Western Pennsylvania boasts numerous early cemeteries such as Rehobeth Cemetery at Rehobeth Presbyterian Church, near Belle Vernon. Many late 18th- and early 19th-century gravestones were carved with trumpeting angels, urns, weeping willows, and other symbols of death, sorrow, and resurrection.
Several years ago, we presented a lecture in Ligonier on the renowned 19th-century artists of the Wall Family: William Coventry Wall, Alfred S. Wall, and A. Bryan Wall. We were to give another lecture the next day in Mount Pleasant, 20 miles away. Why not drive there — the one-time home of the Walls — and look around for evidence of the family? And so on Braddock Road, a narrow, winding two-lane, we caught a glimpse of a cemetery.

The entrance to Mount Pleasant Cemetery, flanked by stone piers topped by cast zinc figures, is at the base of a hill. We ascended the drive, then, deserting our car, wandered in opposite directions looking at gravestones. It was windy and brisk, and neither of us had dressed for it. After 15 minutes, we were ready to leave when Frank saw the most beautifully carved gravestone he had ever seen. It was tall and made of fine-grained sandstone. The carving was deep, and the Gothic detail masterfully executed.

It had been carved to commemorate the life and death of Clement Burleigh, Esq., who died in 1822. Arcane symbols of Free-masonry were prominent amidst bold tracery, quatrefoils, and trefoils. This work, perhaps commissioned by fellow lodge members, was anything but conventional. The lettering, so graceful and elegant, was perfect! And in this rare instance, the carver inscribed his name in the stone.

It read "Wall."

Until that discovery, the little information then known about the Wall family indicated that they had lived in Mount Pleasant in the 1820s.¹ Now we even had evidence carved in stone. Not only is the Wall name as large as the name of the deceased, but there is a great flourish to the "W" — an incised arc rising from the last upstroke and sweeping over the subsequent ones, curving around and beneath the final "l." We never imagined finding any work by William Wall, let alone in a cemetery, but we knew that the Burleigh stone must be his.
Local tax records listed his trade as that of a carver, gilder, and stonecutter. We also knew that he emigrated from Oxford, England, which was full of Gothic ornamentation of the type displayed on Mr. Burleigh’s stone.

At the time, our primary interest was in William Wall’s progeny. We were doing research for an exhibit at The Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art — “Wall to Wall to Wall” — that showcased paintings by his sons William Coventry Wall and Alfred S. Wall, and his grandson A. Bryan Wall. So the discovery of William Wall’s stone for Clement Burleigh, while wonderful, did not add to our project at hand. Mainly, we could now infer that the father’s artistic talent influenced his sons.

However, the discovery did lead us to new questions: What was the senior Wall’s artistic training, if any? Did examples of his work exist anywhere else in the United States or in his native England? Why did he take his family from the academic environment of Oxford to rural Western Pennsylvania?

Gary’s decade of research into the family led him to believe that other William Wall gravestones must exist in the area. Soon, he found more at Middle Presbyterian Cemetery, just a few miles from Mount Pleasant. The finest example is a large horizontal tablet covering the grave of the Rev. Dr. James Powers. This and smaller vertical stones convinced us that William Wall deserved to be brought out of the shadows which his descendants and their paintings cast over him. This led not only to more examples of William Wall’s work, but to the work of many local contemporaries.

**SANDSTONE AND CARVERS**

There are those who equate folk art with the crudely executed work of an untutored hand. Some of the Westmoreland County stones indeed fit the bill, what with badly spaced lines and attempts to correct mistakes by re-carving over errors. Perhaps they were cut by family members or inexpensive, inexperienced carvers? Such stones can be found in the Mt. Zion Cemetery in East Huntingdon Township, one of which was made for a woman whose name may have been
Elisabeth Burcheimer (d. 1804). While her first name is legible, the lack of quality of the stone and lack of carving skill render her surname a bit of a puzzle.

Then there are stones at a skill level a step above the crudely executed ones. These share certain features, notably the spare outline of a plant above plainly lettered text which frequently contains spelling errors and shows a lack of refinement in spacing. Such a stone is that made for Henry Suter (d. 1827), buried in Mt. Zion Cemetery.

Finally, there are stones obviously cut by professional carvers, some who signed their work and others who remain anonymous. Some information can be gleaned from research of tax records, census reports, and newspapers, but no diaries, ledgers, or contemporary descriptions of their work have surfaced, leaving us to guess at their methods, materials, and manner of work.

Sandstone was quarried in the Westmoreland County during the 19th century and was easily obtainable. The presence of local houses built of sandstone in the early 19th century attests to that. But where were the quarries of the fine- to medium-grain stone used for gravemarkers? Also unknown is whether the carvers all began with rough slabs direct from the quarry, or purchased shaped blanks from intermediary carvers. Or perhaps apprentices did this basic work?

The tools used locally probably had not changed much from those used in medieval Europe to build the great cathedrals. And while we have some understanding of lettercutting by way of a small number of traditional carvers today, we still don’t know the specific ways in which the Westmoreland County carvers worked. Was it common to lay out a design on paper and then transfer it to stone? If so, were the designs and letters laid out in chalk, or scribing, or some other method? As for the lettering itself, did carvers refer to alphabet stylebooks or did they have other sources?

At least some names of carvers have come to light. Local cemetery authority (and invaluable resource) Bill Plack has found stones by Daniel Baughman in St. John’s Cemetery, J.H.L. Larkin in Sewickley United Presbyterian Church Cemetery, and James Gemmell and A.M. Craven in Sewickley Presbyterian Church Cemetery. As to the last two carvers, we know that they were respectively from Adamsburg and Robbstown (now West Newton) because they identified their towns when they signed their work.

The most ostentatious example of signed work by a gravestone carver is in Rehoboth Cemetery, Rostraver Township. The stone for David McClelland (d. 1826), was made by William Nash, whose name appears almost as an advertisement. The bottom third of the stone displays a rectangular panel flanked by a pair of fluted, flat columns. Within the rectangle is an oval that contains the following in Roman capital letters: “William Nash, Sculptor, Robbstown, Pennsylvania.”

The fact that William Nash called himself a sculptor, as did a number of other gravestone carvers, may indicate that he practiced stonework for purposes other than just gravestones. This is borne out in an 1824 Westmoreland Republican newspaper in which Nash announced the commencement of his business in what is now West Newton. The notice, under the heading “Stone Cutting,” notes that Nash “will attend to it in all its various branches and engage to execute his work in the most satisfactory manner and with the greatest despatch.”

**URNS AND SKULLS**

P. McKenna also placed a notice for the commencement of his business at Randolph, several miles east of Greensburg. An 1833 issue of the Pennsylvania Argus carried an...
announcement of his ability to make "grave stones, plain and ornamented."7 McKenna indeed produced a very fine stone for David Hunter (d. 1828) in Middle Presbyterian Cemetery. An urn is the central feature at the top, with a heavy drape flanking it and passing through rings on either side. Not far from the Hunter stone is an unsigned stone for John Niccolls (d. 1831) which also features an urn and drapery through rings.

The common traits of the Hunter and Niccolls stones leads one to consider that both stones were made by McKenna, but the Niccolls stone has more in common with a signed stone in Rehoboth Cemetery. That stone also displays the urn and drapery, but is for an Alvira Niccolls (d. 1832) and is signed by A. [M.] Craven. The shared surname and similar style may be a more logical connection to the unsigned Niccolls stone.

A stone in Rehoboth Cemetery for Abner Reeves (d. 1828) also features the urn and drapery motif but is by yet another carver, William Savage. An adjacent stone for Hannah Reeves (d. 1820) is unsigned, yet is practically identical. The similarities between them all give rise to the question of whether there was a connection between carvers Craven, McKenna, and Savage.

The urn is perhaps the most common symbol found on the Westmoreland County stones, but there is also a strong accompanying vegetative theme. A good example is the unsigned stone for Polley Fell in Fells Cemetery, which displays a large urn with a body composed entirely of leaves. Also prominent on this stone are flowers, leaves, and stalks carved in high relief — all found in different forms on the Niccolls and Reeves stones.

While urns and leaves and flowers are common themes for Westmoreland County stones, there are also some examples of death and mourning symbolism. A trio of stones for members of the Tarr family in the Mt. Zion Cemetery were carved with very prominent skulls and crossbones (though most of the features have been chiseled off). Another common symbol is the weeping willow; an unusual elongated version appears in the Middle Presbyterian Church Cemetery on a stone for John Hunter, while a very elegant version appears in Mt. Zion Cemetery on the stone for Jemima Null, carved by William Wall.

Thus we come back to William Wall, who inspired this journey with the stunning beauty of his artistry and workmanship in Mount Pleasant Cemetery. Since that windy day of discovery, many more examples of his work have been found in Westmoreland County cemeteries, and one just over the line in Fayette County.

William Wall died at the age of 90 in 1857 at his home on Rebecca Street in Allegheny City,8 far from the majestic spires of Oxford and the bucolic charm of Mount Pleasant. Rather, he died in an urban area then known for its "dark, satanic mills," to borrow a phrase from fellow Englishman and contemporary William Blake. And in Lawrenceville’s Allegheny Cemetery, the grave of the man who made works of art to memorialize others, has no such work of art to mark his own.

Frank J. Kurtik, is a historian and scholar of early Western Pennsylvania. Gary Grimes is a scholar and lecturer on the history of 19th-century art in Pittsburgh, and has been researching the Wall family since 1981. They are overseeing the grave-stone carving component of the History Center’s folk art exhibit.

2 Tax Records, Mount Pleasant Township, 1826; Tax Records, Mount Pleasant Borough, 1833. Photocopies of both are at Westmoreland County Historical Society.
6 Westmoreland Republican, March 19, 1824.
7 Pennsylvania Argus, June 7, 1833.
8 Pittsburgh Dispatch, April 16, 1857. This newspaper listed William Wall’s age at his death as 88, while it was stated as 90 in Betty Jane McWilliams’, The Four Walls, The Lives and Work of a family of Western Pennsylvania Artists (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Art Gallery, 2001) 7.