

The Church Family - An Overview

Many great families have called Chagrin Falls home over the years, but some have truly helped the town grow since its early days. Possibly the foremost example of this is the Church family. The Church family was one of the first seven families to settle in Chagrin, with their residence here dating back to 1834. They promptly asserted themselves as prominent town contributors after their arrival, and to this day some of the family still calls Chagrin home. This writeup will cover the original Church family members that settled here in the town's early years, focusing specifically on the ones who had an impressive effect on the trajectory of our town's growth.



The Church Family August 31, 1902

Henry Church Sr. (1805-1878)

Henry Church Sr., the patriarch of the Church family, is the man responsible for initially rooting the Churches in Chagrin Falls. A blacksmith by trade, he and his family (a wife and two kids at the time) moved here from Massachusetts in the month of October, during the year 1834. He moved after Noah Graves, a close friend of his, convinced him to come and be a part of his

growing settlement. Church Sr. promptly made his mark on the town. Fellow Chagrin residents noted his good-natured disposition, which made him likable and easygoing. What made his character especially respectable is the fact that his first few years in Chagrin proved incredibly difficult. He struggled to make a living, and it took him a while to establish his family's footing in the settlement. Still, he resolved to give back, which afforded him much respect from his peers. His humble demeanor led to his later serving as justice of the peace. One of the most interesting facts about Church Sr. was his stance on slavery. He held firmly as an abolitionist, and offered runaway slaves his house as a stop on the Underground Railroad. This generosity helped sculpt his children's giving reputations, as they often had to share their food with the fugitive slaves. In his free time, Church Sr. loved to hunt. As a blacksmith, he offered his children his tutelage while helping the town prosper. He constructed the frame of the Irving House, which once stood as an important hotel in the heart of town. Church Sr. passed away in 1878, leaving his children to continue his outstanding legacy.

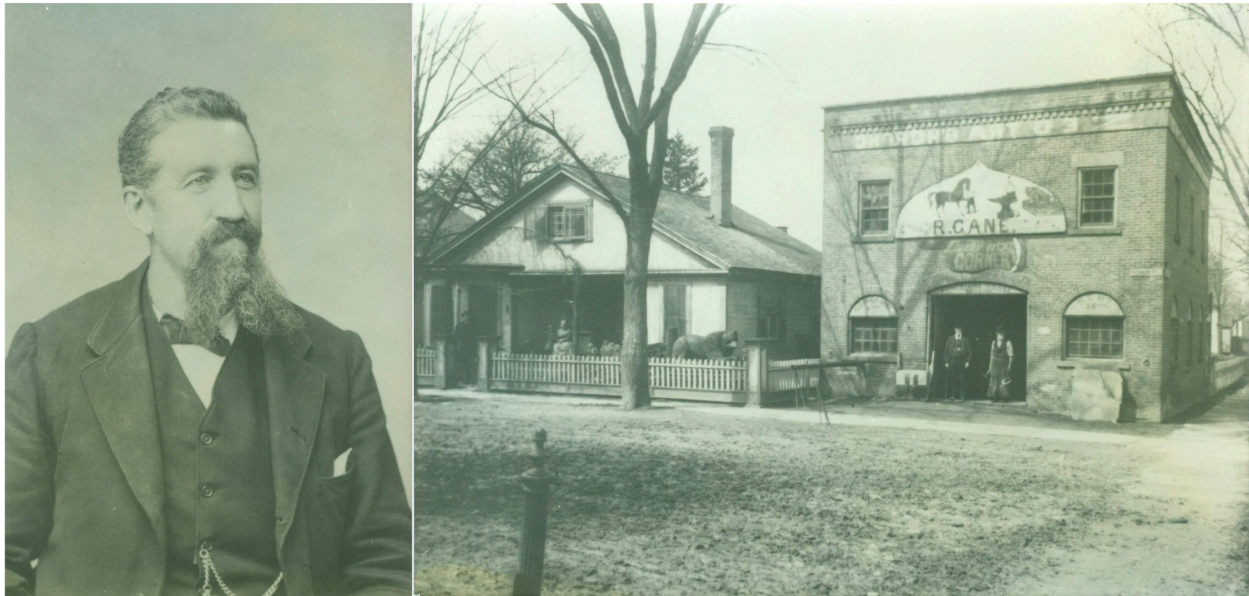


Henry Church Sr.(left) and the Church family house on West Orange Street(right).

Henry Church Jr. (1836-1908)

Named after his father, Henry Church Jr. might have been one of the most talented people to ever live in Chagrin. Born in 1836 as one of the first children in the settlement, residents referred to him as a “born blacksmith.” These analyses proved accurate. After absorbing knowledge from his father, Church Jr. opened his own blacksmith shop, receiving business from both Chagrin residents and its companies alike. However, Church Jr. had a unique quirkiness that carried him to hobbies beyond his profession. He played in the village band. He also held the responsibility of keeping Triangle Park in perfect shape. But most importantly, the world of art had always caught his eye. In order to satiate his appetite for creating artwork, he began applying his craft on the side. Typically, his work would be categorized as folk art. But Church Jr., having no prior

experience, displayed proficiency in nearly every medium he used. He never fully pursued a career in art, although he had the skill level to do so. He produced many works, and spent massive amounts of time perfecting his craft. His pieces ranged from sculptures, which he sold at his blacksmith shop, to paintings. A museum in Geauga Lake served as a gallery for his work. The Cleveland Museum of Art displayed his fabulous tombstone, which he carved for himself, in their courtyard. Even John D. Rockefeller, billionaire and founder of Standard Oil, possessed some of Church Jr.'s finest artwork. One of the most interesting things about Church Jr. is how he balanced his time between work and hobby. He is responsible for the locally famous carving at Squaw Rock, which many experts have lauded as masterful. While he was in the process of sculpting the work, he would leave his blacksmith shop in the afternoon and walk the two miles to the rock's location along the Chagrin River, working until nightfall. Church Jr. had a drive like no other, which he combined with an elite talent in a multitude of areas. Something he once contributed to the town, the weathervane on the top of town hall, still remains in the heart of Chagrin to this day.



Henry Church Jr.(left) and his house, which was located on South Franklin Street, adjacent to his blacksmith shop(house and shop pictured on the right).

Austin Church (1838-1916)

Austin Church, son of Henry Church Sr., proved to be yet another important figure in the town's early history. Continuing the fabulous reputation of the Churches, Austin served as an observant resident involved in many town affairs. He was on the Chagrin Falls school board. He acted as a village trustee. And for some time, he held the same justice of the peace position his father once had. Most notably, Church recorded many of the happenings in Chagrin within his Memoirs. His recording of his daily life is one of the primary reasons why we know so much about the Churches today. Valuable details about the Church family, like their house being a

slave safe house, or how they got off to a rough start in Chagrin would not have been known without his Memoirs. As a person, Austin Church acted with the same engaged disposition the Churches were so known for. A respected member of the town, Church attended school in his youth, only to later be pulled out and become a blacksmith. Austin, along with brothers Royal and Henry Jr., played in the village band. Additionally, during the Civil War, Church served in the Union military twice. First, he volunteered as a “Squirrel Hunter”, along with 78 other Chagrin men. The Squirrel Hunters got their name from the types of weapons they used, which included flintlocks, muskets, and powder horns. As a Squirrel Hunter, Church traveled to Cincinnati, responding to the governor’s call for a defense of the city. The threat dissipated and he traveled back to Chagrin. He then completed his Hundred Days duty and returned home with a nasty camp fever. Although he outlasted the illness, his younger sister Flora contracted it and subsequently passed away. Due to the sheer quantity of Churches that called Chagrin home, he remained close with his family. Henry Jr., Church’s aforementioned brother, even named his son after Austin. Austin Church upheld his family’s strong image through years of hard work in his profession, as well as in his Memoirs. He undoubtedly impacted Chagrin’s early growth in many positive ways.



Austin Church in 1864(left), and some of the Church children (L to R: Henry Jr., Austin, Royal, and Clara)

Jane Church (1833-1917)

Potentially the most charitable of Henry Church Sr.'s children, Jane Church was born in 1833. She experienced the Church family's trek to Chagrin from Massachusetts, and the difficulty they had in establishing themselves here. She also grew up with fugitive slaves consistently coming and going from her house. These conditions helped to mold her into one of the most generous residents in the village. Church attended school as a child, and garnered a reputation as studious. Later in life, Church became a staunch abolitionist. Her inclinations never guided her away from Chagrin, and during the years of the Civil War she served as secretary, and later president, of the Chagrin Falls Soldiers' Aid Society. In fact, one of her greatest lifetime accomplishments came during her time with this group. At the conclusion of the war, the CFSAS still had \$134 in leftover cash. Church concluded that that cash could go to a noble cause. She began campaigning to the town board for permission to raise more funds in order to erect a monument for Chagrin Falls residents who died in the Civil War. Eventually, after receiving clearance and gathering \$1350, an obelisk monument with the names of the 21 deceased Chagrin-based soldiers on it was constructed. Out of gratitude for her unwavering benevolence, the town leaders allowed Church to dedicate the monument, an opportunity rarely afforded to women of that era. Not able to reward her efforts enough, the town leaders also gifted her a beautiful water pitcher set which still resides in our museum today. Church was decidedly a "giver," and those who knew her noted that she never expected a return for her favors. Her gracious character helped turn Chagrin into a blueprint for other towns to follow.



Jane Church(from earlier family picture)

Royal Church (1841-1917)

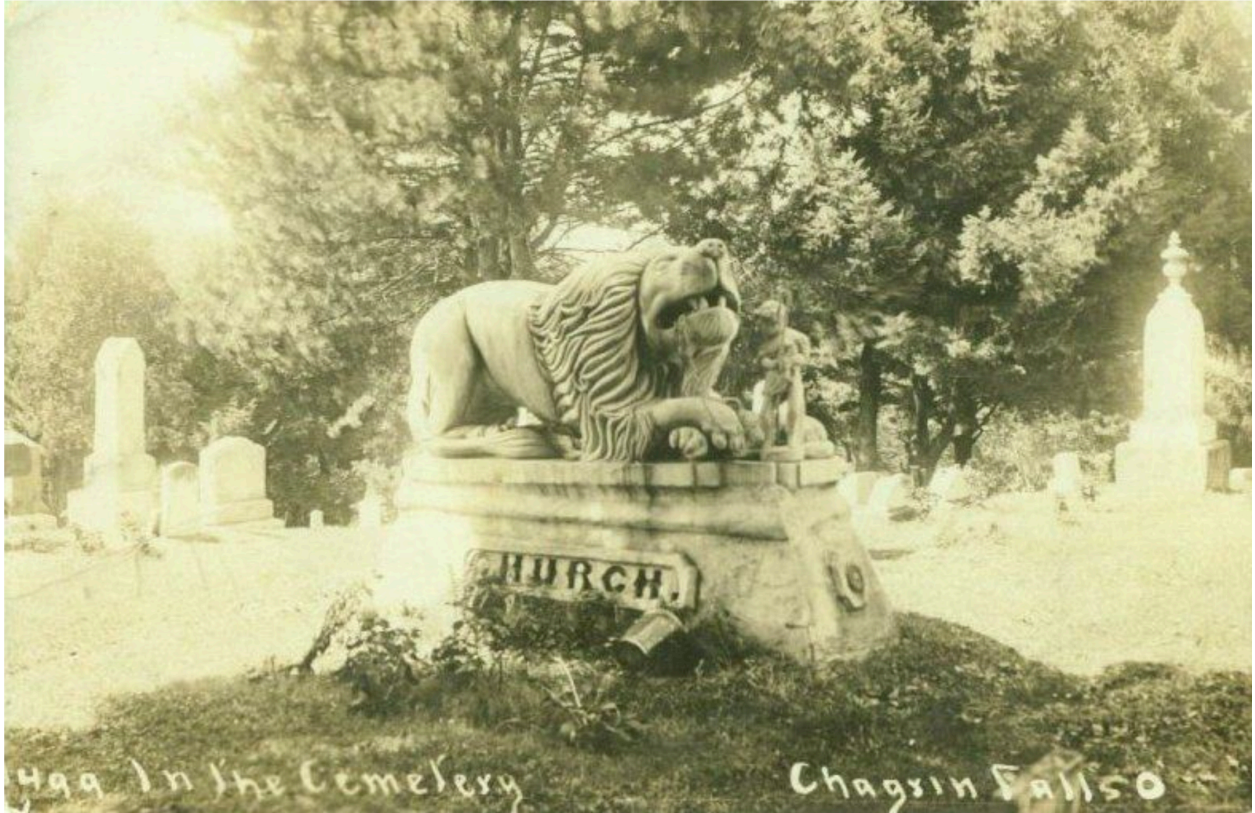
One of Henry Church Sr.'s lesser acknowledged children was Royal Church. Though he never gained the fame or acknowledgement his father and some of his siblings possessed, he still remained revered by village residents. A modest man, Church continued the almost tradition-like undertaking of Churches immersing themselves in town life. He participated in various civic affairs, and played in the town band with his two brothers. Furthermore, like his brothers, he learned the blacksmith trade from his father, using his acquired skills to co-run a family blacksmith shop. Royal Church never made major waves like Henry Jr. or even his father, but he still perfectly exemplified his family's culture.



Royal Church in his blacksmith shop(left), and the town band(right). Royal, Austin, and Henry Jr. all played in the town band together.

Facts about the Church Family

1. Our museum director, Jane Babinsky, is a descendant of Henry Church Jr.
2. A slave of famed Kentucky politician Henry Clay once spent the night at the Church residence.
3. Henry Church Jr.'s aforementioned son, Austin, co-owned a department store in town that conducted business for 62 years.
4. Henry Church Sr. was nicknamed "Squire Church" by his peers.
5. Former Chagrin Falls resident C.T. Blakeslee once described Henry Church Sr. as "as dignified as a Newfoundland dog and as grim as a grizzly bear."
6. Henry Church Sr. had a memorable catchphrase, "By jocks!", which he used frequently.



Henry Church Jr.'s handmade tombstone. It originally marked his grave in Evergreen Hill Cemetery, but has also spent time at the Cleveland Museum of Art due to its spectacular display of craftsmanship.

Bibliography

1. Babinsky, Jane E., and Miriam Church Stem. *The Life and Work of Henry Church, Jr.* Chagrin Falls, Chagrin Falls Historical Society, 1987.
2. Blakeslee, C.T. *History of Chagrin Falls and Vicinity.* 1874.
3. Gorretta, Laura J. *Chagrin Falls: An Ohio Village History.* 2nd rev. ed., Chagrin Falls Historical Society, 2014.