

Cross Roads Cemetery

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Crossroads Cemetery "Peace above the Miracle Mile" February 2, 1994 (edited June, 17, 2005) by Nicole C. Buchmayer, Gateway Publications

Monroeville's first mystery remains unsolved today and it rests just yards away from one of the community's busiest intersections. On a winter day in 1800, a small child wandered away from a wagon train, wandered onto the farm of Robert Johnston and got lost playing amongst a grove of trees. No one came looking for him and no one reported him missing. When spring came and melted the snow, the child's remains were found in the grove. Johnston conducted a search for the child's family but to no avail. He decided to bury the child where he lay, just a few feet from the spot where Johnston had buried his sister-in-law, Mary Clugston Johnston, in 1796. Nearly 200 years later, in the brisk February wind, the child's gravestone cannot be deciphered. The grove of trees is gone, but Mary Clugston Johnston's gravestone still stands among the 3,000 others in Crossroads Cemetery in Monroeville. The cemetery, the oldest, continuously operating one in the area, surrounds the Old Stone Church at the intersection of Monroeville Boulevards and Stroschein Road. Together, they create one of the community's most familiar landmarks. In the late 1700's, when farmers worked the land on which the area's busiest roadways and shopping centers stand today, families were allowed to bury their dead on their own land. Mary and the unknown toddler were the first known burials on the Johnston land. Since the grove was populated by trees and proved unfit for planting, Johnston donated this one-acre area of his farm as a burial ground for his neighbors. Johnston himself rests on the land that was his and was joined in subsequent years by descending generations of his family. Through the years, Johnston's land donation was complimented by other parcels from Johnston's son, John, as well as fellow settlers Joel Monroe, Samuel Snodgrass and Robert Beatty.

Birth of a Church The cemetery grew when, in 1834, land from the Johnstons and Monroes created the foundation for Crossroads Presbyterian Church. The first church was a modest, saltbox-shaped structure erected for \$1,500 and donated labor. Historical references indicate the church property and cemetery were enclosed by a split-rail fence along the roadway. In the early years, when the new church struggled to stand on its own, it was associated with Beulah, Plum Creek and Murrysville Presbyterian churches. During the seven-year tenure of the church's first pastor, the Rev. Andrew Virtue, 114 members joined the church. The first member of the church to enter the ministry, the Rev. Robert Carothers, was installed as pastor on Dec. 18, 1866. His ties to the church were binding, as his father was one of the first elders. Today, he is buried at the west corner of the church. His gravestone, resembling the Washington Monument, is distinctive. The families who first worked the land and then donated it later for a burial ground became active in the church. Throughout the development of the church and cemetery, men named Aber, Johnston, Beatty, Monroe served on both church and cemetery committees. The cemetery's true history is rooted in three different settler families -- Johnston, Beatty and Snodgrass -- which, through pure convenience of location, meshed their adjacent burial plots into one general cemetery area. Johnston, of course, was first to create a burial ground. Around 1850, the Beattys and Snodgrasses began burying family and friends on the portions of their land closest to the Johnston plot. Thus, much of the area that stretches from Monroeville Boulevard down to the rear of Miracle Mile Shopping Center forms the cemetery. The individual properties were physically surveyed and theoretically joined at the base of a large tree in the center of the cemetery. Known as "patent corner," the spot is now marked by the gravestone of Annie Beatty, who died in 1897. Most areas of the cemetery, even those not claimed by the three major families, are clustered by common family names. This is believed to be a result of families "staking their claims" by preference. Only one of these lot markers remains, that of the Gill family. General upkeep of the cemetery was not formally organized until 1872, when church trustees gathered to formulate a fund-raising plan for maintenance. Labor costs for the first clean-up effort on the cemetery totaled \$10. Maintenance costs were later subsidized by the sale of burial plots on an unused area of land behind the church. A surveying firm was hired to lay out a plan of lots in the mid-1870's. Through the turn of the century, grave sites remained priced at \$35 each or \$66.66 for two. Among the most famous, and often forgotten, people buried in the cemetery are Zephaniah Aber, a Monroeville politician during the 1870's; Eli Myers, who in 1880, was one of the area's first postmasters; and Dr. Thomas Robinson of Turtle Creek, a physician from 1870 to 1900.

A Congregation in Transition As the Crossroads congregation continued to grow, the original building, just 50 feet square, became stifling. In 1896, stones from the first building were incorporated with stones from nearby Snodgrass quarry to form the foundation of a new building erected on the same site. This new building is the one that still stands today. Though basically square-shaped, it has the illusion of an octagonal shape with three-sided pyramidal roof bays at the north and south sides. Its Art Nouveau-style stained-glass windows, believed to have come from Kokomo Glass Co. in Indiana, are original. The original pews, restored in 1989, are still used. Also deceptive is their curved shape, which allows them to seat more people than conventional, straight pews. The bell tower at the right of the church, though similar in construction and texture to the church building, was not erected until 1976. The actual bell inside, however, dates back to the 1890's. The tower itself is dedicated to George Westinghouse and Nikola Tesla, an associate of Westinghouse. In 1955, the congregation outgrew the church altogether and prepared to leave. The Crossroads congregation purchased land on Mossie Boulevard and dedicated its new building there in 1958. In 1967, the church moved to its current location on Haymaker Road. Though the cemetery is the final resting place for much history, it is filled only to half-capacity. About 3,000 people are buried there, and the cemetery can hold approximately 6,000 graves. Even though Crossroads Presbyterian Church left the site in the 1950's, under law it remains responsible for maintenance and upkeep of the cemetery. After the Crossroads congregation vacated the building, it was owned and occupied by Monroeville Church of Christ. In 1969, the building was

later purchased by T.M. Sylves and his daughter, Sarah Sylves Thompson, for donation to the Borough of Monroeville as an historic site. The church building is owned and financially maintained as a public building by the municipality. However, all weddings, funerals and other activities in the building are coordinated through the historical society.