

History

By Steve Cronin



DIUGUID

FUNERAL SERVICE & CREMATORY

Marking Two Centuries Serving Families

Reaching a bicentennial is a big event for a business. So, Diuguid Funeral Service & Crematory has spent the last 12 months celebrating its 200 years in business.

“We have been doing it all along this year,” said Chuck Bartel, manager at the historic funeral home, which has two locations in Lynchburg, Virginia. “The community knows we are very old, but I don’t think they realize just how old we really are.”

Diuguid is the oldest business in the historic central Virginia city and the second-oldest funeral home in the

nation. The name is pronounced like “Do-good,” a fitting epitaph for a business that has long been an integral part of its community.

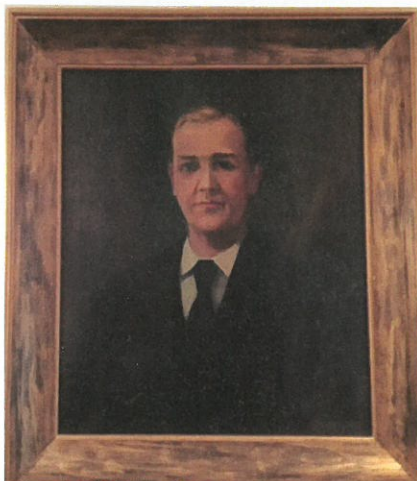
The funeral home has been in operation at various locations since 1817. That was when furniture maker Sampson Diuguid moved to Lynchburg and set up shop. (Kirk and Nice Funeral Home in Plymouth

Meeting, Pennsylvania, has been in business since 1761, giving it the title of the oldest continually operating funeral business in the country).

Sampson Diuguid established a reputation as a fine furniture maker. He soon found that his business included occasionally creating caskets for Lynchburg’s residents.

“He was a furniture maker by trade, an undertaker by chance,” is how the funeral home’s history describes its founder. In 1820 alone, Diuguid handled 20 funerals, indicating just what a large part of the business was devoted to death care.

Photos clockwise from the left: Diuguid Funeral Service & Crematory in Lynchburg, Virginia. The funeral home restored its old horse-drawn hearse for the bicentennial. An old advertisement for the funeral home. W.D. Diuguid ran the firm in the late 19th century. (Photos courtesy Diuguid Funeral Service & Crematory)



Back then, there was no embalming, and when a death occurred, Diuguid would go to the home to prepare the body and take the measurements he'd use to build a custom coffin.

Diuguid died in 1856, but his son, George, carried on the business. The start of the Civil War in 1861 meant changes for the funeral home, which began embalming bodies of soldiers for shipment home. Unclaimed soldier bodies were interred in what is now Old City Cemetery in Lynchburg.

Record books from this period set aside a page each month for war dead. These records indicate that in 1863, there were 196 burials for soldiers at a cost of \$9 apiece (civilian burials cost \$12). The records also indicate that Diuguid was responsible for burying Confederate generals Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson, Jubal Early, Robert E. Rodes, James

Dearing and Samuel Garland Jr.

"The records of Diuguid Funeral Service were so meticulously kept that when the Virginia Legislature appropriated funds for the Confederate Ladies Memorial Association to mark each grave with a stone bearing the man's initials, his state and the unit to which he belonged, the unique records of George Diuguid were used to accomplish this feat," the history said.

Officials in Virginia were so impressed with Diuguid's efforts, that when it came time to draw up an official state death certificate, they modeled the document on his records.

The Diuguids were innovators as well as craftsmen. When Sampson Diuguid saw the difficulty pallbearers encountered carrying coffins over muddy roads to the local cemetery, he designed and built an improved litter to make the task

easier. Such creativity ran in the family. George Diuguid and his son, W.D. Diuguid, invented the church truck. The pair were inspired after seeing the coffin of President James Garfield following his 1881 assassination, according to the funeral home history.

Conditions in Lynchburg, where church aisles were too narrow to allow for pallbearers, also inspired the invention. The Diuguid truck was made of wood, had a large center wheel and two smaller wheels at the head and foot. This allowed the truck to be easily guided down narrow aisles by someone at the front or back.

A turn-of-the-century hearse from the funeral home is on display at Old City Cemetery. The vehicle has a special trap door to make it easy to load and transport a child's coffin, small doors to allow for ventilation and the loading of flowers, a

compartment under the driver's seat to store shovels and another compartment to hold the workers' lunches.

W.D. Diuguid, the third generation in the family to enter funeral service, came into the business in 1880 and operated it until his death in 1927. W.D. Diuguid had an interest in palindromes, according to the history – and rightly so.

Diuguid's last name was a palindrome, his funeral license was No. 11, his business was located at 616 Main St. and his home 616 Cort St. His phone number was 111 and his post office box was 33, according to the history.

W.D. Diuguid's daughter, Mary, was the fourth and final generation of the family involved in the funeral home. She sold the business in 1948. The funeral home, which now serves about 150 families per year, changed hands and locations several times over the years. Foundation Partners Group has owned it for the past seven years, Bartel said.

"There is a legacy that comes along with being here," said Bartel, who has worked at Diuguid for about two years. "As manager here, I have an important duty to carry on the traditions that our founder started – being there for people, giving people what they need and a little more."

Bartel oversees a staff of 16 full- and part-time employees. Everyone at Diuguid is taking part in activities to commemorate the funeral home's bicentennial, he said.

One highlight of the year was a Chamber of Commerce event focusing on the funeral home's history. Another was the Lynchburg's Veterans Day parade. For that event, staff placed the funeral home's old horse-drawn hearse on a trailer and used it as a float, Bartel said.

Diuguid's meticulous records for its first 150 years of service have long been available for viewing on



An old printing block from the time of W.D. Diuguid. (Photos courtesy Diuguid Funeral Service & Crematory)

the Old City Cemetery website.

"People have been accessing our records and probably didn't even realize it," Bartel said.

While the funeral home's two current locations are each less than a quarter-century old, each contains artifacts that serve as reminders of Diuguid's history of service.

"We have some furniture pieces that the Diuguids had made themselves as well as old ledger books showing the cost of a funeral back in the day," Bartel said. "We have a lot of other stuff we would like to put on display, but there is only so much room we have."

The anniversary has also served as a reminder to staff to continue embracing the spirit the funeral home's founder brought to his work.

"If you look at our history, our

founder was very forward thinking," Bartel said. "When you have a founder like that, you are always looking at how you can make things better. It's easy to ask, 'If he were here today, what would he be embracing?'"

Bartel said he believes Sampson Diuguid would be happy his funeral home is now owned by Foundation Partners Group and would embrace the company and its efforts to improve and modernize the funeral experience for its customers.

"Foundation is also very forward thinking. They put a lot of thought behind the things they do, including the ShareLife sight/sound experience," Bartel said. "I think that is the type of thing our founder would have taken a look at and said, 'These are the kind of things families will want. Let's do it.'" •