The Lancaster Crematorium: First in the USA

By John W. W. Loose

In the spring of 1884 a group of Lancastrians met at the *Intelligencer* newspaper office to discuss the feasibility of organizing an association for the reform of funerals. On 27 May 1884 the Lancaster Cremation and Funeral Reform Society was formed, officers elected, committees appointed, and plans made to obtain stock subscriptions. David G. Eshelman, an attorney, was elected president of the Society. Other officers were the Rev. Dr. J. Max Hark, minister of the Moravian Church, vice president; Dr. Henry Carpenter, physician, vice president; John D. Pyott, proof reader, recording secretary; H.C. Brubaker, attorney, corresponding secretary; and George K. Reed, banker, treasurer. The executive committee was comprised of Dr. Miles L. Davis, physician and developer of the cremation furnace; Brubaker, and Pyott. Other directors included A.N. Breneman, boot and shoe manufacturer; W.U. Hensel, attorney; Joshua L. Lyte, businessman; John P. McCaskey, educator; Joseph Ostheim, wholesale grocer; and Andrew Jackson Steinman, publisher and industrial promoter.

Having a distinguished group of representative Lancastrians was calculated to break down the likely prejudices of the town folk. Within a year the Society had fifty-nine stockholders among whom were the city's most prominent citizens.

Robert M. Agnew, Esq., attorney
Dr. William N. Amer, dentist
Dr. James E. Baker, physician
J.J.F. Ball
Dr. Walter Boardman, physician
D.B. Bowman, pharmacist
A.N. Breneman, boot and shoe mfg.
Dr. C.H. Brown, opthalmologist
Henry Clay Brubaker, Esq., attorney
George Brubaker, Esq., attorney
Dr. Henry Carpenter, physician
Thomas B. Cochran, Esq. attorney
H.B. Cochran, Pharm. D., pharmacist
Dr. William Compton, physician, treas., Inquirer Printing Co.
W.P. Compton, Esq., attorney
C.C. Cresson
Dr. M.L. Davis, physician
Dr. Samuel T. Davis, physician
Joel S. Eaby, mgr., Phoenix Cork Works
J.Z. Eby
Levi Ellmaker, Esq., attorney
David G. Eshelman, Esq., attorney
B. Frank Eshelman, Esq., attorney
George E. Fahnestock, merchant
Elizabeth Fahnestock
Charles S. Foltz, treas., Penn Iron Works
Joseph U. Fritchey, salesman
Jacob Gamber, tobacco packer
Milton Thomas Garvin, merchant
William L. Gill, photographer
Frank Griest, clerk to County Commissioners
William W. Griest, reporter, *Lancaster Inquirer* newspaper
D.H. Grube
Dr. J. Max Hark, pastor, Moravian Church
W.H. Hartman, coach trimmer
Charles A. Heinitsh, Pharm. D., Pharmacist
Walter A. Heinitsh, merchant
W.U. Hensel, Esq., attorney, publisher
Dr. M.L. Herr, physician
Dr. J.W. Hess, physician
Junius B. Kauffman, Esq., attorney
M.B. Kauffman, coal merchant
George C. Kennedy, Esq., attorney
George P. Killian, cigar box mfgr.
Charles Kline, Esq., attorney
Dr. Horatio D. Knight, dentist
M.L. Lauber
Newton Lightner, Esq. attorney
Julius Loeb, wholesale notions merchant
Joshua L. Lyte, mgr., *Examiner* newspaper
Horace Martin, dry goods merchant
J.S. Mason
Dr. Edward R. Mayer, physician
Dr. H.S. Metzger, physician
William B. Middleton, supt., Penn Iron Works
John P. McCaskey, educator, secretary, Inquirer Printing Co.
Dr. S.B. McCleary, physician, pharmacist
Joseph Ostheim, wholesale grocer

Joseph D. Pyott, printer
George K. Reed, banker
George N. Reynolds, insurance broker
Augustus Rhoads, jeweler
Joseph Schmid, printer
A.W. Snader, Esq., attorney, member, Pa. House of Representatives
Frank Z. Schieman
D.B. Shenk, clerk
Harry Strohm, clerk
Elmer E. Steigerwalt, coal merchant
H.W. Stein, printer
Andrew Jackson Steinman, Esq., attorney, publisher; pres., Penn Iron Works
Dr. B.F.W. Urban, dry goods merchants
Joseph Wacker, brewer
George Wall, innkeeper
A.W. Wenger
Thomas Atwood Willson, optical good mfg.
W.A. Wilson, Esq., attorney

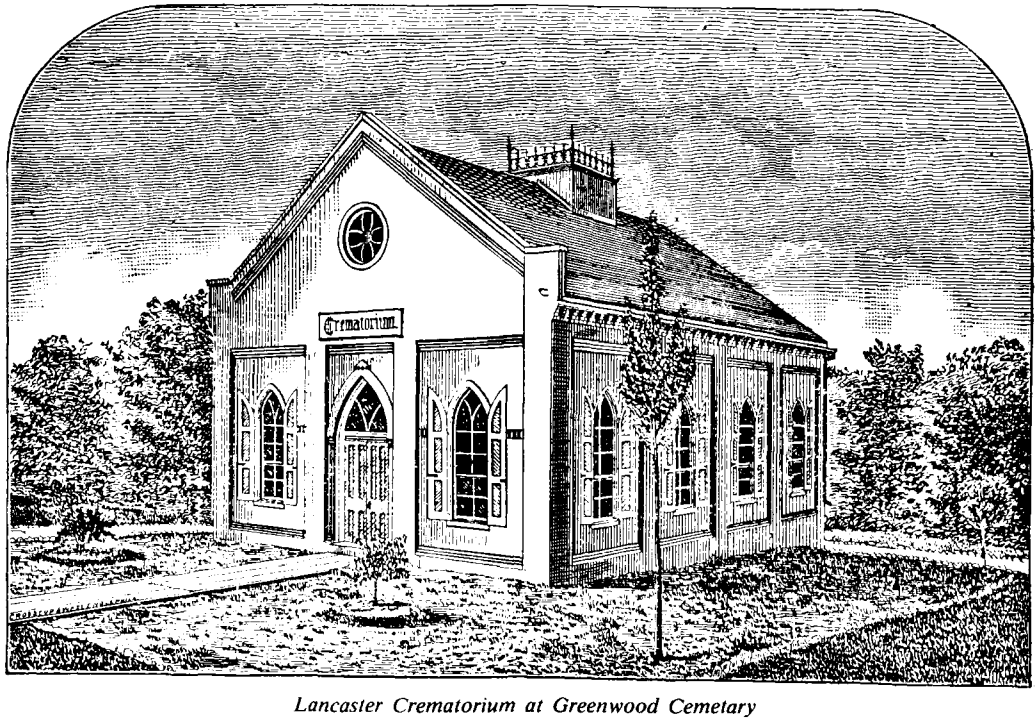
Members of the Roman Catholic and Jewish congregations as well as those of mainline Protestant churches were represented among the stockholders. Two of Lancaster's businesses gave solid support to the crematorium: the Penn Iron Works, a rolling mill headed by A.J. Steinman; and the Inquirer Printing Co., the largest job printing plant in Pennsylvania (later to become the Wickersham Printing Co.). Political antagonists such as A.J. Steinman, W.U. Hensel, M.T. Garvin, and W.W. Griest shared in the promotion of the Crematorium. Virtually every attorney in Lancaster held stock in the institution.

In the Janaury 1886 issue of *The Modern Crematist*, the local effort was described in these glowing terms:

> The cremation interest in Lancaster, Pa., where the first crematorium for general business was built, takes in lawyers and preachers, editors and doctors, manufacturers and bankers, merchants and mechanics, and men [and women] of all vocations. Intelligence, progress and courage are the common and distinguishing characteristics of the members of the Lancaster Society.

Land was purchased in the northeast corner of the Greenwood Cemetery. The Building was commenced immediately. On 25 November 1885 the structure was dedicated, and already a waiting list for its services had accumulated. A brochure published at the time described the building thus:

> The building is a modest brick structure, with iron roof, of Gothic architecture, 48 feet by 32 feet. The ground floor is divided into four apartments; the front room or auditorium is the largest, 24 feet by 32 feet; here the ceremony selected by the friends is held, and the body is put into the retort, the door of which opens into this room; one of these is used as a waiting room for the friends who may accompany the body, and the other for the preparation of the body for incineration. In the rear is situated the furnace room where the firing is done, and where all the tools and miscellaneous articles are kept. There is nothing in the general appearance of the building suggestive of its use; there is no stack protruding through and above the roof—a small observatory on top being the only attempt at ornamentation.



Lancaster Crematorium at Greenwood Cemetary

The floor of the auditorium is made of Portland cement, the other parts of the building are floored with brick. The audience room is furnished with chairs and a table for use of ministers or the officers of societies having charge of the ceremonies at cremation; the walls are decorated with pictures and urns of various designs. The waiting room is provided with chairs, lounges, toilet stands, &c. for the comfort of the waiting friends. The grounds consist of a plot of two acres, one half of which is level—here the building is located; the other is a hillside of solid limestone rock—here the Society intends erecting columariums at an early day. The grounds around the building are beautified by roadways, walks, trees, shrubbery, &c.

The furnaces and retorts were designed by Dr. Miles L. Davis. There were two of these placed side by side. The furnaces occupied a space 13 feet wide, 10 feet long, and 8 feet high and were constructed of fire clay, tiles, asbestos, sand, and iron. The retorts were 9 feet long, 3 feet wide, and 2 feet high. Dr. Davis designed the flues so that the heat encircles the retort thrice before being exhausted. To prevent gases from the body escaping into the atmosphere, they passed through more than 100 feet of flues heated to a temperature of 2500 degrees F.

Fuel used in the furnace was coke and hard coal; 250 pounds of each, or a total of a quarter ton of fuel, was consumed in the incineration of the average body, including the preheating of the retort which required at least six hours. The body itself was reduced to dust in 45 to 90 minutes according to size and condition.

The process is described by Dr. Davis:

> Cremation, as practiced at the Lancaster Crematorium, consists essentially of two elements—the first being mechanical and the second chemical. The first of these processes begins in a small room, known as the preparing room, in the

following manner:

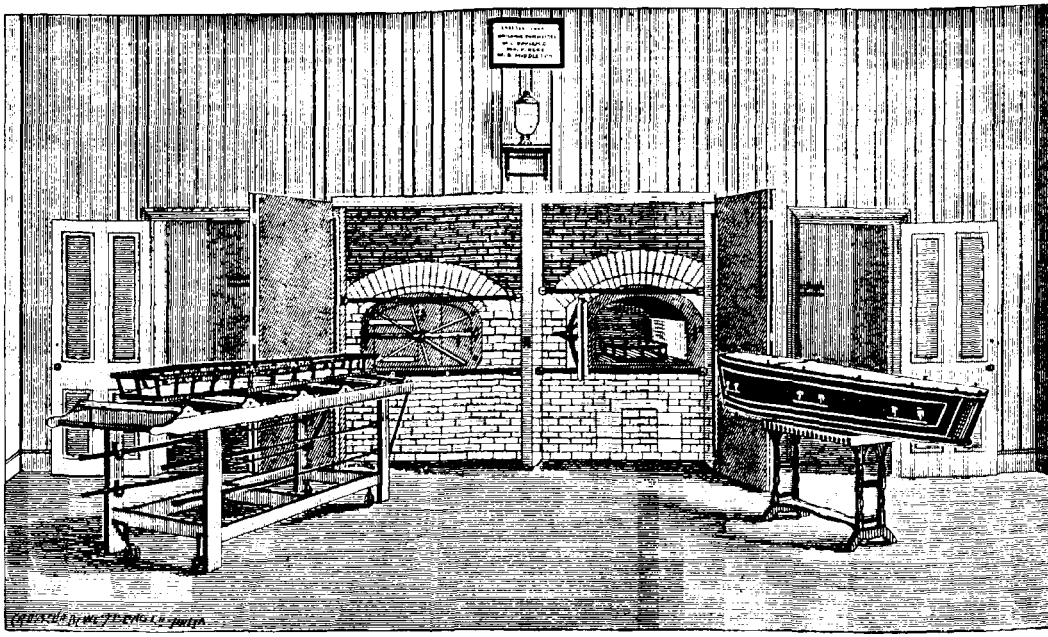
The catafalque, bearing the crib, which is covered with a cloth fifteen feet long wet with alum water, is placed by the side of the casket containing the body, the lid of which is removed and strips of muslin are passed under it. The ends of the bands are attached to an elevator, and the body is gently raised up and placed upon the alum-sheet-covered crib, the free end being covered over the body, thus entirely enveloping it. This procedure is necessary to prevent the clothing in which the corpse is dressed from igniting. The body and catafalque are then covered with a large pall. All being in readiness, a door leading to the auditorium is opened and the catafalque, on noisless casters, is silently moved to the audience room and placed in front of the retort.

The face of the corpse, if desired, is exposed, and religious services, such as the friends may select, are held. This consists of the burial ceremony of societies, churches, or that adopted by the Cremation Society. At the close of these exercises a cable is attached to the crib, the retort door is opened, a signal is given by the superintendent, and the catafalque with its burden gently approaches the open retort; when near, it stops, the pall is removed from the body, and noiselessly the corpse is moved into the retort, impelled, as it were, by an unseen agency. When it is in the proper position a signal is given, the machinery in the rear and out of sight stops, the door is quietly closed air-tight, and the mechanical process gives way to the chemical.

When the retort is opened, the cold air rushing in, the cold body, crib and alum sheet, chill for a few moments the inner surface of the retort; in a few moments the retort has regained its heat; a fine mist commences to arise from the body, which gradually becomes thicker and more dense, until the inside of the retort has the appearance of dense white mist. The idea of fine snow or fog is suggested. This appearance remains until the soft tissues are reduced to ashes. Then the interior of the retort gradually becomes more clear. The alum sheet will be seen to be in the same position as when put it; perhaps slightly sunken. A blue flame will be seen arising through the sheet; about six inches above the body it becomes extinguished. This continues until the bony structure is completely cremated, when all is white as snow, and nothing can be seen inside the retort, the ashes having fallen through the crib and the alum cloth collapsed. The oxygen, by the intense heat, has been made to unite with the carbonaceous elements of the body, and the resulting carbonic acid gas, ammonia and water are driven off through the retort walls, into and through the flues to the air without, where they mingle with the elements of nature. In the retort are the ashes, consisting of pure oxide of lime.

Thus the elements of which the Great Architect made man are simple, decently and expeditiously given back to the source from which they came, pure and clean. The water ascends to the clouds; the ammonia and carbonic acid unite with the soil and nourish the plant; whilst the lime is left to be returned to the earth. During the process there is nothing offensive or calculated to grate upon the most tender sensibility. All is perfectly quiet. There is no burning. The body is simply oxidized, and the union of the oxygen and the organic matter composing the body is so complete that what nature has so perfectly formed in life appears to gently, quietly melt away in death, and becomes resolved into its original elements.

Dr. Miles L. Davis was a veteran of the Civil War after which he attended Millersville State Normal School (now Millersville University). Following his graduation he entered the famed Bellevue Hospital Medical College where he received his degree of doctor of medicine in 1870. He practiced for some years in Rohrerstown and Millersville before establishing a joint practice with his brother, Dr. Samuel T. Davis, in Lancaster.



The furnaces and retorts of the Lancaster Crematorium.

Although he was a highly respected physician recognized for his professional competence, he was an "innovator" in a conservative profession, and his interests in manufacturing sanitary equipment jarred some sensitive persons in the community. Surely the catalogue of his company, The Sanitary Supply Company, represents a grotesque failure in public relations. The catalogue's cover announces "The Davis Garbage and Cremation Furnaces." Inside pages describe garbage furnaces for cities, hotels and families and cremation furnaces for human bodies. He also manufactured antiseptic cuspidors.

The Lancaster Crematorium and Funeral Reform Society published a monthly journal, *The Modern Crematist,* said to be the first of its kind in the nation. The 16-page journal, advertised as "a compendium of facts, an arsenal of argument, a budget of news, and a repository of science," sold for ten cents each, one dollar for an annual subscription, and a "gold eagle for thirteen." W.A. Heinitsh, a local furniture merchant, advertised "cinerary urns" at prices ranging from $5 to $50.

Despite the initial enthusiasm and success of the Lancaster Crematorium, the pioneering effort gradually lost momentum. Neighbors imagined they smelled burning flesh despite the well-advertised findings of Dr. T.R. Baker, professor of chemistry, Millersville State Normal School, who found combustion to be so complete as to not pollute the air. Said Dr. Baker, "The burning of the body produces no material difference in the gases escaping from the chimney."

By 1900 the operation had ceased. Thanks to the promotional efforts of Thomas A. Wilson, a stockholder of the Lancaster Crematorium, the idea

was carried to Reading, Pa. where cremation has been done regularly throughout the present century.

The building housing the Lancaster Crematorium became a maintenance shed for the cemetery until recently when the structure was restored for the purpose for which it was intended originally.

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Title page of Dr. Miles Davis' catalogue.