



R E S O U R C E

GRAVEYARD TOURS BRING HISTORY TO LIFE — and the Living to Church



▲ Debbie Klak, with headset, leads a tour at All Saints' in Torresdale

As historian Debbie Klak prepares to lead the first group out on a tour of the historic graveyard on the grounds of Trinity Church, Oxford, she gently reminds them: “Be mindful that you are in a sacred space. This church is still very active, and the graveyard is still an active graveyard. And we ask you to leave nothing behind but your prayers.”

On this sunny summer morning, the graveyard is far more active than usual. Over the course of the day, some 80 people, many from the community, take the living history tour, with parishioners from Trinity dressed in colonial garb, portraying those who found their eternal rest in the graveyard after doing their part to bequeath the church to future generations.

“I often refer to them as our silent congregation. They’re all in pews outside. Someone has to speak for them now,” says Klak, a member of the Diocese of Pennsylvania’s History Committee and chair of All Saints’ Torresdale Episcopal Church’s History Committee.

Klak worked with Trinity vestry member Ginny McCracken and others at the church

to help organize Trinity's first graveyard tour in June. In preparation, McCracken went back through Quaker historical records and found that Trinity "is the only instance they know of where a meetinghouse converted to Anglicanism."

Trinity Church, Oxford, traces its roots back to at least 1698—the year that the Rev. Thomas Clayton, the first Church of England minister known to have been in the Colony of Pennsylvania, died. It is believed that Clayton started the Anglican congregation, bringing in people from other faith traditions, including Quakers, Anabaptists, Sabbathians, Swedish Lutheran, and other dissenting groups. The original log Quaker meetinghouse that stood on the property was replaced by a quaint, red brick church in 1711 that still welcomes worshippers each Sunday.

Vestry member Chuck Tucker, whose colonial costume is topped off by a tri-corner hat and wig, is speaking on this particular day for Benjamin Cottman, a yeoman farmer who was the only person to serve on Trinity's vestry before and after the Revolutionary War—37 years all told. Cottman Avenue, just a few blocks away, bears his family's name because Cottman's property straddled the roadway.

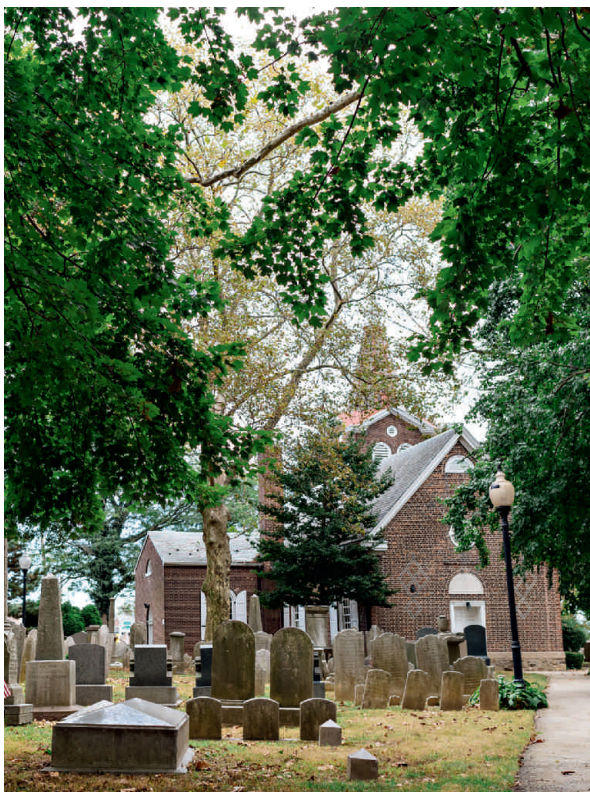
"Trinity was suspect because of our association with the Church of England," Tucker tells a group taking the tour. There is even a legend, likely apocryphal, Tucker says, that, "Gen. George Washington came here and locked the front door to keep the loyalists out."

Not far from Cottman's grave, parishioner Paul Kamalu speaks for Caesar Penrose, a free black person who served as Sexton at Trinity Church, Oxford, for more than 50 years. While George Washington may not have come to personally lock the church, Kamalu recalls the tensions between loyalists and patriots, and how he and Cottman worked together to help keep the church open during the war.

By speaking for the dead, graveyard tours are a creative way to bring to life the history not only of the church and its people, but of the broader community the church serves. It may strike some as offbeat, but graveyard tours offer a creative way to do community outreach, evangelism, and fundraising. ▶



Historic Trinity Church Oxford, which traces its roots back to at least 1698, held its first graveyard tour this summer. Participants (left and next page) dressed in authentic period wear. (Photos courtesy of Megan McGee.)



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“There’s something the Bishop said at a meeting that I totally agree with: You have to be careful not to make your church a museum,” Klak says. The idea is to celebrate not only the past, but the life that continues to shine in our sacred spaces.

Klak’s home church, All Saints’ Torresdale—founded in 1772 with the present Gothic Style church built in 1854—has been offering graveyard tours for years. Over the summer, All Saints’ held its first “Chemistry in the Graveyard” tour, sharing the stories of major chemical manufacturers who are buried in the church’s graveyard and how they shaped America. It drew about 100 people on a Wednesday evening in June.

And their annual October living history graveyard tour, held in conjunction with the church’s popular soup dinner, has attracted as many as 170 people—mostly from the community around the church in Northeast Philadelphia. The church collects free-will donations for events, and the annual soup dinner is a \$5 ticket.

“We don’t make a ton of money,” Klak says. “But it’s not necessarily about that. It’s about seeing the community come out and enjoy your church.”

Making History

Even if a church doesn’t have three centuries of history—or a graveyard—it can still tap into its history to reach out to the

community, spread God’s love, and find new sources of revenue.

What does it take to get started? Klak offers the following advice for churches:

Start simple. Anybody interested in history could begin by writing a “Did You Know?” historical factoid drawn from church records or vestry minutes for the church bulletin or newsletter. Be sure to include a name and phone/email so people who want to learn more or help know who to contact.

Go on tour. To take the next step and conduct tours, there are really only two traits necessary: an interest in history and being comfortable with speaking in public. If you’re looking to start a History Committee at your church, asking lay readers—who are already comfortable speaking in public—is a good place to begin.

Spotlight your stained glass windows.

What if your church doesn’t have a graveyard? “Your stained glass windows—the memorial windows—essentially tell the story of those who came before us without having a graveyard,” Klak says. You can research the names on the memorial windows to learn about the families who donated them, starting with church records and vestry minutes. If the windows are insured, the name of the artist or artists who designed them should be on the insurance policy. If not, the Philadelphia Architects and Buildings website has



Silent Congregation



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information on stained glass windows for many churches and denominations. It's also good to include information on the Bible passage depicted in the window. It may have a special tie to the donor's life. And even if it doesn't, it allows you to share scripture with visitors.

Emphasize the architect. Another option would be to tell the story of the architect who designed your church. If you don't have information on the architect, Partners for Sacred Places may be able to help.

Go online. Ancestry.com is a great starting place to find out more about either the names on the tombstones in the graveyard or on the stained glass windows or other memorials in your church. You can often discover how many children they had, the names in the family, where they lived in relation to the church, and even what they did for a living. If you don't have access to Ancestry.com, the Free Library of Philadelphia does, and other local libraries may as well.

Research public records. They are other rich sources of information. Death

certificates may provide insight into the kind of lifestyle a person led depending on their cause of death. Wills may indicate potential schisms or problems in a family, if, for instance, one child is conspicuously left out. Census data can open a window onto how people in your community lived at the time.

Be social. Google Books has many Social Registers available online that can shine a light on what interests a person had by revealing the organizations they belonged to.

Always have a donation box. At All Saints Torresdale, all money raised by the graveyard tours supports restoration of tombstones.

Open the church. Even if an event is held outside, make sure the church is open. “You never know when people are looking for a church,” Klak says. “People want to see the inside. We started opening the door when we have an event and one or two people stay inside the church to let people see it.” They also hand out brochures with the times of services and information on church history.

Offer chairs outside. At the start of the “Chemistry in the Graveyard” event, Klak quipped: “Walking in a graveyard is good exercise. The rough terrain is good for your calf muscles.” But remember that walking over rough terrain may be difficult for some. Have chairs available for those who are interested in the tour, but have trouble walking.

Remember: A picture's worth a thousand words. For any historical event, if there are photographs available of the people or events you discuss, display them on a table.

Offer refreshments. Again, keep it simple. Ice tea, lemonade and cookies are just fine.

Whether it's a living history graveyard tour, a tour of stained glass windows, or a lecture or discussion, remember: It's all about telling a story. And that doesn't cost a lot of money. It just takes a bit of time and research.

“You can stitch their life quilt together and tell a simple story,” Klak says. “And that's all people need to know.” ■