



# “Grave Matters”

Historic Oakwood Cemetery  
Preservation Association

Syracuse, New York

Spring, 2018 Volume 26, Number 1

## President’s Message ...

... Connie Palumb

The HOCPA Board is pleased to welcome Diane Medvitz as a new member. We are very excited to share her extensive knowledge of cemetery history and gravesite studies. She has personally, with the help of Tom Cadwell, researched and photographed nearly 60,000 gravesites in Oakwood-Morningside, White Chapel, and Valley Cemeteries. These records are all available online at [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com). She routinely receives inquiries from people the world over...from as far as Europe and Australia.

Diane originally hails from Pennsylvania where she graduated from Clarion University. She has retired from her position as librarian in the Onondaga Central School District. Welcome, Diane!

Many thanks to all of you who read and enjoy this newsletter, and, of course, we appreciate your continuing interest and support. Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at [cspalumb@hotmail.com](mailto:cspalumb@hotmail.com).

## Editor’s Notes ...

... Sue Greenhagen



This is where I usually launch into a long-winded peptalk from high atop my soapbox. Come to the tours! Cherish the cemetery! Support our work! These things are still important, but as I write this, something else comes to my mind. The HOCPA Board has said farewell to a long-time member, Darothy DeAngelo, who passed away on January 10. Darothy had not been active on our tours for a while – old age and her infirmities caught up with her, but she never stopped caring about Oakwood Cemetery.

She contributed with research, innovation, and a lot of elbow grease. She was a genius with alliteration. It was she who came up with tours called “Murder, Mystery and Mayhem,” “Doctors, Dentists and Quacks,” and perhaps her all-time best, “Dames, Damsels and Dingbats.” In fact, I was scheduled to lead the “Dames” tour, and she suggested I do it as living history. I borrowed a 19<sup>th</sup> century dress, and I was all set to portray Mrs. Margaret Olive Slocum Sage. Then Darothy got the bright idea of me making a grand entrance, and what better way than in a hearse. She borrowed the hearse, drove us into the cemetery, and the rest, as they say, is history. The tour group loved it..

Darothy was my pal, my companion, my fellow traveler – she was also my sister, my “much older” sister as I was fond of reminding her. She came right back at me, “well, I’m older and wiser.” She left us with so much, and we need to carry on. Her legacy to us is perhaps best summed up in one sentence when she said, “Not everybody’s famous, but everybody has a story.” Amen.

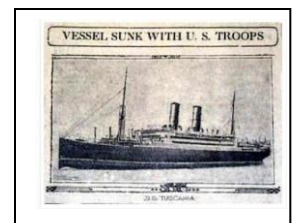
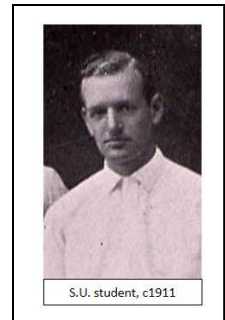


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## Voices of Oakwood ...

## ... Philip Kilburn Lighthall (1887 - 1918)

This year, 2018, we commemorate the ending of the “war to end all wars,” World War One. The Armistice was signed on November 11, at 11 o’clock. Over 12,000 residents of Onondaga County had answered their country’s call. Onondaga’s death toll was 318. One of those who died in the war was Philip K. Lighthall. Born on December 24, 1887, he was the oldest son of John A. and Mary E. K. Lighthall of 419 Douglas Street. After attending school in Syracuse, Philip was graduated from the L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Applied Science of Syracuse University in 1911. He worked as an engineer in Onondaga County until 1917, and then went to Chicago as an assistant construction engineer with the Semet-Solvay Company. On September 2, 1917, he enlisted in the U.S. Army. He went first to Fort Leavenworth, KS, and then to Camp Meade, Maryland, for training. He was commissioned a captain in the 23d Engineers, and on January 24, 1918, he boarded a British ship, the *Tuscania*, bound for Liverpool, England. The *Tuscania* was a luxury liner of the Anchor Line, a subsidiary of the Cunard Line. It was built in 1914, and refitted for troop transport in 1916. On January 24, it carried 2,013 American troops and a crew of 384. Early on the morning of February 5, off the coast of the British Isles, a German submarine, the UB-77, sighted the convoy ships, including the *Tuscania*. They stalked the convoy all day, and as darkness fell that evening, the UB-77 fired two torpedoes toward the *Tuscania*. The first one missed but the second was a direct hit.



Captain Lighthall was one of the 210 casualties that day. He can’t tell us what he experienced but there was a survivor who wrote a letter home telling what happened. Perhaps he can speak for the Captain:

“On Active Service with American Expeditionary Force. Feb, 12

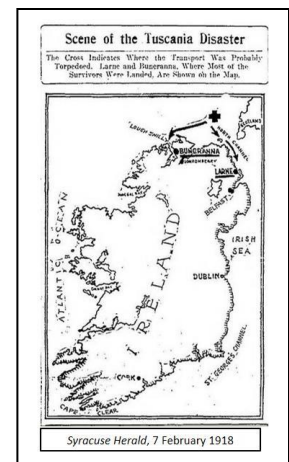
Dear Folks: Well, we are stationed in a tremendous camp ‘somewhere in England,’ waiting to be fully equiped [sic] anew, as we lost everything except the few clothes we had on. Will write about the accident, as it has been published.

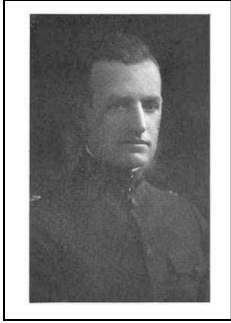
On the night of Feb. 5, at a quarter to 6 in the evening, we were hanging around below decks, awaiting mess, when out of a clear sky there was a terrible smash. All the lights went out and the boat listed to starboard. We all cried, “That’s it!” We knew we had been torpedoed. I was one of the crew on a lifeboat. When I got to the top deck it was pitch dark. We had searchlights, and then found that most of our boats had been smashed by the explosion. We could do nothing. The first torpedo boat came up an hour later and took off some men and then disappeared into the darkness.

All this time we were sending up color rockets, also guns were banging all around us, either from our boat or from torpedo boats. You can imagine our feelings...Another hour passed, and we awaited the end; never knowing what minute the boat would sink, when out of the darkness came a torpedo boat.

I swung out on a rope from the deck and when I got to the bottom of the rope it was short about twenty feet, and there was a ten-foot open space between our boat and the torpedo boat. I started the rope swinging and cut loose, went out as far as possible, and then it seemed I would never come down. I thought sure I had missed the boat and expected to hit the water between the boats, but landed safe and sound right on the deck with some sigh of relief.

We were taken to Ireland, and have traveled from here to there ever since. We were told we could write this, as the news has been published. ‘Over here’ you know there is a war—not like home. You had better commence to conserve now, I tell you. I will write soon again.”



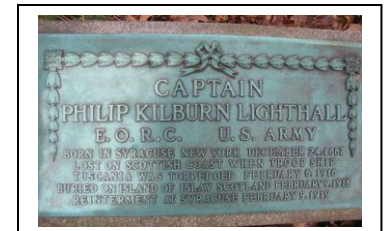


This anonymous soldier’s letter was published in the March 10, 1918, edition of *The New York Times*. It could very well have been written by Captain Lighthall, had he lived, but he didn’t. The *Tuscania* was the first transport ship carrying American troops to be sunk by the German navy. She sank just seven miles north of the lighthouse on Rathin Island, off the coast of Northern Ireland. It took just four hours to sink, and she now rests at the bottom of the North Channel between Ireland and Scotland. Captain Lighthall’s body washed up on shore a few days later and he, along with other victims, were buried. Funerals were held from February 8th through the 11th. Gradually, victims were removed and their remains returned to America.

Captain Lighthall was returned to Syracuse in February of 1919, and buried in Oakwood Cemetery (Section 47, Lot 60).

The Captain’s memory has been honored in various ways. In June of 1919, an American Legion post in Syracuse was organized and named for him. In 1921, a bronze tablet was dedicated by fellow students of Smith College. It honored Lighthall and 15 others “who gave their all for humanity.” In 1923, a flagpole was presented to the Onondaga Orphans Home by Captain Lighthall’s family in his name.

Philip Kilburn Lighthall now rests on a hill in Oakwood Cemetery, shaded by the tall trees that surround him and his family. He has a bronze marker (shown at right) briefly telling his story. Thank you for your service and your ultimate sacrifice. Rest in Peace.



Oh, there’s one other thing about the sinking of the *Tuscania* - one of the soldiers who survived the disaster was Private Harry Randall Truman. In 1980, he was the 83-year old lodge keeper who died in the eruption of Mount St. Helens.

[Sources used: *The Syracuse Herald*, *The Syracuse Journal*, *The Post-Standard* (Syracuse, N.Y.), *The New York Times*, *New-York Tribune*.]

## Winter on the Trails ...

## ... from HOCPA Board member, Paul Harvey

So, it’s still wintertime...despite the 50-degree temperatures as I write this. Before I begin to talk up the Trails for Springtime recreation, let me do what I should have done over the holidays and suggest to all suffering from cabin fever that one of the best resources for these indoor “heebie-jeebies” is MCT! Yes, the Morningside Cultural Trails offers a lot during the winter months, for example: Beside the obvious exercise benefits from snowshoeing and cross-country skiing, walking and running or jogging or, in my case trudging up to the water towers, the trek offers beautiful views and a worthy cardio workout. The stairway, behind Ed Smith Elementary School, is often clear in the wintertime thanks to the protective branches overhead, and that is always a way to build up that stamina, and what a great way! You go up a tenth of a mile and just as you begin sucking wind, you can walk down a tenth! Repeat five times (yup just five, and you’ve got a mile under your belt, and for most folks, in under a half hour). Oakwood Cemetery is a marvelous place in the wintertime, perhaps the best for serious walkers, hikers and runners. Why? Well, first of all, many of the roads are regularly plowed yet there is very little traffic. In addition, the “hill and dale” landscape construction and the frequent twists and turns mean that you rarely are headed into the wind and then only for a few brief moments. Also, there are all the lovely monuments, mausoleums and statuary, now snow-covered and leaf-free. The tree trail is also leaf-free. The “temporary” signs were all still in good order the last time I checked and you can learn how to ID trees without the leaves by reading the signs on the designated trees. The Morningside Gardens are, after every new snowfall, delightful to observe. Several local photographers are regular wintertime visitors there. History, science and nature, as well as other artistic opportunities, abound. Look for these in upcoming posts.

## Cemetery Assignment from West Genesee High School ...

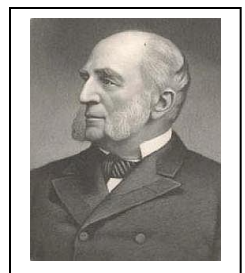
Every fall, students come to Oakwood Cemetery for a walking tour. They hear stories of the lives of some famous (and infamous) residents. Having already read Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, they go back to West Gennie, research folks in Oakwood, and create elegies for them. Here is another example of their work:

### James Jerome Belden

She was only 2  
Who takes a child that young?  
They say it was just the time of living  
But there's no reasoning behind that Kind of sleep.  
Beautiful, happy, and so hopeful-  
Like a vibrant sunflower.  
She barely got to see any life  
She barely got to know of love  
She barely got to see any world.  
Nobody should lose a child  
It's like the biggest failure  
Of all time to parents.  
I still lived out my life though  
Never forgetting the pain and regret  
Of losing my daughter.  
Maybe now I can make changes  
Where I am, not lying in my grave  
But spending time with my daughter  
In fields of sunflowers.  
Maybe now I can convince the man in charge, to stop this wrongful act.  
It should be a cycle,  
Mother and Father before Child  
Not  
Child before Mother and Father.  
It was unfair-  
She only got a glimpse  
At what life can hold for you.

### West Gennie Elegy note...

James J. Belden (1825 - 1904) is one of Syracuse's most important historical figures. Over his lifetime he was involved in banking, construction, newspaper publishing, and hotel ownership. He was mayor of Syracuse, 1877-78. He served in the United States House of Representatives from 1887 to 1895 and again from 1897 to 1899. He was married to Anna Gere (1825 - 1910), and they had one child, Harriet Anna, nicknamed "Hattie." Hattie, their only child, was born on 21 July 1858. She died on 11 November 1860, just two years old. Hattie and her parents are buried in Section 17, Lot 35.



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Please make checks payable to **HOCPA**, and mail to:

**HOCPA, PO BOX 15065, Syracuse NY 13215**

## Oakwood All-Star ...

## ... Helen Cornelia Hiscock Backus

This issue's subject is Helen Cornelia Hiscock Backus, a woman whose contribution to society was in the field of education. She was born in Tully on 28 May 1852, the oldest child of Luther Harris Hiscock and Lucy Bridgman Hiscock. Her mother died in 1861. Six years later, her father was shot and killed by George Cole over an alleged affair Luther had with George's wife while George was serving in the Civil War. Helen and her eleven-year-old brother, the future judge, Frank, went to live with their uncle, the future U.S. Senator, Frank Hiscock.



Helen's education was acquired at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, where she was valedictorian and president of her graduating class in 1873. Upon graduation she traveled abroad, then returned to Vassar where she taught literature from 1875 to 1883. In 1878 she earned a Master's degree from Vassar. One of her teaching colleagues, at that time, was Dr. Truman J. Backus, chair of the English Department. In July of 1883, Helen married Dr. Backus and the couple moved to Brooklyn, when Dr. Backus assumed the position of President of the Packer Collegiate Institute, a position he held until 1908, a year before his death. Helen never lost contact with her alma mater. In 1887 she was elected to the Board of Trustees where she served until 1902. She was Vice President of the Alumnae Association (1878-1879) and President from 1879 to 1884. She was also President of the Vassar Students' Aid Society from 1895 to 1897.

In Brooklyn, she belonged to the Brooklyn Women's Club, an organization of educational and literary character. She served as President for four years. In 1895, she attended the State Federation of Women's Clubs and delivered an address on "Women and the Women's Colleges." She was said to be "a woman of distinguished presence," and to use better English than most. She launched a campaign to have New York City mayors appoint women to the city Board of Education.

Helen Cornelia Hiscock Backus died on 8 January 1906, and is buried in Oakwood Cemetery (Section 3, Lot 1) with her parents and her husband. She was only 54 years old. In 1909 a mosaic was unveiled in the Packer Institute Chapel honoring Mrs. Backus. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of January 9 reported that "the mosaic is a fine piece of work. It was designed by Tiffany... and presents a picture with mountains and a lake in the background, with pines and white birch trees (favorite trees with Mrs. Backus) in the foreground. The sky effect is so well done as to have stained glass effect." Mrs. Backus now rests in Oakwood, a place equally as beautiful as her memorial mosaic.



*address correction requested*

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