



Road trip

Cemeteries and Churches of Central Pennsylvania

by Yvonne J. Milspaw

(2021 Annual Meeting Local Planning Committee)

This 2-3 hour day trip will take you to three interesting local cemeteries, with some suggested side trips. Some of those side trips include some interesting local churches.

Steelton

Baldwin (aka Lincoln) Cemetery and William Howard Day Cemetery

In 1866, there were six families living in the town of Baldwin when the Pennsylvania Steel Company, later called Bethlehem Steel, established a huge mill there. By 1880, the town's name was changed to Steelton, and the population burgeoned to nearly 13,000, most of them immigrants from Eastern Europe, particularly from the former Yugoslavia, and African Americans. The churches and cemeteries of Steelton reflect this diversity and segregation. In the 1970s, there were five Roman Catholic churches, each serving a different ethnic population, and two Orthodox churches, one for Serbians and one for Macedonian Bulgarians; there were seven Baptist or AME churches serving the Black population, and three German churches—two Lutheran and one Mennonite Meeting House. Today there is only one Roman Catholic parish (Prince of Peace) and one Orthodox parish (St Nicholas Orthodox), but the German churches and the variety of African American churches remain strong. Also still going strong are the religious societies or clubs—the Croatian St Lawrence Society, the Slovenian St Aloysius Society, the Serbian American Club, and the Dutch Club.

Baldwin Cemetery is located at the very top of Lincoln Street, a thrilling drive up a very steep hill on a very narrow street.

→ Directions:

1. Leave the hotel, and drive to Front Street in Harrisburg.
2. Go left.
3. Drive a few blocks and take the left-hand lane toward Rt 230 East /Cameron Street.

4. Get in the right-hand lane, turn right onto Cameron Street and travel a few miles into Steelton.
5. Turn left onto Lincoln Street (landmarks: it is a bit past the Islamic Society—formerly one of the Roman Catholic churches—near Club 320, a Fine Wine and Spirits store and a huge billboard reading “Freeburn Fights for You.”)
6. Go to the absolute end of the street—it ends right between the old Baldwin Cemetery and the new African American William Howard Day cemeteries.
7. At the end of the road, turn left onto a gravel/grass cemetery road and drive just to the end of it. You are in the old Baldwin Cemetery.

To your left on the level hilltop are the graves of German and Scots Irish “upper” class (Protestant) folks; to your right are the graves of poorer, “lower” class folks, predominantly Croatian Catholics. Straight ahead and to both the left and right are Orthodox graves of both Serbians and Macedonian Bulgarians. They feature Orthodox crosses, flowers, grave offerings and *fineria* (small, decorated metal boxes where holy candles are burned), and decorated Easter Eggs are offered at Easter. Most of the *fineria* are handcrafted by local folks. When you walk downhill to your right, to the back of the cemetery, you will come to the most neglected part of the cemetery, broken-tipped and generally uncared-for markers, many in Cyrillic, some which once held photos of the deceased. Many of the burials have been removed, but the stones remain. When I last visited, two red foxes were playing there. They knew I was there, but they didn’t care much.

Across Lincoln Street is the William Howard Day Cemetery, the new burial ground for the town’s Black citizens. The gardens are gorgeous, with a centerpiece of statues of the four gospels—St Matthew the Messenger with an angel, St Mark the Recorder with a lion, St Luke the Evangelist with a bull, and St John the Theologian with an eagle, each looking outward, and bordered on the east with a statue of an angel, and on the west by a statue of Jesus Christ. Very worth a stroll through.

William Howard Day was an abolitionist, minister, orator, editor and educator. In about 1870, he established a newspaper in Harrisburg, “Our National Progress.” He was the General Secretary for the AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church, and in 1878, he was the first African American to be elected to the Harrisburg City School Board. He served as its president from 1891–1893. He is buried in Lincoln Cemetery. Preserving African American cemeteries is a focus of both community groups and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, which has made their identification and upkeep a priority.

Interesting Side Trip

The original African American cemetery was called [Midland Cemetery](#) and is located a few miles away. It was abandoned when the William Howard Day Cemetery opened, but recently a woman searching for her ancestor’s graves found it overgrown and neglected, and organized community groups to come in and clean it up.

→ If you wish to visit it (it is a bit out of the way), the address is 206 Kelker Street; here are the directions:

1. Go back down the hill to Steelton.
2. Turn left and go to Pine Street. There is a small sign there saying "Midland Cemetery."
3. Turn left (the building markers there are Noor groceries and Panda Express restaurant). Follow the signs.
4. When Pine Street ends, go right onto Kelker Street.
5. The road twists and turns a great deal as the landscape is extremely hilly. Eventually you will see a park on the right with the sign "Ancestor's Grove" and the restored cemetery on the left. It is extremely difficult to park there.

→ To return:

6. Continue a short way twisting along Kelker Street, and you will soon come to Highland Street (you are now in the community of Enhaut).
7. Turn right onto Highland Street, and continue along Highland Street back down the hill to Steelton.

When you get to the main street in Steelton, the St Lawrence Lodge (Croatian) is on your right. You may want to stop and see the wonderful statue of St Lawrence and his grill (he was martyred by being burnt alive on a grill) just in front of the lodge. We used to tell embarrassingly tasteless jokes about the Lodge selling grilled meat and grilled corn and other grilled stuff.

→ Return to Route 230, turn left and continue straight on to Middletown.

Middletown

St Peter's Kierch (1767)

Call ahead 717-944-4651 for a key to the cemetery. Rev Richard Eckert is the Pastor.

Driving the short distance on Route 230 to Middletown (the oldest town in Dauphin County, founded 1755), you will see the steel mill (some parts still working) on your right, and fragments of the old Union Canal running beside the road.

The small town of Highspire (the next town) was renowned for having a high spire that signaled the rivermen (who were driving and riding logs from northern Pennsylvania down the Susquehanna to the Canal Depot in Middletown) that they were nearly at their destination. Another legend states that there used to be an extremely popular distillery in Highspire, and the rivermen were overjoyed to see the spire so they could start drinking.

The Harrisburg International Airport will soon appear on your right, the runway built onto dikes along the very shallow Susquehanna River. It is a former Air Force Base. On the left is the entrance to Penn State Harrisburg, our partners for this meeting.

Middletown

→ Turn left at the square in Middletown, go one block to the old church (121 N Spring St). Stop and park for a bit.

This is the oldest formal part of Middletown. The brownstone Lutheran Church was built in 1767 to serve the growing (and wealthy) German population of the area, and the churchyard is full of fabulous locally made tombstones. The church pays rent of one grain of wheat per annum to the town. While you are waiting for the cemetery to be opened for you, take a very short walk around the block.

→ Cross High Street and start walking towards the square.

On your right just past the alley is a white Georgian house, built in 1745, that once belonged to **Barack Obama's** many great-grandparents. The local Historical Society has recently put up a marker proclaiming its history.

→ Cross North Union Street, staying on the same side of the square, and walk a block east on Main Street.

You will pass the old Colonial Inn—now a restaurant—the Middletown Historical Society, and a large brownstone 18th-century Georgian house (43 East Main Street) built by one of Middletown's German founders, George Frey, as a tavern and inn. Looking across Main Street, you can see a heavy limestone building that was once the Swatara Bank.

You will notice some of the characteristics of the Pennsylvania town here: houses are built directly on the sidewalk (you can sometimes judge the age of a building by how far from the sidewalk it is sited—the bigger the front yard the newer the building); streets are named for trees; alleys cut across blocks, sometimes having houses and small businesses on them, backyards often have vegetable gardens.

Stop at the corner of Main and Pine Streets and look downhill. Across the street and one block down is Spruce Street, where there was once a garden. Here on certain nights of the year the shade of a woman in white, who was said to have died of a broken heart, walked. There was also a man without a head, who had a habit of walking after dark along the run where Spruce Street now is (Hutchinson, 103).

Next east was a one-story log house where my many-times great-grandfather Valentine Weirich (pronounced Why-rick) once lived. He was a soldier of the Revolution and was then a watchman at the Swatara Bank (Hutchinson 103).

→ Walk north (left) onto North Pine Street.

On the right just behind the large Georgian tavern, is a small fenced off area with a central marker. This is the **Old Lutheran Burying Ground**. It was for relatively poor congregants, and in the mid-19th century it was purchased by a blacksmith who cleared out all the tombstones, piled them up at the rear of the property and built his shop there. In the early 20th century, when the local DAR realized that many Revolutionary War soldiers were buried there, they repurchased the land, put up a general marker, and replaced as many tombstones as they could. Valentine Weirich is buried there, but his family was too poor to purchase a marker.

The area around this intersection of Pine and High Streets is also the site of an early Native American settlement, generally called the Conoy or Ganawese people. By the time of European colonization, Native people were decimated by disease, prejudice and warfare (Mann, 1491, 2006), and the village was exceedingly poor. The Natives had found the best land and sites, but the colonists wanted that land as well. The backyards of some of the most expensive and elegant colonial houses in Middletown bump right into the old Native village site.

→ Walk back along East High Street to the church.

To your left is a Georgian house, now an elegant Chinese restaurant called He. It was once called the Few house, and local legend asserts that the family had a son who NEVER left the house but stayed hidden in an attic room that was furnished with everything the teenaged boy could want—wall-to-wall carpeting and his own television set! I heard this story in the mid-1950s.

St Peter's Church

In 1767, St Peter's Church was built in the old church plan. As you look at the church, you will notice that the side facing High Street has three large windows, but the side facing the cemetery has only two windows. The central window on the High Street side was once a second door into the church. The cemetery side was the location of the high pulpit with a sounding board; a small table on the floor in front of the pulpit was the altar. Worshippers entered the church by either door. All pews faced the pulpit. In the early 19th century, the church was remodeled, the pulpit and altar table were moved to the steeple side, the High Street door became a window, and all pews faced the front of the church. This remodeling happened to most early Lutheran, Reformed (now United Church of Christ) and Union (shared by Lutheran and Reformed congregations) churches.

The churchyard is full of gorgeous local stones, most dating from the late 18th to early 19th centuries. The tops are rounded rather than Gothic; the script is sometimes in German *frakturschriften*, calligraphy, and the best ones are decorated with little angels, composed almost entirely of parts of perfect circles, multi-pointed stars, trailing vines, and/or decorations and texts on both sides.

Middletown Cemetery

→ Travel one block north on Union Street.

The **Middletown Cemetery** will be on your left, and you are welcome to stop by and see some other old stones just behind the caretaker's house—the one you must drive around. The very English slab markers for wealthy colonist Colonel James Burd and his wife Sarah (Shippen) Burd are unique to the area. Other Gothic-style 18th century tombstones are nearby. As are many of my relatives.

We had hoped to take you on the beautiful drive to Hummelstown along Fiddler's Elbow Road, but, alas, the bridge is still out (not helped by this summer's floods).

→ So now you should return to Main Street in Middletown, and travel east a few blocks to Vine Street, right next to the Catholic Cemetery.

→ Turn left there, and travel to Hummelstown, founded in 1762.

Hummelstown

The Swatara Creek (pronounced "crick") curls around Hummelstown and empties into the Susquehanna River at Middletown. It is the size of rivers elsewhere in the country. Most sources will tell you that "Swatara" means "the place we eat eels." However, as we have learned from the work of folklorist W. F. H. "Bill" Nicolaisen (Scottish Place Names, 2001), "the names of rivers go back to the earliest stratum of settlement, and therefore also to the earliest language spoken" (224). Likely it means something else entirely.

Zion Lutheran Church

Hummelstown was founded in 1762 by German settlers, led by the Hummel family. Only a few of its original buildings survive. You will enter Hummelstown on Hanover Street. Go to the square, turn left, then turn right just before the brownstone Zion Lutheran Church, and park behind it, near the limestone old Zion Lutheran Church, now the Hummelstown Historical Society Museum. The entrance to the cemetery is right there.

Zion Lutheran Cemetery has several extremely beautiful old German tombstones, one with a vase of tulips, and one with a portrait showing the deceased with angel's wings. It is worth exploring the sheer volume and variety. The Historical Society has records of the texts of all the stones.

At the very end of the 18th century, the new United States government realized it needed both a census and tax money, so it initiated the 1798 Federal Direct Tax Assessment, generally known as the "Window Tax." Consequently, the Pennsylvania records (now available in the Pennsylvania State Archives) contain fascinating information—the owner's names and ages and sometimes their occupations, the names of the people in the household, the size of the house (and other

buildings on the property), the number of windows, and the material from which the house was built—almost exclusively log or stone.

In 1798, almost 70% of all dwellings recorded in this area were single story; in Hummelstown, 90% of the dwellings were built of log; 10% —the higher-class dwellings—were stone, almost exclusively from the locally abundant limestone. In the mid-19th century, houses were built of brick or brownstone, a lovely warm brown sandstone which was mined along the ridge just south of Hummelstown and Hershey; most of the stone was sent to New York City to build the beautiful Brownstones that grace the more exclusive neighborhoods. There is a Historical Marker for the quarries along East Main Street, by the brownstone United Church of Christ. You can see log, limestone and brownstone buildings as you drive along Hummelstown's Main Street, though most of the log houses are hidden beneath clapboarding. There is one uncovered log house on the left, just past the CVS store.

By the 1930s the quarries were mined out and flooded by underground springs; trespassing was forbidden, so of course they became the favorite swimming holes of local high school students. But there is not much to see there anymore.

Interesting Things to Do in Hummelstown

Stop at the Hummelstown Square to visit some interesting shops, almost all independent family-owned businesses. **Toys on the Square**, a huge shop of extremely fine toys—wooden trains, nifty puzzles, miniature knights, cute dolls—from around the world. **Rhoads Gift Shop** with a nice selection of gifts, cards, women's casual clothes and a full second floor of marked-down items; the **Lotus Crystal Shop** has geodes, gems and crystals. The **Nystrum Guitar Shop** is just next door. The owner has a large collection of vinyl there. **Jo-Jo's Pizza** is the absolute best pizza ever (at least according to our family). If you need chocolate in your life, walk one block west to Rosanna Street (away from the square), and half a block south (left) to **Tina Marie's Chocolates**—fabulous place. Across Main Street, on the alley side of Little Essie Mae's Sweet Shop, have a look at the fancy brick side of the house—this is Flemish Bond, the most prestigious of all brickwork. Drive through some of the **alleys**, especially in the West End of Hummelstown. You will see small businesses, some homes, curtains in garages, and lots of vegetable gardens.

If you travel a block west on Main Street, you can see the marker for the Revolutionary War secret gun factory that provided rifles and pistols for the Continental Army. Sadly nothing remains of it. Only garages there now.

A short drive and you can visit **Bell's Meat Market**: north on Hanover Street, through the underpass and over the "crick." Immediately on the right is the market. Their smokehouse—they still smoke their meats traditionally—is just there. They also process deer, and sometimes have interesting local crafts, but are only open Thursday through Saturday.

Or, if you are thinking of local brews, turn right from the square on Hanover Street, past the new Cigar Lounge, and go to **Rubber Soul Brewery**, to test their delicious food and beers. They have a Fiddler's Elbow Belgian Style Ale.

Just across the street from them is the **Old Factory Store**—three floors of antiques and “collectables.”

Or best of all, in my opinion, is to drive east on Main Street, and visit the **Soda Jerk Diner**. It is on the right, just past **Backyard BBQ**, a bit hidden beyond the Subway restaurant.

Hershey

→ If you are still up for adventure, continue along Main Street (now called Walton Ave), and go through a slightly steep dip, just past the Hoageez shop.

You are now in Hershey. On the left, past the post office and the brownstone American Legion, you will see a short stone post mile marker alongside the road. It is marked with abbreviations like *20 LEB*, meaning it is only 20 miles to the city of Lebanon.

→ Go on to the large intersection, turn left onto Route 39 N and head towards **HersheyPark and Chocolate World**. To get there, take a right-hand turn by the huge Giant Center, home of Hershey Bears Hockey.

Chocolate World is free and worth the visit, especially if bringing chocolate home is one of your tasks.

Or continue along Rt 39 North a bit and turn left to visit the **Hershey Gardens and Hotel Hershey**. Both are worth it.

Or you can keep going straight, and visit **Troegs Brewery and Restaurant**, or the **Tanger Outlet Mall**, both on the right. It is the same Outlet Mall that is famous in Lancaster, but this one is so much closer.

Other Churches and Cemeteries Worth the Visit

Bindnagle's Evangelical Lutheran Church and Cemetery. 801 Gravel Hill Road, Palmyra, PA. 717-838-4599. Built in 1803, it is a vernacular Georgian church, with a splendid hand-painted interior in the old interior style. The cemetery is also splendid with gorgeous stones that are lettered with traditional Germanic *frakturschriften*, beautiful “fractured” handwriting. The interior is so awesome, you should call ahead and make an appointment to see it. Well worth the trouble.

Peace Church (or Friedenskirk) and Cemetery, corner of E Trindle Road and St John's Church Road, Mechanicsburg, PA. (West Shore). 717-737-6492. Built in 1798 as a Reformed Church, later a Union Church still in the old interior style. A Historic Landmark.

Paxton (Paxtang) Church and Cemetery. 3500 Sharon Drive, Harrisburg. www.paxtonchurch.org. 17-561-0510. The oldest Presbyterian church building in continuous use in Pennsylvania (second oldest in the US), founded about 1716. The log church was replaced by the present church building in 1740.

Donegal Presbyterian Church and Cemetery. 1891 Donegal Springs Road, Mount Joy, PA. www.webmaster@donegalpc.org. 717-653-1943. A beautiful old church built in 1721, with its cemetery (very simple stones) overlooking lovely Donegal Springs.

Derry Presbyterian Church. 248 East Derry Road, Hershey, PA. www.derrypres.org. 717-533-9667. The church building is new, but the cemetery and the log Session House, built in 1732, are still standing. The latter is now under glass. The cemetery is the burial place of John Elder, the "fighting parson" from Paxton Church, Harrisburg. Derry Church's old plan interior can be seen under the History tab on their website.

St Nicholas Serbian Orthodox Church. 601 S Harrisburg St, Oberlin/Steelton, PA. www.stnicholassteelton.org. 717-939-3872. Gorgeous and extremely active church. They are currently restoring their traditional mosaics. They welcome visitors.

Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral. 1000 Yverdon Dr, Camp Hill, PA (West Shore). www.holytrinity.org. 717-763-7441. Another extremely welcoming and gorgeous church. And yet another gorgeous, welcoming church.

Christ the Savior Orthodox Church (Russian). 5501 Old Locust Lane, Harrisburg, PA (just across the street from St Ann Byzantine Catholic Church). www.ctsbbg.org. 717-652-1825. Gorgeous Old Style painted interior.

St Anthony Coptic Orthodox Church. 118-120 W Main St, Annville, PA. www.stanthonycocpa.org. One of the newest Orthodox churches in the area.

Works Which May Be of Interest

Holmes, Kristin E., "Pennsylvania's Forgotten African American Cemeteries Are Getting Their Historical Due," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Dec 4, 2018): <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/african-american-cemeteries-pennsylvania-national-register-historic-places-digital-database-bucktoe-20181204.html>

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