

**Were they to keep the dead in . . . or the living out?**

## **CAGES ON GRAVES EXPLAINED**

**A Wee Bit of Olde Scotland Right Here in Columbia County**

**By Ann F. Diseroad**



On a desolate hill outside the sleepy little town of Catawissa is an unusual sight. While familiar to many Columbia County Historical and Genealogical Society members, it is often shocking to those encountering it for the first time. Iron cages cover two of the approximately two dozen marked graves in a tiny cemetery in Franklin Township known locally as “The Hooded Graves.”

People often ask me if I know the purpose of the cages. The local historical record is silent on the matter; however, I once postulated three possible reasons. Other people suggested a fourth theory, often enough for it to deserve consideration as well. Intrigued by this unique pair of structures, I set out to solve the mystery, an investigation which took considerable time and led me down some strange paths. It was well worth the effort.

I now can say with confidence that the cages are *MORTSAFES*, structures intended to prevent theft of a body for use by anatomy instructors, doctors or medical students who at the time had no legal source of cadavers for their work. This was a serious problem, now all but forgotten, throughout most of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries not just in this country but also in the British Isles. Other kinds of mortsafes were used as well and examples of some of them may also be seen in our area.

The iron cage mortsafe was prevalent in Scotland before 1830, but most were removed after passage of the Warburton Anatomy Act provided a legal source of anatomical material and ended the need for body snatching in Great Britain. The few remaining mortsafes in Scotland today are now billed as tourist attractions.

To the best of my knowledge, Columbia County’s Hooded Graves are the ONLY example of this type of structure in the United States.

## **A Brief Review**

Officially this graveyard is called "Old Mt. Zion." It was located across the road from the Clayton School, also used for services by the Mt. Zion Methodist congregation until their church was built in 1874 with a new cemetery adjacent to it.

The cages just cover the graves. They look almost like small conservatories, minus the glass, or large Victorian birdcages. Each structure is not quite 3 feet wide, about 6 feet long and just over 4-1/2 feet tall at the ridgepole. The sides are made of heavy wire crossing diagonally in a pattern of diamonds about the size of those in ordinary chain link fence. The wire of the grave hoods is much stiffer and heavier, however. The "roofs" are constructed of gracefully curving parallel iron bars slightly less than half an inch in diameter and spaced about three inches apart. The framework for the cages extends into the ground but is not set in concrete. A hinged door at the foot end was originally fitted to accommodate a padlock. When the cages were "restored" and rebuilt several years ago, unfortunately this detail was not replicated.

The Hooded Graves belong to two young married women who died in June 1852. They were Sarah Ann, wife of Ransloe Boone, and Asenath, wife of John F. Thomas. A newspaper story published in the 1960s states that there was a third cage removed during the 1930s because it had fallen into disrepair. I have heard this confirmed by older people who remember the third cage. There is a grave for a third young woman, Rebecca Clayton, who died just a few weeks before the women buried in the two hooded graves and who was related to them. This may have been the location of the third cage. Another possibility is that it was over the grave of Asenath's baby daughter who died about four months after her mother.

### **Who Were These Women?**

All three women who died in May and June of 1852 were Thomases either by birth or by marriage. Rebecca Clayton and Sarah Ann Boone were cousins. Rebecca was the daughter of Abel and Ann Thomas, and Sarah Ann was the daughter of Lloyd and Frances Thomas. Asenath Thomas was the daughter of Joseph and Anna Campbell and married to Sarah Ann's brother John.

These families were among the region's earliest settlers. Some were of Scottish descent with the remainder from other parts of the British Isles who had settled in southeastern Pennsylvania or New Jersey many years before coming to this area. The Boones and the Thomases arrived in the Catawissa area well before 1800, coming from Exeter Township in Berks County. The Claytons came from Chester County at about the same time. The Campbells were among the pioneers of Northumberland County.

All three young women were married in late 1849 or early 1850, and lived within a short distance of the Mt. Zion graveyard. While the young people's parents appear to have been well off, the young couples themselves seem to have had a modest lifestyle. Ransloe and Sarah Ann Boone originally set up housekeeping across the river in Cooper Township where Ransloe was a tenant farmer, but at the time of Sarah's death

they were back in Franklin Township. Nelson and Rebecca Clayton lived close to Rebecca's widowed mother and siblings. Nelson was a carpenter. Asenath's husband John, a farmer, was living with his parents, Lloyd and Frances Thomas, at the time the 1850 census was taken. The census taker indicated that John had married within the past year, but Asenath does not appear as a member of the household. Her father had died when she was still an infant. Asenath's mother, who apparently did not remarry, was listed in the 1840 census with four of her five children. She does not appear in the 1850 census and was probably also deceased by this time. In 1850 all three of Asenath's married sisters were living nearby, two in Franklin Township and one in Augusta Township in Northumberland County, but she is not shown as staying in any of those households. Her whereabouts between the time she married and the time she died are so far a mystery.

The cause of the three young women's deaths is unknown for certain but in one case, that of Asenath, it can be deduced. She died about five days after giving birth suggesting that her death was caused by puerperal fever. All three deaths were announced in the *Star of the North*, a Bloomsburg newspaper, but no cause of death was given even though it was common to do so. Sarah Ann's epitaph indicates that she, too, was a mother. It is possible that all three of the young women's deaths were connected with childbirth.

Whether all three died of the same or different causes, something was going on which prompted the girls' families to erect protective iron cages over their graves.

### **Were the Cages Just Decoration?**

One possible explanation for the cages is that they were simply decorative like the rather flamboyant gravestones popular a few decades later and the intricate iron fences which often surrounded not only the family homestead but the family plot as well. This is not a bad idea. Frequently it is tempting to attribute deep and significant meaning to objects and actions that were, in fact, merely whimsical.

The Franklin Township mortsafes are much more esthetically pleasing than the ones to be seen in Scotland today, but functional things don't have to be ugly. Throughout history extravagantly decorated, but otherwise common, objects have been used to advertise a family's wealth and status. The Thomases were involved at the managerial level in the production of iron, an important 19<sup>th</sup> century Columbia County industry. Members of the family were ironmasters for several of the iron furnaces on the south side of the Susquehanna while others worked as furnacemen and in other related occupations. Whether created for this purpose or not, the cages certainly demonstrate the family's connection with the iron industry and, along with the large and expensive (for that time and place) gravestones, display the family's wealth.

There has to be more, however. One aspect in particular of the cages violates a strong 19<sup>th</sup> century taboo and suggests that the cages were not just ostentatious but must have had a functional purpose as well. This is the prohibition against walking, standing or sitting on a grave. Doing so was considered highly disrespectful of the

dead as well as dangerous for reasons both superstitious and practical. Walking on a grave was said to disturb the sleep of the deceased. It could also be hazardous for the living. Until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people were buried in wooden coffins without vaults so that as decay took place, the ground above the grave caved in. A person actually on top of the grave when this took place could be trapped. Someone not being careful where he stepped could break a leg.

Because of the way the cages were constructed with access only from one end and none of the openings between the bars big enough to insert a hand, the only way to trim the grass and keep the grave clear of weeds was to enter the cage and crawl on top of the grave. Without extenuating circumstances, this sort of behavior would have been strictly avoided.

### **Foraging Animals, the Traditional Explanation**

The reason people suggest most often for the cages is that they were to keep animals from digging into the graves. Some even specifically mention wolves. The truth is that the wolf as well as the panther had been nearly extirpated in this area by 1850. Most of the sheep killings and other damage attributed to wolves were actually caused by domestic dogs running loose. Anyone familiar with the behavior of dogs knows that an above ground barrier will not deter an animal intent on getting to something on the other side as digging comes naturally.

Animals *will* dig into shallow graves – this is sometimes how murders are discovered. But these graves don't appear to be shallow. The soil at Old Mt. Zion is not particularly rocky, a situation that would have made digging graves the usual 5 to 6 feet deep difficult. The two hooded graves are located in different parts of the burial ground, each with other graves right next to it.

What is significant is that the cages were made *to be locked*. Some kind of catch would be sufficient to keep out most animals. Only humans would need to be locked out.

In a newspaper article about the Hooded Graves a neighbor is quoted as saying, "It was a tradition brought over from England to keep animals out of the graves." This is actually not far from the truth considering that most people don't realize that England and Scotland are separate countries on the island of Great Britain and that contemporary accounts of grave violation refer to the perpetrators as "animals" in a figurative sense using the word as an insult meaning "less than human."

### **Were The Women Vampires?**

The idea that the cages were meant to keep the occupants of the graves *in* rather than intruders *out* is an intriguing one, rather romantic but not rooted in any known vampire tradition. Throughout history a number of methods have been employed to prevent corpses from turning into vampires and, should the worst happen, to keep the vampires from getting out of their graves. These include burying the body with nets, with sharp objects, with poppy seeds, with things in its mouth, face down, puncturing

the body and staking it, to cite just a few. When these measures failed, the bodies of the vampires were exhumed and burned or decapitated.

There was an active vampire tradition in New England during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; however, those who performed the rituals never used the word “vampire.” It was used only by journalists commenting on the practices with horror at the display of such superstition in what they considered to be an enlightened age. In the dozen or so cases reported, modern investigation has revealed that those involved believed that consumption (tuberculosis or other conditions presenting the same symptoms) was caused by “the dead feeding on the living,” resulting in the pallor, emaciation and other typical symptoms of the disease. Families usually took action to find and dispatch the vampire after several family members within the same household died in rapid succession and others were ill.

### **Protection Against Body Snatchers? You’ve Got to be Kidding!**

I’m not. Body snatchers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were not pod people from another planet who replaced the bodies of sleeping human beings. Also known as resurrectionists, grave robbers, sack’em-up men and the truly ambiguous euphemism “grave diggers,” these were professionals or amateurs, often doctors, medical students and teachers of anatomy, who illegally removed recently buried corpses from their graves for use in dissection for anatomical instruction and practice of surgical techniques. In fact, through most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, corpse stealing was a rite of passage for many medical students, and there is evidence it took place in this area.

During the 1850s medical schools were proliferating although it was still possible to become a doctor without graduating from one. Most of the young men (and the few young women) who wanted to become doctors first served an apprenticeship with a preceptor or practicing doctor for several years, usually three. Then the student attended medical college for two years although the programs ran for only a few months each year. After completing the course work and a thesis, the student received the M.D. degree.

Both chartered medical schools and private schools had offered anatomy in America since about 1765. Both types of schools were forced to use illegally procured subjects because the few bodies of executed criminals which the law provided were nowhere near enough. In 1850 Philadelphia was the center of medical education in the United States. At that time the city had four chartered medical schools and several private anatomy schools. As a result there were well over 1,000 medical students in Philadelphia alone in need of cadavers with essentially NO LEGAL SOURCE for this material.

Anatomy was considered the most important area of study for future doctors for several reasons. First, as a “science” it separated those doctors who had studied it from the herbalists, bonesetters, homeopaths, faith healers and other quacks proliferating during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Doctors believed knowledge of the human body was the first step to being able to cure its ills. Also, most medical progress being made at this time was in surgery as numerous new operations were being developed and old

ones perfected. Even greater progress in surgery loomed on the horizon as the first experiments with anesthesia were conducted. Hindering this progress, however, was a serious lack of cadavers for dissection and practice of surgical techniques.

The shortage of subjects was relieved by resorting to theft, usually from the burial grounds of the poor who had fewer means to protect their dead, but documented examples of body snatching show that no one was truly safe from this indignity. One of the most famous cases was John Scott Harrison, a former Congressman, son of one president and father of another. His body was found in the dissecting room of the Medical College of Ohio in Cincinnati after being stolen from a mausoleum in a “respectable cemetery.”

### **What was so bad about dissection?**

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when organ transplants are so common that people indicate on their driver’s licenses their willingness to be donors, it is difficult to understand or even imagine the fear and horror with which our ancestors regarded dissection. It was considered a fate worse than death, and actually was used at one time by the courts to extend punishment *beyond* death.

Dissection was considered sacrilegious. For nearly two thousand years, people believed in the literal resurrection of the body at the second coming of Christ. This was why bodies were buried with their heads to the west and their feet to the east (making the body snatcher’s job easier!). As part of this belief, people feared that a body that was not intact and in its proper grave would not, *could not*, be resurrected. As a result, that person would be denied his or her rightful place in eternal life. This was very serious business indeed.

To be dissected was to be associated with the worst sort of criminals. Talk about “guilt by association”! Because the few legal dissections that took place were of criminals, any individual who was dissected was automatically branded a criminal. This is not as strange as it first seems since for hundreds of years under British law, the only bodies legally available were executed murderers. That law pertained in this country as well because of our British roots. Later dissection was added to the punishment of execution for other offences as well. Dissection was such a disgrace in late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century England and Scotland that the families of executed criminals would sometimes risk their lives to retrieve the bodies of their relatives before they could be given to the anatomists.

As recently as 1900 and as close as Lycoming County, William Hummel, convicted of brutally murdering his wife and her three children, went to great lengths to assure that after his hanging his body would not be given “to the doctors.”

Compounding the public’s fears of dissection was the knowledge that the bodies of those dissected were not treated with respect while being used and were not properly interred afterward. There are many stories of medical students brandishing severed limbs out windows at passersby, and photographs of 19<sup>th</sup> century medical students with their cadavers show them smoking, playing cards, drinking and having other kinds of fun. Many skeletons, parts of bodies and interesting examples of

diseased organs and deformities were preserved as specimens for anatomical collections both instructional and private. Material not preserved was discarded as trash and sometimes fed to animals. There were even instances of using human fat to make candles and human bones for fertilizer.

Lurid and sensational tales of body snatching and dissection were part of the popular literature in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. In these stories the doctors and medical students were portrayed as depraved and evil. The tales had definite sexual overtones. Violating a grave was considered rape of the grave and dissection of the body another form of rape. While most of these popular works have faded into a well-deserved oblivion, one of the first, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, has become a classic. This novel, written in 1817 was based not just on the real horrors of body snatching but also on real Galvanic experiments publicly performed on cadavers as anatomists strove to understand the human body's nervous system.

So violent was the public's reaction to dissection that at least 17 major riots, several resulting in serious injury and loss of life, were recorded against American medical schools between 1785 and 1855. In some cases medical colleges were forced to close or move to different cities. Many of the riots happened in the 1840s. One occurred in nearby Ohio in February of 1852, shortly before the deaths of these Columbia County women.

That incident was precipitated when a father, who had discovered his daughter's body missing from her grave, learned that parts of a young woman's body had turned up in the cesspool of a Cleveland medical school some 150 miles from where the girl had been buried. A committee of the father's friends found more female body parts and bodies inside the school when they were allowed to search the premises while an angry mob waited outside. The father identified a hand as his daughter's. When shown the evidence, the mob attacked, breaking windows and stealing, damaging or destroying furniture, chemical apparatus, museum collections and valuable anatomical models. As a final gesture, the crowd set fire to the building.

### **But Why Columbia County?**

"Resurrectioning" was not limited to burial grounds close to the medical schools. When city officials became watchful and relatives posted armed guards or took other preventive measures in the cemeteries near the schools, the body snatchers extended their operations further afield. There are documented cases of bodies packed in a variety of materials including salt, brine, whisky, bran and sawdust being shipped great distances in boxes and barrels labeled "pickles" or whatever would normally be shipped in that kind of container. They were transported short distances by wagon or cart and longer distances by train or boat.

Rural cemeteries were prime targets because their remoteness gave a false sense of security. Catawissa, however, was not nearly as remote as it seems. Old Mt. Zion was on a small road with few houses but within a mile of the Reading Road, greatly improved and excellent for its time. Trains ran from Pottsville to Philadelphia. Rail service was also available from Sunbury, a mere 19 miles from Catawissa.

I cannot yet relate a specific series of events that led to the erection of mortsafes over the graves of Sarah Ann Boone and Asenath Thomas, but I have discovered enough facts to conclude that medical grave robbing was a concern here. It is possible that news of the riot in Ohio reaching Columbia County was a factor. It is also possible a grave in Old Mt. Zion had already been violated. Three women died and were buried in that cemetery in October 1851 just as the chartered medical schools were beginning their sessions. Rebecca Clayton died and was buried there in May 1852, just a few weeks prior to Sarah Ann and Asenath. At this time the chartered medical schools were closed but the private anatomy schools were in session.

Not all body snatching was done in connection with the medical schools. If a doctor knew he would be required to perform a surgical operation, especially a difficult one or one he had not done before, he might try to obtain a cadaver to practice on first. Young doctors were often enthusiastic and eager to expand their knowledge through further dissection practice after graduating from medical school. There are documented cases of body snatching by local doctors in rural Pennsylvania within a few years of the erection of the cages on the Hooded Graves.

### **Local Doctors, Missing Bodies**

It was not until nearly 1850 that this area had a number of academically trained physicians. John K. Robbins graduated from Jefferson Medical College in 1844 and practiced medicine for the rest of his life in Catawissa. In 1848 James Boyd McKelvy and H. W. McReynolds both graduated from University of Pennsylvania Medical College and returned to Columbia County to establish their practices. There were other young medical school graduates in neighboring Montour and Northumberland Counties. We can assume, because it was standard practice at the time, that these young men dissected illegally obtained cadavers as part of their education. And there is significant evidence that Dr. McKelvy, a surgeon as well as a physician, dissected, almost certainly illegally, in Bloomsburg.

The 1850 census shows young Dr. McKelvy living on the southeast corner of Market and Main Streets (now the site of the PNC Bank) in Bloomsburg with his parents. Across Market Street, lodging with a saddler, was a 20-year-old medical student, John P. Taggart. Dr. John Ramsey, who had been McKelvy's preceptor, lived nearby. While young Taggart could have been apprenticed to either Dr. McKelvy or Dr. Ramsey, it is more likely that he was McKelvy's student. At this time Dr. McReynolds was living in a hotel in Catawissa about a block from Dr. Robbins.

On Christmas Day in 1851 Dr. McKelvy married Mary Elizabeth Abbet and subsequently built an elegant structure on Main Street at the corner of Jefferson in Bloomsburg. This building served as both his home and his medical office until he died in 1901. In 1914 workmen digging in the alley next to the house discovered human bones buried there. More than 60 years had elapsed since the erection of the cages over the graves in Franklin Township. After passage of Pennsylvania's Anatomy Acts in 1867 and 1882, providing a legal source of anatomical material, attitudes had changed. What would have created a major scandal in 1852 barely caused a ripple in

1914. The find was casually dismissed as “left over from some demonstration,” less notice than probably would be taken today.

There is an interesting connection between Dr. McKelvy and one of the hooded graves. Sarah Ann’s husband Ransloe Boone and James Boyd McKelvy were cousins. Ransloe even had a brother William McKelvy Boone named after Dr. McKelvy’s father. Could young Dr. McKelvy have been aware of a plan to steal Sarah Ann’s body and warned his cousin who then, with the help of his wife’s family, took a precaution they had only heard about through an oral tradition but never actually seen? And less than two weeks later when Asenath died, did Lloyd and Frances Thomas do for their daughter-in-law what they had done for their own daughter? That is what appears to have happened.

There is no doubt that corpses were stolen in Bloomsburg. In 1925 all bodies in the Lutheran and Reformed cemetery across from Old Rosemont on First Street at Center were moved to New Rosemont in Espy to clear the area for construction of a new high school (now the Schoolhouse Apartments). Although the former union church building had been razed after the Lutheran and Reformed congregations split and each built its own church in the 1850s, members of the two congregations continued to use the old graveyard for burials well into the 1880s. By around 1900 the site had been abandoned and people were calling it an eyesore; however, negotiations to relocate the bodies failed repeatedly until the town needed the land for the new school.

The contract to move the bodies was carried out under the supervision of Dr. S. B. Arment of the Pennsylvania Department of Health. It was estimated there were about 500 burials in the old cemetery with more than one body in some graves. Dr. Arment had records confirming the private removal of 150 bodies between 1906 and 1925. The Rosemont interment book also records some removals prior to 1906. Nevertheless, there is a huge discrepancy between the 369 bodies officially removed and the 500-plus bodies said to have been buried. Soil conditions there are not conducive to total disappearance of remains within the amount of time they would have been interred.

The *Morning Press* summed up Dr. Arment’s comments on the situation. “He is confident...that more bodies had been buried there but no trace of them could be found.”

### **Conclusion**

Now that cages on graves have been explained, the next logical question is “Why weren’t there more?”

Perhaps there were. We already know that one was removed from this same graveyard in the 1930s. We also know that many of the iron fences once common in this area have disappeared. Perhaps the cost of such a structure was prohibitive for most people and they used other means to protect the final resting places of their loved ones.

In any case, knowing the reason does not detract from the mystery of the cages. It may even add to it. We are still left to wonder, “What *really* happened outside the sleepy little town of Catawissa in 1852?”