

East Falls Past--Laurel Hill

The Fallser, October 2008, by Wendy Moody

With Halloween approaching, our thoughts turn to ghosts, skeletons, cemeteries...

Reprinted below is an excerpt of an article that appeared in the *Suburban Press* in 1929:

When Thomas Drennan Was in Charge of Laurel Hill

The first superintendent of the Laurel Hill Cemetery was Thomas Drennan, who was born in Queens County, Ireland in the year 1793. Coming to this country when quite a young man, he finally settled at the Falls. Drennan was married twice, his first wife being Ellen Farren, and by whom he was the father of four children, one girl and three boys.



Upon the securing of the charter for the Laurel Hill Cemetery (1836), Drennan was the first man to be hired. His duties were multiple. He was not only superintendent, but he was the chief grave digger, he being the first man to turn a sod in this now much noted cemetery. He was also clerk and paymaster, and his ledger in which he made entries - when the first interment was made - is still in a fair state of preservation.

The first body interred by him was that of Mercy Carlisle, whose mortal remains were laid to rest October 19, 1836.

Shortly after becoming superintendent, he moved with his family into the dwelling to the left of the entrance of the burial grounds, afterwards occupying what was once called the old Seminary Building, which was near the southern line of the property, on the rise of the hill; after which he resided until his death in the cottage which stood next to the chapel, almost in the center of the cemetery. The chapel and the cottage were torn down about 1885.

When Drennan first assumed charge of the cemetery, the burials were few and far between, and help was only hired when an interment occurred, with the exception of boys, who were employed at a small stipend, to keep goats from running into the burial ground from the high granite quarries of Hugh Scott,

But it was a few years until the reputation and beauties of Laurel Hill became known throughout Philadelphia and its surroundings. Drennan's duties increased accordingly, several additions were made to the laboring forces, and the superintendent became a superintendent in reality. Among those employed was Mary S. Collins, who resided at the entrance, and whose duty it was to notify the superintendent of the approach of a funeral by the ringing of a bell.

In 1848, the Harleigh property, with its famous old yellow colored mansion, was acquired by the cemetery company and named South Laurel Hill. The old building was left standing for some years, but was finally torn down to make room for more graves. The owners of the property were loath to part with their beautiful and quiet abode and it is doubtful if there would have been a South Laurel Hill had it not been for the prevalence of the chills and fever in the locality following the backing up of the Schuylkill after the erection of the Fairmount Dam, making a residence on its banks not so desirable. Drennan was given charge of the newly acquired ground.

Drennan's second wife, Margaret Whalen, presented him with five sons.

Drennan continued as superintendent until his death at age 59 in 1857.