

A Burial Back in 1879

by Doris Sherrow, August 99

John Concklin, an elderly bachelor living on Indian Hill Avenue, died of dysentery on July 30, 1879. He had been sick for five days with this rather common summer ailment, and the paper mentioned "much sickness" around Portland and Middletown. In his probate papers are bills from his August 1st interment by the undertaker and coffin maker **W.G. Spencer**. Not only are these bills gracefully designed and handwritten, they offer a window into the funeral industry of the later 19th century.

Concklin had been one of several children of **Dr. Isaac Concklin**. He was a carpenter, as were two of his brothers. The houses at 57 and 67 Indian Hill Avenue (the latter gone) were built in the late 1840s by his brothers. John inherited his grandfather's house, which formerly stood at 51 Indian Hill Avenue (known to older residents as the Hanford house, it was dismantled around 1979, and reassembled in Ohio).

Wellington G. Spencer was the local mortician. He conducted his business from a long gable-to-street commercial building next to and south of the present day Café 66. This building is pictured in the January, 1992 **Portland Historical Society calendar**. It is white with a small, fancy ell to the south under the sign of "Undertaker." This building, still in use as a funeral parlor, burned in 1936 under the ownership of Spencer's son-in-law, **Arthur Emmons**, and was then rebuilt in its present form. **Café 66** survived that fire only because it was stucco.

Spencer's flowery letterhead on the bill reads: "W.G. Spencer, Undertaker, and Manufacturer of Caskets and Coffins. Dealer in House Furnishing Goods, Paints, Varnishes, Glass, &c., &c. Terms." An outlined box to the left offers: "Merino shrouds, caps, &c., On hand and made to order. Carriages and Hearse Furnished." Spencer billed the estate as follows:

- Imitation Rosewood Casket: \$22.00
- Outside Box: 3.00
- Cashmere Robe 4.00
- Preserving body in ice: 5.00 (it was midsummer)
- Attending funeral 4.00

Total: \$38.00

A second bill to the estate came from **Laverty & Sarsfield**, "Hack, Livery, and Feed Stable." This was the business carried on by **James Laverty** at 188 Main Street in addition to his thriving saloon business. Five years later a disastrous fire destroyed his saloon. Laverty scrambled to rebuild this moneymaker, producing the building we know today as Portland Restaurant.

The August 1st rental of "2 Hacks Funeral" from Laverty and Sarsfield cost the estate \$8.00. One of those "hacks" would have been the hearse. The type of hearse used by Spencer is pictured in the October, 1996 Portland Historical Society calendar. It is framed in shining black wood with glass sides allowing a view of the interior (a sort of sinister version of Cinderella's carriage). The undertaker and his assistant sit atop the wagon, grim and black-suited, with a pair of white horses yoked to their rig. The rules drawn up

by the Center Cemetery Association in 1897 state that an assistant must remain in the wagon seat to control the horses during the funeral. One wonders what incident necessitated such a clear statement of policy!

A third bill rests with the probate papers: **John Strickland** charged Concklin's estate \$4.00 "for opening grave" on that 1st of August. Strickland was a 43 year old farmer who lived near the cemetery. Digging a 6 foot deep, 6 foot long hole in the August sun must not have been pleasant.

The fourth and fifth bills in the estate supplied Concklin's grave marker. In May, 1880, George A. **Shubert** in New Haven, charged the estate \$20.00 "To one head ston [sic] as agreed [sic]." And the Boston and New York Air Line Railroad Company issued its narrow receipt: "For transportation of Merchandise from NH: 1 Grave Stone 7.86 [pounds?] \$.94" The ninety-four cents was paid by John's youngest brother **George**, who picked up the stone from the train station on Marlborough Street.

John Concklin's gravestone, a simple, four foot rectangle of brownstone, was placed in Center Cemetery beside his parents' stones, and near his Sage relatives.