



Olmsted 200

Two Centuries and More History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township –
First Farmed in 1814 and Settled in 1815

Issue 101

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Cemetery Plot Could Be Olmsted's Spookiest Spot

October has been called the scariest month of the year. That's partly because it was the month of the great stock market crash of 1929 that began the Great Depression



Many people have been attracted to a quiet spot in the old Chestnut Grove Cemetery, where a witch's grave supposedly is located.

and another crash in 1987, when the market dropped 23 percent on one day. But it's mostly because of the day at the end of the month, Halloween – the day that celebrates ghosts, goblins, witches and other weirdness.

The scariest place in Olmsted, at least for some people, is a nondescript spot in the old Chestnut Grove Cemetery, also known as Turkeyfoot, near the bases of two trees. It is said to be the location of a witch's grave. Many lists of scary or haunted places in northeastern Ohio include it.

For example, a story titled "Cleveland's Creepiest Urban Legends" in the October 6, 2019, issue of *Scene*, gave this explanation for its background:

The most popular story is that a woman accused of witchcraft in the 1800s was hung from a large tree in the cemetery. Her body was then cut down and buried at the base of the tree. The creepiest version says that

the witch was dismembered after being executed, with her body buried in 13 small boxes around the tree.

An October 24, 2017, story called “Spookiest Places in Cleveland” on WOIO (Channel 19) television gave a similar account of the witch’s grave tale.

PANICd (panicd.com) the website of the Paranormal Activity Network Investigation Center Database, includes listing #1335 for what it calls “Witch’s Hill” at the old Chestnut Grove Cemetery. It gives more than one version of what could have made it a witch’s grave:



Without its former fence, the “witch’s grave” is hard to spot at one side of the cemetery.

The story, as widely circulated among various ghost websites by anonymous sources, goes something like this: A woman accused of witchcraft was executed and buried at this cemetery. The townsfolk did not erect a marker, but instead built an iron fence around her grave, which was next to an old tree. An indentation next to the tree inside the fence marks her grave. “Bad things” will happen to those who get close to her grave.

Another variation of the story has several witches executed and buried here, and their ghosts continue to haunt this area. That this location is sometimes referred to as a “hill” and not as a cemetery can be due to the fact that the cemetery itself sits on top of a ledge overlooking the Rocky River and connecting park below.

The Upper Midwest Ghost Society provides a more detailed, colorful version: the accused witch was hung from a tree and buried near the base of its trunk, in the very spot where her body was dropped from the noose. Nasty.

The writer of that entry visited the cemetery and decided it is not surprising that the cemetery is considered to be haunted:

It is surrounded by woods, the various old trees cast many shadows, and the layout itself is a bit unusual. We even found a skeleton of a large animal (raccoon? skunk?) on top of a grave that the groundskeeper somehow missed for some time. In the back portion of the cemetery, graves could be found deep in the woods and in a hidden hollow

down a steep hill, which then connects to a park hiking trail! It is also said “strange lights” can be seen at night in this part of the cemetery.

The “witch's grave” was very difficult to find. There is no longer a “fence that surrounds a tree,” where the grave is allegedly located. Quite by accident, we did find a tree at the edge of the cemetery surrounded by square stone blocks. Upon closer examination, those blocks contained metal spikes in the center, strongly suggesting that a fence once existed here.

The remains of the fence can be seen along the front and right sides of the tree. Also visible is a small indentation in front of the large tree trunk. Is this the site of an old, sunken grave?

PANICd says four claims of paranormal data are associated with the cemetery: an electronic voice phenomenon (sound found on an electronic recording interpreted as spirit voices), voices heard by the Bradford family monument, voices heard by the “Witches Circle,” and various orbs in pictures. However, the website also says no evidence to support those claims has been reported yet.

(Note: the site refers to the cemetery as being in Olmsted Falls, but it gives the address as 7789 Lewis Road, North Olmsted. Old Chestnut Grove Cemetery is located along Chestnut Grove Drive near Lewis Road, but the 7789 Lewis Road address is the location of the new Chestnut Grove Cemetery, where the administration building for both cemeteries is located. It is definitely not in North Olmsted.)



A series of square stones mark two sides of the boundary of what some people believe is the witch's grave at the side of Olmsted's old Chestnut Grove Cemetery.

These tales of the supernatural are interesting, but are they history? History is the study of the past. One definition of history says it is “a branch of knowledge that records and explains past events.” The stories of the witch's grave bear the form of explanations of a past event, but for an account to be considered history, it must be based on facts, and these stories are lacking in provable facts. For example, no version includes a name for the alleged witch, a date (other than the 1800s) for when the witch was executed, any account of why she was accused of being a witch or how she was found guilty. Other than these oft-repeated tales, no written records contain any hint that Olmsted ever had a

problem with a suspected witch, although many of the community's early settlers came from New England, which had a good share of witch trials.

Dan Hill, who served as superintendent of the cemetery for many years, said during a cemetery tour as part of Olmsted Heritage Days in 2007, "The whole idea of a witch in this area is a little bit farfetched." Nevertheless, he said he had some "very weird experiences" with the witch's grave.



This is Dan Hill, as he looked on August 19, 2007, while he led an Olmsted Heritage Days tour of the old Chestnut Grove Cemetery.

"One was some girls from Bay Village," Hill said. "I know they were from Bay Village because they were down here on a Sunday afternoon in a Beamer convertible, drinking wine, sitting over near the witch's grave, one of them walking backwards. I got to ask, right? 'What are you doing in the cemetery walking backwards on Sunday afternoon?' She says, 'Is it true you won't get pregnant from making love on the grave the night before?' I said, 'If you believe that, lady, go right ahead.'"

Those girls were just a few of the many people attracted to Chestnut Grove by the story of the witch's grave. Hill said the reason the iron fence that once went around the purported grave was removed was that too many people were attracted to it.

"The police said, take down the fence, so I took down the fence," he said. "They felt that everybody that was coming in looking for the fence knew that was where the witch's grave was, so they'd go there and do their little thing."

Hill said one reason for doubting that a witch was buried there is that the ground at a cemetery always is consecrated. "They would not bury an unholy person in a cemetery on consecrated ground, so there's a very good chance that could not be a witch," he said.

But as soon as Hill offered that explanation for why a witch could not have been buried at that spot, he followed it up with a possible loophole that might have made it possible. "If you look at the old cemetery drawings, that lot does not appear in the original cemetery drawings, so maybe it's outside the cemetery," he said. Thus, the reasoning goes, if that plot is technically outside of the official cemetery boundaries, the ground would not have been consecrated, so a witch could have been buried there. Hill didn't say he believed that was the case. Instead, he called it "a cute little story."

When he was asked how the spot came to be known as the witch's grave, Hill replied, "Well, the fence was around it, and kids just started the idea it must be a witch,

and they're trying to keep her in there. The question was asked how it was determined it was a witch. Children, in their infinite wisdom, their minds will start going. They come down here, and they see the fence around there. They automatically figure it must be a witch or something they're trying to enclose."



A closeup of one of the border stones on the edge of the purported witch's grave shows a spike, which is left from the fence that once surrounded the plot.

However, Hill said, it's not unusual to find such fences around certain graves.

"If you go to a lot of old cemeteries, they have fences around the graves – the family plot," he said. "There's one over at St. Mary's [cemetery] right on Bagley Road. They raised it up about a foot and a half and put a concrete wall around it.

Instead of fences, other families mark the boundaries of their plots with little icons or rounded stones around the edges, Hill said. Some are like that at Chestnut Grove.

The supposed witch's grave still has several stones marking its boundaries. The fence was attached to them. As the PANICd account above noted, what is left of the fence is just short metal spikes sticking out of the stones.

After Hill removed the fence, he said, many people looking for the witch's grave had trouble finding it, so they would "ramble through the whole place" trying to find it. Fortunately, he said, the cemetery was not subjected to much vandalism.

Thus, facts that would corroborate the stories about a witch's grave are lacking, but it is a fact that many people come searching for the witch's grave, and that itself is part of Olmsted's history.

Other Olmsted locations have their own creepy tales.

Although Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township don't have a scary reputation, a small number of places have spooky tales associated with them. For example, the railroad tracks were the scenes of many deaths, often of inebriated people, who walked on the tracks and, for some reason, didn't get out of the way of trains.

"A train killed a 73-year-old German man named George Miller who came out of an Olmsted Falls saloon apparently intoxicated and decided to walk along the tracks to Toledo," Berea's *Grindstone City Advertiser* reported in its Olmsted Falls column on September 5, 1873. "He went only a short distance before a train hit him."



The railroad tracks near the depot and downtown Olmsted Falls were the scene of many deaths.

That and other deaths occurred along what was then the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railway tracks near downtown Olmsted Falls. Others occurred along the tracks that ran through West View. In 1871, the tracks were owned by the Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati and Indianapolis Railroad, when quarry worker Thomas Cody, who had been drinking, was hit and killed by a train. His wife, also drunk, was found asleep nearby. Their young son was left on his own at the scene.

But not all deaths along the tracks could be attributed to the effects of alcohol.

For example, in 1886, the newspaper reported on the death of a child, Pearl Osborn, who was crossing the tracks after leaving her father's store in Olmsted Falls when she was hit by a handcar operated at full speed by railroad workers. In 1899, the paper ran an item about 71-year-old Susan Pettit who was returning home along the tracks after visiting friends in Olmsted Falls when she became confused as a train approached. It hit her, threw her about 60 feet, cut off her left foot, broke one arm, cut the back of her head and killed her.

More on those and other accidental railroad deaths can be found in Issue 89 of *Olmsted 200* from October 2020.

Murder also occurred along the LS&MS tracks near the Olmsted Falls depot on the night of July 14, 1910. A group of railroad workers were encamped there in train cars. The weather was hot and humid, so three laborers seeking fresher air went outside to sleep on the cool ground. Not long after they fell asleep, they were awakened by several men, one of whom announced, "This is a holdup. Where is your money?" When Charles Brunner said he had no money, he and his companions were shot. Other workers poured out of the train cars they had been sleeping in, but the robbers escaped. The wounded men were sent by train to St. Luke's Hospital, but Brunner died along the way. The full story of that event can be found in Issue 90 of *Olmsted 200* from November 2020.

Another location associated with two murders is the Grand Pacific Hotel, although neither murder occurred there. One of the victims was Thomas Brown, the hotel's proprietor, who served one year as the first mayor of Olmsted Falls beginning in 1856. Years after his term as mayor, he disappeared while on a trip to Cleveland to deposit money in a bank. Neither his family nor anyone else knew what happened to him, but a few years later, a skeleton with a bullet in its head was found in a place known as Devil's Hole or Devil's Gulch a short distance north of Olmsted Falls, so it was assumed Brown had been robbed and murdered, and his body was thrown into the gulch. More on Brown can be found in Issue 22 of *Olmsted 200* from March 2015. (Note: David Kennedy, who often contributes research to *Olmsted 200*, is not convinced that Brown

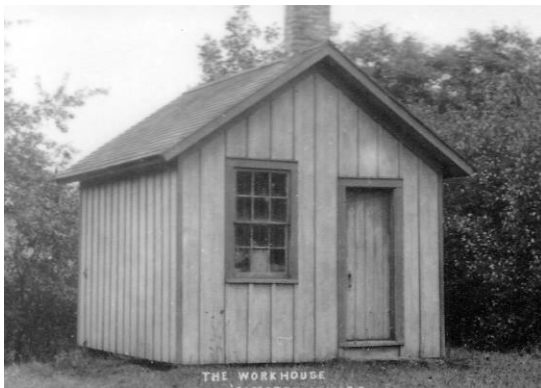
died while traveling to Cleveland, but his investigation into what happened to Brown is incomplete.)



Thomas Brown, an early proprietor of the Grand Pacific Hotel (left), is believed to have been a murder victim. A hotel room, perhaps the one above, once was used to display another murder victim, Rosa Colvin.

The other murder that had a connection to the hotel was the subject of one of the most sensational crimes in northeastern Ohio shortly after the Civil War. Rosa Colvin was murdered with an ax to her head in her home a few miles southwest of Olmsted Falls on March 24, 1866. Her body soon was put on display in one room of the hotel. The two men initially and incorrectly charged with the murder – her husband and a friend – were held in another room of the hotel until they were transferred to the county jail in

Cleveland. The story of Colvin's murder and the trial and execution of the convicted murderer can be found in Issue 94 of *Olmsted 200* from March 2021.



A strange man who asked to be held in the old Olmsted Falls jail ended his life there in 1882.

Another building now in Grand Pacific Junction that once held a dead body is the old jail. In 1882, "a strange-acting man" named Patrick Falen came to town on a Monday evening after getting drunk in Cleveland. He claimed someone was chasing him and asked for the protection of being locked up in the jail. When Mayor Luther Barnum arrived that Tuesday morning to release him, he found the man's lifeless

body suspended from a lattice in front of the cell with a towel around his neck. That story and more about the jail can be found in Issue 29 of *Olmsted 200* from October 2015.

One other scene of death is the now-placid David Fortier River Park in Olmsted Falls. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, it was the location of dangerous sandstone quarries. One casualty there was a six-year-old boy, whose last name was Welch. In June 1871, he made the mistake of playing along the railroad spur that was used to haul sandstone blocks and grindstones out of the quarries. The boy loosened a brake holding railroad cars. When they started moving downhill, he became frightened, fell between the cars and was crushed fatally. The full story ran earlier this year in Issue 97 of *Olmsted 200* from June.



These grindstones, now covered with moss, in David Fortier River Park apparently were left after they fell from a train on a railroad spur from the old quarries. In 1871, a boy who also fell from a train car was killed.

Olmsted might have other locations associated with gruesome events, but the places above offer a good start for anyone wanting a haunted Halloween.

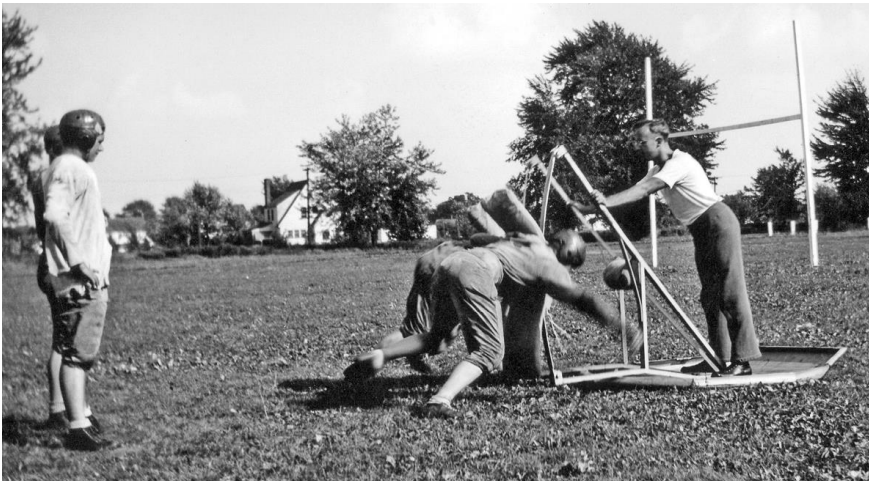
Photos Show Glimpse into Olmsted's Century of Football

Last month's issue of *Olmsted 200* included a story about the inauguration of the Olmsted Falls High School football field half a century ago in 1971. That might also very well have marked half a century of Olmsted football. It's not clear when the first football game was played in Olmsted Falls, but Walter Holzworth, in his 1966 book of Olmsted history, wrote that the first publicized report of a football game in Olmsted Falls occurred a century ago in 1921.



Mike Gibson's father, Bill Gibson, #75, stands at the center of this early 1940s photo of Olmsted Falls High School football players. All photos in this story are courtesy of Mike Gibson.

No photos of football games or the football field from that time are known to exist, but Mike Gibson, a former Olmsted resident now living in Oregon, has pulled some photos of early 1940s Olmsted football out of his family's collection to share with readers. His father, Bill Gibson, played for the Olmsted Falls High School football team from 1939 through 1942 before he graduated in 1943.



These photos show Olmsted Falls High School football players in the early 1940s in various stages of practice. The one on the lower left also seems to show houses along Division Street (now Mapleway Drive).

“Family legend says that this team was undefeated for four years,” Mike Gibson wrote in an email.

Although a few of the photos were taken at an unidentified location, the others were taken at the old Olmsted Falls football field along Mapleway Drive (then called Division Street) that was replaced 50 years ago by the current football field.

“I spent hundreds of times on that field myself with track practice, football practice (one year, 1961 – rough sport for a skinny kid!) and marching band practice,” Gibson wrote. “I remember a BBQ at our house at 8278 Mapleway that was a celebration

of the success of the 1959 team. I believe that both members of the 1940s teams and the 1959 team attended.”



Also included with the football photos are these of cheerleaders. The one on the left is dated “Fall 1942.”

In addition to the 1940s photos, Gibson sent one taken by his grandfather from May 1, 1958, showing the old press box that stood at the former football field along Mapleway Drive.



This 1958 photo captured not only a young Mike Gibson (center) with friends Ken Nickels and Wes Ferris but also the press box that stood at that time by the old football field for Olmsted Falls High School. Notice that it is not connected to any spectator stands. Perhaps they did not stay up year-round.

“The three 10-year-old kids in the photo are Ken Nickels (son of Francis Nickels), Mike Gibson, and Wes Ferris,” he wrote. “I believe we were out on that field as some sort of spring elementary school field day. Can’t be sure.”

As Gibson’s photos demonstrate, people’s old family pictures can be useful historical records of the way Olmsted looked in the past. Anyone with similar photos is welcome to share them with *Olmsted 200*.

Thanks go to Mike Gibson for keeping Olmsted 200 and its readers in mind when he digs through his family’s photos.

Depot Started Showing Its True Colors 25 Years Ago

A quarter-century ago, an Olmsted Falls landmark, the depot on Garfield Avenue, began showing a fresh face to the world. Joanne Berger DuMound called it a “pleasant surprise” in her Olmsted Dates and Data column in the October 17, 1996, issue of the *News Sun*.

“The depot has a new hunter green/gray façade to it, which really perks up the area,” she wrote. Members of the Cuyahoga Valley and West Shore Model Railroad Club got credit for choosing an excellent color combination, which member Ron Morgan of Berea told DuMound was close to the depot’s original shade.



That year, 1996, also was when the model railroad club bought the building after leasing it from Conrail since 1977 to house the club’s extensive displays of model trains and railroad memorabilia.

This is the way the depot in Olmsted Falls looks these days. It was built in 1876.

Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will include a story about a man who started his life in Olmsted Falls and went on to found a world-famous company that created many over-the-counter medications familiar throughout America.

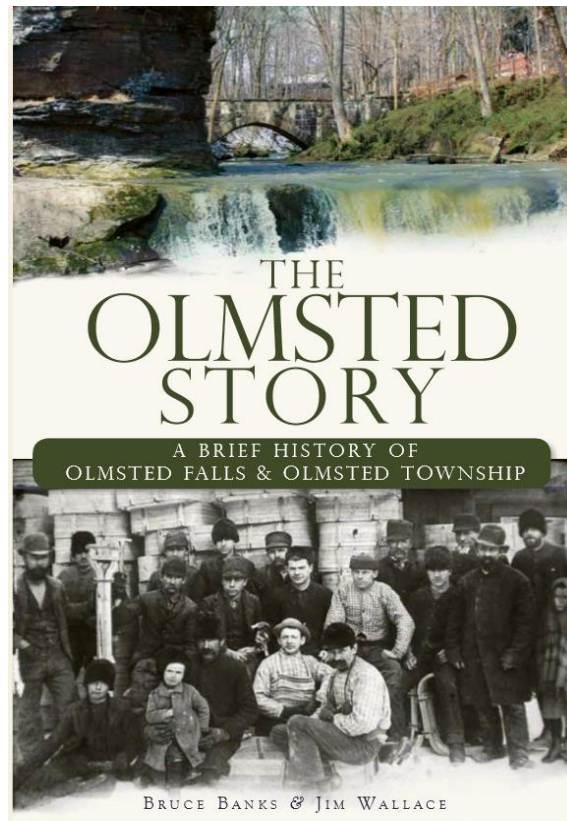
If you know of other people who would like to receive *Olmsted 200* by email, please feel free to forward it to them. They can get on the distribution list by sending a request to: wallacestar@hotmail.com. *Olmsted 200* has readers in several states beyond Ohio, including California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Michigan, Wisconsin, New York, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Maine, as well as overseas in the Netherlands, Germany and Japan.

Your questions and comments about *Olmsted 200* are welcome. Perhaps there is something about Olmsted’s history that you would like to have pulled out of *Olmsted 200*’s extensive archives. Or perhaps you have information or photos about the community’s history that you would like to share.

If you have missed any of the past issues of *Olmsted 200* or want to share them with someone else, all of them can be found on Olmsted Township's website. Go to <http://olmstedtownship.org/newsletters/>. A list of *Olmsted 200* issues is on the right side. Click on the number of the issue you want to read. All of the issues of *Olmsted 200* also are available on the website of the City of Olmsted Falls. Find them at: http://www.olmstedfalls.org/olmsted_falls_history/index.php. A link to *Olmsted 200* can be found on the left side of the page.

Except where otherwise noted, all articles in *Olmsted 200* are written by Jim Wallace. Thanks go to Mary Louise King for help in proofreading and editing many issues. Thanks also go to David Kennedy for frequently contributing research and insight for some stories. Written contributions and photos, as well as comments and questions about items in this newsletter, will be considered for publication. Send any correspondence by email to: wallacestar@hotmail.com.

Olmsted 200 is written, researched and edited by Jim Wallace, who is solely responsible for its content. He is co-author (with Bruce Banks) of ***The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township***, published in 2010 by The History Press of Charleston, S.C. ***The Olmsted Story*** is available at Angelina's Pizza in Olmsted Falls and the Berea Historical Society's Mahler Museum & History Center and through online booksellers.



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