

Cover Story

By Stan Goldstein



Opposite page: Sculpted by Erastus Dow Palmer in 1869, the “Angel at the Sepulchre” is among the most iconic monuments at Albany Rural Cemetery. It was commissioned by Robert Lenox Banks, a secretary and treasurer for the New York Central Railroad, and later secretary to the board of directors of the cemetery, for the grave of his wife, Emma Rathbone, who died at 31 of complications of childbirth. (Photo credit: Paula Lemire) Below: Paula Lemire, historian/media communications coordinator of Albany Rural Cemetery. (Photo credit: Michael Radlick)

Spreading the Good Word about Albany Rural Cemetery

When the movie “Ironweed,” starring Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep came out in 1987, Albany, New York, native Paula Lemire was intrigued by the local sites where it was filmed.

“Local history has always been important to me. One of the TV news stations showed the local locations where they filmed. They showed an angel in an opening scene from the Albany Rural Cemetery and I wanted to see this place,” Lemire said. “In an early scene in the movie, Jack Nicholson and Tom Waits are down and out during the Depression and get jobs as grave diggers. I was vaguely aware of the cemetery and that a president (Chester A. Arthur) was buried in it. But I had never been there before. I then always came back to visit the cemetery through high school and here I am now.”

Lemire has been the media communications coordinator and historian at the cemetery since 2017 in what she calls her “dream job.”

Albany Rural Cemetery is located in Menands, just north of Albany. Founded in 1841, it was one of the earliest rural cemeteries in the United States.

“I started coming here regularly with a friend from high school,” Lemire said. “I was exploring the cemetery for the most part. With 467 acres, there was something new to find every time. I started to research the history. Visually it is so appealing – the hills, ravines, monuments, fantastic statues and stained-glass windows. There is always something to learn, I never get bored here. I wanted to and still want to find the stories behind the stones.

“The angel I saw at the beginning of ‘Ironweed’ is called the ‘Angel at the Sepulchre’ which is my favorite,” she added. “This was the



monument I most wanted to see. When I now give tours, I always tell people that ‘This is the reason I’m here!’”

The “Angel at the Sepulchre” was commissioned by Robert Lenox Banks, a secretary and treasurer for the New York Central Railroad and, later secretary to the board of directors of the Albany Rural Cemetery, for the grave of his wife, Emma Rathbone, who died at 31 of complications of childbirth Dec. 4, 1866.



The tomb of President Chester A. Arthur was designed by sculptor Ephraim Keyser and was placed three years after Arthur's burial in 1886. (Photo credit: Paula Lemire)

“Mourning for his young wife, Banks approached sculptor Erastus Dow Palmer to create a memorial for a circular lot at the high point of the south ridge of the cemetery,” Lemire said. “Palmer accepted the commission and agreed that he would create no duplicates of the finished work.”

Always looking to learn more about the cemetery, Lemire, around 1992, found a 100-plus-year-old book in a local used bookstore. That book was Henry P. Phelps’ “The Albany Rural Cemetery: Its Beauties, Its Memories” published in 1893. “I spent my Christmas money one year on that book,” she said. “I still have it, though it fell apart pretty quickly.”

In 2017, Lemire approached the cemetery about being a historian. She was soon hired.

“I sent them a letter and broke down what they could do better as far as their history and highlighting the cemetery,” she said. “I started a

Facebook page as a hobby. I blogged about it and told them I could be of use to them. It was a hobby initially.

“I then got an email from them asking if we could meet and the rest is history,” she added. “They told me they were vaguely aware of my Facebook page. I told them that social media would be very useful for them. They had the occasional tour but there were more tours, more events they could be doing and they could get the message out about what they have here.”

The History

Speaking of history, the Albany Rural Cemetery is full of it. As the final resting place for about 135,000 people, it continues as an active cemetery for burial across its tree-lined hills and valleys. In addition to Arthur, the 21st president of the United States, interred there are 34 members of Congress, eight Cabinet members, five New York governors,

55 mayors of Albany, as well as many artists, architects, sculptors, writers and business people.

A few of the notables include: Gen. Phillip Schuyler, Revolutionary War hero, and father-in-law of Alexander Hamilton; Stephen Van Rensselaer III, founder of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute; William James, great-grandfather of novelist Henry James and the psychologist William James; Marcus T. Reynolds, an architect known for his bank designs and specifically his design of the Delaware and Hudson Railroad Co. building in downtown Albany; John Van Buren, son of President Martin Van Buren; and Erastus Dow Palmer, a world-renowned sculptor.

There’s also at least 1,030 Civil War soldiers and sailors buried there with the Cemetery Soldiers’ Lot being the final resting place of 149 soldiers who are specifically commemorated by the Grand Army of the Republic monument constructed in 1873.

“We get many visitors to see President Arthur’s grave,” Lemire said. “One person was recently here checking it off his list of visiting all the presidents’ graves. The Arthur monument was the work of sculptor Ephraim Keyser and was placed three years after Arthur’s burial in 1886. Visitors always ask if ‘Chet’ is buried inside the black granite sarcophagus, but he is actually buried beside his wife and her grave is the one marked by the white marble casket-like monument. We’re going to install and unveil a new interpretive sign for the Arthur lot soon.”

Another popular grave for visitors is Margaret Schuyler Van Rensselaer, known as “Peggy.”

“She’s the daughter of Gen. Schuyler, a major general in the Continental Army during the American Revolution, and she’s the sister-in-law of Alexander Hamilton,” Lemire said. “She’s portrayed as one of the supporting characters in the Broadway musical ‘Hamilton.’ Another notable buried here is a mentor to Susan B. Anthony – Lydia Mott, a Quaker from Long Island, who was a women’s rights activist. She influenced Susan B. Anthony to go from the temperance movement to women’s rights.”

New General Manager

David Eslinger became the general manager of Albany Rural Cemetery in July and shares Lemire’s enthusiasm for everything about the property. He started as the development director there in June 2020.

“I came here on a Sunday afternoon when I was first looking at the potential of having a position here,” Eslinger said. “I was impressed by the lay of the land, the sheer volume of the folks who were interred here and the architecture of the buildings. The landscape is absolutely beautiful.”

Prior to starting at Albany Rural Cemetery, Eslinger had no experience in the cemetery business. He had managed several of his own



Paula Lemire, left, historian/media communications coordinator, and David Eslinger, general manager, pose in front of the bronze cathedral-like monument of Erastus Corning (1794-1872) who was one of Albany’s most prominent citizens of the mid-19th century. (Photo credit: Michael Radlick)

companies and worked in the insurance and risk management business.

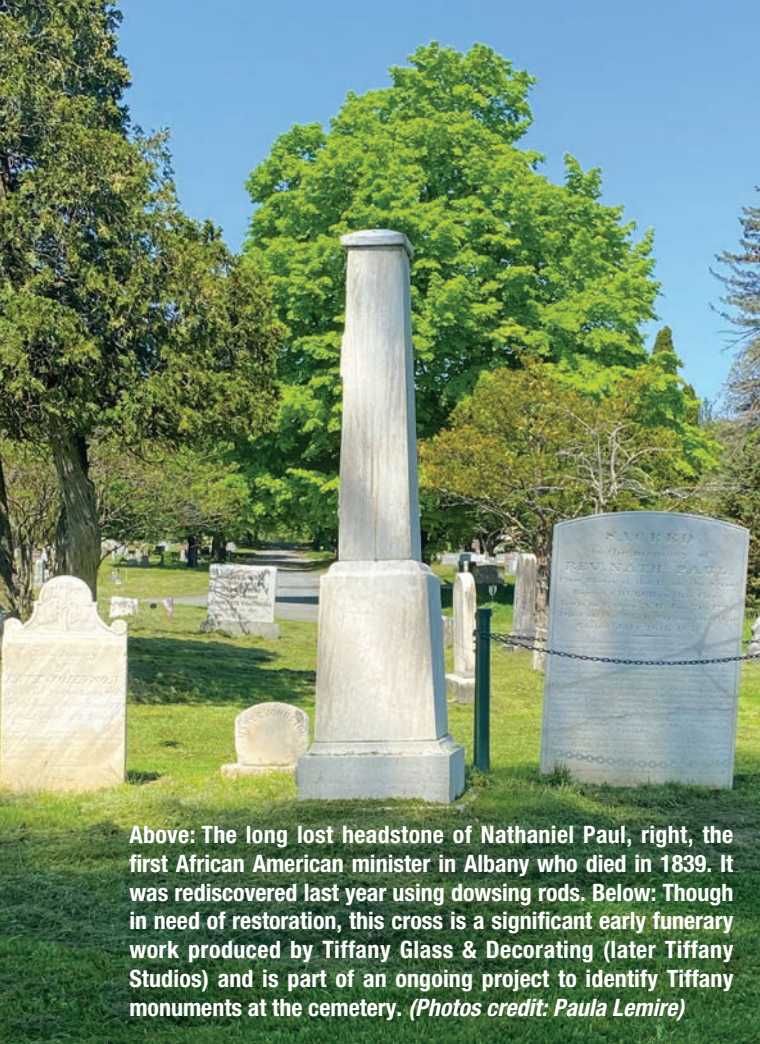
“My mother passed away in March of 2020, and ironically, the position ended up being somewhat therapeutic,” he said. “My life went from being a caregiver to being back in the workforce. The grieving process is unique and being alongside and working with the death-care environment largely helped me being in an area that I was not familiar with.”

“I thought it was an amazing cemetery and as I moved through the process to becoming GM, it was amazing to be in an environment with so much history,” he added. “Just the breadth of the type of folks here. You have a president here and even murderers. For me, it has been a big privilege to work here.”

“When David told me he was going to try for the GM job this summer, I was happy to hear that,” Lemire said. “I knew the cemetery would be in good hands with him. It’s one of the best things to happen to the cemetery in a long time. I admire his enthusiasm for the cemetery and no matter what idea I throw at him for projects he always says, ‘Let’s find a way to do this.’”

One of the areas Lemire excels at is promoting the cemetery via social media.

“One day someone said to me, ‘I think the cemetery has the potential to be one of the most significant historic places in the area’ and I have made that my goal,” she said. “The cemetery has been overlooked as a historic site for too long. There is so much history from the Colonial level to the present in one parcel of land.”



Above: The long lost headstone of Nathaniel Paul, right, the first African American minister in Albany who died in 1839. It was rediscovered last year using dowsing rods. Below: Though in need of restoration, this cross is a significant early funerary work produced by Tiffany Glass & Decorating (later Tiffany Studios) and is part of an ongoing project to identify Tiffany monuments at the cemetery. (Photos credit: Paula Lemire)



Lemire is a constant presence on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram promoting the history and events at Albany Rural Cemetery.

“We are very much on the same page for the engagement level of the cemetery,” Eslinger said. “Paula has a fantastic social media presence and following. One of the key things I insisted on was to have her more involved in these key areas. I told her that she needs to manage this, to determine what direction we take with most social media outlets. She has an incredible following and her statistics are great with the level of engagement she has.”

Events

On Aug. 28, Lemire hosted a sold-out walking tour and presentation exploring the varied examples of Tiffany monuments in the cemetery. While the name Tiffany may be associated with diamonds, stained-glass lamps and a small blue box, the same studio designed hundreds of ornate gravestones and monuments around the country. Lemire talked about her journey finding the many varied examples in the cemetery and those on the tour got to see the Tiffany windows in the cemetery chapel.

Other events are hosted by the Friends of the Albany Rural Cemetery. The group was formed to promote and perpetuate the beauty and rich history of the cemetery. There’s different contribution levels and membership fees are used to fund the various activities and programs integral to the Friends’ program. Members get a newsletter with articles and photo essays about historical people and events related to the cemetery, notice of activities, invitations to special events and access to a private Friends section of the website with publications and other resources.

On Sept. 12, the Friends hosted an “Ask The Historian and Cemetery Open House” event. It was a chance for attendees to ask questions about the cemetery’s history, the Civil War, monument cleaning, as well as general cemetery questions. Lemire discussed cemetery history; Eslinger focused on cemetery matters; Mark Bodnar, the Friends president, and Civil War expert Robert Mulligan spoke about the Civil War; and trustees Tyler Kattrein and Christopher White discussed monument cleaning and restoration.

“With the pandemic, we’ve been doing tours and events cautiously, but we are getting it back to normal,” Lemire said. “We’ve had a very good response and we want to keep that momentum going into the fall.”

Among the events scheduled are the annual wreath-laying at the grave of President Arthur in honor of his birthday Oct. 5; An Evening With A Psychic Medium Oct. 17 – local psychic-medium Michele Lyons Polito will talk about all things paranormal – and Oct. 23 will be the Haunted Halloween Twilight Walking Tour with Lemire followed by a presentation and light refreshments in the chapel.

“We are developing associations with like-minded organizations with similar goals in the area for tours and events,” Eslinger said. “We have partnered with the Albany Historical Foundation, Discover Albany and the Albany Institute of History and Art. Our goal is to set up programs to share some caveats like a famous painter who is buried here, a famous person in the community or as we did with identifying the monuments designed by Tiffany studios.”

A Tremendous Find

One of Lemire’s proudest moments came a year ago when she discovered the long-lost grave of Nathaniel Paul, a Black Baptist minister and abolitionist who worked in Albany. In 1820, Paul was the founding pastor of what would become the First African Baptist Church in Albany.

He was an outspoken abolitionist and gave a sermon about abolition and slavery to celebrate abolition in New York state in 1827 that is still read today. He was also one of the first managers of the Wilberforce Colony for Black immigrants in Ontario. Paul returned to Albany where he preached in the Baptist Church until his death in 1839.

He was buried in the State Street Burial Grounds in Albany, but his grave was later moved to Albany Rural along with about 14,000 others when the burial grounds were closed and emptied to make way for a park. Records indicated that Paul was relocated to a plot in Section 99.

In the early summer of 2020, Lemire went looking for Paul’s grave in Section 99 of the cemetery,

where there are graves of mostly Black individuals and families. His headstone was most likely tipped and buried for over 100 years.

“I knew he was buried here but couldn’t find a headstone. The records said he had a headstone,” Lemire said. “I went looking for it with dowsing rods and the rods kept crossing at the same spot. I kept hitting something and I could tell it was hard and flat like a gravestone.”

A few weeks later, Lemire returned to the spot with White, an acquaintance who owns Albany Grave Diggers, which offers services in genealogical research and restoration of gravesites, headstones and other features of cemeteries.

“As soon as Chris cut the turf with a spade and started to roll it back, the first thing I saw was ‘Sacred to the memory of,’ and I knew it had to be him,” Lemire said. “His name was literally right where my dowsing rods has crossed, and I had a silent scream of joy. His headstone was much larger than we expected and it was about seven inches down.

The marble headstone was restored and placed again in its proper spot last fall. “It looks magnificent now,” Lemire said. “Whenever I am up in that area of the cemetery, I see people visiting his grave.”

Moving Forward

Lemire and Eslinger, who call themselves “workaholics,” want to continue to get the word out about the cemetery and make visitors aware of all the Albany Rural Cemetery has to offer.

“We have a laundry list of things ahead. One of those is we are planning on a podcast,” Eslinger said. “We will have stories that are unique to the cemetery and have questions and answers. We will have interviews with funeral directors and walk you through the process from the perspective of the funeral directors in our area.

“We want Albany Rural to be a highly engaging organization,” he added. “We don’t have a ‘get off my lawn!’ policy. We want the place to be welcoming at the individual level and at the corporate level. We would like to bring the cemetery back to its heyday where families used it as a park. We are still burying people here, and we have a lot of land for interment. We want people to be involved and we use our grounds as a welcoming platform. We have hundreds of people every week who religiously walk through here.”

Lemire agrees. “We want to be welcoming and think outside the gate,” she said. “We want people to visit. We have maps available at our office and we are launching a new website soon.”

For Eslinger, there is no one better to spread the word about Albany Rural Cemetery than Lemire.

“Paula is like the Google for the cemetery, she is fantastic,” he said. “She does an incredible job. We are very fortunate to have a passionate individual who works countless hours. We both share that we’re workaholics and the things Paula provides, the insights, are great.”

For more information about Albany Rural Cemetery, visit www.albanyruralcemetery.org •