Unmarked / Unidentified Graves

Occasionally, during the conversations held as part of our research, someone would recall to us that there were “about 20” burials at Ahavas Achim. One recollection was quite specific: 17. Yet evidence existed to suggest only eight.

A small stone, 8”x2”, with only 3 inches visible above ground, had been photographed early in the project and disregarded as merely a plot marker. This small stone suddenly took on new significance when two taller, yet similar, stones were noticed just outside of the rightmost fence boundary.



Figure 5: Unknown burial #68.

The two stones, like the one shown in the photo at right, bear only an inscribed number. Only the tops of the digits “6” and “8” can be seen etched into this small stone without digging an inch or so into the soil. The two taller stones are inscribed with the numbers 152 and 158. The numbers are etched into the surface of the stone facing away from the road, which is the orientation of the face inscriptions on the known grave markers.



Figure 6: Numbered stones stacked in the corner of the Ahavas Achim cemetery

In the corner of the cemetery is a stack of stones, the significance of which had not been immediately recognized. It now became apparent that these stones were, in fact, identical to the two taller stones. It was further recognized that the small stone pictured above was actually the top of one of those numbered stones, the full length of which is almost two feet. It turns out that most of the stones in the stack are numbered, as well. The ones that are not numbered appear to be the lower fragments of the numbered stones.

Perhaps more importantly, it has been shown that the three *in situ* stones – the small one and the two taller ones – are roughly placed along a straight line, fairly equidistant from the wall at the front of the cemetery, ranging from 12 to 14 feet from the wall. If we can assume that all three are near their original locations, this suggests that the stacked stones may actually be grave markers, and that they may have, at one time, been in that same line as the three *in situ* stones. If that is the case, then there could be at least 18 burials at Ahavas Achim – 10 of which would have been marked with these austere, numbered, “slab” stones.



Figure 7: “Slab” stones, Kesher Israel Cemetery, Port Vue

Similar stones can be found in the Kesher Israel Cemetery in Port Vue. Most of the Port Vue “slab” stones are *in situ*, and arranged in a row as one would expect to see grave markers. On that evidence, we conclude that the numbered stones at Ahavas Achim did, at one time, mark the locations of burials. The slab stones found at Ahavas Achim are inscribed with the

following numbers: 62, 68, 73, 75, 79, 92, 119, 122, 152, and 158. Of those, only stones numbered 68, 152, and 158 are believed to be *in situ* as of this writing, though it is expected that the lower portions of the fallen stones may still be in place below ground.

Although the *in situ* stones provide only three data points, the order of the numbers suggests a chronological layout, with the older (lower-numbered) burials near the northern boundary. One is left with impression that these burials were done in haste, with no time allotted for a full inscription.



Figure 8: Unknown burials #152 (left) and #158 (right)

Who were the people that were buried in such a manner? Were they paupers? Were they children? Were these stones only temporary until the permanent stone could be erected? A number of theories were considered. One long-time resident of the area recalled being told that there were "children who died in the epidemic" buried at Ahavas Achim. This was echoed by another person in a separate conversation.

If we are to take those two recollections at face value, and if we presume that the Port Vue and Ahavas Achim stones were placed around the same time, then the question becomes, "which epidemic?" Much of southwestern Pennsylvania was beset by smallpox in 1904 and was besieged by the H1N1 "Spanish" flu in 1918. Within the context of epidemics, it is important to note that the land for the Kesher Israel Cemetery in Port Vue was purchased in 1907[233], three years after the smallpox eruption.

There was also a period of time, from 1909 into 1911, during which scarlet fever reached near-epidemic levels of infection in McKeesport. A review of articles published in that era, though, reveals that measles was responsible for significantly more deaths in those years than scarlet fever. Typhoid fever, diphtheria, and other contagious diseases were a factor as well.

These findings suggest that the influenza epidemic is the more likely reason behind what appears to have been a series of hasty burials.

[233] Jewish Cemetery and Burial Association. https://jcbapgh.org/cemetery-history/