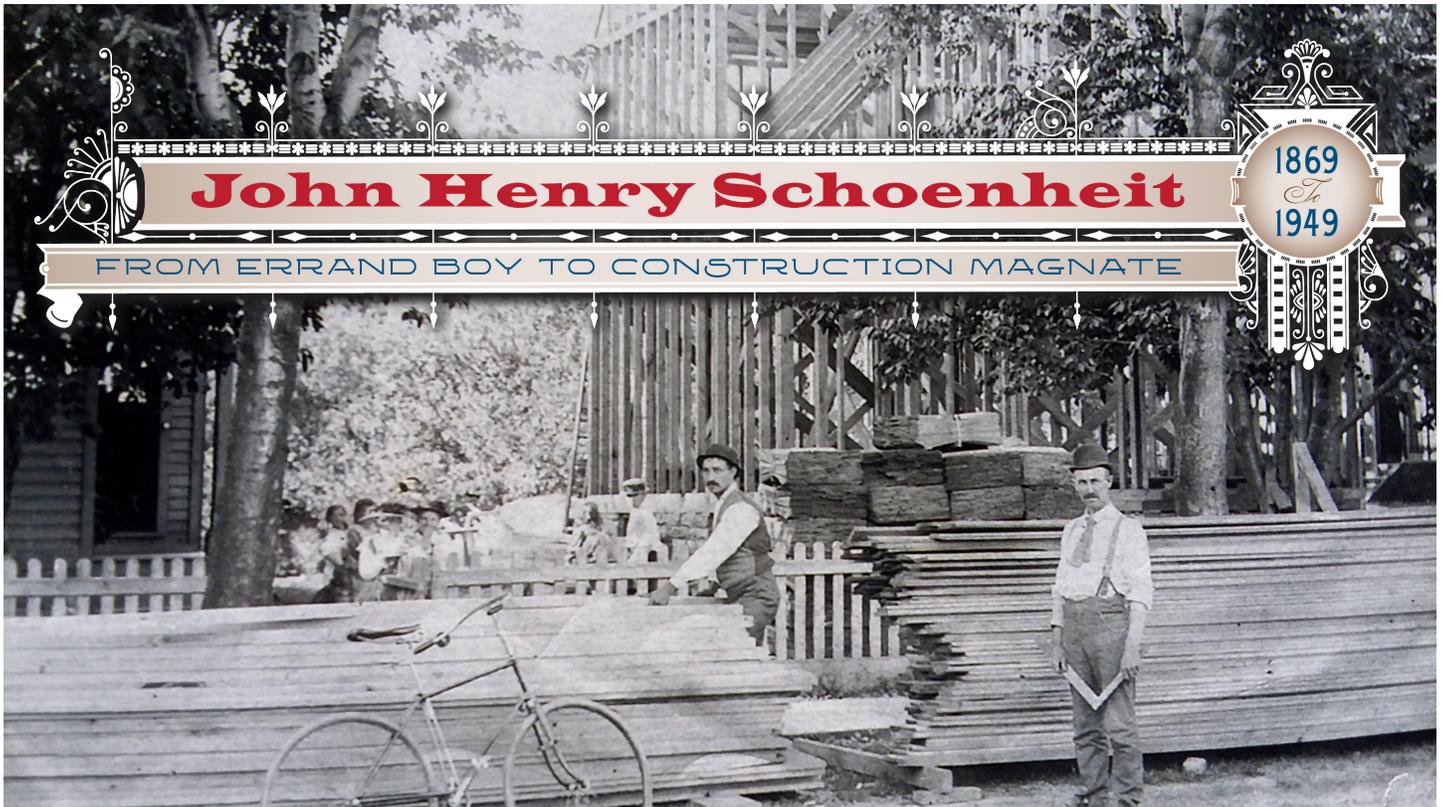


# EPITAPH

The Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery

VOLUME 41 • NO. 1 • WINTER 2021



*John Henry Schoenheit, holding his framing square, inspects one of his building sites. Early in his construction superintendent role, he rode a bicycle to review work on his various projects.*

by Richard O. Reisem

**I**n 1877, when John Henry Schoenheit was 8 years old, he started working as a paid errand boy for the 99 Cent Store (forerunner of Dollar General Store) near Four Corners (East and West Main, State, and Exchange streets) in downtown Rochester. His second employment was at Rundel's Art Gallery, 57 West Main Street. In 1882, he joined the Hayden Furniture Company to become a skilled carpenter in the furniture trade. It was a natural development for young John, since his father, Henry Ferdinand Schoenheit, was a cabinetmaker by trade, having been trained in Germany.

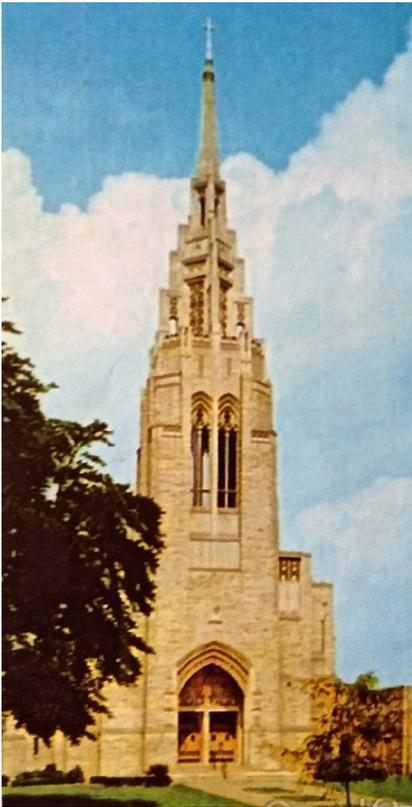
Despite his early employment, John managed to pursue a formal education. He started public school in Elmira, where his family lived at the time. When his family moved to Rochester, he continued his education at School No. 14 and later, School No. 4.

In 1887, Schoenheit, now a skilled carpenter, worked for several building contractors until the spring of 1890, when

he started his own company. An opportunity to become a foreman in a larger building firm came up in 1892. He worked in that position for more than 10 years when he became a partner in the firm, F. H. Rapp & Company, on January 1, 1903.



*Schoenheit's company built major buildings in Rochester, including West High School.*

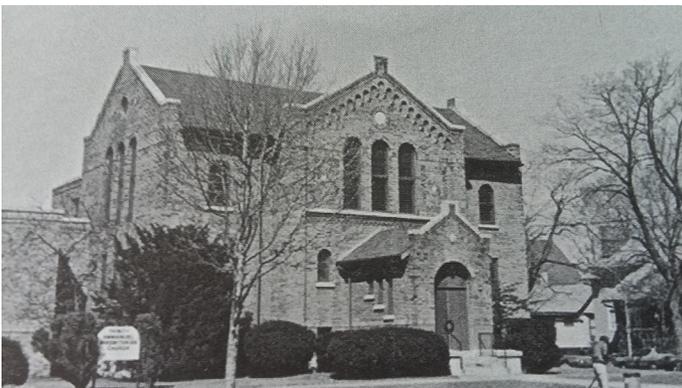


*Asbury Methodist Church is one of the dominant churches on East Avenue.*

1890, the year he started his own company, was also the year he married Marion Turner, a Rochester resident, on November 12. The wedding was held in the Plymouth Avenue Baptist Church. They had six children, five sons (H. Clarke, William T., Alfred V., Milton J., and Charles F.) and one daughter, Marion "Enid".

Schoenheit became a member of several fraternal organizations, namely the Yonnonidio Lodge of the Freemasons, Foresters of America, and Knights of Malta.

As a master mason, he became a member of the Lalla Rookh Grotto. He was also enthusiastic about automobiles, being a charter member of the Rochester Automobile Club (AAA). He enjoyed motorcycle races. With his wife and family, Schoenheit spent summers on Lake Ontario near Crescent Beach. And being a prominent general contractor, he belonged to a number of building construction organizations.



*Schoenheit built many churches, including Emmanuel Presbyterian Church.*

By 1912, when Schoenheit was 43 years old, he was in charge of the construction company he joined in 1903. His reputation for the highest quality brought his company

major important building projects in Rochester. Among the prominent buildings he constructed were West High School; Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Building on West Main Street; Rochester Public Schools Nos. 6, 7, and 9; Asbury Methodist Church, Corn Hill M. E. Church, Emmanuel Presbyterian Church, Mt. Hor Presbyterian Church, and a large number of industrial buildings as well as retail and wholesale stores. Schoenheit's company office was in the Granite Building on West Main Street.



*Schoenheit's house at 337 Magnolia Street in Rochester, NY.*

When Schoenheit reached retirement age, he began to reduce his busy, demanding large building projects, but still maintained a lively business. On November 30, 1949, he was returning home from Pittsford where at the age of 80 years he was engaged in a carpentry job and taking a bus home to his house at 337 Magnolia Street when he suffered a heart attack on the bus. He died in an ambulance taking him home. After funeral services at the J. B. Winchell Funeral Home, 598 Genesee Street, he was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery, Range 7, Lot 56. Also buried in Mount Hope are John Henry Schoenheit's German immigrant parents, Henry Ferdinand and Elizabeth Schoenheit, and four of his six children.

(Author's Note: Research and photos provided by J. Henry Schoenheit's granddaughter, Carol Willits Brown.)





# ROCHESTER ORPHAN ASYLUM

## FIRE

by Sally Valentine Steinmiller

**J**anuary 8, 2021 marks the 120th anniversary of the Rochester Orphan Asylum fire. All of Rochester grieved over the 28 children and three adults who died in that fire, but for my family, the grief was personal and continued for years, because my mother's twin half-sisters died in that fire.

On January 1, 1894, my grandfather William T. McCaw married Gertrude E. Potter in Rochester, NY. Gertrude gave birth to twin girls, Gertrude and Marion, on January 7, 1896. Sadly, Gertrude died less than two weeks after giving birth and was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery on January 19, 1896. According to cemetery records, she died of Bright's disease at the age of 27 years. Some internet research indicates that Bright's disease is an earlier name for kidney failure due to high blood pressure and fluid retention. I expected it to be closely related to childbirth, but discovered that it was actually more common in men, only occasionally occurring in pregnant women. In that era most of the patients with Bright's disease died.

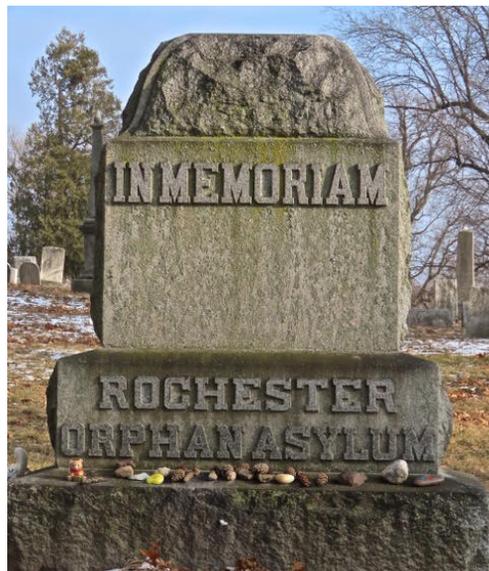
Thus, my grandfather was left to raise his twin daughters alone. I don't know who helped care for the girls as infants,

but according to the intake records of the Rochester Orphan Asylum, which are available at the University of Rochester library, the girls entered ROA on September 1, 1897 at the ages of 20 months. My grandfather, William T., was required to pay \$3.00 a week for their care, which was the normal rate of \$1.50 per child. City records show that my grandfather worked as a night watchman and

probably slept during the day so a daytime babysitter would not have sufficed. Actually, most of the children at ROA had one living parent; few were actually true orphans.

The Rochester Orphan Asylum was the first house of its kind in Rochester for children. Previous alms houses were only for adults. On February 28, 1837, The Rochester Female Association for Relief of Orphans and Destitute Children was opened on Adams St. with eight children. All of the children had lost parents in the cholera epidemic that year. In 1844, the house moved to an acre and a half lot at the corner of Grieg St. and Hubbell Park. In 1869 it started

admitting babies under two, and in 1881, the Potter Memorial Building, where the fire started, was added as the west wing. By 1901, ROA housed over 100 children.



*Rochester Orphan Asylum plot is in Section O at the corner of First and Cedar avenues.*



*Twins Gertrude and Marion McCaw perished in the orphanage fire of 1901.*

The tragic fire started just before 1:00 a.m. on Tuesday, January 8, 1901. William Clark and Philip Young, who were walking down Plymouth Avenue, saw flames coming out of the west wing of ROA and turned in the alarm at firebox #25 on the corner of Plymouth and Glasgow streets. These two young men would become heroes of the fire.

My mother's version of the story was long on drama and short on facts. I always wondered what caused the fire, and several years ago I decided to delve more deeply into that history. I learned that at first the fire was thought to have started in the boiler room attached to the west wing because of two explosions that were heard that night. The boiler man swore that the boilers were working properly and banked for the night at 6 p.m.

Later it was determined that a gas jet in the laundry room that supplied heat for the laundry equipment was accidentally left open. On the first floor of the west wing,

a brick wall separated the residence from the laundry room and boiler room. The gas from the open jet filled the laundry room, then seeped under the door to the next room. There it ignited a small explosion in another gas jet, which caused another explosion, this one large enough to throw doors across the room. Directly on the other side of the brick wall was a wooden staircase leading to the second and third floors. The fire went directly up this stairway to the third floor. The second floor was saved and the third floor destroyed.

Impediments to putting out the fire included ice-covered streets that hindered the horses pulling the fire wagons, ice-covered fire escapes that later became blazing hot, and something as simple as a locked front door with a missing key.

The east wing of ROA housed the nursery and the boys. The west wing housed all of the girls (about 75) and the infirmary. I can't be sure, but it is my belief that Gertrude

and Marion were on that third floor of the west wing. One newspaper account spoke of three children found under a bed with their arms wrapped around each other. Since my mother's account of the story always included an admonition not to get under the bed in case of a fire, I'm choosing to believe that those three little girls were our twins and a friend, who died trying to comfort each other. Mom and her brothers were all afraid of fire for their whole lives. In any public building, they always looked for exit routes, and that fear was also ingrained in me.

The fire turned out to be almost a macabre form of entertainment for the city of Rochester. Thousands of people visited the scene the next day, jamming the streets. It sounds unbelievable to me, but it was estimated that 20,000 people visited the morgue.

But my most surprising discovery, was to find that the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle actually quoted my grandfather.

*“William McCaw, a night watchman at the Haywood building, went to the morgue quite early in the morning and identified his two little girls, Gertrude and Mary. He turned away in heart-broken horror, refusing to trust the evidence of his own senses and declaring brokenly that he must send a friend to look at them before he would be sure they were his children.”*



*This is an early photo of the Rochester Orphan Asylum when it moved to a site on Pinnacle Hill.*

The twins were laid out at the home of their grandfather, Thompson R. McCaw, 16 Birch Crescent, where a service was held at 2:00 Friday, January 11, 1901. They were buried in the family plot at Mount Hope Cemetery. It's worth noting that Dear Mary and Sweet Gertie died a day after their fifth birthday. I can't help wondering if they had any kind of birthday party. I wonder how they spent their last day. Questions I'll never have answers for.

On January 13, 1901, a community memorial service was held at Central Church where thirty-one seats were

left empty and covered in black in memory of those who died in the fire.

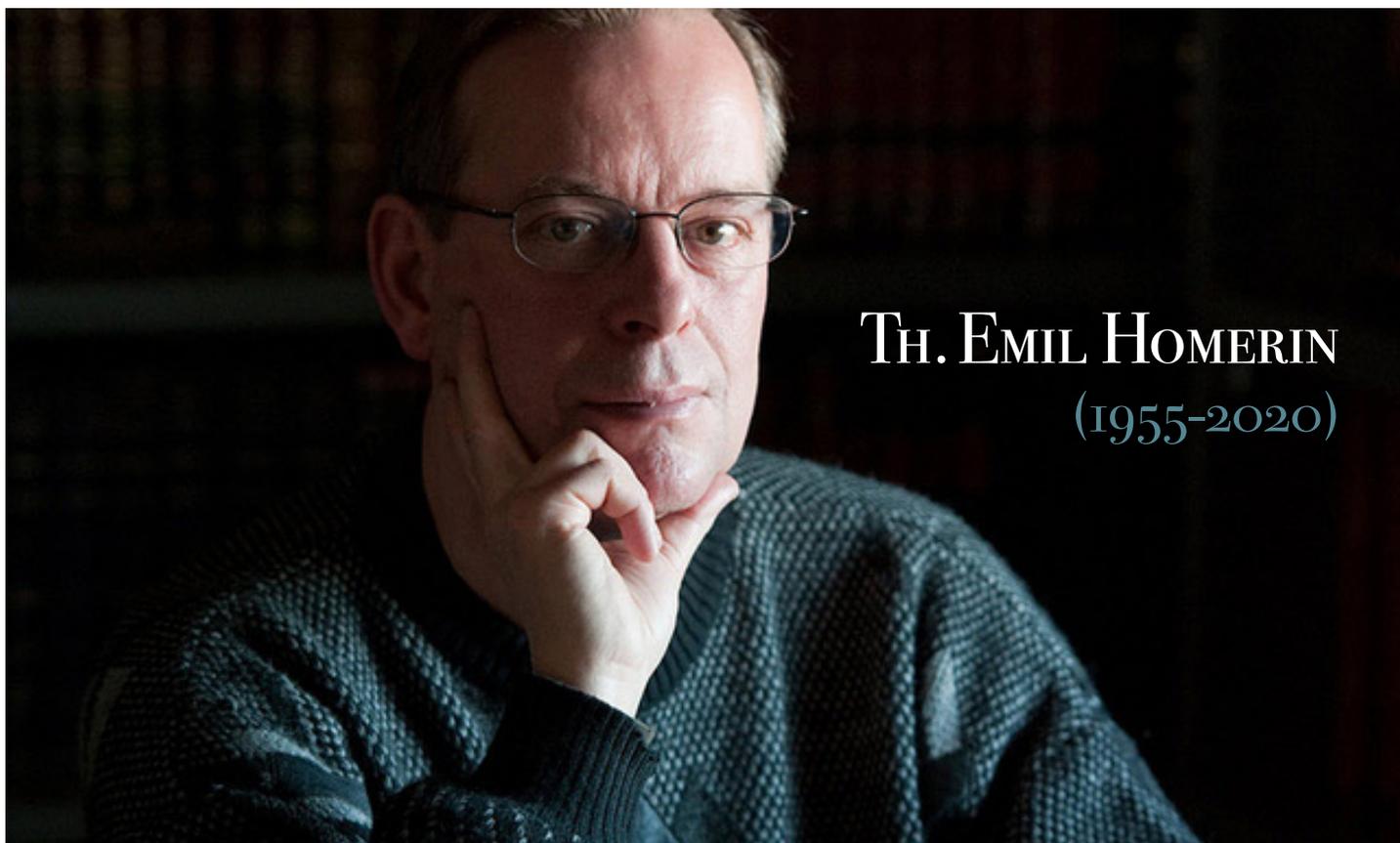
Although some of the children, like our twins, were buried in family graves, others who could not afford private burials were buried together in a special plot with a commemorative headstone at Mount Hope. On January 8, 2001, a 100th anniversary ceremony of remembrance was held there.

In the aftermath of the fire, the asylum board was faulted by the New York State board of charities for not hiring a night watchman. One of the accounts actually said that ROA needed a night watchman, because women are “emotional and quick to hysterics.” The city of Rochester was faulted for not hiring an assistant fire marshal; it had been two years since the last inspection. In one of those wonderful twists of fate, my brother, William R. Valentine, named for our grandfather, held the position of assistant fire marshal in the city of Rochester from 2002–2006.

The ROA never rebuilt on Hubbell Park. In 1905 they moved to 30 acres of land on Cobbs Hill in Rochester, and by 1910 the original plot held a dozen new houses. More importantly, the asylum board decided never again to house so many children in one building, and rebuilt using the cottage model, which is still in use today. It was renamed the Hillside Children's Center and continues to serve families in need as a vital part of the Rochester community.

Sadly, the twins were not the only children my grandfather had to bury at Mount Hope Cemetery. One year after the fire, he married my grandmother, Mary Woodhouse. Their first child, William (Little Bill), was born on September 30, 1903 and died of diphtheria on February 25, 1905. Grandma blamed his death on an infected cousin who came to their house and kissed the child. I was told that my grandfather long lamented the deaths of those three children and wondered if he would ever have any children that lived. However, this story ends on a happy note. My grandfather joined his three children at Mount Hope on February 14, 1938, but not before fathering five more children, the youngest of whom was my mother, who carried the name of her half-sister Marion. I was born after his death, and perhaps growing up without a grandfather inspired me to delve into this history. I am proud to be able to share his story.





## TH. EMIL HOMERIN (1955-2020)

Theodore Emil Homerin. Photo by J. Adam Fenster.

Emil Homerin—longtime trustee, exceptional tour guide, significant patron in diverse projects—died December 26 of pancreatic cancer. He was 65 years old. Below, several of his colleagues at the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery express their tributes to him and to the valued benefactions he so generously gave to our organization.

**Richard Reisem:** Emil Homerin was a popular teacher in a department at the University of Rochester where religion was the principal subject. In this situation, the question arises, “What were Homerin’s personal religious beliefs?” The answer was provided to me when in 2013, FOMH introduced my biography of Myron Holley at the Unitarian Church on Winton Road, a church that Myron Holley had founded. I was told that Emil Homerin was one of their prominent members. As the UR professor of religion and classic studies, Emil Homerin created a course called “Speaking Stones”, much of which was taught in Mount Hope Cemetery itself. Homerin required his students to select a gravesite in the cemetery, research the burial occupants, and write an essay about that individual or family. He then offered what he considered to be the best essays from every class to me for publication in the *Epitaph*. I, then, as editor of the *Epitaph*, selected the best

of the best and published them. It became an honor for the winning students to have their work published, outstanding material for our *Epitaph*, and important broadening historical information about the permanent residents of Mount Hope Cemetery. We have been doing this since 2003, which is now 17 years, and in each of those years we published several essays. It is an invaluable library of Rochester history.



Emil Homerin leading a Speaking Stones tour in Mount Hope Cemetery.

**Patricia Corcoran:** Emil was a tour guide extraordinaire. His last tour was in 2018, and he had planned to give a tour in 2020 entitled “Lost Secrets,” examining symbols, inscriptions, and funerary art that expressed views of life, death, and immortality in the 19th century. In the days when tour guide training focused on going on tours of the star tour guides and basically memorizing their tour info, Emil was one of my stars. I was fortunate to attend his final tour in 2018, which took place in the south end. Emil generously opened his course at the U of R to our tour guides, and I jumped at the opportunity to audit his course. It was inspiring to work with all these students and observe their enthusiasm and excitement about the cemetery. Emil’s influence facilitated our close relationship with the UR library that we so appreciate today. For the many years that Emil was a member of our board, by coincidence I always sat next to him at meetings. He was enthusiastic, insightful, and had a point of view. He felt strongly that the board sat on a lot of money instead of fixing gravestones. He walked through the cemetery each day on his way to work, so he was constantly bothered by seeing so many broken gravestones. Today, whenever I write checks for gravestone repair, I think how happy Emil would feel knowing that we were working so hard to repair gravestones.

**Nancy Uffindell:** Emil was a longtime FOMH board member and tour guide, and he taught his Speaking

Stones course at the U of R, contributing his student’s best papers to our newsletter, *The Epitaph*. Some current and past board members had the pleasure of auditing his amazing course. Many of us were fortunate to consider him a friend. Emil’s knowledge was so vast. Not only was Emil a scholar on cemeteries and mourning, but he translated 14th-century Islamic poetry. He wrote numerous books on that topic. He also was involved with opera on the U of R campus, and in 2015, co-produced and directed the Table Top Opera production of *Kindertotenlieder*, or *Songs on the Death of Children*, combining Mahler’s music with issues facing children today. It was an amazing multi-media production, with Emil’s English translation of the original German poetry.

**Sally Millick:** This is indeed shocking news. Emil made many contributions to FOMH, including the fabulous archive that we tour guides draw upon from the Speaking Stones course. He was an exemplary scholar and professional in his field. May he rest in peace.

The FOMH board has established a fund to plant a tree in Homerin’s memory and in the spring we will stage a dedication, inviting friends, family, and colleagues. Gifts to the Emil Homerin Tree Fund are welcome. As of January 12, the fund had a donation of \$200.



## *President's Message:*

Dear Friends, We celebrate this new year with a renewed sense of optimism. We will continue our aggressive restoration program in 2021, focusing on repairing all gravestones in Sections A and B. We are searching for creative ways to modify our tour program to abide safely with COVID restrictions. Our inveterate researchers work diligently to uncover stories of Mount Hope, writing *Epitaph* articles and making videos on our YouTube channel. Our cradle grave program is already planning new opportunities for volunteers to adopt gardens and celebrate little known families of a bygone era. Our dedication to restore the Old Chapel perseveres under the leadership of Chris Grooms and his dynamic committee. We invite all members to attend our Annual Meeting via zoom on April 6 at 7 p.m. Most of all, we appreciate your continued support and dedication to our mission. Your ongoing membership is critical to our success. With your enthusiasm and the hard work of our board and many volunteers, we look forward to a productive and exciting 2021.

— Patricia Corcoran



The Friends of Mt. Hope Cemetery  
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As of January 12, 2021, the Section A Restoration fundraiser has reached \$13,520 from 130 donors. This has been achieved in less than two months. This is a remarkable accomplishment, and we are so profoundly thankful. Our goal was to reach \$14,800, which is just \$1,280 away, and we continue to receive donations practically every day. We are likely to exceed our goal, so you should know that we will extend our restoration work to other needy sections.



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Richard O. Reisem, Editor  
Rose O'Keefe, Associate Editor  
Joanne Mitchell, Copy Editor  
Ron Brancato, Graphic Design

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