

INDIGENT BURIAL SITES IN SACRAMENTO COUNTY

INTRODUCTION

The Cemetery Advisory Commission's first project related to Indigent Burials was in 2003. Five memorials, at five sites throughout our County where the majority of County Burials have occurred since the Gold Rush, were placed and dedicated. These sites represent the burial sites of approximately 15,000 people, most buried with no grave markers.

WHAT IS AN INDIGENT?

First we need to explore a bit of terminology. All those we are remembering were "County Burials"...people buried by and at the expense of the County of Sacramento. They may have been County Hospital patients, Coroner's Cases, or simply people who had no funds for a private burial. A common word referring to these people is indigent... derived from the verb "to need." One thing we know about those who buried as "indigents" is that they do not conform to a stereotype. One of the "indigents" buried in the Sacramento Historic City Cemetery discovered one of the richest silver mines in Nevada but was buried as an indigent when his family was not available to pay for his interment. An indigent may be a father, a mother, a brother, a sister, a child, a friend, who lost their job in a recession...or a relative who lost all in the great depression...or someone who made some poor decisions, or someone with an unexpected illness that decimated their savings. They are all persons that we need to treat with respect and dignity...and remember as we would like to be treated...and remembered.

SACRAMENTO INDIGENT AREAS

Most of you have heard of a Potter's Field, a term often applied to indigent grave sites. "Potter's Field" is a biblical reference to land rich with clay. Being an area poor for farming or for even a quarry wasteland, these areas became convenient locations for disposal of those too poor to afford the orthodox cemeteries. Well, in Sacramento, there have been numerous Potter's Fields since the Gold Rush. There are indigents buried in many of our cemeteries. Since the 1800's, state law has made county coroners responsible for interring the remains of any person whose estate cannot cover the expenses and no other party steps forward to make such arrangements. In Sacramento County, over the past 150 years, we know that the County Coroner contracted with at least 19 cemeteries for the burial or cremation of indigents. These 19 cemeteries include sites owned by cities, religious groups, fraternal organizations, and private parties. We also know that charitable groups and individuals have voluntarily provided the burial expenses for many more individuals who could not afford this expense—most cemeteries in the county contain these "charitable burials."

Current indigent burials are handled through a contracted funeral home and are buried in a group interment each year at a contracted cemetery. The cremated remains are placed in separate clearly marked containers and interred in an assigned spot inside the grave. A marker is placed at each indigent burial site.

As of 2010, all veterans are automatically interred at the VA National Cemetery in Dixon unless family is known and requests differently. The burials for veterans that have no known family are handled by Dignity Memorial through Reichert's Funeral and Cremation Services at no charge. Their final resting place is the VA National Cemetery in Dixon.

FIVE MAJOR BURIAL SITES OF INDIGENTS

SACRAMENTO COUNTY CEMETERY

NUMBER OF INDIGENT BURIALS

An estimated 10,000+ were buried there, representing Coroner's Cases, County Hospital Burials, and others without funds to pay for their burial.

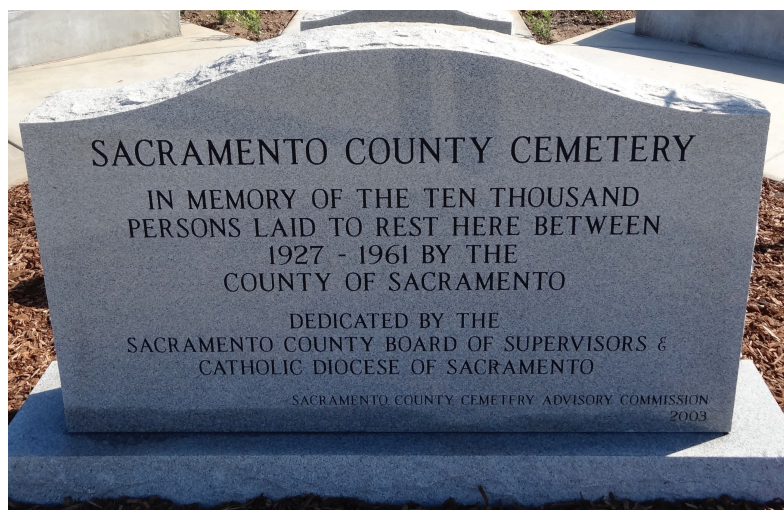
BRIEF HISTORY

The Sacramento County Cemetery was started in 1927 and used for burials until 1961. The 12 acres, along with 3 acres of unused land, was sold to St. Marys Cemetery in 1975 for a minimal cost and, as no funding was available for maintenance, it was "disked" several times yearly to keep the weeds down and basically appeared as an open field. Markers were small concrete blocks with a brass plate on top that either disappeared over the years or were buried at the end of each row after being catalogued, to allow maintenance of the cemetery.

In 2003, St. Marys Cemetery erected a granite bench, and the Sacramento County Cemetery Commission erected a granite memorial. In 2005 the remains of the 72 people from the old Sacramento County Hospital Cemetery, found during expansion of the UCD Cancer Center, were re-interred here and St. Marys generously erected a granite memorial to them.

Several years ago the Diocese of Sacramento initiated plans to move the indigents into an adjacent area that could be memorialized. The over 10,000 who had no obvious identity now lie in a beautiful area with their names...their identity...permanently engraved on markers.

Thanks to the work of Lois Dove, an archivist at the Sacramento Historic City Cemetery and a member of the Cemetery Commission, the approximate 10,000 names of those interred at the County Cemetery have been converted from the original records and published as a book and will eventually be on this website.





SACRAMENTO COUNTY CEMETERY
IN MEMORY OF THE TEN THOUSAND
PERSONS LAID TO REST HERE BETWEEN
1927 - 1961 BY THE
COUNTY OF SACRAMENTO
DEDICATED BY THE
SACRAMENTO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS &
CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF SACRAMENTO
SACRAMENTO COUNTY CEMETERY ADVISORY COMMISSION
2003

NEW HELVETIA CEMETERY
(reinterred at East Lawn Memorial Park)

NUMBER OF INDIGENT BURIALS

Estimated at about 2,000 from mid-late 1800's to 1912.

BRIEF HISTORY

New Helvetia Cemetery, established in 1849 and “contiguous” with Sutter's Fort Burying Ground, with burials dating to 1847 or earlier, was converted into a park in about 1918 by removing most of the beautiful hand carved monuments and replacing them with uniform flat concrete markers. It was used less than the City Cemetery, due to its propensity for flooding. In 1955-56, the property was desired for a school. The city removed over 5,235 early settlers and pioneers. 4,691 (all considered unknowns) were placed into a mass grave at East Lawn Cemetery. A small number of “knowns” were moved to the City Cemetery and other local cemeteries. The City moved no monuments or grave markers and never put up even a single memorial. The Old City Cemetery Committee in conjunction with East Lawn, who provided all the financial support, erected a monument in the 1990's. Subsequently other groups have erected monuments in memory of those buried there, including the Japanese Community, the Medical Society, and the Sheriff's Department.



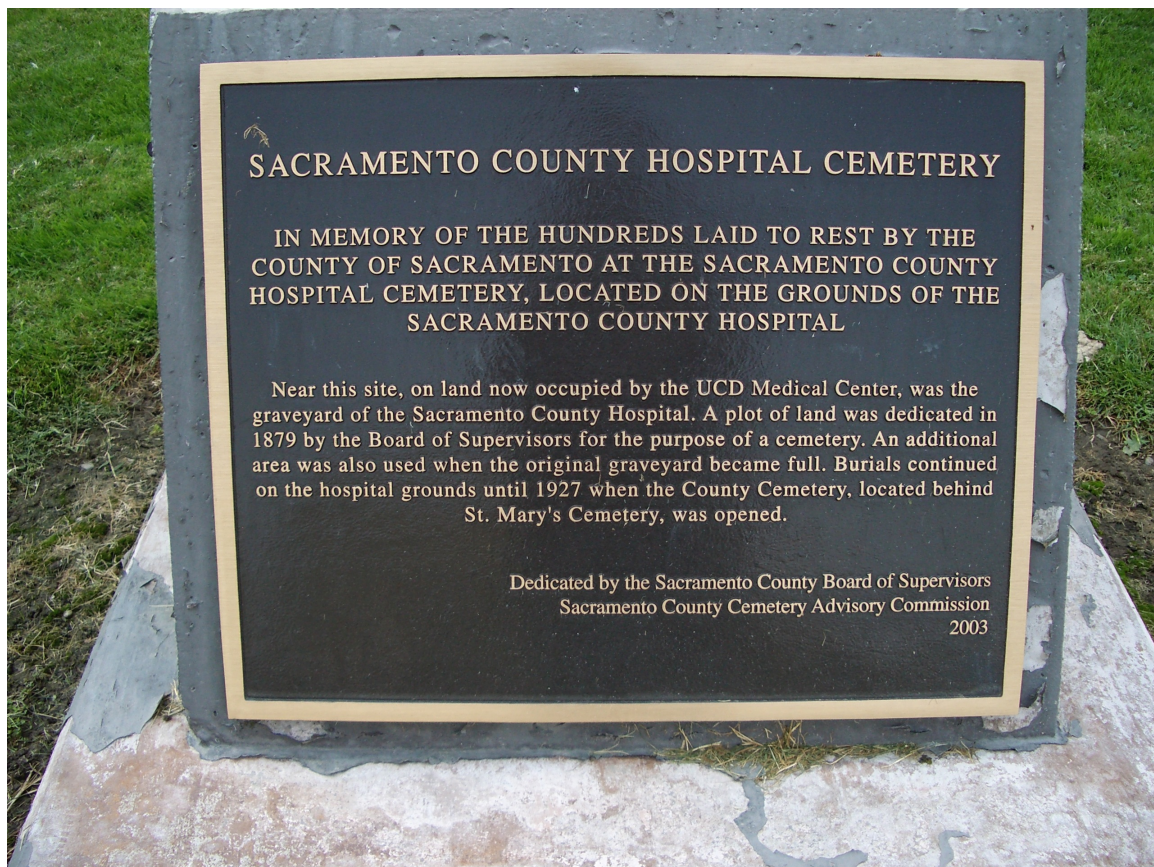
SACRAMENTO COUNTY HOSPITAL CEMETERY

NUMBER OF INDIGENT BURIALS

Estimated at about 265 from 1903 to 1912, and 1926 to 1927 (by available records). However it is likely that more burials occurred prior to 1903, and many more may have been buried on the County Hospital Grounds.

BRIEF HISTORY

Established by the Board of Supervisors in 1879, there were likely two burial areas at the old County Hospital. A newspaper article in the Sacramento Bee, March 1, 1912 noted the burials were in the same area where the hospital sewage system drained. There is anecdotal evidence but no definite evidence that any of these burials were ever moved. The suspected location at the time of placement of the memorial was thought to be adjacent to the Cancer Center but due to the “sensitivity” of a memorial to the dead it was felt best to locate it remotely...therefore its placement next to the water tower a block or two away. However the “suspected location” was proven accurate during an expansion of the Cancer Center when 72 remains were located.



BELLVIEW CEMETERY

NUMBER OF INDIGENT BURIALS

Estimated at about 2.000 from approximately 1961-1973

BRIEF HISTORY

Bellview cemetery was started in 1861 as a Family Cemetery and likely became a Public Cemetery in 1862, when burials other than family occurred. In 1875 it became the Bellview Cemetery Association and the next century was purchased in the mid-1900's by a man who sold plots, described his great plans, and left with the endowment money, ending up in prison. In receivership by the County for a time it was used for County Indigent Burials but no apparent grave markers were placed. Bellview was later purchased by a man in Southern California with apparently little interest in its preservation as further deterioration and vandalism occurred. The more recent burials are in the back of the cemetery (now a large area covered with river rock) whereas the more historic burials are in the large grassy area towards the front. Bellview was ultimately sold for back taxes, and several years ago was purchased by the Slavic Missionary Church who changed the name of Bellview and the larger cemetery in front, previously Arlington, to Quiet Haven Memorial Park.



SACRAMENTO HISTORIC CITY CEMETERY

NUMBER OF INDIGENT BURIALS

Estimated at at least 3,000 from mid 1800's through much of twentieth century.

BRIEF HISTORY

The Sacramento City Cemetery began in late 1849 and is over 30 acres in size with over 30,000 burials. It has been the site for indigent burials over the past 150+ years in a variety of areas, especially Southside Cemetery (a small area of City Cemetery actually now within Oddfellow's Cemetery), and likely in the areas near the current Veteran's area and the Mortuary Chapel.

