

Saving the Master Mason's Headstone

By David Walter, Westtown Township Historical Commissioner

Rest in Peace." That's what we expect when a loved one passes away and is put to rest in a cemetery. This expectation was not met for one of Westtown's most accomplished citizens. However, the Westtown Township Historical Commission has done what it could to remedy this oversight.

The accomplished citizen was Valentine Kirgan, born in Bradford Township, Chester County on August 7, 1771, to Hugh Kirgan, a weaver, and Mary Hawley Kirgan. Valentine became a master mason and settled in Westtown, where he built houses and other structures for a time.

In 1810, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania decided to move the state capital from Lancaster to Harrisburg. A number of buildings were erected between 1810 and 1812 to house government offices. Kirgan worked on the construction; disbursements from the contractor, Stephen Hills, show \$2,623.34 paid him for brickwork.

Between 1819 and 1822, the first Capitol building was constructed. Stephen Hills won the architectural contract and designed a red brick, Federal-style building. Having previously worked with Valentine Kirgan, Hills hired him as the lead mason on the construction job. Kirgan's role was prominent enough that he, as well as one other mason, is mentioned in the parchment documents recovered from the cornerstone in 1897.



The Pennsylvania Capitol (1822-1897) constructed by architect Stephen Hills

Over the years, such distinguished visitors as the Marquis de Lafayette, the Prince of Wales (King Edward VII), and

Abraham Lincoln walked its halls. Then, on February 2, 1897, fire erupted in the Lieutenant Governor's office, and the edifice burned to the ground. A new Capitol building was started, but abandoned in 1899 when funding ran out. Today's Capitol was constructed between 1902 and 1906. It would not surprise any Pennsylvanian to learn that construction costs were three times the original estimate, and that several people were sent to jail for graft connected to the construction.

When the first Capitol building was completed, Kirgan returned to Westtown, resuming his mason trade. It is likely he had a hand in building Thomas Darlington's Westtown Inn or Darlington's Inn, dated 1823, which still stands at the corner of Street Road (Rt. 926) and Wilmington Pike (U.S. 202).

In February 1823, Kirgan married Deborah Taylor Hawley, the young widow of William Hawley, Jr. Deborah was the daughter of Capt. Thomas Taylor, Jr. and granddaughter of Col. Thomas Taylor, of the Revolutionary War-era Chester County Militia. The Kirgans welcomed a daughter, Deborah (Debbe) H. Kirgan, November 1, 1824. Sixteen days later, Valentine was widowed when his wife died from complications of childbirth.

Young Debbe was orphaned seven years later when Valentine died July 22, 1831, and was laid to rest next to his wife in the Taylor Family Burying Ground, in what is now the Pleasant Grove neighborhood. Generations of the Taylor family were buried in the family cemetery up the hill from their farm house. Other relatives and neighbors were also buried there until 1864 when the Taylors sold the large farm to Isaac Cochran. The property deed included a restriction that the cemetery would always be accessible to the public.

The property then went through a succession of owners (Rhoads, Fox, Jones) over the next 100 years. The deed restriction was still in place in a 1917 sale, but cannot be found after that. The abandoned cemetery, enclosed by a low wall, was neglected; headstones were removed or repurposed. Early in the 20th century, the Faucett family moved their loved ones' headstones to Birmingham Lafayette Cemetery, though the mortal remains were left at Taylors.

By 1970, Westtown landowners were being approached by developers to sell their property for housing developments. With the thought of selling part of his farm, then Taylor farm's

owner, Marshall Jones Jr., was curious about the old cemetery on his property. In 1969, he turned to Dr. Marshall Becker, archaeology professor at West Chester University (WCU), to conduct a professional archaeological recovery excavation in the burial ground. Over a period of years, Dr. Becker and his students, recovered remains of some 30 individuals (out of perhaps 100 buried there) and made valuable observations on Colonial burial customs. Recovered remains are now in storage at the University of Pennsylvania; the rest are still interred at the site of the Taylor Family Burial Ground.

In the course of recovering artifacts, Dr. Becker found Valentine Kirgan's intact headstone cemented face down and being used as a doorstep in the basement of the original Taylor stone house. With permission, he removed it to storage at WCU. Dr. Becker had to end his project in 1973, when Jones sold the farm to a developer. The large Pleasant Grove neighborhood now sits on the former Taylor farm, and the cemetery was covered over and lies under private property.

The Westtown Township Historical Commission secured Kirgan's stone from West Chester University in 2016, intending to place it near the site of the Taylor Family Burial Ground. When that proved impracticable, the Historical Commission launched a genealogical search for any living descendants of Valentine and Deborah Kirgan. It was learned their daughter, Debbe, married Joseph Hunt in 1842 and had four children. Two daughters, Aurelia (1856-1933) and Bessie (1860-1934) never married. A son, James Hunt, married Emma Bovard, and had one child, Helen. Helen taught music at West Chester High School, never married, and died in 1976. The fourth child, Estelle, married Ralph Wilson, of Bel Air, MD and had three children. Because "Wilson" is a common name, it has been impossible to trace that family branch beyond the children.

The Historical Commission's research revealed that Valentine Kirgan's daughter Debbe, son-in-law Joseph, and granddaughters Aurelia and Bessie are buried in a plot at Birmingham Lafayette Cemetery. Grandson James and great granddaughter Helen are also buried in a separate plot there. With the kind permission of Birmingham Lafayette Cemetery, a pro bono stone cleaning by Old Philadelphia Inc., and funding from Westtown Township, Valentine Kirgan's stone now rests on the plot with his only child and several granddaughters.

A brief ceremony commemorating the placement of the stone was held May 4. The stone reads: "In Memory of Valentine Kirgan died July 22nd 1831 in the 60th year of his age."

Perhaps now an accomplished Westtown resident can truly Rest in Peace.

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*In Memory of
Valentine Kirgan
died July 22nd
1831 in the 60th
year of his age."*



Westtown Township Historical Commissioners (from left) Gail Guterl, Dave Walter, and former commissioner Jonathan Hoppe, at the dedication ceremony at Birmingham Lafayette Cemetery.

Photo by Jim Guterl