LEIGHTON BRIDGE & IRON WORKS

by Lily Carhart

If you walk deep into Mt. Hope Cemetery and find yourself wandering up Glen Avenue, you will reach a crossroads at which you are confronted by a large, ornately decorated gravestone, grandly sitting high above you on what is called Patriots’ Hill. You have reached Section B, Lot 10. The substantial, rounded, gravestone is considerably larger and clearly more prominent than any of the nearby gravesites. Looking closer, you will see that the large stone, with an imposing cross on its face, is the gravemarker of Thomas and Kate Leighton and is surrounded by seven smaller rectangular markers designating members of his family.

During the 1860s and 1870s, Thomas Leighton was an extremely prominent contractor and bridge builder, who founded and owned Leighton Bridge & Iron Works and built over 100 bridges throughout the country, including many around Rochester, though none of these survive. He was active in the community as a member of boards and committees. Leighton’s prominence in the city gives us information about his social and professional life, while the gravestone gives us further insight into his family.

On February 2, 1886, Thomas Leighton, the prominent international bridge builder died, after being “weakened by the continued inroads of disease”, especially asthma and recurring bouts of malaria. He was born on March 8, 1818 in Augusta, Maine and remained there to receive his education. As a young boy, he was apprenticed to a carpenter, from whom he learned the fundamentals of
bridge building. Not much is known about his life until he moved to Rochester, New York in 1854. However, we do know that he spent time, most likely in the early 1850s, in Panama working on the Panama Railroad, building railroad bridges. In 1854, Leighton moved to Rochester with his wife Kate, and according to the 1859 City Directory, the couple settled at 19 Main Street.

Between 1854, when the Leightons moved to Rochester, and 1866, Thomas and Kate had four children—Tommy, Fred, David, and William—the first three of whom died in 1864 from dysentery. According to the City Directory, Thomas Leighton, and his associate John Fowler worked at the corner of Main Street and St. Paul Street, while he still maintained his other property on Main Street. In 1868, however, the Leightons moved farther down Main Street to No. 202.

In 1869 Leighton bought property on North Clinton Avenue, and he and his family moved in the next year and remained there until 1876, when he bought property on East Avenue where his family remained until Kate’s death. In the 1870s, East Avenue was becoming the most prestigious residential area, and home to more successful and affluent residents.

By 1876, Leighton had built his bridge-building company into a thriving business, and he and his family had become quite wealthy. Despite the depression in the 1870s, Thomas Leighton built an addition to his newly acquired mansion, which made it the largest mansion on the avenue in 1876. In addition to his business interests, Leighton also served as president of City Bank of Rochester around 1876.

When Thomas Leighton first arrived in Rochester in 1854, he was not yet the prominent and wealthy bridge builder who could build the largest mansion on East Avenue. Upon his arrival, he partnered with a man named John Fowler and created a bridge-building company that mostly made wooden bridges. The shop was originally located on the corner of Main Street and South St. Paul Street.

In 1868, after Fowler had died, Leighton established his own independent company that went on to be far more successful than the one he shared with Fowler. It was at this time that Leighton started building iron bridges. The 1870s was a time of explosive growth of railroads across the country. The railroad companies needed contractors to build tracks and bridges so they could bring trains to every part of the country. It was the beginning of an American industrial revolution, which gave Leighton the opportunity to obtain a large number of contracts for bridges and other iron works to jumpstart his company.

By 1874, Leighton Bridge & Iron Works was a large and prominent iron works company in New York. The works was located on what became known as Leighton Avenue, near Goodman Street, and was one of the largest iron works in the country at the time. In fact, in November 1874, the Rochester Union and Advisor published an article about the accomplishments of Leighton Bridge & Iron Works. According to the article, the works was set up alongside the freight yard of the New York Central Rail Road Company, and four tracks ran through the workshop itself, in order to make transportation of material more convenient.

The building was very large, and over 300 employees were employed there. The ground floor held the iron while the designs were developed on the upper levels of the building. Leighton was known for his efficiency and quality materials. The article reported that Leighton is “the leading bridge builder of his country, and by his skill in the introduction of labor-saving machinery, arrangement of his shops, he has made iron bridges a necessity through their cheapness and durability”.

At the time the article was written, the company was working on 15 bridges. He built 128 bridges for New York Central alone, in addition to many other bridges for other railroads. Some of the famous bridges he built include: The bridge across the Hudson River from the New York Central depot at Albany.
the two bridges over the Connecticut River at Springfield, Massachusetts, the Vincent Place Bridge, the Allen Street Bridge, the Exchange Street swing bridge, and the Redstone Bridge across the Minnesota River, built in 1880. The Redstone Bridge, unlike the others, is still standing today and is one of the oldest bridges in Minnesota.

In 1881, Thomas Leighton was forced to retire for health reasons, and he rented out, and suffered from what was called “inflammation of the brain caused by effusion of blood”. Today, we would say there was internal bleeding in her brain. According to her obituary, Kate was born Kate Taylor in Owego, New York. She married Leighton around 1856 and arrived in Rochester around the same time.

Thomas and Kate had two children that survived them, William T. Leighton and remained unemployed. They were most likely left a substantial inheritance from their parents, since their father was quite wealthy when he died. We can see evidence of this in William and Helene’s travel experience. They each applied for passports multiple times, and they are recorded returning to the country many times from places such as Liverpool, England and France. As mentioned, neither sibling married nor had any children to continue the family line.

Eventually sold his property on Leighton Avenue to John F. Aiden, who had previously worked for Leighton. The Leighton Bridge & Iron Works Company eventually developed into the Rochester Bridge & Iron Works Company by 1887, shortly after Thomas Leighton had died. Leighton had become a well-known and respected bridge builder by the time of his death in 1886, and so he received a long obituary in the Rochester Union and Advisor as well as a relatively short obituary in the New York Times.

Unlike her husband who died quietly in bed, Kate B. Leighton died 13 years later from injuries sustained after being accidentally thrown from a carriage. Initially it was thought she was only bruised and shocked but then she fell into unconsciousness and passed away. It was discovered that she eventually sold his property on Leighton Avenue to John F. Aiden, who had previously worked for Leighton. The Leighton Bridge & Iron Works Company eventually developed into the Rochester Bridge & Iron Works Company by 1887, shortly after Thomas Leighton had died. Leighton had become a well-known and respected bridge builder by the time of his death in 1886, and so he received a long obituary in the Rochester Union and Advisor as well as a relatively short obituary in the New York Times.

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In 1880, Redstone Bridge across the Minnesota River, built by the Leighton Bridge & Iron Works.

Helene (or Helena) T. Leighton. They continued living in Brighton, New York, a contiguous suburb of Rochester, after their parents died. William died in 1918 of pulmonary tuberculosis, and by 1920 Helene had moved to Santa Barbara, California. Neither Helene nor William ever married. When living in California, Helene lived with Anne W. Booth. She most likely was renting a room in Booth’s house.

Helene then died in 1934 also of tuberculosis, and her ashes were sent back to Rochester and buried in Mount Hope.

While they were alive and living in Rochester, William was a civil engineer and Helene

In the Leighton family plot, there are a total of eight stones; the large stone prominently noting the family name, and seven smaller stones, one for each member of the family.

The dates for Thomas and Kate are prominently displayed on the large rounded stone. The dates for Tommy, Fred, David, William and Helene are on their individual, rectangular stones. It is interesting to note that the inscription for Thomas and Kate on the larger stone faces outward, while the inscriptions for the children face upwards, towards the sky.

These smaller individual stones are very simple, with no images or symbols, only the names, as well as birth and death dates for the...
THOMAS LEIGHTON
MAR. 8, 1818,
FEB. 2, 1886.

KATE B. LEIGHTON
DEC. 23, 1899,
AUG. 9, 1899.
children, which are the following:

Tommy: September 9, 1857-September 3, 1864
Fred: December 20, 1858-September 3, 1864
David: November 26, 1862-September 8, 1864
William T.: September 10, 1865-August 13, 1918
Helene T.: January 12, 1869-February 18, 1934

The stones are elegant and cleanly cut with rough sides. All seven are equally sized, yet Kate's and Thomas' names are large on their stones in order to fill up the space left because their birth and death dates are on the large stone. Perhaps this was merely the style at the time, or perhaps it was a statement that as individuals, we are all the same in death as we face our maker, even though the family name may be important in this world.

In contrast with the simplicity of the individual stones, the massive Leighton family gravestone includes a large number of symbols that tell us something about the spiritual beliefs of the family.

The inscription for Thomas Leighton is fairly straightforward. It reads:

THOMAS LEIGHTON
MAR. 8, 1818
FEB. 2, 1888

These dates match the information that is recorded in the interment records from Mt. Hope Cemetery. According to these records, Thomas died at the age of 67 and was buried on February 4, 1886. Unlike Thomas, Kate's inscription is very odd because the dates do not make clear sense. Kate's inscription reads:

KATE B. LEIGHTON
DEC. 23, 1899
AUG. 9, 1899

Kate's date of death correlates with the interment records from Mt. Hope, while it is likely that the birth date is the result of an error made by the carver. Kate's year of birth is somewhat ambiguous. According to the interment records, Kate was 59 years old when she died in 1899. This would place her year of birth around 1839. If this were the case, Kate was 22 years younger than her husband Thomas, and so married at the age of 14 or 16 (there are conflicting accounts of year of marriage), with her first child born when Kate was 17. The census records from 1860 confirm that she was born around 1839 and that she was approximately 22 years younger than Thomas, who was born in 1818. Overall, it seems most likely that the carver of the stone accidentally carved a nine in place of the three, thus incorrectly stating her birth year as 1899 instead of 1839.

Unlike the ambiguity of Kate's inscription, the imagery and symbolism in the design of the large stone is clear and cohesive. The largest and most obvious symbol on the stone is the massive, well-articulated, tilted cross which sits in the center of the stone. The cross leans over the inscriptions, as if it is pointing to them, or resting on them. This may have been done out of convenience or as a method to emphasize the individual names, which are carved in a small font. In addition, there is no way to miss the bold lettering of the name "LEIGHTON" written across the cross. This is the first thing to which the eye is drawn, thus emphasizing that the name is the most important element of the stone. Therefore the most important portion of the stone is the family name and the deceased's connection to Christ or to God. If you look more closely at the name you can see that the letters themselves appear to be constructed of thick, solid branches, which emphasizes the metaphor of "people as plants", which I will discuss later. The tilt of the cross is itself a further reference to Christ. The cross is often viewed as a symbol for the crucifixion. This may very well be the case in this stone. However, the cross is also very often a symbol for the "conjunction of opposites", such as life and death, and it therefore often symbolizes a connection between heaven and earth. Many of the symbols on this stone have a connection with immortality, resurrection, or the transition from this life to the next. In addition, in many depictions of Christ carrying the cross, the cross itself is tilted over his back. The cross is also often depicted as being tilted when Christ is being taken off the cross before he was resurrected. Perhaps the tilted cross on this stone is referencing this and indicating that the people buried here will be resurrected like Christ.

The emphasis on their religion, or on Christianity, is also seen in other symbols and designs on the stone. The next most notable patterns or designs are the clovers that are depicted over the entire surface of the stone. The three petals of a clover are symbolic of the Holy Trinity. In nature, clovers grow in large quantities and therefore, have also been known to be a symbol of vitality. The clovers are very abundant on this stone as if they are trying to emphasize their devotion or respect for the Holy Trinity. These flowers, or leaves, could also be ivy. Ivy, similar to clover, is a symbol of the Trinity because of its three points. In addition, clinging ivy is a symbol of immortality because it is green throughout every season. It also symbolizes attachment and fidelity. Therefore, ivy also fits the religious context of this stone. The leaves seem more like clovers than ivy to me because of their shape. Some of these clovers face up towards the sky, or towards heaven, while others curl around toward the ground and those buried beneath. This organization and positioning of the clover leaves could be understood as symbolizing the belief in death and resurrection. The clovers lock down and recognize the dead, yet they look to heaven because the dead will be resurrected.

On the top portion of the cross there is an upside down flower, which could be a bell flower, a lily, a rose, or possibly an iris. Bell flowers symbolize constancy and gratitude. Lilies are symbols of purity, innocence and virginity, and they symbolize "the surrender to God's will and grace". Irises are very similar to lilies in meaning, often being called the"rival of the lily. The rose, like the lily and the iris, is a symbol of purity. All the flowers, however, have religious symbolism.

Regardless of the difference in meanings between the individual types of flowers, an upside down flower always has the same significance. Flowers facing downward are symbols of death and long life, and this is a good example of "people as plants". Like plants, humans live their lives, then we wilt and die. The downward-facing flower is a symbol that a person has lived to the witting stage of their life and is now gone. Thomas Leighton lived to 67 years and Kate lived to around 59, both considered full lives at the end of the 19th century. Thus an upside-down flower would be appropriate on their gravestone.

However, on the bottom of the cross there is what appears to be a flower bud. Buds are most often used on children's graves because they symbolize a life that is cut short, or a young life. While there were no young people
on that particular stone, Thomas and Kate lost three children under the age of seven during one week in 1864. These children are buried in this plot. The bud on the large stone may be referencing these three children and their early loss. The bud could also be a symbol of new life. It could be symbolizing that the Leightons have finished their lives here on earth, as seen in the upside-down flower, and now they are moving on to the next life as shown by the bud. It could be a symbol of resurrection. There also may be some small branches of palm leaves. Palms are symbols of triumph over death, another reference to an afterlife.

The last and possibly the most interesting of the designs on Leighton’s stone, is a small flower, or sun-like symbol, that is part way down the cross and is in the center of the stone. It looks similar to a passionflower, which is a symbol of Christ’s passion, redemption, and crucifixion. If this symbol is in fact a passionflower, it correlates with the large amount of religious symbolism on this stone. This symbol may also be a sun. Sun is a symbol of renewed life, which is also religious in nature and thus is appropriate for this stone. All of this supports the motif of a full, Christian life lived, including difficult and sad times as well, to be followed by “redemption” and “resurrection” in the next life.

The Leighton gravestone, with its imposing size and ornate carvings, is clearly a display of the family’s wealth. However, the monument does not give any indication as to how the family acquired wealth. It is interesting that a prominent figure, such as Thomas Leighton, would leave no indication of his profession on his gravestone. Leighton was well known for being a bridge builder, and his wealth was a product of his work. However, there is a good possibility that Kate was the person who commissioned this stone. From her obituary, we know that Kate was an active member of Christ Church, a prominent Episcopal church in Rochester. This fact makes it seem more plausible, or rather more probable, that Kate was the individual who commissioned the stone. There was never mention of Thomas being active in the religious community. If he had designed the stone, it seems likely that there would be some recognition of his profession in addition to the many religious references.

Also, according to his obituary, Thomas was a Mason, and there is no indication of this on his stone. Even if he was not a very active member, he most likely would have included some indication of his membership on his stone.

Everything that is written about Thomas Leighton and Leighton Bridge & Iron Works describes the business as one of the most important bridge-building companies in the country at the time, yet little was written on them following their deaths. Perhaps because most of his bridges no longer survive, information about Leightons is not abundant. In addition, the fact that Thomas and Kate had no grandchildren and the family line ended with his children, may have contributed to the relatively small amount of biographical data about the bridge builder. Despite this, Thomas Leighton was clearly an important figure in railroad and bridge construction during the end of the 19th century, and a prominent member of the Rochester community.

(Editor's Note: The author Lily Carhart is a student at the University of Rochester and prepared this essay as part of the course requirements for the course, Speaking Stones, taught by Professor Emil Homerin, who is also a trustee of the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery.)

ANNUAL MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

By Richard O. Reisem

A festive annual meeting of the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery was held at 7:00 p.m., April 4, 2013, at Brighton Town Hall. Here are some highlights.

President Marilyn Nolte announced that the organization currently has 548 members. She said that 1,736 people attended Friends’ public tours in 2012. An additional 562 people participated in special group tours. She reported that the organization received donations, including $500 from Flower City Challenge Race, $721 from United Way’s Rochester Re:day, $1,000 from Canandaigua National Bank, and $500 from Proud Market plant sale. She said that $53,000 from the former Cemetery Heritage Foundation was transferred to the Friends. The City of Rochester has approved the Friends organization to administer gravestone perpetual care funds. The Florentine fountain was repaired, painted, and a basin liner installed. Representatives from the Friends visited Nunda and Ceneseo cemetery organizations to provide advice on advocacy programs. The Friends received grants from the Farrah Foundation to restore Jewish lots and NYS Department of Environmental Conservation to develop a Tree Management Plan for Mount Hope.

Trustee Zakery Steele, a landscape architect, described the tree management plan, which includes identification of historic trees and appropriate replacements, as well as strategies to monitor and maintain Mount Hope trees, minimizing the impact of insects and disease.

Trustee and treasurer Dennis Carr presented the financial report, stating that cash on hand March 31, 2013 was $128,437 of which $92,714 are unrestricted funds.

The guest speaker was Rabbi Shaya Kilimnick, spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Shalom, who gave a spirited and witty presentation on the “Development of Jewish Life in Rochester.”
TAKE A CEMETERY TOUR OR TWO THIS SUMMER

You should treat yourself to a Mount Hope Cemetery tour, or maybe two or three, this summer. We have the broadest selection of tours that we have ever offered. You are sure to find several that you shouldn’t miss. Go to the Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery Web site, fomh.org for the complete listing with times, dates, and starting points.

- Public tours of the South Section occur every Saturday at 11:00 a.m.
- Public tours of the North Section occur every Sunday at 2:00 p.m.
- Twilight tours are every Thursday at 7:00 p.m.
- Special tours this year include Rochester Baseball Pioneers; Bird Watcher Tour; Rochester & the Legendary Erie Canal; Mischief, Murder, & Mayhem; Jewish Roots; Rochester’s Prosperous & Penniless; Rochester’s Abolitionists, Patriots, & Philanthropists; Revolutionary War; The Ice Cream Tour; Lost Secrets; Civil War; Geology at Mount Hope; The Cemetery in a Tram; Fall Foliage Tour.
- Grand Torch Light Tours, October 19 and 22.

All the tours, except the tram and Torch Light tours are free to members. Reservations are required for these two tours, but for all the others, just appear at the designated time.