

**Unrest and Remembrance:
A Study of Washington Park Cemetery Burial Records**

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A 1920 advertisement published in the St. Louis Argus, a Black weekly newspaper, describes the new Washington Park Cemetery (WPC) as a modern garden cemetery with provisions for perpetual care, a burial park that will be beautifully maintained and preserved for all time (Appendix A). Today, it is one of the oldest Black burial sites in St. Louis, Missouri. Built at a time when 90% of cemeteries around the United States were restricted by racial covenants, it was the promise of a thriving space as much for living Black St. Louisans as it was for the dead (Cox, 2017). Indeed, it was advertised as a gathering space, a place with a picturesque landscape and walking paths, the site of large holiday gatherings to celebrate life and remember loved ones who have passed (Cox, 2017). But all of that has changed. Due to a variety of reasons, WPC has suffered decades of neglect and abuse, and the last burial occurred in the 1980s. This reality eventually led to the north sections of the property to be identified as abandoned (Williams, 2018).

In 1992, the City of St. Louis first condemned and then purchased the north section of the cemetery in order to expand the light rail system and clear a hill for an airport runway (Lhotka, 1992). Beginning in 1993, 2,500 graves were removed for the train project and in 1997, another 9,500 graves were moved for the airport project (Lhotka, 1996; Morris, 2000). The city hired contractors to disinter graves in sections 14, 15, and 15-South (Appendix B) and move the deceased individuals to 23 different cemeteries across the metropolitan area. A lawsuit that addressed the issue of relocation required that the city provide a list of the 12,000 graves they moved and it is publicly available on the city's website (City of St. Louis, 2001).

Imagine for a moment that you are visiting your hometown of St. Louis and you decide to stop by WPC where your grandparents are buried, only to discover that the section of the cemetery where they were meant to spend eternity has been replaced by asphalt. That is precisely what happened to a person who eventually made it to the reference desk of the library where I was working in North St. Louis County in 2019. As I set out to help her locate the graves of her family members, that is when I came across news articles about the disturbing history of the disinterments of WPC.

The Washington Park North Reinterment Index provided by the City of St. Louis (2001), referred to in this study as “the removal list,” is where I finally located the names of my library patron’s grandparents. Though, that is not entirely accurate; their last name was spelled incorrectly on the removal list, but other identifying information gave us confidence that we had identified the correct people. Armed with directions to a different cemetery, the library patron went away confused but relieved that she could pay her respects to her grandparents.

I have thought about that reference interaction and WPC often. I wonder how many people have not had success finding their relatives’ graves, and whether the graves are actually located in the cemeteries and plots indicated on the removal list. Perhaps most importantly, I wonder what it means to a family and its history and customs when a grave cannot be located. This project has given me the opportunity to look into the matter in more detail.

Most people likely consult the removal list in search of a specific person or persons. In my research on this subject, I have not come across any evidence that the removal list as a whole has been checked for accuracy. This project sets out to discover whether burial records for a deceased individual moved from WPC to one of the 23 cemeteries contain any inconsistencies across sources. For the purposes of this project, I have narrowed my inquiry to this question: How do burial records for graves that have been relocated from Washington Park to Calvary Cemetery compare with burial records of Washington Park graves that have never been moved?

Based on news articles and civil lawsuits about people who could not locate family members’ graves (Tuft, 1994; Tuft, 1995a; Tuft, 1995b), and a history of mismanaged cemetery moves in St. Louis (O’Malley, 2019), I predict that graves that have been moved from WPC to Calvary Cemetery will have more inconsistent burial records than graves that have never been moved, and furthermore, I predict that I will not be able to locate some of the graves moved to Calvary.

Methods

From the removal list, I randomly chose 25 people whose graves were moved from WPC to Calvary Cemetery, and then I visited WPC and randomly chose 25 legible graves from various sections of the property. I collected identifying information about

each deceased person including the individual's name, date of birth, date of death, original plot location of the grave marker at WPC and, for the reinterred graves, the new plot location at Calvary Cemetery. For background information on how I made methodology choices, see Appendix C.

For this report, I studied five sources of burial information: the removal list (St. Louis, 2001), original death certificates from the Missouri Office of the Secretary of State (n.d.), Calvary Cemetery's index of burials (Archdiocese of St. Louis, n.d.), WPC's index of burials (St. Louis Genealogical Society, 2003), and observations of the actual grave markers located in WPC and Calvary. I then used data collection tables (Appendices D and E) to record my findings.

I am not attempting to determine which sources or pieces of information are inaccurate or how they may have gotten that way. Instead, I am trying to determine whether data about a deceased individual's burial is consistent or inconsistent across sources. Below is the system I used to determine whether or not inconsistencies exist.

Names

When an individual's name was spelled the same way in each burial source, I considered that a consistent piece of information. An example of an inconsistency with a name would be for the individual Georgia Highbau, whose death certificate and grave marker lists her surname as Highbau but whose surname is listed as Highbow on the city's removal list and Calvary's burial index. I did not count an omission as an inconsistency. For instance, Virgil George Hightower Jr. is listed as Virgil Hightower on the city's removal list, but his full name and suffix is listed on the grave marker and on his death certificate. This is not considered an inconsistency in this report.

There was a solitary case where a first name was shortened to a nickname in one source but not another: Thomas Tyus is listed as such on the city's removal search and death certificate, but Calvary's index and the actual grave marker lists this individual as Tommie Tyus. This is considered an inconsistency in this report. While it is quite possible that the nickname on the grave was a family preference, the nickname could cause confusion to current or future descendants or researchers.

Dates

If any part of the dates of birth or death in one source conflicted with a date listed

in another source, that is considered an inconsistency in this report. For instance, Irnell Nowlin’s death certificate indicates that she died on July 10, 1906 but her grave marker indicates that she died in the year 1907. This is considered an inconsistency in this report. I did not count an omission as an inconsistency. For instance, if only the year of death is listed on the grave marker, but that year matches other sources, that is not considered an inconsistency in this report.

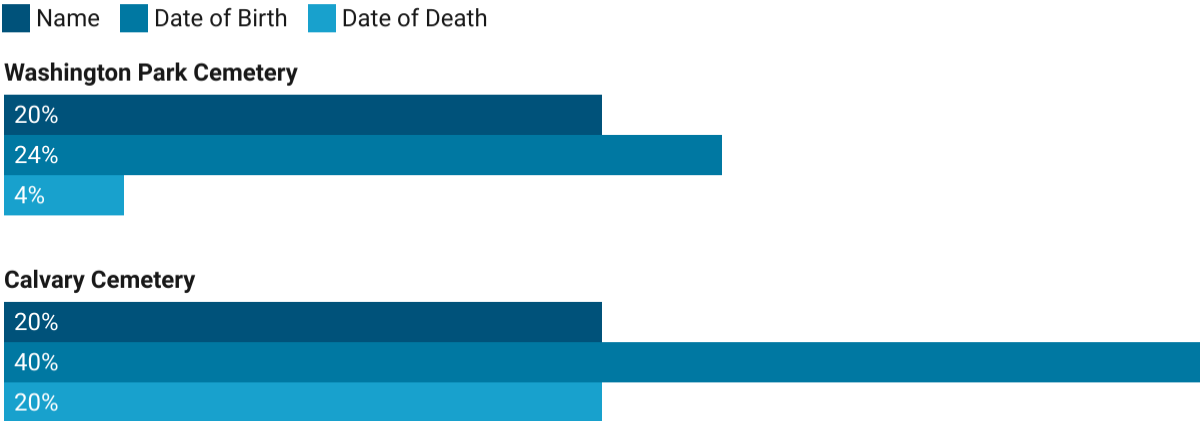
Results

Overall, this study shows that there were inconsistencies in the burial records of those reinterred at Calvary and those whose graves were never moved. However, as predicted, there were more inconsistencies in records of the graves that were moved. Of all the fields of identifying information examined, a grave’s plot location is the most consistent across the sources of burial. One hundred percent of the original plot locations listed on the removal list matches the locations listed in WPC’s burial index. My prediction that I would not be able to locate the reinterred graves was not supported.

Burial records of graves that were moved to Calvary and graves that were never moved from WPC had inconsistencies in names, dates of birth, and dates of death. As illustrated in Figure 1, date of birth inconsistencies occurred at the highest rate in both groups.

Figure 1

Percentage of Inconsistencies Across Sources of Burial Data



As illustrated in the data collection tools (Appendices D and E), some individuals had more than one field of burial data that was inconsistent across sources. For example Virgil Hightower's date of birth and date of death were listed differently on his grave marker and his death certificate.

Graves moved to Calvary had the highest frequency of inconsistencies in burial records. Ten out of the 25 graves studied had inconsistent birth date records and five out of the 25 graves had inconsistent death date records. For the 25 WPC graves that were not moved, six had inconsistent birth records and only one had an inconsistent date of death record.

Discussion

Errors in burial records are particularly disappointing when they occur more often in records of graves that were disinterred. This study is important because of the meaning placed in burial grounds, in this case, by and about Black St. Louisans whose families chose WPC as their final resting place. Spaces like WPC allowed the Black community to reclaim cultural and historical burial rituals passed down from the African diaspora, which included elaborate caskets, baubles on graves, and celebratory funerals (Cox, 2017; King, 2010). At its peak, it was a place that recognized the value of Black lives within a society that reinforced Jim Crow-era racial covenants in neighborhood bylaws and exclusionary zoning practices (Cox, 2017). Ultimately, transportation systems were deemed more important than the stories and histories of the individuals interred there. As Cox (2017) points out, the lack of preservation of Black burial grounds speaks to the continued trend of devaluing Black lives and bodies.

Cemeteries are certainly not just repositories for the dead. In some ways, cemeteries are future-oriented places for the living, for memorials are nothing if not directed at those who will visit and remember (Eggner, 2010). The cemetery gives the living a sense of historical continuity, a physical place where religion, philosophy, and culture intersect (French, 1974). As Francaviglia (1971) points out, the landscape, architecture, social status, and segregation of a cemetery actually mirror the living, not the dead. Not only are these sacred spaces a way to connect with loved ones, but they are places where culture can be preserved (Jones, 2011). Morris describes Black cemeteries, like Black history, as ephemeral.

Real World Implications

If someone is searching for a relative who was originally buried at WPC but was moved, inconsistent burial records might prevent them from finding their loved one. This could be seen not only as damaging to a family's culture, but also to Black history. Wright and Hughes (1996) point out that “[b]y preserving African American cemeteries, we are sustaining the memories of the folk ways they represent; the sermons, prayers, and testimonials are expressions of life's hardships, its stresses and strains, and, in the end, its beauty” (p. 249-250). Rainville notes that cemeteries of historically excluded groups may be the most valuable since their histories are largely silenced or ignored (2009). Fraser and Butler (1986), who studied a disinterment of Black graves in another state, wrote: “[I]n the event of a choice between [B]lack history and ‘progress,’ the rare physical markers of an Afro-American past are easily destroyed” (129).

Looking Ahead

There are several possible actions that could come from this report. Further comparisons of graves moved from WPC to Calvary or one of the other 22 cemeteries to which graves were moved could be conducted. A larger quantity of graves could be studied. A deeper dive into more sources of burial information could help determine which data are, in fact, errors. A list of errors on the removal list could be provided to the City of St. Louis. A list of errors on the grave markers could be reported to the cemeteries. A study could be conducted on “abandoned” cemeteries; the designation of WPC as “abandoned” by the city is the reason the city was able to purchase parts of the north section of the cemetery. But as Engelhart (2019) argues, as long as a cemetery is considered by the public to be a burial site, it should not be considered abandoned. Cemeteries may seem like quiet places, but when seen as rhetorical spaces, there are thousands of voices and remembrances calling out (Wright, 2005).

Conclusion and Reflection

My goal in conducting this study was to examine whether burial records for graves that have been moved from WPC contain more inconsistencies than graves that have not been moved. Based on the random sampling I studied, this prediction was supported. However, many more questions than answers emerged over the course of this study. What is the impact on a community when a loved one's final resting place

has been moved and records are possibly mismanaged? In what ways might a city avoid removing a cemetery? In what ways might the process of record-keeping be improved if and when a cemetery move becomes necessary? What is the aim of a grave marker that no one can locate? When a Black cemetery is dismantled, is this an extension of gentrification and environmental injustice, even after death? What provisions exist to attempt to keep a promise of perpetual care? How do we, as a society, want to treat cemeteries that are no longer being cared for?

When I phoned the Calvary Administrative office to request maps of the various sections I needed to observe for this report, I was taken aback when I was told that they had maps for all sections of the cemetery except for section 37, where most, but not all, WPC graves were relocated over two decades ago. I would like to see a map for that section developed and available for families and researchers, and to give recognition to the people buried there. Despite the absence of a map, I was pleased that I could locate each of the grave markers I sought for this report. That gives me hope that my library patron made it to her grandparents' graves after all.

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Appendix A

Advertisement for Washington Park Cemetery (St. Louis Argus, June 18, 1920).

"WHERE NATURE LEADS THROUGH PATHS OF PEACE"

WASHINGTON PARK

A GARDEN CEMETERY OR BURIAL PARK

With Perpetual Care and Maintenance

GROUNDS: Natural Bridge and Brown Road
Phone, Cabany 1938

OFFICE: 220 Central National Bank Building, 705 Olive St.
Phone, Olive 7826

**"A CEMETERY YET A LOVELY GARDEN SPOT WHERE
NAUGHT OF WOE OBTRUDES ITS MELANCHOLY"**

THE GARDEN CEMETERY IS AN AMERICAN IDEA

—Less Than thirty years ago the American idea, the Garden Cemetery or Burial Park—as distinguished from the old graveyard with its crude congestion of grave mounds, quaint and incongruous burial stones, gnarled and ancient trees and overgrown with weeds and shrubbery—was developed.

—The most beautiful burial grounds in the world have been the result, contrasting sharply with the congestion of monuments and tombs existing in burial places throughout all the countries of the old world—so-called "Cities of the Dead," and in all of the older cemeteries of this country.

—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.

—Washington Park will be a departure from the old graveyard and will be in the true sense of the word a Burial Park—and will remain a beautiful place of public veneration for all time to come.



FORE GROUND, ENTRANCE, CHAPEL AND KEEPERS LODGE AS SEEN FROM NATURAL BRIDGE ROAD

Visit this Beautiful Park--Grounds Open Daily for Inspection

Drive out Natural Bridge Road to Brown Road or take Kirkwood-Ferguson car to Carson Road--Automobiles to Grounds meet all cars every Sunday afternoon from 2 to 5 o'clock

Prospective Buyers Will Be Taken To Grounds in Automobiles

Appendix B

Notice about the plan to disinter graves at WPC (St. Louis Genealogical Society, 2003).

NOTICE NOTICE NOTICE
WASHINGTON PARK CEMETERY

The St. Louis Airport Authority purchased a portion of the Washington Park Cemetery, north of Highway I-70, to remove an obstruction to its runway. The Airport has assembled the names and locations of deceased persons buried in sections 14, 15 and 15-South (15-South is also known as Section 13). If you are related to someone buried in the above sections, please call the Airport Community Programs Office at 731-4100 or write:

Airport Community Programs Office
 4610 North Lindbergh, Suite 260
 Bridgeton, Mo 63044

ATTENTION: WASHINGTON PARK CEMETERY PROJECT

The shaded areas of the above map are known as Sections 14, 15 and 15-South.

St. Louis Cemeteries: Washington Park Cemetery SLCEM70

Appendix C

Note on Methodology

I originally started with several dozen individuals whose graves were moved from WPC to Calvary Cemetery from the removal list provided by the City of St. Louis. I chose the individuals at random, but I chose less common names to avoid confusion between burial records. For instance, I avoided common surnames like Smith, Brown, and Williams. I narrowed the list down to 25 individuals based on the wealth of information I could find on each individual. For instance, I chose individuals who died in 1970 or earlier so I could attain their death certificates, since Missouri death records are made public after 50 years.

For the other half of data collection, I visited Washington Park Cemetery and randomly chose several dozen legible graves and then looked up information about the individuals represented. In this case, I started with the actual graves simply because their presence means they have not been moved. Again, I narrowed the list down to 25 individuals based on the wealth of information I could find about the individual.

The reason I chose the specific pieces of identifying information I did is because I am imagining a family member searching for a loved one's grave; chances are good they have at least some of this information. If, for example, a name is spelled differently in two different databases, that could become a serious obstacle in the search for a grave.

Appendix D

Data collection tool used to keep track of inconsistencies in burial data on individuals moved from Washington Park Cemetery to Calvary Cemetery.

| Individual | Name | | | | Date of Birth (DOB) | | Date of Death (DOD) | | Plot | | | | Inconsistent Information |
|------------------------|---------|------------|-----------|--------------|---------------------|------------|---------------------|------------|------|--------------|-----------|--------------|--------------------------|
| | Grave | Death Cert | Cal Index | Removal List | Grave | Death Cert | Grave | Death Cert | Orig | Actual Grave | Cal Index | Removal List | |
| Allen, Violet | | | | | 1917 | 1916 | | | | | | | DOB |
| Betts, Iola | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Blanchard, Simon | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Henley, Ella Mae | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Herring, Percy | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Highbow [sic], Georgia | Highbau | Highbau | | Highbow | | | | | | | | | Name |
| Hightower, Virgil | | | | | 5/18/1927 | 5/18/1929 | 5/22/1949 | 4/25/1949 | | | | | DOB, DOD |
| Hinesman, Katie | Hineman | Hinesman | | Hinesman | | | | | | | | | Name |
| Hoggset, Hester | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Murrell, Thomas | | | | | 1/1/1892 | 12/2/1905 | 12/14/1956 | 12/7/1956 | | | | | DOB, DOD |
| Nowlin, Irnell | | | | | 1907 | 7/10/1906 | | | | | | | DOB |
| Otey, James W | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Owens, Blanche Jones | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Page, Amelia | | | | | 1899 | 3/5/1898 | | | | | | | DOD |
| Parham, Tom | | | | | 1882 | 1878 | | | | | | | DOB |
| Perry, Callie H | Pery | Perry | | Perry | 1894 | 1/15/1899 | | | | | | | Name, DOB |
| Sanders, Josephine | | | | | 1/17/1912 | 1/28/1912 | | | | | | | DOB |
| Sandlin, Ora Lee | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Sango, Samuel Wade | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Scruggs, Cora | | | | | 9/15/1888 | 9/15/1883 | 11/7/1961 | 11/28/1961 | | | | | DOB, DOD |
| Toombs, Olivia K | Olivia | Oliva | | Olivia | | | | | | | | | Name |
| Toy, Lonzy | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Tree Jr., George | | | | | 1946 | 8/31/1945 | | | | | | | DOB |
| Tyus, Thomas | Tommie | Thomas | | Thomas | 1893 | 4/6/1894 | | | | | | | Name, DOB |
| Welch, Salina | | | | | | | 11/23/1948 | 11/19/1948 | | | | | DOD |

Note. Blank lines next to an individual signifies that there were no inconsistencies across sources of burial data.

Appendix E

Data collection tool used to keep track of inconsistencies in burial data on individuals that were not moved from Washington Park Cemetery.

| Individual | Name | | Date of Birth (DOB) | | Date of Death (DOD) | | Index | Plot | | Inconsistent Information |
|-----------------------|---------|------------|---------------------|------------|---------------------|------------|-------|--------------|--|--------------------------|
| | Grave | Death Cert | Grave | Death Cert | Grave | Death Cert | | Actual Grave | | |
| Banks, Elenora | | | | | | | | | | |
| Bluiett, Della | Bluiett | Bluett | | | | | | | | Name |
| Breedlove, James T. | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cannon, Julius W. | Julius | Julious | | | | | | | | Name |
| Clarke, Leon McIntosh | Leon | Lean | | | | | | | | Name |
| Collier, Elie | Elie | Eli | 1/10/1888 | 1/14/1888 | | | | | | Name, DOB |
| Curby, Nanie May | Nanie | Nannie | | | 5/10/1994 | 5/8/1944 | | | | Name, DOD |
| Davis, Alfonso | | | | | | | | | | |
| Fondren, Hargest | | | | | | | | | | |
| Forbis, Mamie D. | | | | | | | | | | |
| Gibson, Dezzie M. | | | | | | | | | | |
| Herron, Blannie | | | | | | | | | | |
| Kenner, Alice | | | | | | | | | | |
| Lester, Willie | | | | | | | | | | |
| Long, Ora Dee | | | | | | | | | | |
| Massey, Chester | | | | | | | | | | |
| McCaleb, Vivian F. | | | | | | | | | | |
| Oldham, Sidney | | | | | | | | | | |
| Peyton, Julia K | | | 4/4/1900 | 4/5/1900 | | | | | | DOB |
| Proctor, Lena Belle | | | 1900 | 1901 | | | | | | DOB |
| Reid, Castoria | | | 1900 | 2/26/1902 | | | | | | DOB |
| Shelton, Mayre C. | | | 1890 | 7/7/1900 | | | | | | DOB |
| Swanson, Jessie | | | 1885 | 5/17/1893 | | | | | | DOB |
| Traylor, Samuel | | | | | | | | | | |
| Watters, William H. | | | | | | | | | | |

Note. Blank lines next to an individual signifies that there were no inconsistencies across sources of burial data.