure, still standing, built in the 1800s by Joseph S. Stichter of the former Stichter & Sons, a hardware business in Reading. Later, the name became Stichter Hardware Co. Inc., 505-509 Penn St., which is out of business.

The deed said the powderhouse was not to be disturbed as long as Joseph Stichter lived.



Eagle/Times: John A. Secogea

Ralph C. Tobias, left, and Michael L. Strauss study a map plotting the land around what's now called the Fix cemetery. It was established by a farmer named John Gerber 175 years ago and is believed to be the oldest family cemetery in the city.

"It would seem that Joseph Stichter and Jacob Bitting had some sort of verbal agreement between them concerning this powderhouse," Strauss said.

Built on a stone foundation, the powderhouse has brick walls three courses thick. It has an unusual arched brick roof, over which is a wooden roof. It had a thick iron door with a heavy iron bar to lock it.

But, the bar and door were removed in recent years by a caretaker because vandals were punching out some brickwork around the door in attempts to remove the door and get inside.

The first of two land grabs on the cemetery happened in 1884, when the Schuylkill Division of the Pennsylvania Railroad took a strip of the western border, Strauss said. Cemetery heirs lost a legal battle to prevent it.

Railroad tracks on the western border were removed a few years ago. Removed at the same time was a bridge that carried the tracks over Lancaster Avenue, where Morgantown Road intersects with the avenue.

In 1963, the state launched the second grab for construction of the West Shore Bypass on part of the cemetery.

The state got court permission to dig up the remains of Joseph Santee and Marion Murphy, whose names were on tombstones in the northwestern part of the cemetery. She was an infant who died in 1867, her stone says. Nothing is known about Santee.

The remains were re-buried less than 50 feet from the original graves in what appeared to be a vacant part of the cemetery.

John H. Fix, 70, of Temple, is happy about Strauss' research because some of Fix's relatives are buried in the cemetery — and because he's been the volunteer

caretaker there for the past 31 years.

Fix believes that 70 to 75 people were buried there, all of whom lived in the stagecoach and horse-and-buggy days.

Fix was in several funeral processions that used a dirt road to the cemetery. The last procession in 1946 was for Mary E. Fix, 80.

"Fifty years ago, there were more headstones in the corner, where the bypass went through," Fix said. "The state took a pretty good chunk of the corner. I still think some bodies are under the bypass."

Progress has not been kind to the old family plot.