

## **The German Cemetery of Washington, D.C.**

**Gary Grassl - June 2002**

The dome of the U.S. Capitol consists of 36 cast-iron segments that fit together like slices of an orange. The plan for this complex design was devised and drawn by August Gottlieb Schönborn. This architect from Thüringen worked in the Office of the Architect of the U.S. Capitol from 1850 to the time of his death in 1902. He was called "the architect of the dome of the Capitol" in his obituary in the Washington Post. Schönborn lies buried in Prospect Hill Cemetery on North Capitol Street, which overlooks the U.S. Capitol and downtown Washington, D.C.

Originally known as "der deutsche Friedhof in Washington, DC," Prospect Hill Cemetery was founded in 1858 by members of the Concordia German Evangelical Lutheran Church. This church was completed in 1835 at 20th and G Streets, NW, four blocks from the White House. John Philip Sousa was baptized here in 1854.

Many of the monuments of Prospect Hill Cemetery were designed by Jacques Jouvenal, who emigrated to the United States in 1853 from Elsaß-Lothringen; these include his own, whose inscriptions are in German. He designed the statue of Benjamin Franklin that stands in front of the Old Post Office Building at 12th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW.

In 1862, Architect Emil Friedrich designed a major addition to first building of the National Deaf Mute College. It was in this building that Abraham Lincoln signed legislation establishing this as the third educational institution in the United States to receive federal funding, the first being West Point and the second the Naval Academy. Several years later, Friedrich designed four more buildings for the school known today as Gallaudet University. He too lies buried in Prospect Hill Cemetery.

Here is also the Merchant-Taylor William A. Petersen of Hanover. It was in the house that Petersen built in Washington that the President (Abraham Lincoln) died on Good Friday 1865.

Joseph Peter Gerhardt of Bonn fought in the German democratic revolution of 1848. During the Civil War, he served as the commander of a German regiment and finally of a brigade. He led the large German contingent that marched down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Capitol at the funeral of President Lincoln. Brevet-Brigadier Gerhardt lies buried in the Cemetery along with about 40 other veterans of the Union Army.

Here lies Attorney Louis Schade of Berlin, who also took part in the 1848 revolution and who published The Washington Sentinel for 30 years. When speculators wanted to buy the house in which Lincoln had died, he purchased it in 1879 to preserve it for posterity. It is known today to tourists from all over the United States as "the House Where Lincoln Died."

Here lies also Julius Frederick Viedt of Braunschweig, a lieutenant in the Union Army and the founding president of the Washington Sängerbund. They sang Goethe's *Gesang der Geister über den Wassern* under the dome of the Capitol before Lincoln's bier. In January 1893, members of the Sängerbund sang in Prospect Hill Cemetery at the funeral of their founding president.

On Memorial Day 2002 the Washington Sängerbund returned to Prospect Hill Cemetery, where it had in the years past sung at so many memorials for its singers. This time for the first time in its 151-year history it was under the leadership of a woman -- Carol Traxler. Under the direction of Herbert

Traxler, it began with a moving hymn from the time of Germany's Thirty-Years War: "Meinen lieben Gott, trau ich in Angst und Not." With Rudolph Becker, a past president of the Sangerbund, officiating at the ceremony, the Sangerbund then sang Schubert's "Wanderers Nachtlied", the poem by Goethe. Jean Bischof Crabil presented a brief history of the Cemetery. Mindful that Prospect Hill Cemetery is what is known in Germany as a Waldfriedhof, the Sangerbund concluded with "Abschied vom Walde: O Taler weit, O Hohen." Volker Schmeissner, President of the German-American Heritage Society, emphasized in his address the importance of the Cemetery to German Americans in the Nation's Capital and the need to preserve it for future generations. Rev. Martin Burmeister, Assistant Pastor of the Concordia Church, developed this theme further in his Message. He said:

**Die Erinnerungen und Erfahrungen einer Generation gehen verloren, wenn sie nicht festgehalten werden. Jede Gesellschaft und jede Kultur errichtet deshalb Symbole und Zeichen der Erinnerung. Das konnen Denkmale sein oder besondere Feste und Gedenktage. Der franzosische Soziologe Maurice Halbwachs hat das einmal das 'kollektive Gedachtnis' genannt. Die Erinnerungen und Erfahrungen der vorangehenden Generationen bleiben aber nur erhalten, wenn die Statten der Erinnerung auch gepflegt werden. Kummert sich niemand darum, dann verfallt das kollektive Gedachtnis, und so wie das Unkraut uber Steine wachst, wachst auch das Vergessen uber die Geschichte der vorangegangenen Generationen.**

Prospect Hill Cemetery is one such place of remembrance for German Americans in the Nation's Capital. Here the memory of the contribution of past generations of immigrants can be nurtured. But that will be possible only if the Cemetery is morally and financially supported by the German-American community of the Washington area.

There are about 14,000 persons buried in Prospect Hill Cemetery, 9,000 to 10,000 of them adults. The vast majority are of German heritage. Most persons buried there immigrated to Washington in the 19th century. There are, of course, also recent burials, and quite a few lots are still available today.

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Until the American Civil War, the U.S. Capital was little more than a village on the Potomac. It was noted for the magnificent distances between its few public buildings - but little else. Washington, D.C. did not become what might be called a city until the time during and shortly after the Civil War. Despite this building boom, Washington did not become a magnet for immigration. In the 1870's, about 9 percent of the adult male population of all races was Irish; 7 percent German; and each of the other ethnic groups boasted no more than 2 percent. There was no large ethnic enclave in Washington. But despite their small numbers, the Germans made a unique contribution to the creation of the City of Washington; they provided an inordinate number of skilled craftsmen.

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**The Memorial Day ceremony was sponsored by the German-American Heritage Society of Greater Washington, D.C., Concordia Church, and the Prospect Hill Lot Owners Association (President: Carol Holler; Secretary: Carolyn Rossmiller; Treasurer: Jean Bischof Crabill; Trustees: Rudolph Becker, Annita Carmank, Albert Reitz and Henry Fankhauser).**

**After the Memorial Day service, Superintendent Dennis Olson led the guests through the Cemetery. Everyone was thankful that Mr. Olson and his wife Joan maintained and sustained an important place in German-American collective memory--Prospect Hill Cemetery.**

**For more information on the Cemetery read *The Immigrants and Their Cemetery: The Story of Prospect Hill* by Jean Bischof Crabill available from Prospect Hill Cemetery, 2201 North Capitol Street, NE, Washington, D.C. 20002-1103. Tel. 202-667-0676. Also, *The Families of Prospect Hill: Prospect Hill Cemetery*, Washington, D.C., 1858-1997 by the same author and source.**

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