

Who was buried in Barker Park?

by John R. Pattison, resident of Troy's Pottery District

It's no surprise to any of Troy's old timers to know that Barker Park was once a public burial ground before it became the site of Troy's first City Hall. But, it might be a surprise, even to Troy's old timers, to know that two of Uncle Sam Wilson's children were buried there. It also might be a surprise to know that this ground was the final resting place of slaves and unidentified travelers, as well as many of Troy's early settlers and prominent citizens. Additionally, there was a mysterious interment attributed to a man by the name of Aaron Burr Reeve. Could there be a connection to our third Vice President (1801-1805) and a contestant in the infamous Burr-Hamilton duel of 1804?

Before we go further, let's document some known facts made available by local historian, Don Rittner, about that small patch of ground now known as Barker Park.

Prior to 1630, it was part of Mohican territory known as Great Meadow. In 1707, a tract of land encompassing what is now most of downtown Troy was purchased by Dirck Vanderheyden. In 1774, Jacob Vanderheyden became owner of the middle farm that includes the Barker Park area. On May 10, 1796, Jacob Vanderheyden deeded to the village trustees of Troy a plot to be used as a "public" burial ground. It covered all the land from Third Street running east along State Street to the alley, and South to the First Baptist Church.

On July 12, 1875, The Troy Daily Press ran a story about the controversy surrounding the removal of the individual graves in order to build the new City Hall. This story revealed that in 1796 Jacob Vanderheyden, in fact, deeded *two* "plats" for burial purposes, "*one for the inhabitants of the then village of Troy*" and "*the other ground was used more miscellaneously and negro slaves and unknown strangers found there a last resting place.*" This latter plot is the area that is now Barker Park. The other one, to the best of my knowledge, was lost or removed when the railroad was built in the 1830's. (It was said to be in the neighborhood of Congress and 6th Avenue, just south of Troy's Union Station where trackage was located.)

A list shared by Terri Page, of the Oakwood Cemetery Office, gave us the names of people who were buried in Barker Park. Oakwood has records showing that 144 graves from the public burial ground were re-interred at Oakwood to make space for the construction of the new City Hall on July 17, 1875. This list reveals only name, burial number, and grave number.

Looking over these names, we see a Polly Willson, and a Samuel Willson. Hmmm?

Back to the cemetery office for another visit. With the burial number in hand,

information from a master file produced the name of the deceased, date of death, and parents of the deceased; in this case Samuel and Betsy Wilson, none other than our own "Uncle (and Mrs. Uncle) Sam. The Wilson's were known to be members of First Baptist, located just south of the burial ground, so it's understandable to see why young Samuel would be buried there. His interment was recorded as July 27, 1807. (Yes, there is a slightly different spelling of last name, but they are the same family.)

And finally, what's the story with this Aaron Burr Reeve interment?

The same list of interments transferred from the old burial ground at State and Third Streets to Oakwood Cemetery on July 17, 1875 includes the name, "Reeve, Aaron Burr" as burial #5077, grave #101. With these numbers, the Oakwood office provided a master file which revealed the date of burial, age at death, and names of parents. In this case, the date of burial was September 1, 1809; the age at death was 29; and the parents were said to be the Hon. T. Reeve, and Mrs. Reeve, and that's as far as it takes us.

Further investigation provided by the Russell Sage College Library's newspaper archives produced an obituary from the Lansingburgh Gazette of September 15, 1809. Sure enough, this person was important enough to deserve a notice in the weekly paper of that time. It stated, "*...he was an attorney at law, and the only son of the Hon. T. Reeve, one of the judges of the Supreme Court of Connecticut.*"

This was now becoming very curious. Rumors have been around Troy since the infamous duel of Washington's Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton, and U.S. Vice President Aaron Burr (which happened in 1804, on the banks of the Hudson River at Weehawk Heights, N.J.) to the effect that Burr retired after the duel to live in Lansingburgh, at least for a while, in the home of Augustus Peebles, a prominent citizen of the day. So there may be a possible Troy connection there.

But, could this burial suggest any connection to Jefferson's Vice President?

Well, here it is. Reeve's father turns out to be one Tapping Reeve, Esq., prominent jurist of Litchfield, CT. and founder of the first Law School in the United States of America in 1765, which also happened to be located in Litchfield, CT. The school is still there to this day, by the way, as a museum, and a visit is well worth the 90-minute drive from the Capital District.

And furthermore, as it turns out, thanks to a Google connection, we learned that Judge Reeve was married to Aaron Burr's sister, Sarah, in 1771. Apparently they named their son after her father, the Rev. Aaron Burr, who, by the way, was the founder of the College of New Jersey, today known as Princeton University. We also found that Vice President Aaron Burr had been a student at this law school,

the only law school in the nation at the time, as was John C. Calhoun, well known orator and statesman from North Carolina, and other early leading citizens of our new democracy.

And, from here it's guesswork about why the young lawyer Reeve happened to locate in Troy. A likely scenario is that he had good connections to the Albany area. Vice President Burr, or shall we now call him Uncle Aaron, was well known in the Capital District since he had married an Albany woman and had practiced law there for a time. When the young Aaron Burr Reeve obtained his legal training, he might well have decided to practice in Troy, which had just won designation as the site of Rensselaer County's new courthouse (much to the understandable chagrin of Lansingburgh residents who worked hard to have it located there). At that time, Troy was a bustling young community at the headwaters of the Hudson River. Promise and opportunity were abundant. It would be a good place for a young attorney to start out. When he died at the age of 29, in 1809, cause unknown, we know he was buried in what is now Barker Park. Others were buried there before him, some as early as 1787, nine years before it was deeded over to the city as a burial ground. If there ever were any early records, they seem to be lost or no longer exist.

So the answer to "Who was buried in Barker Park?" may never be completely known, even though we know it served as an early burial ground. Some burials may have had no identification even at time of interment. Others have had stones stolen, desecrated or covered over, and a few may even lie there to this day under the rubble of the old City Hall.

Fortunately, we still have the documents at the Oakwood Cemetery Office which are available for research.