

A dozen “graveside chats” were recorded during the summer of 2016 at St. Agnes Cemetery, Menands, New York, focusing on people buried at the cemetery, their lives and the times. “The Orphans” talks about the obstacles faced by immigrants, and about how many children were orphaned or abandoned. By 1850, there were 28 orphanages in the state of New York, including St. Vincent’s Orphan Asylum in Albany, run by the Sisters of Charity. In this gravesite chat, a former resident of the home tells the story of a day in September 1903 when three of her friends at the orphanage drowned in a pond while on a picnic at the cemetery.



St. Agnes’ DVD brings cemetery’s stories alive

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Cemeteries often like to remind people that they are rich depositories of local history, and many offer guided tours to tell visitors some of those stories. St. Agnes Cemetery, part of Albany Diocesan Cemeteries in New York, has taken this idea a step further. We’ve recorded and are selling DVDs full of history as told through a series of “graveside chats.”

I conceived the Gravestone Chat project last winter. I spend the cold months at my desk thinking of ways to bring members of the community into our historic cemetery for reasons other than funerals and other somber occasions.

There is so much history here, and so many stories to tell, that I wanted a means of telling stories that would be permanent rather than a tour-stop narrative in real time.

The chats are poignant, funny and educational, and the scripts try to accurately reconstruct the lives of children, immigrant families, entrepreneurs and ordinary citizens who lived in the area and are buried at St. Agnes. The film is an enduring piece of our history. The scripts were well researched so that the people being portrayed would be



Actors in period clothing in St. Agnes Cemetery, Menands, New York, where they brought the deceased to life in a series of filmed graveside chats.

honored for who they were.

In addition, each script features a theme in history—something that the deceased would have experienced or something that actually impacted their lives personally.

Sometimes the impact was death, as we see with the Myers Department Store collapse that killed 13 people, including 12-year-old cash boy Frances Leonard. Two years later, his 32-year-old mother died giving birth to her eighth child.

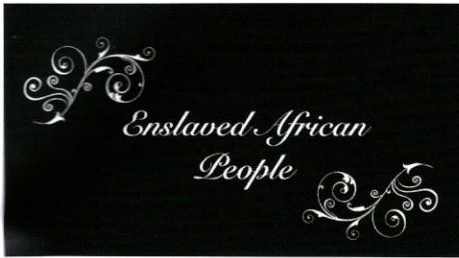
The scene shows them both in heaven,

happy to see each other and recounting the reasons for young Frances’ death. There were no building codes for public buildings in 1905, and building fires and collapses happened too often.

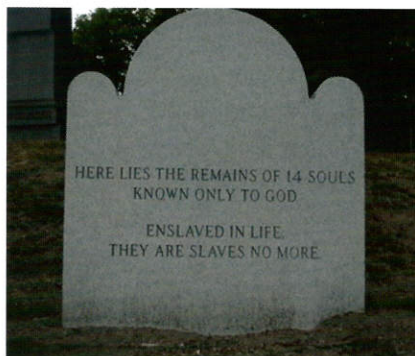
Another scene features a young black couple enslaved by the Schuyler family of Albany preparing to bury their third infant. (Slavery was legal in New York until 1827.)

The theme is of course slavery, but also how pregnant slaves were not given any chance at a lighter workload nor were they





Above, the title card for the graveside chat about an enslaved couple burying an infant for the third time (**right**). This vignette explains why giving birth, hard on all women of that time, was even harder for slaves. This graveside chat ("Enslaved couple burying yet another infant") can be viewed on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/-r7y3LWHKjw>.



Far left, an angel appears to give the grieving mother a message of hope, telling her that her daughter is with Jesus, and that one day slavery will end. Before burying the child, the woman tells her husband she's decided to name their baby Hope.

Left, a marker at the cemetery in memory of the slaves buried in unmarked graves.

allowed to spend time with their newborn or let their bodies heal from childbirth. Infant mortality was high for all in the 18th century, but for slaves it was even higher.

There are 12 chats in all, each with a different historic theme.

The DVD is appropriate for adults and for children as young as middle school-aged. It is educational, poignant, entertaining and as historically accurate as we could get.

It has been purchased by members of the public and by libraries, and we have started marketing to schools this year.

Humanities NY awarded St. Agnes a grant to produce the film over the summer. I contacted the board president, Margaret King of Albany Civic Theater, and she was immediately interested in being part of the production process. Once the scripts were written, she recruited actors to study the parts

and then we set filming dates.

A lot went into costume choices and dialogue. We are pleased with the result and so was our grantor, Humanities NY, which will fund us again for Graveside Chats Volume II this year.

There is a lot of history in our old burying grounds. I make it my job to ensure that history, and the people who lived it, do not remain in the dark. □

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