

Giddings Cemetery, Vernon Township

Enclosed by a modest white fence and flanked by homes on each side, the Giddings Cemetery, though little known to most, is tied to one of the most prominent names in the early settlement of Vernon Township. Used as a burying ground as early as 1813, with the first interment being one William Brown, the name for the cemetery comes from Thomas Giddings, a native of Hartland, Hartford, Connecticut, who, in 1798, settled Vernon along with Martin Smith. Only .5 acres in size and situated upon his land in the east-central portion of the township, a tenth of a mile south where State Route 88 and Orangeville-Kinsman Road intersect, the cemetery was owned by Thomas and his wife, Mary, until 1843, when they conveyed it to the township trustees. Seeing regular use up through the 1890s, by the turn of the century burials became sporadic, with the last occurring in 1939 for Amelia Brown, the granddaughter of the cemetery's first resident, William Brown.



Right: A view of some of the oldest graves in the Giddings Cemetery, with that of the first interment, William Brown (d. 1813) at left. (Photo by the author)

Thomas Giddings

The namesake of the little country cemetery where he would one day take his earthly repose, Thomas Giddings was born on January 27th, 1776, in Hartland, Hartford County, Connecticut, the only child of Elisha and Susannah (Perkins) Giddings. Orphaned at only a year old, the circumstances of Thomas's early life are unknown until the spring of 1798, when at the age of only 22, he was hired by Dr. Jeremiah Wilcox of Hartford, Connecticut, to survey his land holdings in what is now Vernon Township. Hired alongside Giddings was 36-year-old Martin Smith, a fellow native of Hartland who'd bestow the name of "Smithfield" to the unnamed township upon arrival (later changed to Vernon in 1815). Offered a job to drive some cattle to Vienna Township, where some families had settled before, Giddings departed first and left Martin back in Connecticut, with the understanding that the two would eventually meet in Vienna Township. Following a relatively smooth trip over the Allegheny Mountains to Pittsburgh and then to Sharon, Mercer County, Pennsylvania, Thomas and Martin reunited in mid-June at their designated spot, within just a day of one another's arrival. Following the delivery of the cattle to their customers, Thomas walked to Sharon, where Martin had been temporarily lodging. From there, the men, along with a Mr. Ely, Martin Smith's hired hand, purchased a boat and necessary supplies to proceed up the Shenango River to the Pymatuning into Vernon. After a few days' time traveling amongst driftwood-choked waters, the men arrived in Vernon on June 19th, 1798, one half mile south of the present center. The following day, the men located a spring, as fresh water was essential to settlement, and erected a crude shelter nearby, the logs of which were cut by the axe of Thomas Giddings. By the following year, an influx of settlers from back east began to pour into Vernon, and Giddings felt it right to return to Connecticut to marry. On March 30th, 1800, at the age of 24, Thomas Giddings wed Lydia Brockway, a native of Branford, New Haven County, Connecticut, in Hartford. Not remaining back east for long, Thomas and his new bride soon returned to Vernon, the first members of the Giddings family to settle upon the Western Reserve. Over the next few years, more members of the Giddings clan would follow to Northeast Ohio, perhaps most notably Thomas' cousin, a young Joshua Reed Giddings of Wayne Township, Ashtabula County, who'd have a future as a respected country lawyer and abolitionist congressman. During the War of 1812, Thomas Giddings organized a regiment under the Fourth Regiment of the Ohio Militia, aptly named Thomas Giddings' Company, with Giddings himself as captain, though the details of his service, or the companies, are scant. In 1826, Thomas' wife, Lydia passed away at only 45 years old. Buried near where she lived in the little cemetery established 13 years earlier, it was perhaps around this time that the lot acquired its present name of the Giddings Cemetery. However it came to be called such, Thomas soon remarried to Mary Gault, of whom little is known, and in 1843

conveyed the burying place out of his hands to the trustees of Vernon Township, where it remains today. Six years later, Mary would pass away at the age of 59, followed by her husband Thomas in 1865. Both interred at the cemetery they bestowed their name to; in an ironic twist of fate, the stones that mark their graves are no longer extant, having been cut down by the hands of time long ago.



Left: Unfortunately, the burial spots of Thomas Giddings and his two wives, Lydia and Mary, remain unknown within the cemetery they rest in, as the marble slabs that marked their graves have long been cut down by the hands of time and consumed by the earth. However, their legacy lives on with the name of the Giddings Cemetery. (Photo by the author)

James and Reliance Bliss

In February 1844, Isaac Bliss, a resident of Clearfield County, Pennsylvania, removed with his wife, Lydia, and four children, 12-year-old Phebe, 10-year-old Reliance, 6-year-old Philip, and 2-year-old Elizabeth, to Kinsman Township, Trumbull County, Ohio. Described as a “devout, tender, and childlike” Methodist, Isaac lived in “continual communion with his Saviour, always happy, always trusting; always singing,” raising his children to do just the same. Two years after settling in Trumbull County, the Blisses would be blessed with another family member: a bouncing baby boy named James. Unfortunately, he would not be long for this world, as on February 15th, 1847, he would pass away at just a year old. Nine months later, his thirteen-year-old brother, Reliance, would do the same. Though the family resided in Kinsman, the boys were buried at the Giddings Cemetery in Vernon, the reason for such being unknown. Wracked with grief, the family soon moved yet again, this time over the state line to Epsysville, Crawford County, Pennsylvania, and then to Tioga County in 1848. While the Blisses' time spent in Trumbull County was undoubtedly brief, and the lives of James and Reliance perhaps a mere footnote to historians, it was perhaps young Philip who was most impacted while living here. Having an ear for music from the time he was little, it was while in Kinsman that Philip had his first encounter with the piano. One day, while down in town, he heard music “sweeter than anything he ever before listened to,” and following the source, he came to a home, the door of which was left open. Inviting himself in, he “stood unobserved at the parlor door, listening, entranced as a young lady played upon the piano.” Thought to be one Mrs. Bracken, who owned the only piano in Kinsman at the time, once she ceased, he broke the silence, asking her to play some more. Surprised at his intrusion and having “no appreciation of the tender heart that had been so touched by her music,” he was immediately rebuffed and left “crushed,” only “with the memories of the harmonies that seemed to him like heaven.” In 1856, after laboring in lumber camps and on farms, along with serving as a schoolteacher around Bradford County, Pennsylvania, he enrolled in the singing school of J. G. Towner at Townada. Here, he met composer W.B. Bradbury, who, along with Towner, persuaded him to dedicate his life to music. Doing so, he furthered his education at the Normal Academy of Music in Geneseo, New York from 1860 to 1863 and a year later, wrote his first song, a sentimental ballad entitled “Lora Vale,” the rights of which were sold to Root and Cady of Chicago. Relocating there, in 1868, Bliss made the acquaintance of Dwight Moody, the famed evangelist. Influencing Philip to make a living as a gospel composer, thus began the busiest period of his life, authoring popular gospel songs still sung today, such as “Hold The Fort (1870),” “Let The Lower Lights Be Burning (1871),” “Pull For The Shore (1873),” “Brightly Beams Our Fathers Mercy (1873),” and “Hallelujah, What a Savior (1875).” Life would eventually bring Philip Bliss back to Northeast Ohio, where on December 29th, 1876, he died alongside his wife, Lucy, at Ashtabula aboard the Lake Shore, Michigan, and Southern’s luxury train, the “Pacific Express,” following the collapse of an experimental iron bridge over the Ashtabula River. One of 92 killed, unceremoniously referred to as the “unrecognized dead” due to being burned beyond comprehension, Bliss and his wife were interred at a mass grave at Ashtabula’s Chestnut Grove Cemetery, 35 miles north of where he and his dearly departed younger brothers lived all those years ago.



Right: Perhaps otherwise overlooked, this heavily weathered marble stone marks the resting spot of James and Reliance Bliss, younger brothers of famous gospel hymn writer Philip Paul Bliss, author of such songs as “Hold The Fort,” “Let The Lower Lights Be Burning,” “Pull For The Shore,” and “Brightly Beams Our Fathers Mercy.” The Blisses lived in nearby Kinsman from 1844 until 1847, while Philip himself would pass away in Ashtabula, Ohio, on December 29th, 1876, a casualty of the infamous Ashtabula River Railroad Disaster. (Photo by the author).

Abigail “Nabby” Moses

Born on December 20th, 1791, in Barkhamstead, Litchfield County, Connecticut, as the fourth out of ten children to Isaac and Abigail (Brockway) Jones, the life of Abigail “Nabby” Moses is perhaps better connected with adjoining Hartford Township than Vernon, but nonetheless, still holds a spot in the history of the Giddings Cemetery. In 1799, her father, Isaac, came west to Trumbull County with his father-in-law, Edward Brockway, and son-in-law, Asahel Brainard, to settle Hartford Township, first making camp beneath a large tree near the present town center. After staking a claim, clearing the land, and planting crops, before Christmas that year, Jones and Brockway returned back east, while Brockway stayed back to watch over things. In the spring of 1800, Isaac, along with Edward, returned to Hartford with their families to permanently settle. It was here that Abigail, or “Nabby” as she was called, would grow to adulthood and, sometime prior to 1813, marry Abner Moses, a former native of East

Hartland, Connecticut. Sadly, details are scarce on Abigail’s life in Hartford Township, though as the mother of nine children, she was likely quite busy, though in 1835 following the birth of her last child, Wilbur, who himself wasn’t long for this world, died at the age of 41. Buried at the Giddings Cemetery, Abigail rests beneath a wonderful brownstone marker unlike any other in the cemetery, featuring a broad weeping willow, next to it perched the form of an obelisk. Unfortunately, the identity of the carver is unknown.



Left: The daughter of Isaac Jones, one of three men to first settle nearby Hartford Township in 1799, Abigail “Nabby” Moses resided in Vernon following her marriage to Abner Moses, where she passed away in 1835 at age 42. (Photo by the author)

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