

Minneapolis' buried treasures



Elizabeth Flores, Star Tribune

Oscar Vaughn's tombstone in the Minneapolis Pioneers and Soldiers Memorial Cemetery would make you think the Civil War veteran was 110 when he died. But after some research, Sue Hunter Weir, the head of the Friends of the Cemetery, thinks he was closer to 86 when he died.

A special place for Memorial Day: Old Minneapolis cemetery tells the tales of long-gone war dead.

By [CURT BROWN](#), Star Tribune

Sue Hunter Weir kneels into a crouch and sweeps some grass clippings off the headstone of Oscar Vaughn, a veteran of the U.S. Colored Infantry in the Civil War who died 80 years ago.

Vaughn's headstone says he was born in 1808 and died at age 110 in 1918. Weir knows better.

The leader of the nonprofit Friends of the Cemetery group, Weir combed through old Census tracks and figured out Vaughn was closer to 86 when he joined the other roughly 200 soldiers buried in Minneapolis' oldest graveyard.

On May 30, 1868, the commander in chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, Gen. John Logan, designated a special day "for the purpose of strewing flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the latest rebellion."

Monday, the 155-year-old Minneapolis Pioneers and Soldiers Memorial Cemetery at the northeast corner of E. Lake Street and Cedar Avenue S. held its 140th consecutive Memorial Day service in honor of Logan's command, with the Seward Community Band playing and a reading of the Gettysburg Address.

One of the state's oldest graveyards, Pioneers and Soldiers is also one of its most obscure. Covering 27 acres in the Phillips neighborhood, it is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The cemetery has watched a city grow up around it since it received the first of more than 20,000 bodies -- a pastor's baby -- in 1853.

No casket has been put in the ground for nearly 40 years because only those with plots purchased before 1919 are allowed in.

"It's not an active site anymore, therefore no plots are being purchased, so there's no funding stream coming in for perpetual maintenance," said Bonnie McDonald, the director of the Minnesota Preservation Alliance, which recently listed the cemetery among the state's 10 most endangered historic sites.

However, there's almost no chance the valuable land will be sold to developers because the Health Department requires that descendants of the 20,000 people buried there be contacted, and disinterments are costly.

When the Layman family, which owned the cemetery for its first 60 years, tried to turn it into a shopping center and a park around 1920, residents rose up and formed a Cemetery Protective Association.

"Every good Minneapolitan who loves this City, who cherishes its traditions, who feels grateful to those workers that have passed on for what they wrought here, must certainly make vigorous protest," said a 1925 editorial in the Minneapolis Journal.

The cemetery has been owned and maintained by the city since the 1920s. Budget constraints have left one worker as caretaker. The wrought-iron fence surrounding the cemetery needs an \$800,000 overhaul and many of the headstones and the 1871 caretaker's cottage are languishing from neglect.

But the lives of those interred there are being kept alive by Weir.

One woman's obsession

A University of Minnesota academic adviser who lives nearby, Weir admits she's obsessed with preserving the cemetery's history.

"I hate to say it, but these people are more real to me than those on the other side of the turf," said Weir, 59.

According to her painstaking research, half those interred were children, roughly 10,000 who all died before their 10th birthday -- often from diseases linked to tainted Mississippi River drinking water. There are a few notables, too, such as early city street layout designer Charles Christmas, black abolitionist Charles Goodridge and Mary Prescott, a Dakota woman married to white trader Philander Prescott -- namesake of the Wisconsin river town and a casualty of the 1862 Dakota Conflict.

It's the war veterans, though -- only one of whom fought in World War I or later -- whose stories resonate:

- Sgt. James Nettle Glover, one of three soldiers from the War of 1812. Born in 1793 in Maryland, Glover and his dozen kids depended on slavery for their tobacco farms. But he became an abolitionist, moved to Wisconsin, freed his slaves and ended up living in Minneapolis with his daughter. He died in 1873 of apoplexy at 80.
- Oscar Vaughn, one of at least seven members of the U.S. Colored Infantry at the cemetery. He fought in the 1864 Battle of Nashville and attended the 1896 Grand Army encampment at the State Fair, where boosters from Fergus Falls recruited him and other black veterans to move to farms in Otter Tail County. He moved in with a daughter in Minneapolis when his health began to fail.
- William Holtz, a Prussian immigrant and carpenter who joined Company G of the Fourth Regiment of the Minnesota Volunteers. Unlike 239 of his comrades, he survived the siege of Corinth, Miss. Dropsy, an old term for tumors and cancers, killed him in 1869.

Weir also points out two dozen Civil War-era pauper graves, purchased by the Grand Army when families couldn't afford them.

One of her favorite stories, many of which Weir has chronicled at www.friendsofthecemetery.org, bubbles up at the graveside of Samuel Howard. A Civil War captain of the 2nd Cavalry, 11th Massachusetts Battery, Howard died Dec. 19, 1908, of kidney failure.

He'd been on a train from an old soldiers' home in Olympia, Wash., heading home to Boston for Christmas when he fell ill. Minneapolis undertaker Harry Hurlburt found the 72-year-old soldier slumped over east of Miles City, Mont.

At one stop, Hurlburt bought Howard a fresh orange, a December delicacy worth more at the time than a ham. The old man held the orange until he got to Minneapolis, where Hurlburt had an ambulance bring him to a hospital. He died still clutching the orange.

"He had no connections in Minneapolis, no family here," Weir said. "But this is where he got off the train and died. And this is where he's buried."

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Sue Hunter-Weir leads Friends of the Cemetery.

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Minneapolis city workers got the cemetery ready for Memorial Day.

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Photo gallery: A cemetery with friends

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- [Minneapolis Pioneers and Soldiers memorial Cemetery](#)
- **[Link: Legacy.com: Armed forces members who died in Iraq](#)**