



CELEBRATING 150 YEARS

A collage of historical and promotional materials for John Breen Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. The collage includes newspaper clippings, photographs of the building and family, and a large photograph of the new site at 122 Amesbury Street. The main text reads "John Breen Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. 1869 1960" and "Leading Funeral Directors In Greater Lawrence". It also mentions "91 Years Performing Many Personal Services In A Dignified Manner To Afford Those In Sorrow The Greatest Measure Of Comfort At A Time When We Do Our Best To Soften The Sorrow And Lift The Hearts Of Those Who Remain Behind". The collage also features a large photograph of the new site at 122 Amesbury Street, Lawrence, Mass., and a newspaper clipping titled "Breen's New Undertaking Parlors Are the Best".

**150th
ANNIVERSARY**



**JOHN BREEN MEMORIAL
FUNERAL HOME, INC. *EST. 1869***

HONORABLE BEGINNINGS

The legacy of founder John Breen

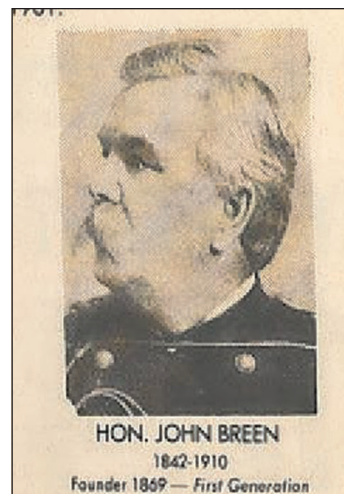
John J. Breen arrived in Lawrence as a youngster in the mid-1800s and spent his life becoming a leader of the city and a pillar of the community for which he left a legacy that has spanned generations.

Born on June 20, 1842 in Tipperary, Ireland, Breen emigrated to America in 1847 at age 5 with his parents, Patrick and Margaret, to escape the potato famine plaguing their homeland.

The Breen family eventually settled in Lawrence in 1853, six years after its founding, and joined the growing Irish population in the city. About one-third of the city was Irish by 1848, and a section even became known as "Little Dublin."

Many of the immigrants took jobs in factories or entered carpentry. Patrick Breen was employed as a laborer by those undertaking the construction of the Bay State Mills along the river.

John Breen attended the local grammar schools and then prepared for college by attending a private school. Although coming from a working-class background, the family managed to fund his education. He enrolled in St. Charles College, a Roman Catholic school in Maryland, but due to ill health, he had to withdraw before completing



his studies.

In 1867, Breen was selected to go to Ireland on a special mission to secure the release of Daniel Donovan, of Lawrence, a U.S. citizen.

Upon his return, he opened John Breen Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. on Oak Street in 1869. The business was originally established by A. W. Goodrich before being purchased by Breen.

In April 1873, Breen married Nancy Jane Brackett and the couple had four children. In 1876 and 1877, he was elected to the Common Council from Ward 3. He did not finish his second term, as he resigned to take a position on the Board of Fire Engineers, which he held until his election as mayor in 1882.



The Honorable John J. Breen, an Irish immigrant who settled in Lawrence with his family as a young boy, entered the funeral home business in 1869. His first location was on Oak Street, pictured.

Over the next several decades, he set out to establish the business's reputation in the community, while also working to improve the overall quality of life for the residents

of the city of Lawrence.

Breen served as the city of Lawrence's first Irish-American mayor — and some assert the first Irish-American mayor in New England — from

1882-1884, while continuing to run John Breen Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. By that time, Lawrence had large populations of English, French Canadians and Germans as

well as Irish immigrants.

Breen, a Democrat, was praised for “his charity,” and many times “manifested his kindness to the orphans in the home of the Protector of Mary Immaculate,” according to news reports.

He was also regarded for conducting the office of mayor “with great dignity” and “was held in high esteem by the thousands of friends throughout Greater Lawrence,” it was reported.

After leaving the office of mayor, Breen continued to be involved in city affairs, serving on the Lawrence School Committee until his death on Dec. 21, 1910 at the age of 68.

Newspapers reported Breen’s death with “sincere sorrow” as the announcement was made public by the tolling of the city’s bells. Built around 1910, the John Breen Elementary School was named in his honor.

Charles R. Breen, John Breen’s great-great grandson and a co-director of the funeral home today, said his ancestor focused on improving the city’s resources.

“He did a lot with the education system in Lawrence,” Charles Breen said, adding that his great-great-grandfather also worked to improve the city’s infrastructure.

John Breen’s son, also John J. Breen, took over the funeral home as his father’s health failed and assumed its operation following his death.

The younger Breen was highly respected in the city as well, and played a large role in the growth of the community. He served on the School Committee as well as the Board of Aldermen, of which he was the president in 1914, and was connected with several fraternal organizations.

With his death in 1932, his wife, Gertrude, a licensed undertaker and a female pioneer in the field, took on the family business with their sons, Charles M. and John Breen, who would go on to become the third generation at the helm of the operation.

Sources: “John Breen as Mayor of Lawrence, 1882-1885,” by James O’Connor, research seminar; *irishecho.com* (Jan. 10-16, 2007)



John Breen Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. moved to this Lawrence home at Hampshire, Cross and Tremont streets around the late-1930s.



The current funeral home on Amesbury Street in Lawrence opened in 1971.



The Breen family added a second location with the opening of its North Andover home on Merrimack Street in 1960.

BREEN FAMILY LEGACY

Founder and first generation

Honorable John Breen
1842-1910

Second generation

John Breen
1875-1932

Mrs. Gertrude Breen
1886-1964

Third generation

John Breen
1912-1998

Charles M. Breen Sr.
1914-1995

Fourth generation

Charles D. Breen
1936-1990

Charles M. Breen Jr.
1937-1975

Fifth generation

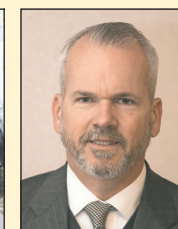
John R. Breen
Charles R. Breen
Lisa M. Breen



John R. Breen



Lisa M. Breen



Charles R. Breen

JOHN BREEN MEMORIAL FUNERAL HOME, INC.

► Phone: 978-682-8381

► Website: breenfuneralhome.com

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Lawrence

1869: Original funeral home opened on Oak Street.

Around the late-1930s: New location opened at the corner of Hampshire, Cross and Tremont streets.

Dec. 5, 1971: Current funeral home opened at 122 Amesbury St., 300 yards from the former location. It houses four chapels.

North Andover

Dec. 11, 1961: Current funeral home opened at 35 Merrimack St., opposite St. Michael's Church parking area

**150th
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**JOHN BREEN MEMORIAL
FUNERAL HOME, INC. *EST. 1869***

150 YEARS OF COMPASSION AND SERVICE

For five generations, John Breen Memorial Funeral Home has been dedicated to the community

As she watched the funeral procession for a local florist begin its route to the cemetery recently, Lisa M. Breen felt there was something missing from the motorcade.

She knew the late shopkeeper had mentioned to his family that he wanted his delivery van to be among the line of vehicles.

Breen, one of the co-directors of John Breen Memorial Funeral Home in Lawrence and North Andover, was determined to fulfill the man's wishes — even though his daughter had said it wasn't necessary.

Breen encouraged the florist's daughter to hand over the keys to the delivery van and then proceeded to drive the vehicle herself as the line of mourners made its way to the cemetery.

The family was pleased and grateful for the added attention to service.

But for Breen, the small act was just part of the specialized care that she and her team provide.

The gesture offers a window into how Breen and her brother, Charles R. Breen, and cousin, John R. Breen, conduct themselves each and every day in service to the bereaved of Greater Lawrence and the Merrimack Valley.

The trio of co-directors tends to every detail for grieving families — going the extra step to treat every individual with the utmost reverence and compassion.

That commitment — to care for families from all walks of life during a difficult and heartbreaking process — is

one that has been passed down in the Breen family for 150 years.

Lisa, Charles and John Breen are the fifth generation to carry on the proud legacy established by their great-great-grandfather, John Breen, in 1869. As co-directors, the trio owns and operates the funeral home that has been a mainstay in Lawrence for 1½ centuries.

Almost 60 years ago, the John Breen Memorial Funeral Home expanded its operation with the opening of a second location in North Andover, behind St. Michael Parish. Eleven years later, Breen's new Lawrence location opened at 122 Amesbury St., adjacent to Lawrence High School.

The addition of the second funeral parlor in North Andover and the new Lawrence location only strengthened what has been a successful family enterprise for five generations that has in turn touched the lives of generations in the area communities it serves.

A proud lineage

As a young boy, arriving in America from Ireland, John Breen, along with his family, joined the growing community of immigrants calling Lawrence home.

Breen founded John Breen Memorial Funeral Home in 1869 and continued to run the business even while serving as the 22nd mayor of the city for three years, from 1882 to 1884.

When his ailing health led Breen to stop running the funeral home, his son John J. Breen took the reins. The

younger Breen was a prominent figure in the city, as well, serving as an alderman and on the School Committee.

When son John J. Breen, passed away in 1932, his wife, Gertrude, assumed the role of the director of the business along with their sons, Charles M. and John, who eventually became the third generation to lead the funeral home. The boys completed their funeral director licenses at 17 and 19 years old.

Charles and John were followed into the business by their own sons, Charles M. Breen Jr. and Charles D. Breen — cousins who were as close as brothers and who represented the fourth generation of the family operation.

The third and fourth generations worked long and hard to ensure the business survived despite various challenges. During the Great Depression, for example, they often went unpaid by grieving families who couldn't cover their costs, but knew they could go to the Breens and be treated with compassion. The third generation — Charles M. and John — took second jobs, serving as night watchmen at a local mill to help support their families.

During the oversight by the fourth generation, the funeral home's second location was added in December 1960 with the opening of the parlor at 35 Merrimack St. in North Andover. Meanwhile, the current Lawrence location, at 122 Amesbury St., came into operation in December 1971.

Tragically, the fourth generation

died too young, their children say, resulting in the fifth and current generation taking over the operation in the 1980s and '90s.

Charles D. Breen's son, John R. Breen, was the first member of the fifth generation of Breens to join the family business. After graduating from high school in 1980, he initially began a course in medical technology at Merrimack College in North Andover.

"One day, my father said to me, 'Do you want to work at the funeral home?'" John R. Breen recalled. He agreed.

He dropped his class at Merrimack, quit his job at Market Basket and arrived for work at the funeral parlor the following Monday. He would work during the day, then spend his evenings completing the courses to obtain his funeral director license.

John R. Breen enjoyed 10 years working alongside his father before Charles D. Breen passed away in 1990 at the age of 53. Charles D. and his wife, Mary, had seven children: John, Amy, Mary, Katie, Charles, Joanie and Brigid. John is the only sibling to work for the funeral business. He and his wife, Christine, have four children: Sarah, Ruthie, John and Emily.

Meanwhile, Charles M. Breen Jr. tragically lost his life in 1975, when he was only 37 years old. He was hit and killed by a car at Salisbury Beach. His daughter Lisa was just 10, and son Charles R. was 7. They also have an older sister, Susan, who was 12 at the time, and a younger brother, Christian,

who was 3.

Charles R. Breen decided at his high school graduation in 1987 that he would enter the family business, joining his cousin, John R. Breen. He and his wife, Kathleen, today have two children, Connor and William.

Lisa M. Breen, Charles R.'s sister, came on as the third member of the current trio of funeral directors in the 1990s, when she left her job at AT&T to enter the fold. Lisa is newly married to husband, Steven, and she has one child, Casey along with Steven's son, Jake.

The three co-directors say they are guided by their family's legacy and follow the examples set for them.

"I'm just grateful that they passed this honor down to us and they worked so hard for it," Lisa Breen said.

'Fabric of the community'

A fixture in the Merrimack Valley for 150 years, John Breen Memorial Funeral Home has overseen funerals for many prominent figures in the community, including Lawrence Mayor John Buckley, state Sen. William X. Wall, Judge John Fenton, John Coady of Coady's Towing Company, Lawrence firefighter James Zahn, Robert Sheehan of Sheehan's Service Station in Methuen, state trooper Edward "Buzz" Mahoney and Lawrence police officer Thomas Duggan.

But the funeral home has also carried out the arrangements for thousands of other citizens who made their home in Greater Lawrence over the decades.

With every generation of the Breen family that has operated the funeral home, the high level of professional, respectful service to the bereaved has been unwavering.

So, too, has been the family's long-standing commitment to the Greater Lawrence community and the Merrimack Valley.

"They are very much a part of the fabric of the community," said John Cuddy, a Lawrence native who grew up alongside current co-director John R. Breen and was part of the same tightknit graduating class at Central Catholic High School in Lawrence.

"They're at every parade, every Fourth of July," Cuddy continued.

The Breens belong to many business and charitable groups in the area, including the Merrimack Valley Chamber of Commerce; the Kiwanis Club of



John R. Breen, left, and his cousins – Lisa Breen and her brother Charles R. Breen – say they are proud to carry on the family tradition as the fifth generation to operate and serve as co-directors of John Breen Memorial Funeral Home, Inc.

Greater Lawrence; the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Division 8, of Lawrence; the Methuen-Salem Rotary Club; the Mary Immaculate Guild; and St. Monica Knights of Columbus Council 14725 in Methuen. In 2016, Lisa Breen was named the grand marshal of the Lawrence St. Patrick's Day Parade, becoming one of a chosen few Irish-American women to earn the honor.

The Breens are accepting to all members of the community, Cuddy added, and have been since they first opened their doors.

"The old-timers all know that when the Lebanese first came to Lawrence, nobody would do their funerals except for John Breen," Cuddy reflected.

As pillars in the multi-ethnic community of Lawrence, the co-directors of John Breen Memorial Funeral Home have embraced the diverse populations that make up the city, Cuddy said, and that's why they have reached such a prominent anniversary.

"That's why it's been successful and why it's lasted," he said of the funeral home business.

Cuddy's family recently called on the Breens to handle the arrangements for his mother, Elizabeth, following her death after a long battle with breast cancer.

His family's connection to the Breens made the process easier, and more personal, he added. The Cuddys knew they could rely on the funeral home and the Breens to make sure the day went seamlessly.

'The personal touch'

For the Breens, fulfilling their mission to carry out one's final wishes is an honor and a responsibility they don't take lightly. They will do their best to make sure that every need is met, they said.

John R. Breen recalls the farthest trip he's made to bring someone to her final resting place. Thirty years ago on Good Friday, he drove from the Merrimack Valley up to Fulton, New York — a five-hour trip one way — after bereaved family members had promised their mother, who was terrified of flying, that they wouldn't transport her on a plane after she had passed.

Bob Carrier, the owner of Carrier Family Funeral Home & Crematory in Windham, has also seen firsthand the caring nature of the Breen family. The Breens use his facility for all of their cremations, and he encounters one of the three co-owners every few days.

"They're a nice family," he said. "They care about the personal touch; not every funeral home is like that."

Indeed, in today's industry, many formerly local, family-owned funeral homes have been bought by larger conglomerates that oversee operations from a distance. These corporations employ a standard model, such as outsourcing staff to tend to visiting hours, Charles R. Breen said.

In contrast, the team at John Breen Memorial Funeral Home has remained independent, allowing the family to continue providing the individualized service that has been their hallmark for 150 years.

"There's always a Breen here during visiting hours," Charles R. Breen said. "We don't use outside staff."

His cousin, John, said the nicest compliment they receive from bereaved families is appreciation for making a difficult time "so much easier."

"We treat them like we would want our own family treated," he said.

At times, knowing their clients so well can be difficult, the funeral directors admit, and they find themselves unable to hold back their own tears during a funeral Mass.

But having a familiarity with their clients is largely an asset, allowing them to provide added touches that a family may not think to ask for, but will appreciate — such as leading the procession by a loved one's home or going out of their way to route a procession past special family landmarks.

While the current directors share all responsibilities and duties at both of the family's funeral parlors, they do employ several part-time employees to assist with tasks — from bookkeeping to helping with funeral preparations to serving as greeters during visiting hours.

Their staff members — John Gentile, Elisa O'Connor and Jim Abdallah — work at both the Lawrence and North Andover homes. In addition, Lisa and Charles R. Breen's older sister, Susan, lends her talents as hair stylist. Paul W. Collins had been part of the group since 1944 until he passed in 2014.

Lisa and Charles R. Breen's mother, Susan A. Breen, and John R. Breen's mother, Mary D. Breen, worked at the funeral home after their husbands passed away until cutting back their hours in recent years. Mary is now fully retired, while Susan is semi-retired.

Lawrence native Joe Hey's connection to the Breens goes back decades. He's known the older generations and has used the business to provide funeral services for his own family members over the years. He also worked for John Breen Memorial Funeral Home for five years, assisting at funerals and wakes.

"You couldn't work for better people," Hey said. "The past generation of Breens, how they treated families that came in at the lowest point of their lives ... it seems to have passed down to the current generation."

"They have the same nature," he said. "They are polite, respectful and easygoing."

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**JOHN BREEN MEMORIAL
FUNERAL HOME, INC. EST. 1869**

A FAMILY TO MANY

The Breens have been a source of support and comfort to locals for 15 decades

There are few, if any, longtime Lawrence area residents who haven't had some kind of encounter with John Breen Memorial Funeral Home.

If they haven't turned to the family business following the loss of a loved one, they've certainly attended a wake or a funeral at one of Breen's two facilities.

And everyone has heard the name.

After all, it's an institution that goes back 15 decades.

As Ann-Marie Doherty puts it, in Lawrence, "you say Breen, and all you think of is Breen Funeral Home."

Doherty, the niece of the city's late Mayor John J. Buckley, who served in the 1970s and 1980s, said the Breens have come to feel like family to her own over the years. They have used the funeral home to mourn many relatives, she said, including Mayor Buckley, who died in 1997.

"They make you feel like family, they really do," Doherty said. "They go over and above for you."

Doherty said that on the day they buried her father, Charles F. Nyhan Sr., in 2007, the Breens honored her family's wishes and drove the procession past Lawrence City Hall in tribute to the late city clerk, as well as by the site of the former H.P. Hood and Sons plant, where her dad worked as a foreman for more than 25 years.

"These little, little things that they do make you feel better," Doherty said.

Doherty said the personal connections the Breens have to their work and their clients — and their desire to continue to be a valuable part of the community — is abundantly clear.

"Sometimes I think the Breen family has tears in their own eyes during some of the funerals they hold," Doherty said, an observation that the Breens themselves acknowledge as true.

That compassion comes as no surprise to their friends.

Mary Gosselin's relationship with John Breen Memorial Funeral Home — and the Breen family members themselves — goes back quite a ways.

Her family has turned to the funeral home at the passing of her great-grandparents, her grandparents and her parents. The Breens also oversaw the arrangements for her father-in-law and mother-in-law.



The Breen family name, as seen in this monument at the Lawrence funeral home, has enjoyed a high level of respect in greater Lawrence for 150 years.

The ease of making those arrangements has changed with time and technology, Gosselin said, but the feeling of family that the John Breen Memorial Funeral Home provides has been a consistent source of comfort.

This past February, Gosselin again called on Lisa Breen, whom she now considers a friend, when her uncle passed away.

When Lisa Breen arrived at her uncle's home, Gosselin said, she showed great sensitivity and understanding, in particular to her cousins, in how she answered all of their questions and explained the process to them.

"They are just very compassionate and they understand what you're going through," Gosselin added. "They are very family oriented and accommodating."

Gosselin recalled how her mother used to quip as she read the daily newspaper and reviewed the obituaries.

"She would say, 'It's not a funeral if it's not at Breen,'" Gosselin said with a chuckle.

'Professional and personable'

The Breens' personal relationship with clients and the community is what has the most lasting impact on people, the Rev. Joseph McCarthy said.

The Rev. McCarthy worked closely with the Breens while assigned to St. Monica's Parish in Methuen.

"So many funeral homes now are owned by corporations from afar with a single manner of doing things," he said. "A family-owned home like Breen, it's much, much more personal."

The priest attributed the longevity of the Breens' business to the strength of their family ties, which have abided through the generations.

They also have great respect for the faith of all, he added, a facet of the funeral home's code of conduct that the family stresses in its nonsectarian approach.

The Breens, too, are connected to the community and involved with numerous charitable organizations around greater Lawrence and the Merrimack Valley.

Bill Sullivan is the current president of the Ancient Order of the Hibernians' Lawrence chapter, to which the three funeral directors belong. Charles and John Breen are members of the men's chapter, while Lisa Breen is active with its ladies group.

The Breen family has been involved with the Hibernians going back to the local chapter's own beginnings, also close to 150 years ago.

"They will do whatever they can to help you," Sullivan said. "The family's always been committed to the community just as the three Breens are now. They have a stake in the community."

He added, "They are very professional and personable."

That professionalism extends beyond their clients to other funeral homes as well, whose directors the Breens consider colleagues rather than competitors.

Dan Cotnoir owns Edgar J. Racicot Inc. Funeral Home in Dracut, but his friendship with Charles R. Breen and his family extends back decades to when his funeral home was located just two blocks away from John Breen Memorial Funeral Home.

"We help each other out often," Cotnoir said. "They're absolutely wonderful people."

That association is so deep, in fact, that when Cotnoir was in the process of moving his business to Dracut, the Breens let him and his family temporarily live in the unit above their North Andover location, and use the funeral home for his business.

"It's nice that there's a group of us who see the value in being colleagues rather than competitors," Cotnoir said.

PILLARS OF THE COMMUNITY

The Breen family's professional, hard-working approach has been passed down for five generations

Charles M. Breen and his brother John — the third generation to operate the John Breen Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. — were key figures in the community.

The grandfathers of today's current owners, the Breen brothers could be seen at every social gathering or important event in Lawrence.

And if you saw one, you likely saw both, as they were always together.

As funeral directors, Charles and John earned a level of reverence that, even for the time, was rare.

"They were pillars in the community," said Dan Cotnoir, the owner of Edgar J. Racicot Inc. Funeral Home in Dracut and a longtime friend of the Breen family. "They lived and breathed the business."

"They were always called 'Mr. Breen,' even by people their own age," he added. "No one ever called them by their first names."

Cotnoir said he sees the three Breens who are leading the funeral home today in a similar light. While today's co-directors have a more personable and laid-back demeanor, they are still traditionalists who follow the same approach their grandfathers did.

"They still hold that industry standard that we all think of," Cotnoir said.

The elder generation, brothers Charles M. and John, set an example that is still followed today, agreed the Rev. Chris Casey, a native of Lawrence, Casey who now is a priest at Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Methuen.

"I never knew which was which, so to me, they were always 'Mr. Breen,'" the Rev. Casey said. "They were both dignified gentlemen who made sure that each family's needs were met."

Charles M. and John Breen led the



Three generations of Breen family members gather in 1971 for the groundbreaking of the current Lawrence funeral home on Amesbury Street. Lawrence Mayor Daniel Kiley, third from left, joins, from left, brothers John and Charles M. Breen Sr. and their sons and grandsons, Charles R. Breen, Charles M. Breen Jr., John R. Breen and Charles D. Breen.

funeral home with their mother, Gertrude, following their father's death. They were followed by the fourth generation, Charles D. and Charles M. Breen Jr., the fathers of the current fifth-generation directors.

The Rev. Casey said the John Breen Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. has been used by his own family in its times of need.

"It is through that personal experience," he said, "combined with the countless funerals I've attended that have been directed by the Breens, that I can say they are class acts and do genuinely good work with great

compassion."

Faced with the difficult task of tending to a family during challenging times, the Breens rise to the task, the Rev. Casey said.

"I know them to be faithful to everything of the great Breen family tradition, as well as consummate and compassionate professionals who work very well together and always put the needs of the families first," he offered.

"Funeral ministry is so important in that it provides families the help they need to make it through what can be a devastating time in their lives. Every funeral and every family is unique. The

Breens make sure that the family is well cared for throughout the process. I am sure they make the previous generations proud."

Peter Breen, of North Andover, Charles D. and Charles M. Jr.'s cousin, has watched the current generation carry on the family legacy.

"My father was the only Breen son that didn't work at the funeral home," he said. Instead, he opted for a career at Merrimack College in North Andover.

That doesn't mean, though, that Peter Breen and his nine siblings didn't still help out at the funeral home.

"When I was a kid, we used to go over and clean the hearses and caskets," he said.

As the business marks its major milestone of 150 years, Peter Breen said its success is due to the strong work ethic of his family members.

"Every Breen that I know is a hard worker," he said. "It's a family that believes in work and giving back to the community, and that's been passed down through the generations."

While the Breens operate a second location on Merrimack Street in North Andover, which their grandfathers opened in 1960, they are first and foremost embedded in Lawrence.

In 1971, John Breen Memorial Funeral Home, Inc. relocated to the Lawrence site that it has been at ever since, 122 Amesbury St. — only 300 yards from its former site on Hampshire Street.

Cotnoir said that proximity over the years illustrates how the Breens have remained true to their roots.

"Talk about still being in the neighborhood, they are only one block away from their original building," Cotnoir, the Dracut funeral director, said.

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TRUE TO THE PAST — POSITIONED FOR THE FUTURE

The Breen family holds close to tradition while embracing the changing industry

In the early days of John Breen Memorial Funeral Home, wakes were held inside the homes of loved ones over the course of multiple days.

Undertakers performed all preparations for the wake and burial right at the family's house, while also readying the space for guests, including removing doors from their frames, and carting in dozens of chairs to accommodate visitors.

Today, as the Breen family business marks its 150th anniversary, the three current owners said it's astounding to look at the changes in both the funeral business, but also society overall since their great-great-grandfather founded the business.

Clients today arrive at their doors more informed and prepared, according to the trio of co-funeral directors, Lisa, John and Charles Breen. They have done research on the internet and are familiar with the options available for arrangements, services, caskets and more.

An increasing number of people are pre-planning their funeral services, as family dynamics have changed and people are mindful of not wanting to leave the task to their loved ones after they're gone, the Breens said.

Clients are also becoming more savvy about looking ahead to the potential that a loved one may have to enter a nursing home and how to best manage finances through such a transition.

As families have grown more spread out geographically, so, too, has the reach of the John Breen Memorial Funeral Home. With locals relocating beyond the Merrimack Valley, the Breens find themselves traveling greater distances to bring loved ones back home to their final resting places.



A proclamation from the city of Lawrence recognizes the Breen family for its 150 years of service to the community.

Perhaps one of the biggest changes is the presence of a female as a funeral home director in what is a historically male-dominated field.

Lisa M. Breen is following a path paved by her great-grandmother, Gertrude Breen, a licensed undertaker who took over the business in the 1930s when her husband, John J. Breen — the son of the funeral home's founder — passed away.

Charles R. Breen said grieving families often prefer to work with his sister, Lisa Breen. "They feel more comfortable," he said.

Lisa Breen resists the praise, saying she finds the work gratifying.

"If you can help a family through a hard time ... the hardest time, and make it more comfortable for them, it's rewarding," she added.

Apart from the planning, the funeral proceedings themselves have also

Marking a milestone: Breens hosting 150th celebration

The Breen family invites the public to a celebration marking the 150th anniversary of the John Breen Memorial Funeral Home on Saturday, June 29, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the main funeral home, 122 Amesbury St., Lawrence.

The service of thanksgiving will be officiated by the Rev. Christopher Casey of Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Methuen. Local dignitaries will be in attendance to offer congratulations and present citations to the family. Members of the Breen family will also offer remarks. Refreshments will be provided.

The Rev. Casey said he expects the service to be "an opportunity to pray, thanking God for the 150 years of service the Breen family has provided, and to ask God's blessing on the future of the business."

During the service, the Rev. Casey said he will offer a blessing over the Breens, their business and their property.

"The blessing will help us to remember that the work and the workers in the funeral business are doing holy work that brings people into an encounter with our God," he offered. "Being in the funeral business is very much a ministry of our Lord. We are blessed in the Merrimack Valley to have many dedicated and caring professionals who serve families in their time of need.

"The fact that the Breens have done this important work for 150 years is amazing, but also something that the Breen family can be so proud of as they have served families with dignity, care and compassion throughout these years."

undergone major changes in recent years, the Breens said. Today, pets are a common presence at wakes and services, as the beloved companions are brought in for their final goodbyes to their owners.

Social media and technology have entered funerals, too, with loved ones choosing to chronicle the events in videos and with photographs to share online or with those who are unable to attend. A funeral is now often a chance for everyone to reunite, Lisa Breen said, and families want to preserve that moment, too.

The greatest change, however, has been the trend toward cremation, both for financial consideration as well as a way to keep a loved one close, the Breens said. There are an increasing number of companies that will create

keepsakes, artwork or jewelry from the remains of loved ones, they said.

Looking to the future, John Breen said, he expects to see "green burials" increase in popularity. There's also a growing interest in water/aqua cremation, biodegradable urns and wicker coffins, as well as a movement away from embalment. He believes those trends will eventually result in changes to guidelines and laws governing the industry.

But the Breens said one of the reasons their funeral home has endured for 150 years is the willingness to change with the times and embrace new traditions.

"We pay attention to what's changing," Lisa Breen said.

That's something the family plans on continuing to do for years to come.



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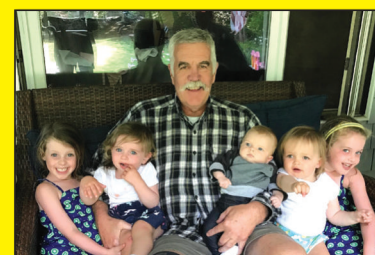
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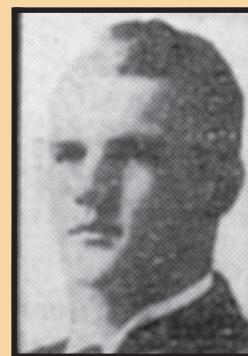
photos circa 1949 Breens



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Res MU 2-8474



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