

## PROPERTY

The following information was compiled and given to us by Richard A. Moyer, Treasurer, Franconia Mennonite Conference:

"Where did the Coventry Mennonites bury their dead prior to 1798?" John C. Wenger asks in his 1937 *History of the Mennonites of the Franconia Conference*. The answer is, in the Sprogel Burying Ground. John Henry Sprogel originally bought the "Manatawny tract" of over 20,000 acres from Penn. The tract was named New Hanover in honor of the native town of the purchaser. Some time prior to 1715 Sprogel set aside about three acres within the present borough of Pottstown for burial purposes. The first known interment was his son, Frederick, in 1716. Mennonite names such as Grubb, Bechtel, Rhodes, Schantz, Reiff and High were on the markers in the Sprogel cemetery. Bishop Martin Bechtel was buried there in 1786. It is very probably that after the Coventry Mennonite Cemetery was opened, the number of Mennonite burials in Sprogel's cemetery gradually decreased and finally ceased altogether.

"...On March 30, 1868 Jacob E. Bleim, Christian H. Bleim, Abraham Mensch, Jesse Bechtel, John H. Bleim, John E. Bleim, Henry C. Gabel, Jacob G. Gabel and their successors were constituted a body corporate by the General Assembly of Pennsylvania "to manage and improve the Sprogel Burial Ground, situate on the east side of the Schuylkill River, and near the South line of the borough of Pottstown..." The said Board also was granted the privilege "...to erect a place of worship with a dwelling thereon, at which place funeral services may be performed and worship be held by the Menonist persuasion..." But no meetinghouse was erected. Gradually the cemetery was abandoned. In the decade 1880-1890, Mr. George F. P. Wenger took a photo of the entrance to the ancient burying ground, the use of which he has kindly granted to us for this book. By 1905 the cemetery was hemmed in as follows: "The improvements of the Glasgow Iron Company are on one side, the Philadelphia Bridge Works bound the north side and a foundry building is located on the third side. The Pennsylvania Railroad crosses that part of the tract not used for burials. Sidings and switches enter the various manufacturing plants on two sides of the burial ground." Legal action was then instigated to sell the cemetery. The cases dragged through the courts for about a year.

Historic Cemetery Moved (pick up the story again as told by John C. Wenger)

On November 1, 1905, Judge A. S. Swartz handed down a decree permitting to sale in spite of the opposition of interested people. About sixty bodies were disinterred, most of them being removed to a new half-acre burial lot on Hanover Avenue, and the remaining ones were buried in various cemeteries selected by relatives. Thus industrialism moved the dead from their graves. The historic burial acre was no more.

Bishop Elmer Kolb, formerly a resident of Pottstown and pastor of Pottstown Mennonite Church, stated that all of the graves now in the Sprogel Burial Ground were moved from the former plot on the river along Keim Street. No Pottstown Mennonite Church members were buried here at North Hanover and Prospect Streets. The grave stones became worn with age and inscriptions obliterated by children playing on the grounds. So the trustees voted to bury the remaining stones

near the monument to preserve them for posterity, a March 20, 1951 newspaper article stated.

A relocated obelisk-shaped 12 foot granite monument stands tall in the center of the Sprogel Burial ground today. One side informs that "this monument is in honor of John Henry Sprogel who purchased this land of Wm. Penn, and dedicated this portion to John Bleim, Jacob Bleim and others for a burial ground forever."

The other says, "This monument has been removed from the Sprogel Cemetery in Pottstown, PA to its present site in AD 1906. Trustees Joseph Bechtel, President, Frank Bleim, Sec. & Treas. William S. Blimp, Samuel S. Bleim, Isaac E. Blimp." The remaining two sides list Sprogel persons who were buried at this site.

#### Pottstown Mennonite Church Begins

The Earl Miller family, of the Norristown Mission, moved to Pottstown in 1930. During that same year, cottage meetings were held in the Miller home. Jacob M. Moyer held the first worship services at 380 N. Charlotte Street on November 23, 1930 and four weeks later, Sunday School was begun. Elmer G. Kolb served as superintendent and Arthur G. Kolb as assistant.

In 1934 the church purchased the 306 N. Charlotte Street property at a cost of \$4,193.89. John C. Wenger reported that by 1937 the Sunday School attendance averaged 109, with 39 persons already baptized by Bishop Bean.

#### Mennonites Receive Burial Property

The trustees of the Sprogel Burial Ground decided to give the two and one-third acre property to the Mennonite Church in 1951. Jacob C. S. Bleim, president of the burial ground association, tells why in a newspaper article of March 20, 1951.

"He said there were no Bleims buried on Hanover Street grounds, and the cost of maintaining the site was becoming a burden to the trustees. Bleim gave another reason why the property should be transferred to the gospel mission. The original Bleims were Mennonites, "It is only right, then," he stated, "that we give it back to a Mennonite group." The original charter called for the building of

a place of worship on the grounds, but it was never erected."

The court approved some amendments and the trusteeship of the property was granted to the Pottstown Mennonites. The "Minutes of the Adjourned Meeting of the Sprugel Burial Ground of Pottstown" tell the story of the actual transfer:

"The adjourned meeting of the Sprugel Burial Ground of Pottstown was held in the office of C. Edmund Wells, attorney, 410 High Street, Pottstown, PA on Saturday afternoon, March 17, 1951, at 2:00 p.m. Present were Samuel S. Bleim, Jacob C. S. Bleim, Walter S. Bleim and John S. Bleim, constituting four of the five members of the Board of Trustees. Mr. Wells reported that the Articles of Amendment have been approved by the Court under date of Thursday, March 15, 1951, and that the Articles of Amendment as approved, have been recorded in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds of Montgomery County at Norristown, under the date of Friday, March 16, 1951.

Pursuant to the plan to be accomplished by the Amendment of the Charter and the Articles of Incorporation, viz., of having the Mennonite Gospel Mission of Pottstown to take over, perpetuate and continue the Sprugel Burial Ground Corporation as a matter of convenience to the present Incorporators and for the benefits to be derived by the Mennonite Gospel Mission, Walter S. Bleim, and John S. Bleim submitted their written resignations from the Office of Trustees and as members of the Corporation.

The written resignation of Forrest B. Bleim was also submitted. On motion of Jacob C. S. Bleim, seconded by Samuel S. Bleim, the foregoing resignations were accepted, effective immediately. It was thereupon moved by Jacob C. S. Bleim and seconded by Samuel S. Bleim, that Earl Layman of 343 Manatawny Street, Pottstown, Paul Y. Benner of R. D. Spring City, PA and Elmer G. Kolb of 306 N. Charlotte Street, Pottstown, PA, be appointed as members of the Board of Trustees and members of the Corporation to succeed the three resigning members, the said appointees being members of the Mennonite Gospel Mission of Pottstown, PA, and the motion was unanimously carried. The new members being present, they were duly inducted into office."

Then Jacob and Samuel Bleim submitted written resignations effective immediately and these were unanimously accepted by the new board. Henry H. Good of Spring City and Elmer M. Mack of Souderton were elected as successors for the balance of the terms of the resigning members. The resigning trustees turned over to the new board a U. S. Savings Bond of \$1,000 and cash of \$85.80. (*to be continued*).

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR PROPERTY. (part 3)

### New Pottstown Church Building

The mission planned to build a new 40 x 60 foot church on the grounds as soon as the transfer occurred. Ground was broken on June 26, 1951. Dedication services were held May 4, 1952.

"By 1952, the \$30,000 church was ready for occupancy, providing seating for 180-200 with four anterooms on the first floor and seven classrooms and a large assembly room in the basement." (Conference NEWS, Feb. 1981). This building was used by the Pottstown Mennonite Church until 1991.

### Sale of Building Lots

Permission was sought to subdivide and sell two building lots from the church/burial ground lot in 1960, according to a February 1, 1960 newspaper article:

*When the graveyard corporation was formed, part of the charter restricted the use of the property to burial purpose. The Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas must remove this restriction before the Mennonites can sell the area for building.*

The court permitted the sale of lots. This reduced the total lot size to about 1-3/4 acres.

### Closing of Pottstown Mennonite

By the 1990's attendance had declined and the vision for the church in Pottstown was not clear. A paper on "Options available to the Pottstown Mennonite Church" was prepared. It stated the following:

"A consensus has been developing that our church needs to take some definitive steps in regard to our future. It has been difficult to sustain our congregation with our limited resources. Therefore, the decision has been made to close the church on December 22, 1991."

Options for the building were listed, such as to remodel it for a day care or nursery, sell the property, loan the building and grounds to the Word of Joy congregation for a time.

A new plan for the use of the building emerged by February 1992. The February 19, 1992 minutes of the Mission Commission of Franconia Mennonite Conference reviewed the Pottstown situation and then record an action.

"On December 22, 1991 the Pottstown Mennonite congregation had its last Sunday morning worship service at its Hanover and Prospect Street location. This group met recently and seemed relieved of the burden to keep the church going. It was unanimously agreed to return the building to Franconia Mennonite Conference. (The building was built on land which had originally be granted to the 'Mennists' for \$1.00.) The Conference can then give the building to the Estrella de la Manana congregation for their ministry.

The Spanish congregation is presently using facilities at 515 Walnut Street which are not adequate. The proposal includes a plan to sell this property and divide the profit between the Spanish congregation and Franconia Conference and its missions programs."

**ACTION II:** The Mission Committee affirmed the Pottstown Church proposal. Claude Good, a member of the ministry team of the Pottstown Mennonite Church, reflected on the closing of the church and the above record. These minutes "accurately reflect the decision of the congregational leaders and overseer to transfer the property at Prospect, Hanover and Logan Streets to Franconia Mennonite Conference. Conference could then give the building to the Spanish Mennonite Congregation, Estrella de la Manana, for its use."

The Pottstown congregation's secretary, Carol Landis, had already left to join the Vincent Mennonite Church with her husband several months before the church closing. Thus, there were no minutes recorded for the last two or three meetings regarding the closing of the Pottstown Mennonite Church, Claude reported.

The Estrella de la Manana group is currently using the above-mentioned property for its worship services.

Compiled by Richard A. Moyer  
Franconia Mennonite Conference  
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