

# Update on the 1930 Devon Fireworks Explosion Site and the Westover Bird Sanctuary

Heidi Sproat and Michele Hawk

At the Society's monthly meeting on Sunday, May 15, 2016, area residents Michele Hawk and Gail Cappelli presented a program featuring updates about the site of the 1930 Devon Fireworks Explosion and the development of the Westover Bird Sanctuary.

Back in 1978, TEHS's own Bob Goshorn wrote an excellent article about the infamous explosion that occurred on April 3, 1930 at the Pennsylvania Fireworks Display Company located in Devon between East Conestoga Road to the north and Old Lancaster Road to the south. Goshorn's article, "When the Fireworks Factory in Devon Blew Up" (*Tredyffrin Easttown History Club Quarterly*, Vol. 16 No. 3, Fall 1978) <sup>1</sup> was well-researched and brought to *Quarterly* readers some perspective and information about an event that had occurred almost fifty years prior. The article was well-received and conveyed clearly the facts about the explosion and its subsequent investigation.

However, in 1978, due to technical limitations in the printing process used at that time, there were no images included in Goshorn's article. Not until the publication of the article "Scenes of Disaster at Devon" in the special double issue of the *Tredyffrin Easttown History Quarterly* (Vol. 44, Nos. 1 & 2, Winter/Spring 2007) <sup>2</sup> entitled *The History of Tredyffrin Township 1707-2007* ("T300" — prepared by Mike Bertram to coincide with the celebration of the township's 300th anniversary), did we see any images of the devastation and aftermath of that horrible explosion — aside from yellowed newspaper accounts from decades ago. Images in the T300 article were haunting and revealed the extent of the aftermath. Fortunately, today's technology allows the editors to include both images and scanned documents in the *Quarterly* for readers to view.

Furthermore, starting in 2007, TEHS embarked on a monumental undertaking to digitize images it holds in its collection — a tremendous task. Fortunately, almost fifty images and newspaper articles of the disaster in Devon are now available for viewing at the TEHS website.

Because the property where the explosion occurred was set aside but never developed since that catastrophe, Sean Moir (presently a member of the Tredyffrin Township Board of Supervisors) and a group of concerned area residents (members of Tredyffrin Bird Town Committee) thought that the seven-acre parcel located at 55 Old Lancaster Road would be an excellent site for the development of a Bird Sanctuary for passive recreation.

In 2015, this group actively pursued obtaining official township designation for the site and the Tredyffrin Board of Supervisors approved renaming the area from Westover Park to Westover Bird Sanctuary <sup>3</sup> in March 2016. The Bird Town committee applied for and received a Bird Habitat Recognition award and received a sign from Audubon Pennsylvania. That sign will be displayed in a kiosk in the future.

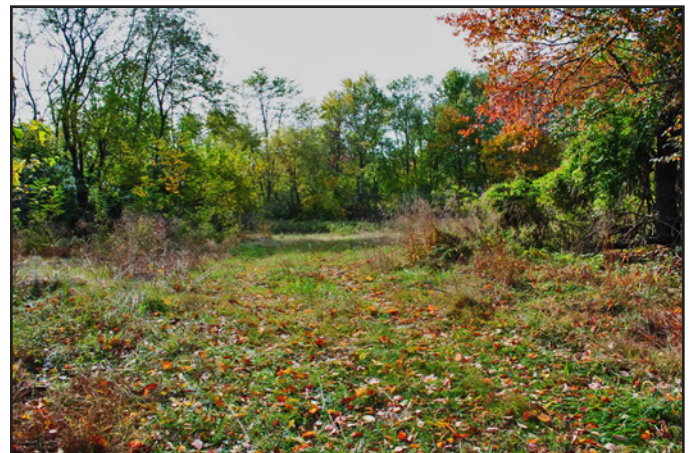


Image of Westover Park, courtesy of Bonnie Witmer

In order to educate visitors about Westover Bird Sanctuary, volunteers Michele Hawk and Gail Cappelli researched the history of the site and have presented several programs locally about their efforts to get the word out about Westover Bird Sanctuary and the history behind the park.





Aerial view of the Westover Park area. *Courtesy of Google Maps*

Ms. Hawk commenced the program with a series of slides that helped the audience understand where the fireworks site was originally located and how, using another of recent technology's wonderful tools, Google Maps, viewers could orient themselves to the geographic specifics.

The park has two entrances: a larger entrance on the north side, off East Conestoga road; and a smaller entrance on the south side, off Old Lancaster Road. Each has limited parking, with room for only a few cars.

Examining an historic 1926 map <sup>3</sup> of the area, viewers can identify specific properties relative to the park location. Some of these properties include the Stephen Fuquet property and the home thereupon, "Roughwood," which area is now the site of St. Luke Lutheran Church; the Charles M. Lea estate and the attending structures thereupon, including "Westthorpe Farm" and a large horseshoe-shaped barn [recently renovated into two elegant residences]; the Lea mansion today houses the Middle School, Admissions office, and the Art and Alumni centers for Devon Preparatory School; and a triangle of homes which the presenters used to orient the viewer



Artist's rendering as the park existed in the 2006 proposed Westover Park Master Plan prepared by Yost Strodoski Mears for the Tredyffrin Township Board of Supervisors,



to the layout of the land and structures. This triangle of homes is north of the railroad tracks and just south of "the Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike" (now Old Lancaster Road) and a 13-acre property shown on the map as being owned by J. Gibson McIlvain. The McIlvain property would become the site of the Pennsylvania Fireworks Display Company after its purchase by factory owner, Alexander Vardaro.

Although the 1926 map shows the property as owned by Mr. McIlvain, Alexander Vardaro was manufacturing fireworks in the community years before this. According to Ms. Cappelli, the fireworks company, established in 1923, had been in the general area and operated more as a "cottage-type" industry where fireworks were assembled in people's homes.

Ms. Hawk presented two incredible aerial photos from 1927 clearly showing the layout of the land and the orientation of some of the fireworks factory buildings. As a safety precaution, the buildings of the factory were spread out in order to keep the explosive components of the fireworks separate, intending to avoid just the kind of potential disaster that tragically occurred. Although there had been minor explosions in the 1920s, and complaints had been registered with the Department of Labor, the buildings and site were inspected and said to be in compliance with applicable laws and codes then in effect.

A trio of large explosions occurred around 10 a.m. April 3, 1930 with devastating consequences. From newspaper accounts at the time, the explosions demolished several buildings in the immediate area and were felt in Philadelphia and as far away as Trenton, New Jersey. The explosions caused fires and sent debris airborne, starting fires elsewhere. Scores of people were injured and ten employees were killed.

The blasts were so powerful that strong concussions were felt on Grove Avenue, a large Italian community, on the south side of the train tracks, across Lancaster Pike. Property damage was significant and many nearby homes were knocked off their foundations, and countless windows were shattered all along Lancaster Pike. The nearby Betner Company paper bag factory building had 1,700 windows blown out, causing \$40,000–\$50,000 in damage. Over 20 people were injured by flying glass. Even a passing train on the nearby railroad tracks was rocked and windows blown out. Due to the direction of the blasts, most homes on Grove Avenue were declared uninhabitable for three to six months. Ms. Cappelli described how her father's family of eight children had to stay with family and friends living elsewhere during this time. At the time of the



Section of a 1926 map<sup>3</sup> showing the vicinity of the fireworks factory. Note that the road identified as "Old Lancaster" is now known as Conestoga Road, and the road identified as "Philadelphia and Lancaster Turnpike" is now known as Old Lancaster Road.



Aerial view of the fireworks factory site, looking northeast, 1926. The various separated structures may be seen just above and to the left of the residences in the center.

*Aero Services Corporation photo courtesy of TEHS Archives*



explosion, her father was four-and-a-half years old, and he and two of his sisters stayed with family in Quakertown. According to newspaper reports, every window in Devon blew out and that they were picking up “firecracker” debris in Norristown. Curiously, the areas southeast of the explosion area — Campbell’s Nurseries, with its large glass greenhouses (now Kmart and Acme) — remained relatively unscathed.

News of the explosion made national and international news. Within minutes of the explosion, spectators swarmed the area and nearby Valley Forge Military Academy cadets were called in to protect the property and stand guard over bodies of victims until they could be transported to area morgues.

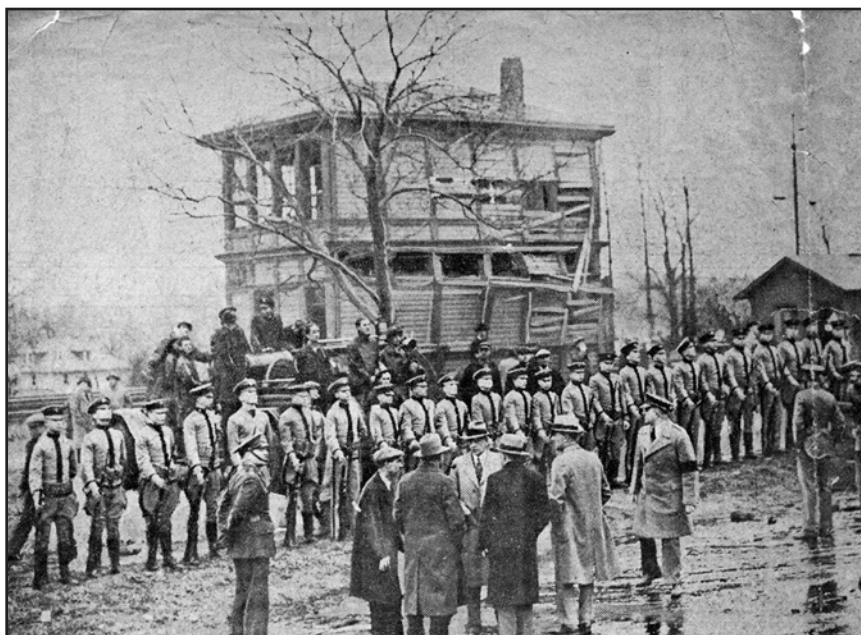
While much of the preceding information has been documented in either Goshorn’s 1978 article or the follow-up 2007 TEHS T300 article, what has come to light in recent months has been the discovery of the death certificates of the victims and additional images that have surfaced in newspaper articles or in private image collections. Notably, each of the victim’s death certificates reveals an uncharacteristic “contributory explanation of death” handwritten in heavy blue ink “conflagration of entire building.” Until death certificates were made available online by various third party companies, these were unavailable for viewing. It took some creative digital investigation to locate the death certificates because they were not filed by name. Researchers had to review hundreds of records with dates of death on April 3, 1930 in the greater Main Line area to properly identify all ten of the deceased.

As a result of this explosion, the Pennsylvania state legislature passed strict fireworks laws. Owner Vardaro left Pennsylvania and built another fireworks company in Bear, Delaware, and in 1942 his son, Victor, died as a result of a fireworks explosion.

According to our researchers, in 1952 the property was conveyed to Martin Spinelli, owner of Devon Building Supply Co., who in turn sold the property to Westover Builders, Inc. in 1964. Although Westover applied to build various structures on the property, township approval was never granted and the property remained vacant until 2002 when Tredyffrin Township purchased the property at a price well below market value with funding assistance from the Chester County Commissioners’ Open Space Municipal Grant Program, and the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Bureau of Recreation and Conservation. The conveyance was under, and subject to, restrictions that the property be used as a public park or recreation area in perpetuity and that the name of the Weissenberger family or



Aerial view of the site of the explosion. The area of debris in the foreground of the picture is where ten factory buildings stood. The home of the factory owner is in middle at left, and the nearby highways and railroad tracks are shown. Aero Services Corporation photo from newspaper clipping, courtesy of TEHS Archives



Valley Forge Military Academy Cadets on duty at the explosion site, lined up before the heavily damaged railroad signal tower. From a newspaper clipping, courtesy of TEHS Archives



their Westover business must remain on the park's name. A smaller portion of land, along Old Lancaster Road, was deeded to the Township by Albert DiAddezio for \$1 which completed the land acquisition.

Scarcity of funds left the township unable to go forward with its 2006 plan for Westover Park. Therefore, use of the undeveloped and unmanaged property as a bird sanctuary was proposed by the Tredyffrin Township Bird Town Committee and approved by the township's Board of Supervisors in 2016. In order to obtain funds for the Sanctuary, members of the Bird Town Committee approached Tredyffrin Township's Foundation for Parks and Recreation. The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit charitable organization, dedicated to enhancing the beauty and utility of the township's parks. Members of the Foundation voted to appropriate funds for signage both to honor the history of the property, and to educate the public in regard to the value of the restored wildlife habitat created by the Sanctuary. The Foundation also agreed to serve as a conduit for donations for the Sanctuary, establishing a link on its website where donations can be earmarked for clean up and enhancement of Westover Bird Sanctuary.<sup>4</sup>

Ms. Hawk also suggested that erection of a Pennsylvania Blue & Gold Historical Marker might be appropriate and requested volunteers to help research and apply for this designation with the administering state authority.

Both Ms. Hawk and Ms. Cappelli thanked the various volunteers for their time and efforts in researching and providing the information presented in the presentation.

## References

- 1 Bob Goshorn, "When the Fireworks Factory in Devon Blew Up" *Tredyffrin Easttown History Club Quarterly* (Vol. 16 No. 3, Fall 1978) <http://www.tehistory.org/hqda/html/v16/v16n3p057.html>
- 2 "Scenes of Disaster at Devon" in the special double issue of the *Tredyffrin Easttown History Quarterly* (Vol. 44, Nos. 1 & 2, Winter/Spring 2007) entitled *The History of Tredyffrin Township 1707-2007*. Compiled by Mike Bertram. <http://www.tehistory.org/hqda/html/v44/v44n1+2p058.html>
- 3 G.W. Bromley, *Outline Map Pennsylvania Railroad Overbrook to Paoli* map, 1926, plate 27 <http://www.andysantiqueatlases.com>
- 4 Westover Bird Sanctuary page on the Tredyffrin Township's Foundation for Parks and Recreation website: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160404064745/http://www.tredyffrinparksfoundation.org/Pages/WestoverBirdSanctuary.aspx>

**To the Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania:**

SIR:—In compliance with the requirements of an act of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, entitled "An act to provide for the incorporation and regulation of certain corporations," approved April 24th, 1874, and the several supplements thereto, the undersigned, all of whom are citizens of Pennsylvania, having associated themselves together for the purpose hereinafter specified, and desiring that they may be incorporated, and that letters patent may issue to them and their successors according to law, do hereby certify:

1st. The name of the proposed corporation is **Pennsylvania Fireworks Display Co.**

2d. Said corporation is formed for the purpose of to manufacture, buy, sell, import, export, at wholesale or at retail and as principal or as agent, to display and to engage in the business of displaying fireworks of every class and description, and to do all things incidental to, or connected with, or growing out of said business.

3d. The business of said corporation is to be transacted in **Philadelphia, Pa.**

4th. Said corporation is to exist **perpetually**

5th. The names and residences of the subscribers and the number of shares subscribed by each, are as follows:

NAME	RESIDENCE	NO. OF SHARES
Alexander Vardaro,	1711 S. Broad St., Phila., Pa.	5
Antonietta Vossella Vardaro,	1711 S. Broad St., Phila., Pa.	90
Tito Cantiofo,	1711 S. Broad St., Phila., Pa.	5

6th. The number of directors of said corporation is fixed at **three**, and the names and residences of the directors who are chosen directors for the first year are as follows:

NAME	RESIDENCE
Alexander Vardaro,	1711 S. Broad St., Phila., Pa.
Antonietta Vossella Vardaro,	1711 S. Broad St., Phila., Pa.
Tito Cantiofo,	1711 S. Broad St., Phila., Pa.

7th. The amount of the capital stock of said corporation is **\$10,000.**

Amount of into 1,000 shares of the par value of \$10.00 each, being ten per centum of the capital stock.

and \$1,000. being ten per centum of the capital stock.

and each to the treasurer of said corporation, to be paid in cash and evidence of:

Alexander Vardaro, 1711 S. Broad St., Phila., Pa.

Alexander Vardaro (SEAL)

Antonietta Vossella Vardaro (SEAL)

Tito Cantiofo (SEAL)

STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA.

County of **Philadelphia**

Before me a Notary Public in and for the county aforesaid, personally came the above named **Alexander Vardaro, Antonietta Vossella Vardaro and Tito Cantiofo,** who in due form of law acknowledged the foregoing instrument to be their act and deed for the purposes therein specified.

Witness my hand and seal of office this **22nd** day of December A. D. 1922.

STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA.

County of **Philadelphia**

Personally appeared before me this **22nd** day of December A. D. 1922, **Alexander Vardaro, Antonietta Vossella Vardaro and Tito Cantiofo,** who being duly sworn, according to law, depose and say that the statements contained in the foregoing instrument are true.

Sworn and subscribed before me, the day and year above said.

**Morris Polin, Notary Public.** (SEAL)

**Alexander Vardaro**

**Antonietta Vossella Vardaro**

**Tito Cantiofo,**

My Commission Expires at the end of next Session of Senate. **EXECUTIVE CHAMBER.**

Harrisburg, Jan. 2, 1923.

To the Secretary of the Commonwealth:

Having examined the within application and found it to be in proper form, and within the purposes of the above corporation as specified in section two, of the act, entitled "An act to provide for the incorporation and regulation of certain corporations," approved April 24th, A. D. 1874, and the several supplements thereto, I hereby approve the same, and direct that letters patent issue according to law.

**Wm. G. Spruill** Governor.

**SECRETARY'S OFFICE.**

PENNSYLVANIA, SS:

Filed in Charter Book No. **200** page **203**

Witness my hand and seal of Office, at Harrisburg, this **2nd** day of January A. D. 1923.

**Samuel J. Wagoner** Secretary of the Commonwealth.

Articles of Incorporation document for the Pennsylvania Fireworks Display Company, dated 2 January 1923



**CERTIFICATE OF DEATH**

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS

1. PLACE OF DEATH  
County of Montgomery Registration District No. 16-07-61  
Township of Samuel Merion Primary Registration District No. 16-07-61 File No. 117  
or  
Borough of Bryn Mawr (No. Bryn Mawr Hospital) (Word)  
City of Josephine Capelli [If death occurred in a Hospital or Institution give its NAME instead of street and number.]

2. FULL NAME Josephine Capelli

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

3. SEX F 4. COLOR OR RACE W 5. SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED OR DIVORCED (write the word) Single

5a. If married, widowed, or divorced HUSBAND of (or) WIFE of \_\_\_\_\_

6. DATE OF BIRTH (month, day, and year) Oct 14 1913

7. AGE Years 16 Months 5 Days \_\_\_\_\_ IF LESS than 1 day, \_\_\_\_\_ hrs. or \_\_\_\_\_ min.

8. OCCUPATION OF DECEASED  
(a) Trade, profession, or particular kind of work: Clerk  
(b) General nature of industry, business, or establishment in which employed (or employer):  
(c) Name of employer: \_\_\_\_\_

9. BIRTHPLACE (city or town) Penna. (State or country)

10. NAME OF FATHER Chris Capelli  
(State or country) Italy

11. BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (city or town) \_\_\_\_\_ (State or country)

12. NAME OF MOTHER Jovina Leontinis  
(State or country) Italy

13. BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (city or town) \_\_\_\_\_ (State or country)

14. Informant Chris Capelli  
(Address) Home care, Levere Pa

15. Filed April 19, 1930 Wm M Conaghy REGISTRAR  
11-5184

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

16. DATE OF DEATH April 3, 1930  
(Month) April (Day) 3 (Year) 1930

17. I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from investigation was made, 1930 to April 4, 1930, that I last saw him alive on \_\_\_\_\_, 1930, and that death occurred, on the date stated above, at \_\_\_\_\_  
The CAUSE OF DEATH\* was as follows:  
Result of Disruptive Explosion at Devon Delacorte Co. Pa. Died in Bryn Mawr Hospital, Bryn Mawr, Lower Merion, Phila. County, Pa.  
CONTRIBUTORY (Secondary) 179 (duration) \_\_\_\_\_ yrs. \_\_\_\_\_ mos. \_\_\_\_\_ ds.  
18. Where was disease contracted if not at place of death? \_\_\_\_\_  
Did an operation precede death? \_\_\_\_\_ Date of \_\_\_\_\_  
Was there an autopsy? \_\_\_\_\_  
What test confirmed diagnosis? \_\_\_\_\_  
(Signed) Wm M Conaghy Registrar Admire Pa

\*State the Disease Causing Death, or in deaths from Violent Causes, state (1) MEANS and NATURE of INJURY, and (2) whether ACCIDENTAL, SUICIDAL, or HOMICIDAL. (See reverse side for additional space.)

19. PLACE OF BURIAL, CREMATION OR REMOVAL St. Mary's Hospital DATE OF BURIAL April 5 1930  
20. UNDERTAKER Wm M Conaghy ADDRESS Admire Pa

Death certificates for Josephine Capelli, age 16, and Angela Chicarelli (note name spelling errors), age 18, both tragically killed in the explosion.  
Courtesy of PA STATE ARCHIVES 350 North Street, Harrisburg, PA 17120-0090 PA Historic & Museum Commission

**CERTIFICATE OF DEATH**

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS

1. PLACE OF DEATH  
County of Philadelphia Registration District No. 15-04-82  
Township of Tredyffrin Primary Registration District No. 15-04-82 File No. 28  
or  
Borough of \_\_\_\_\_ Registered No. 28  
City of \_\_\_\_\_ [If death occurred in a Hospital or Institution give its NAME instead of street and number.]

2. FULL NAME Angelo Blackwell  
(a) Residence, No. \_\_\_\_\_ St. \_\_\_\_\_ Ward. \_\_\_\_\_  
(Usual place of abode) (If non-resident give city or town and State)  
Length of residence in city or town where death occurred yrs. mos. ds. How long in U. S. if of foreign birth) yrs. mos. ds.

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

3. SEX M 4. COLOR OR RACE W 5. SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED OR DIVORCED (write the word) Single

5a. If married, widowed, or divorced HUSBAND of (or) WIFE of \_\_\_\_\_

6. DATE OF BIRTH (month, day, and year) 1911

7. AGE Years 18 Months \_\_\_\_\_ Days \_\_\_\_\_ IF LESS than 1 day, \_\_\_\_\_ hrs. or \_\_\_\_\_ min.

8. OCCUPATION OF DECEASED  
(a) Trade, profession, or particular kind of work: Working  
(b) General nature of industry, business, or establishment in which employed (or employer):  
(c) Name of employer: \_\_\_\_\_

9. BIRTHPLACE (city or town) Penna. (State or country)

10. NAME OF FATHER Peter Chicarello  
(State or country) Italy

11. BIRTHPLACE OF FATHER (city or town) \_\_\_\_\_ (State or country)

12. NAME OF MOTHER Lily Sanatus  
(State or country) Italy

13. BIRTHPLACE OF MOTHER (city or town) \_\_\_\_\_ (State or country)

14. Informant Peter Chicarello  
(Address) Levere Pa

15. Filed 4/4 1930 Emma R Hoffman REGISTRAR

MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

16. DATE OF DEATH April 3rd 1930  
(Month) April (Day) 3 (Year) 1930

17. I HEREBY CERTIFY, That an inquest was held upon the body of the above named deceased on the 4th day of April, 1930; that the jury rendered a verdict giving the cause of death as follows:  
Result of Disruptive Explosion at Bryn Mawr Hospital, Bryn Mawr, Lower Merion, Phila. County, Pa.  
CONTRIBUTORY (Secondary) 178 (duration) \_\_\_\_\_ yrs. \_\_\_\_\_ mos. \_\_\_\_\_ ds.  
18. Where was disease contracted if not at place of death? \_\_\_\_\_  
Did an operation precede death? \_\_\_\_\_ Date of \_\_\_\_\_  
Was there an autopsy? \_\_\_\_\_  
What test confirmed diagnosis? \_\_\_\_\_  
(Signed) Wm M Conaghy Registrar Admire Pa

\*State the Disease Causing Death, or in deaths from Violent Causes, state (1) MEANS and NATURE of INJURY, and (2) whether ACCIDENTAL, SUICIDAL, or HOMICIDAL. (See reverse side for additional space.)

19. PLACE OF BURIAL, CREMATION OR REMOVAL St. Dennis Cem. DATE OF BURIAL 4/5 1930  
20. UNDERTAKER Assurance & Manager Malvern ADDRESS Malvern Pa