

# An International Burial Ground on Europe's Edge: Istanbul's Feriköy Protestant Cemetery

Brian Johnson and Richard Wittmann

Istanbul, the former Constantinople, is often described as a bridge between cultures. Though clichéd, the comparison holds true, both for the city's physical location, straddling Europe and Asia, and for the various communities that have populated it from ancient times to the present. Istanbul's communal and cultural mix not only appears in its many world-famous monuments, such as the Hagia Sophia and Topkapi Palace, but also, as we have noticed, at a less obvious place: the Feriköy Protestant Cemetery.



Fig. 1. Istanbul's European and Asian shores.



Fig. 2. The Feriköy Protestant Cemetery.  
Photo by Brian Johnson.

Situated about two miles north of Taksim Square, one of European Istanbul's contemporary hubs, this roughly 3.5-acre site in the district of Feriköy has been the main burial place for the city's Protestant and otherwise non-Catholic or Orthodox dead for a little over a hundred and sixty years. The cemetery is unique, with historic links that reach back much earlier than its opening in 1859. Some of its tombs

date to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, having been moved to Feriköy in the 1860s from a now-vanished Protestant burial ground once located near Taksim.<sup>1</sup> The cemetery's monuments, ancient as well as more recent, which commemorate generations of lives, reflect Istanbul's diversity and reveal countless episodes in the city's past.

Roughly five thousand dead from many nations occupy the Protestant cemetery, including about two hundred U.S. citizens. This is the largest number of Americans interred at any cemetery in Turkey. Americans also helped establish the burial ground in the mid-1800s, and they have played a crucial role in its care until today. The cemetery is undoubtedly one of the most important historic landmarks with U.S. heritage in Istanbul and all of Turkey.



Fig. 3. Tombstones from Taksim along the cemetery's east wall.  
Photo by Donald Johnson.

Just inside the entry gate, some of the tombstones transferred from the former Taksim burial ground stretch in a line along the cemetery's east wall. Most are ledgers or sarcophagus covers. They no longer mark specific burials but still offer tangible evidence of Istanbul's foreign Protestant community from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, chiefly merchants, diplomats and others of high rank.

Besides family crests, many of the stones display *memento mori* common in Western funerary art of the period. Among the most impressive monuments is a slab engraved with a relief of cypress trees and a horse-drawn bier out of which protrudes Death's arm

holding a scythe. Without an inscription, it captured attention in the past as much as it does today. The sculpture so fascinated one visitor in the 1830s, Reverend Robert Walsh, chaplain of the British embassy at Constantinople, that he made a point of both describing and illustrating it in his memoirs. (Figs. 4 and 5)

The horses seem to take fright at the apparition, and start off with terror, one looking behind, and the others straining forward, as if to fly from the fearful image. The sculpture, though rude, is very spirited. It is without any kind of inscription, and no one from whom I inquired could tell me its age or designation.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 4. Tombstone with horse-drawn bier sculpture (on the east wall). Photo by Donald Johnson.



Fig. 5. Illustration of the horse-drawn bier sculpture in Robert Walsh's memoirs.

Other monuments from Taksim are scattered throughout the cemetery. A few mark the graves of their original owners, including those of several U.S. citizens. A noteworthy example belongs to the first American child born in Istanbul, Constantine Washington Goodell, son of the founder of the Constantinople station of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Reverend William Goodell.

Constantine Washington was born on August 30, 1831 and baptized a few weeks later, on September 25, at the residence of the head of the American legation, Commodore David Porter, twelve days after the U.S. and the Ottoman Empire established diplomatic relations. He was named in honor of the Roman emperor Constantine, founder of the city of his birth, as well as George Washington, founder of the capital of the United States. Tragically, in 1841, he died of typhoid fever and was laid to rest at the Taksim cemetery. But the old burial ground hindered urban expansion, and it was whittled down by construction in 1842, when his father had to move the grave.

February 18, 1842. On account of the encroachments . . . on the . . . burying ground, I had to remove the body of our beloved boy. The grave . . . had been dug deep, and the coffin was scarcely damp. Everything was sweet and still. The new grave which we have prepared a few rods distant was also deep and dry; and there we laid the body, to rest in its quiet bed till the resurrection morning. Beloved child, farewell!<sup>3</sup>

Further building in the early 1860s again disturbed Constantine's resting place, and his remains, along with those of more than a dozen other Americans, were exhumed and transferred to the newly opened Feriköy Protestant Cemetery. The epitaph on his tombstone has worn away in the decades since his death, and only traces of a few letters remain of the lines that once read:

Time was, is past, thou can't not it recall;  
 Time is, thou hast, employ the portion small;  
 Time future is not, and may never be;  
 Time present is the only time for thee.<sup>4</sup>

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was unquestionably the most important American presence in the Ottoman Empire, operating schools, colleges, medical facilities, and publishing enterprises throughout Asia Minor and the Balkans. A large share of the American burials in Feriköy are of Board personnel and their dependents. Moreover, Board members contributed to the founding of the Protestant cemetery, participating in its administrative affairs and even petitioning the U.S. Congress in 1859 for \$1,000 to cover part of the cost of erecting a perimeter wall.<sup>5</sup> This involvement continued until 2010, when the American Board's successor agency, the United Church of Christ's Global Ministries, finally closed its Istanbul office, which traced its origins to the station opened by William Goodell almost two hundred years earlier.

Given the American Board's connections to the cemetery, it seems fitting that the first person buried there, Elizabeth Riggs (1839-1859), was an affiliate. (Fig. 6) The eldest daughter of American missionary Elias Riggs, who served almost sixty years in Istanbul, Elizabeth was fresh back in the city in late 1858 after two years of schooling in the United States, ready to begin teaching at a Board girls' school. But she fell ill with scarlet fever, died on November 29, and was buried in Feriköy the next day, three months before the cemetery opened officially in February 1859. Her name appears as number one in the burial registry.<sup>6</sup>



**Fig. 6.** Grave markers of Elizabeth Riggs (chest tomb, back row, third from right) and Constantine Washington Goodell (front row, far right, below the tree). Photo by Brian Johnson.

Besides Americans, people of many other nationalities rest in Feriköy. Data from funerary records shows that British and German burials comprise the most, slightly over sixty percent of all interments. Of the cemetery's British residents, newspaper publisher William Churchill is one of the most notable. (Fig. 7)



**Fig. 7.** William Churchill's chest tomb (foreground). Photo by Brian Johnson.

Born in London, Churchill worked there as a journalist before coming to Smyrna (today's Izmir) around 1815 to report for an English gazette. He later moved to Istanbul, where, in 1836, while quail hunting on the city's outskirts, he accidentally shot and wounded a Turkish boy, for which he was arrested, imprisoned and beaten. Outraged by this treatment, Great Britain's ambassador in Constantinople became embroiled in a dispute with the Ottoman minister of foreign affairs, which caused a diplomatic row that was only resolved after Churchill's release and receipt of compensation, as well as the minister's dismissal.<sup>7</sup> A weakened Ottoman Empire relied heavily at that time on Britain's support to prevent other European powers from slicing it up and sharing the pieces.

Fully redeemed, and even awarded an Ottoman medal, Churchill later received permission from the authorities to open his own newspaper, *Ceride-i Havadis* ("Journal of News"), the Ottoman Empire's first privately owned paper. When he passed away in 1846, his son Alfred took over and continued to publish the paper until his death in 1870. William Churchill was first buried in the Taksim cemetery, and his remains were moved to Feriköy in 1863, where they now lie, together with Alfred's, in the cemetery's British section.



Another famous cemetery resident, remembered for much different achievements, is Swiss-German brewer Franz Carl Bomonti. Around 1872, when Franz Carl was fifteen, his family settled in Plovdiv, in today's Bulgaria but then part of the Ottoman Empire, which was populated by enough beer drinkers for the Bomontis to realize a commercial plan. They opened an artisanal brewery in the city, which soon became so successful that they established a second branch in Istanbul. Franz Carl participated in the growing venture, and the Bomontis eventually built a modern industrial brewery in the Ottoman capital, located, by chance, a short distance from the Feriköy Protestant Cemetery.



Fig. 8. Franz Carl Bomonti's tomb (drawing by Merve Köksal, 2020).

By the mid-1890s, the Bomontis' yearly beer production exceeded a million gallons, and they had opened a network of beer gardens in the Ottoman realm to monopolize not only the production but also the sale of their product. Franz Carl died at age forty-six, and though the family stopped running the business in the 1930s, "Bomonti" still appears on the label of several specialty beers produced by Anadolu Efes, present-day Turkey's largest brewer. It also endures as the name of the Istanbul district where the Bomontis' brewery was located. The facility itself has been converted into an entertainment complex filled with restaurants and cafes, where plenty of beer flows on any given evening. For those readers who might have a chance someday to enjoy a draft from one of its taps, it would be appropriate to raise a glass to Franz Carl, who rests nearby, in the Feriköy Protestant Cemetery.

### Notes

1. For information about the larger cemetery of which this burial ground was a part, see Brian Johnson,

"Istanbul's Vanished City of the Dead: The Grand Champs des Morts." in Nezhil Başgelen and Brian Johnson (eds.), *Istanbul: Myth to Modernity*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Archaeology and Art Publications, 2002) 93-104.

2. R. Walsh, *A Residence at Constantinople, During a Period Including the Commencement, Progress, and Termination of the Greek and Turkish Revolutions*, vol. 2 (London: Richard Bentley, 1838) 442.

3. E.D.G. Prime, *Forty Years in the Turkish Empire, or, Memoirs of Rev. William Goodell* (New York: Robert Carter, 1876) 275.

4. *Ibid.*, 256.

5. Evidenced in contemporary minutes of the Board's Constantinople station, uncatalogued. American Board Archives: <http://dliir.org/arit-american-board-archives.html>. American Research Institute in Turkey, Istanbul.

6. Several of Elizabeth's diaries are preserved in the American Research Institute in Turkey's American Board Archives and are available online via the website of Istanbul's SALT Research Center, including her last journal, from the year of her death: <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/45837>.

7. For details about this incident, the so-called "Churchill Affair," see Arthur Alric, *Un Diplomate Ottoman en 1836 (Affaire Churchill)* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1892).

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**CONTENTS**

**Introduction to the International Issue**

Jim Freeman. . . . . 3

**I Chose to Climb: The Mountaineers' Cemetery in Zermatt, Switzerland**

Judi Trainor. . . . . 10

**Vikings, Mountaineering and Tragedy: St. Olaf's Church,  
Wasdale, England**

Wendy A. Crocker . . . . . 18

**Cimetiere Notre-Dame-des-Neiges, Montreal, Quebec  
(Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery)**

Merrilee V. Adler . . . . . 21

**Survivors of the Old Christian Cemetery in Singapore**

Loren Rhoads . . . . . 24

**An International Burial Ground on Europe's Edge:**

**Istanbul's Feriköy Protestant Cemetery**

Brian Johnson and Richard Wittmann. . . . . 31

**Jewish Cemeteries on the Lido, Venice. Landscape and Gravestones**

Jim Freeman. . . . . 35

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Edward Whympfer Marker. Chamonix, France.

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