

Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

Kearney's First Cemetery: Why a Community Decides to Move a Cemetery and Forget its Past, Part I

By: Cannon Marchand

Death and "where you bury" is part of an individual's and community's shared identity and history. Cemeteries are one of the most permanent records of past people. Through names and dates etched in to stone markers a picture of what a community used to be can be learned. Kearney, Nebraska, currently a mid-sized western community has lost and forgotten its first burial ground and the identity of those that were buried there. In 1889 the people interred at the first community burial grounds were moved as Kearney as a community struggled to transition from a Western frontier town to a more civilized society that could be comparable to societies back East. People did not want to be reminded of how fragile life could be in the early days of settling the prairie. To both hide and forget that past, the bodies were moved to the newly created municipal cemetery and reinterred in mostly unmarked graves. By examining who was buried at what should be considered the first cemetery in Kearney and attempting to identify where exactly the burial grounds were, a better understanding of Western U.S. history, the struggles of early Western life, and the overall societal transition of the closing of the frontier period in U.S. history can be gained. At a more local level, Kearney as both a city and community should strive to remember its forgotten cemetery history in order better to understand and respect its past and those who died in the formation of its community.

The Kearney location was surveyed into plots in 1871 and identified as a good choice for a settlement because the Union Pacific Transcontinental mainline tracks formed a Junction with the Burlington and Missouri Railway there. The town was first called Kearny Junction, named after a nearby frontier fort named for frontier Army Officer General Stephen Watts Kearny.

The town grew in population and was incorporated in 1873, and was then just called Kearney. The population in 1873 grew rapidly, from around two hundred fifty, to around ten thousand inhabitants in 1892.

The city enjoyed hasty growth, industrialization, and general development through the work of land speculators and industrialists. These individuals were called boosters and worked through newspapers and other forms of communication back East to attract people to come west to Kearney. These people moving west then bought their own land and started or invested in businesses. The most famous land speculator in Kearney was George Frank, who spent and lost a fortune attracting people to move to and invest in the community. Eventually, different economic factors in the late 1880s and early 1890s across the country caused an economic panic. The Panic of 1893 was partially caused by land speculation taking place across the country just as in Kearney. Kearney saw prominent land speculators and investors go broke and almost half of the ten-thousand residents would move away to find work elsewhere. The population of Kearney thereafter saw steady growth and general advancement into the current day.

During this time of economic growth and development Kearney, as a city, did not formally establish a cemetery until 1876. An important question then is: what did people do with their dead in the early history of Kearney prior to 1877? The 1860s and 1870s were times of settling and developing the Western regions of the country. One thing that was not in short supply was land and space. People who bought land did not buy it small plots, but by the acre. At the same time development of urban centers was lacking. Formalities such as municipal cemeteries would take time to develop. So, if one had land and wanted to keep their dead loved ones close to them the logical thing was to just bury their family on their land. This was common in early frontier Nebraska.

In fact, there is a notable account of a dead individual being buried in a large backyard in the early history of Kearney. The story is about a prominent son of a founder of Kearney. Asbury Collins, for whom Collins Township, on which most of Kearney now sits was named, owned a good deal of land around what was developing into the city. In 1875 his son, Milton Collins, was a young man who also owned his own land and home. In mid-September of that year between twenty and thirty men described as cowboys were moving some sixty horses through the Kearney area. That night some of the horses destroyed some corn in Collins' farm. Young Collins demanded payment for the destroyed crops leading to an altercation between the men and Collins. Collins was shot multiple times and was buried on land owned by his family near what is now downtown Kearney. Other examples of burials on family's land also exist.

Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that everyone in the community wanted or was able to bury their dead on family-owned land as not everyone owned sufficient land to bury on. People without land in the community and transients just moving through the area would also die in Kearney. Hence, the city, being incorporated in 1873, needed a cemetery and an appropriate location was sought almost concurrently with the city's founding, or at least within a few years. The spot which is still the current City Cemetery was formally selected in 1876 and eventually purchased in 1877. An obvious problem with this time-line, however, is that it leaves a near six-year gap from Kearney being incorporated to when the city started its own cemetery. There were at least two bodies at the present day city cemetery from 1861 and 1866. They were placed there when the land was owned by either Ira Wambaugh or the Collins family prior mentioned. Asbury Collins was a reverend so it is possible that these were members from his earlier parish.

There is no evidence of any other bodies at the site of the current cemetery being buried there in the 1870s. The Kearney Hub in 1893 would jokingly have you believe, through its good-humored attempts at bolstering the image of the city, that no one died in the founding years of Kearney. In fact, the Hub reported in 1897 that, "the city was settled so long before there was a death that... a man was killed for the purpose of starting the cemetery and giving the undertaker something to do." Obviously, this is not how things developed. The boosters of the city would have just as easily forgotten or ignored the deaths that were so common in the early days of Western life. They were trying to sell Kearney as being little different than the Eastern cities. So, what did people who did not have land to bury upon or want the graves on their own land do with their dead before the current city cemetery was founded?

The downtown and oldest parts of Kearney are in the Platte River valley right along the Union Pacific mainline. About a mile from the city center are the hills at the edge of the Platte River valley before the land continues in a large flat plain. Hills are significant for considering where to put your dead. Hills are a common location for many cemeteries because they bring the dead closer to God. More logical, but less good-natured reasons are that hilly land is also less suited for agricultural farming, and building on hills is usually cheaper than flat land. A good majority of cemeteries across the United States are on hilly land because it is cheaper. It would make sense that if a body needed to be buried in early Kearney one would follow a small draw up the hills that overlooked the city and begin placing graves there if no other place existed to bury them. The current cemetery in the early 1870s was over a mile away from the city center and was still privately owned by Ira B. Wambaugh, a community member, and then later, interestingly, by the same Collins family as mentioned earlier until they sold it to the City in 1877. It would have been more out of the way for early Kearney residents than the closer hills immediately to the North.

So if someone did place a body on the hills that overlooked Kearney it would make sense that others would do so too. And indeed they did. The first person buried on one of those hills north of the city has been forgotten, but it is likely that it was someone's family member buried there for the sole reason that it made for an appropriate burial ground. Soon after, however, others started to be buried around that individual and a small ceme-

tery was created. According to a 1967 history of Kearney publication, Where the Buffalo Roamed, the first person to die in the newly created city was Pleasants Rodgers. It notes that he was buried in the area around Kearney, as lake Kearney would be, but there is no concrete evidence for this assertion.

If, however, this was the first cemetery in Kearney and housed the dead before the city started running the current cemetery in 1877, there are some problems that need to be addressed. Primarily, where was this cemetery by the lake and what necessitated it being moved and now forgotten? These are difficult questions to answer and there is no primary source such as a deed record saying that a cemetery was located just North of Kearney Lake. There are clues to suggest that it did exist and was just north, perhaps almost on the banks, of what is now Kearney Lake, currently adjacent to the Kearney Country Club and overlooking the University of Nebraska at Kearney campus.

Locating the cemetery just North, maybe within tens of meters, of Lake Kearney seems plausible for several reasons. The first is that even though the deeds of that section of land do not indicate that it was a cemetery or that the city or county ever owned it, they do identify the individuals who owned it through 1889. This year will be important later. It was deeded from the government to the Union Pacific railway which was the case for most of the land around Kearney. The land section passed through various hands in sales, first from the railway to a C.H. McCormick, then to a Perkins, then to a William Forbes, then to a William McNair, and then to a Thomas S. Glover in 1889. The interesting thing about these men is that the Kearney Hub either makes no mention of them (in the case of Perkins and Forbes) or it indicates they were business men, whom we would now call land speculators. These men would not have had a strong tie to the land as it was not their family land. They were in other words absentee land owners. For example, Glover lived in New York. C. H. McCormick is the famous inventor of farm implements, such as the McCormick reaper lived in Chicago.

McNair also was the name of George Frank's wife's father, but it is not for certain this is the same McNair. Accordingly, it is possible that they allowed burials in the hilly section of the land around where Kearney Lake is now as it was not that valuable for farming and they already had large amounts of land and other business pursuits to manage. This would mean the land was not a formal city cemetery but may well have been used for burials on an informal basis.

The evidence for the cemetery being located here gets stronger as the Kearney Hub reported in August 1889 that there had been a cemetery before the current cemetery was purchased. The Hub did so by running notices from D.M. Swisher, the city sexton, to the public stating, "I am directed by the cemetery committee to remove all the remains in the old graveyard north of the lake to Kearney cemetery on or before August 10, 1889. All persons having relatives buried there who wish to procure lots in the cemetery and superintend such removals will please confer with me immediately." Other evidence for the cemetery being located North of Kearney Lake comes from the interment records for the current cemetery. Regarding the bodies moved it does say in the description that the bodies were moved from "North of Kearney Lake". Unfortunately the Hub was in its infancy in 1889. Other earlier newspapers make no mention of where a cemetery was. They were mostly focused with advertising the greatness of Kearney to attract people to the community.

Of course, "North of Kearney Lake" is not very exact, and the only reference to a true location for the cemetery was in a Hub report on a city council meeting. A section of that report stated that the city approved a bill for paying expenses relating to "removal of bodies from the old cemetery at the reunion grounds." The reunion grounds would reference the Grand Army of the Republic reunion. The GAR was a national club for Union soldiers that fought in the Civil War. Cities had chapters and Nebraska had state wide meetings or camps once a year. In 1889 Kearney was selected for the camp location. This was not a small affair. Kearney's population at the time was around eight thousand people and the reunion's attendance brought that number up to forty or forty-five thousand people. The grandstands alone built on the parade grounds could hold six thousand people. During the course of the reunion reenactments of both land and sea battles were conducted; parades occurred that featured twenty-two bands that came to Kearney. Also, special train service was provided by Union Pacific railway to bring people to Kearney for the event. Where the Buffalo Roamed, a 1967 Buffalo County historical publication, has a section on the event but does not mention the cemetery. It does however feature a picture of the event near the Kearney Lake.

To be continued in Vol. 42 No. 2...

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Please help us thank our January 14th daily sponsor, Mary Kommers in recognition of her grandfather Waldo Bodison.

Thank you, Mary! Your support is appreciated!

Director's Report—Jennifer Murrish

Hello, BCHS/Trails & Rails Museum members! This has been a crazy winter in Buffalo County. The waves of snow have been manageable, but a nuisance. It certainly reminds me that even though it is annoying, we are all prepared for it. Didn't we all go get gas for our cars and food for our pantries? Some of you probably made sure your rechargeable batteries were ready next to the flashlights. Is this how our pioneers prepared? I simply feel humbled to imagine what they went through during these storms on the prairie. We hope you are staying warm and spending time making new memories (aka history) with your friends and family!

We have been working hard on some big projects here at the Museum. I don't have a lot of updates yet, so I will just list a few projects that you will certainly be seeing more about in the near future. Feel free to check out our Facebook page for more instant updates: "BuffaloCounty HistoricalSociety".

- *new exterior sign by M & J Signs in Elm Creek
 - *donated shelving units from Lincoln Children's Museum
 - *grants for Phase 2 of the Family History Center
 - *partnership with the Kearney Hub on an upcoming book
 - *partnership with UNK to involve youth in creating displays
 - *framing the Guge images
 - *Buffalo Tale placement inside Museum buildings
 - *Eagle Scout project with benches, bike rack, and a weather-proof lending library
 - *installation of the remaining curtains
 - *Textile Tales
-

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