

# The History of Washington Park Cemetery

Washington Park Cemetery, originally 75 acres, was founded in 1920 in what is now the City of Berkeley by businessmen Andrew Henry Watson and Joseph John Hauer as a for-profit burial place for African Americans. It was created under the nation's Jim Crow laws, which were initiated during Reconstruction after the American Civil War. The land was purchased from the estate of grain merchant B.H. Lang. It became the largest African-American cemetery in the St. Louis area. Andrew Henry Watson was owner of Watson Law Reporting and Process Serving Company and previous to this had been a St. Louis City deputy sheriff. Hauer, a member of the St. Louis Real Estate Board, made his fortune in real estate and mining.

Originally sold as a perpetual-care burial ground, Washington Park Cemetery's covenant was dissolved at some point in its history. Beautifully landscaped in the lawn-park tradition, the grounds were planned by master cemetery designer G.D. Joyce. He created an ordered set of paved paths and tree plantings that were meant to offer respite to those who visited loved ones interred there. Joyce's design is still evident despite the cemetery's deterioration and lack of upkeep. Today, his colonnade of ginkgo and tulip trees can be still seen from the lawns adjacent to Natural Bridge Road. Joyce was a partner in the Joyce Surveying Company, which designed other rural lawn-park cemeteries including Memorial Park Cemetery, Laurel Hills Cemetery, Lake Charles Cemetery and other suburban burial grounds reserved for white burials.

Throughout its history, the cemetery suffered from the systemic racism that created the racial divide that still plagues St. Louis today. Hauer and Watson were supportive of restrictions on land rights within the City of St. Louis, including the rights for equal interment and recreational use of public parks. Ironically, during its development, both investors were accused of disrupting bucolic country land with the presence of black St. Louisans, whose rights to picnic at the cemetery they defended. St. Louis itself has a long history of racism and racial segregation. In 1916, St. Louisans voted on a "reform" ordinance that prevented anyone from buying a home in a neighborhood more than 75 percent occupied by another race, and in East St. Louis in 1917, a mob of white attackers destroyed 300 houses occupied by African Americans, wounded hundreds, displaced thousands, and killed over 100 people, but the exact number is not known. Historically black communities in the city were razed for the sake of "urban renewal," highway construction and redevelopment projects. Indeed, it was highway expansion that was the first sanctioned intrusion on the cemetery's land. In the late 1950s, Interstate 70 was built, bisecting the cemetery and paving over graves.

As Washington Park Cemetery was being developed, the airfield that that would become St. Louis Lambert International Airport was also being developed. Lambert-St. Louis Municipal Airfield became the first municipally owned airport in the United States and would become the second intrusion into the bucolic peace of the cemetery.

In 1972, the airport acquired nine acres for an expansion, and again in 1996, the City of St. Louis acquired part of Washington Park Cemetery for purposes of "aviation obstruction removals and land use compatibility" relating to Lambert Airport's longest runway, I2R-30L. Known as Washington Park Cemetery North, the area was situated along the eastern-most boundary of Lambert Airport, north of Highway 70 and east of McDonnell Boulevard.

In 1992 came the third transgression into the cemetery as the MetroLink light rail extension to the airport was built. In all, somewhere between 11,974 and 13,600 souls were disinterred and relocated to 23 area cemeteries, but records and numbers are unclear. This upheaval and the mismanagement of burial records caused some families to lose track of the graves of their ancestors.

The cemetery also suffered at the hands of past owners, and its original landscaped beauty fell into disrepair over the years. In 1990, the third owner of the cemetery was investigated for mismanagement and malfeasance including allegations of "overturned graves, missing bodies and stolen caskets." Since then, Washington Park Cemetery has changed hands several times. Today, the cemetery is owned by Kevin Bailey, whose grandfather is interred there. He has been working to rehabilitate the cemetery with help from the community.

Additional information and a more detailed history can be found in essays by Michael R. Allen and Azzurra Cox on the project website at <http://digital.wustl.edu/washingtonparkcemetery>.

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#### References:

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City of St. Louis Recorder of Deeds website: <http://stlouiscityrecorder.org/archives/cemetery/washingtonparkcemetery.html>.

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—Co-incident with the conception of the Garden Cemetery was developed the permanent care and preservation of the same, and it is only in recent years that land has been sold with provisions for perpetual care.

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