

Where is Joseph Priestley buried?¹

By Tom Bresenhan, Friends of Joseph Priestley House

Friends Burial Ground (“The Quaker Green”)

Visitors to the Joseph Priestley House often ask, “Where is Priestley buried?” The answer is – he was buried in two places in Northumberland, the Friends Burial Ground and Riverview Cemetery. Let’s begin with an eye witness to his burial. Rev. William Christie’s funeral sermon delivered at the gravesite states, “The Rev. Joseph Priestley, LL.D.F.R.S who died here on Monday February 6, 1804, ... was interred on Thursday, February 9, in an enclosure called the Friends Burial Ground... The severity of the cold hindered many ladies from attending the funeral, but there was a pretty numerous concourse of respectable citizens.”²

The development of the burial ground began in 1772, when John Lowden and William Patterson, having received four tracts of land from Thomas Penn, one of the heirs of William Penn, laid out the town of Northumberland. By 1774, there was an extensive tax list of newly arrived landholders, and Reuben Haines, a wealthy Quaker from Germantown, secured a patent to develop the land surrounding that of Lowden and Patterson. Eventually, Haines purchased all the landholdings. He developed the town around a common green, in the manner of an English village. Haines assigned lots to the major churches. The Society of Friends, or Quakers, were given the lot on Second Street between Queen and Wheatley Avenue. Part of the lot was set aside as a burial ground. This land gradually became known as “The Quaker Green.” Today a remnant of the burial ground exists containing two flat markers, one for Joseph Nourse and his infant son and daughter and the other for Josiah Haines (1764-1795), son of Reuben Haines.



Remnant of the Friends Burial Ground, near the corner of 2nd St. and Wheatley Ave, Northumberland, PA.

At the time of Priestley’s death two members of his immediate family were already buried in Quaker Green. In 1795 his youngest son, Henry (Harry) Priestley, sickened and died and nine months later his wife Mary Priestley died. Priestley himself conducted both funeral services.

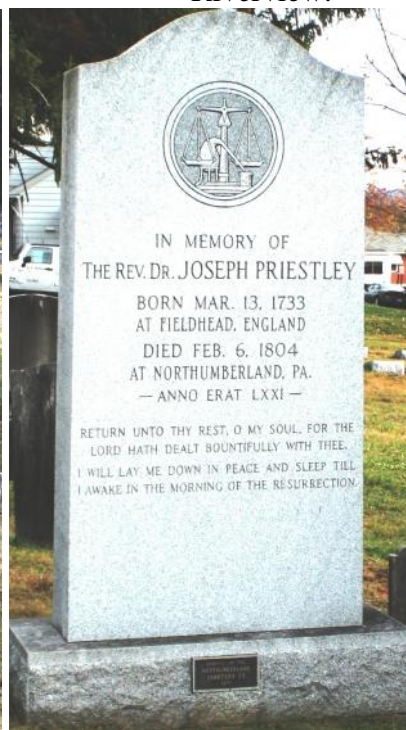
Their graves were visited by John Finch, son of Dr. Priestley’s daughter Sarah Priestley Finch. He visited Priestley’s house noting that the laboratory, “is now converted into a house for garden tools! the furnaces pulled down! the floor covered with Indian corn!” and that his grandfather’s grave, “is in the environs of the town, surrounded by a low wall.”³

Riverview Cemetery

The Northumberland Cemetery Company was formed in 1853, with Joseph Rayner Priestley, grandson of Dr. Priestley, as its first president. The company developed land at Seventh Street between Orange and Prince Street as a burial ground now known as the Riverview Cemetery. There is no record of exactly when it happened but Joseph, Mary and Henry Priestley were disinterred from the Friends Burial Ground and reburied in the Priestley plot at Riverview Cemetery. Over the years Priestley descendants and spouses were buried at Riverview.



(Side view)



(Front view)

In 1971 the Northumberland Cemetery Co. placed a large monument in front of the tombstone of Dr. Priestley.

Sources

¹ This article is drawn largely from the research notes of Brooke Dearman, staff member at the Joseph Priestley House, compiled November 2008.

² Christie, William, *Speech Delivered at the Grave of Rev. Dr. Joseph Priestley*, (Northumberland: Andrew Kennedy, 1804).

³ Finch, John, *Travels in the U.S. and Canada*, (London: 1833).

⁴ Toulmin, Priestley, “*The Descendants of Joseph Priestley, LLD, FRS (A Progress Report)*,” in *Proceedings* Vol. XXXII, Northumberland County Historical Society, Sunbury, PA 1994.



Priestley’s in Riverview Cemetery⁴

Listing of descendants and spouses buried in Riverview Cemetery (in order of year of death)

- Henry Priestley (1777-1795)
- Mary Wilkinson Priestley (1742-1796)
- Joseph Priestley L.L.D., FRS (1733-1804)
- Jane Biddle Priestley (1818-1831)
- Marianne Priestley (1831-1832)
- Lindsey Priestley (1827-1849)
- Joseph Rayner Priestley (1849-1851)
- Sarah Anne Priestley (1836-1852)
- Joseph Priestley (1856-1858)
- Joseph Rayner Priestley (1793-1863)
- Major Harry Toulmin (1813-1870)
- Lindsey Priestley (1850-1875)
- Frances Dundas Biddle Priestley (1798-1878)
- Joseph Priestley MD (1819-1883)
- Hannah Huston Taggart Priestley (1825-1894)
- Frances Biddle Priestley Toulmin (1829-1916)
- Jane Biddle Priestley (1862-1919)
- Sarah Anne Priestley (1856-1922)
- Elizabeth Lyon Priestley (1848-1929)
- Frances Housel Priestley (1849-1938)