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Douglas County Potter’s Field Interpretations in Context

The Potter’s Field in Omaha was an active burial site for people whose bodies were unidentified and people who were too poor to pay for their burial expenses from 1887 to 1957, and 3,912 burials with unmarked graves occurred during this time. Many of those buried were the result of various epidemics of influenza, typhoid, etc.[[1]](#footnote-2) Another large group were migrants who passed as they were headed westward along the “Platte River Road.” About half of those buried in Potter’s Field were stillborn babies or children under the age of two. Others were victims of hate crimes, murders, and accidents where nobody claimed their remains. Because of the societal status of those buried in Potter’s Field, they were largely forgotten.[[2]](#footnote-3)

The most well-known person buried in Potter’s Field is Will Brown. He was a meatpacking worker, a common job for black Americans moving to Omaha at the start of the Great Migration. At this time, the black population in Omaha more than doubled, which fueled resentment in the white population. Racial violence was prevalent all around the United States, but Omaha was one of the most violent cities, and had extremely high arrest and conviction rates for black residents comparatively.[[3]](#footnote-4) In the summer of 1919, often called the “Red Summer” for its high instance of lynching, Will Brown was accused of raping a white woman, was arrested, and taken to the Douglas County Courthouse. When word got out about the arrest, a white mob that eventually grew to 20,000 started rioting in the streets surrounding the courthouse. They then went up into the building, pulled Brown out, hanged him by a light pole, and burned and dismembered his body. Some rioters took parts of the charred body as souvenirs and were pictured with the body, smiling for the camera.[[4]](#footnote-5) The riot ended when the soldiers stationed at Fort Omaha intervened and declared martial law.[[5]](#footnote-6) Nobody was prosecuted, and it was later found that Brown could not have committed the crime due to his severe rheumatism, and the woman admitted to the false accusation. Many see this as the darkest day in Omaha’s history. Brown was then transported to Potter’s Field where he was buried in the company of the driver and the gravedigger, and his grave was marked by a piece of wood with “Lynched” carved into it.[[6]](#footnote-7) Because of his burial in the field, people have made it a point to remember and honor Brown in his death because the same systemic problems that led to Brown’s lynching are still present in the U.S. and in the overtly segregated Omaha.

The most notable and largest Potter’s Field is the one just outside of New York City, Hart Island. With over a million buried on the island, no headstones, and restricted entry due to the management by the department of corrections, those buried are easily forgotten and efforts to preserve their memory are almost impossible. Community efforts to open the cemetery to the public have been successful, with plans of opening a ferry line to the island and moving jurisdiction from corrections to parks and recreation,[[7]](#footnote-8) but the COVID-19 outbreak halted these plans. With the large volume of COVID deaths in the city, burial and storage space for the remains was insufficient. Claiming to be a temporary solution, COVID victims were buried in the Hart Island Potter’s Field, just like the remains of AIDS victims and Influenza victims.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Community has been the driving force behind the development and preservation of the site. When the cemetery was decommissioned in 1957, the weeds grew out of control, and the field became a popular spot for teens to go for their illicit activities, including vandalizing the few headstones in the field, making them unreadable. The first interventions in its maintenance were sporadic volunteer efforts from local boy scout troops and church groups during the 1970s. In 1985, community efforts headed by former Sheriff Richard Collins led to restoration and commemoration of the field and those buried there. Over the next year, Collins and community organizations raised $22,000 for the restoration project.[[9]](#footnote-10) With this money, volunteers were able to replace the gate to the field, put up new fencing, trim the overgrowth, and create a meditation garden. Just inside the gate is a stone with a reminder of the nature of the space and reminds visitors to treat it with respect. Then the path leads to the meditation garden in the shape of a circle with a sundial in the center. Around the perimeter of the circle sit concrete benches and plaques describing the history of the field and giving demographic numbers of those buried there and encouraging visitors to sit and reflect. The rest of the plaques between the circled benches list every person buried in the field whom researchers could find on record, their burial year, and their age at death. When the restoration project finished in 1986, the grounds were reconsecrated and opened to the public. This project brought the community together and made those buried in Potter’s Field recognized and honored in a lasting way and encourages visitors to interact and confront the past and the circumstances that enabled those buried to be forgotten.

In 2009, 90 years after Will Brown’s death, he was finally given a headstone. California resident Chris Hebert watched a documentary on Henry Fonda, an Omaha Native who described his experience watching Will Brown’s lynching from his father’s office in a nearby building, which moved Hebert into action. He discovered Brown’s anonymous burial and sent funds to the county to give Brown a proper headstone. The inscription reads “Lynched in Omaha Riot: Lest We Forget.” This headstone has given the community a place to gather around while fighting for a better future, and as a symbol of the hardships the black community has endured and reminds them to continue the fight. Brown’s headstone if often decorated with black power ephemera, and there is consistently a painted rock placed by his name reading, “We are not a conquered people.”

In 2021, community members banded together along with History Nebraska to get a historical marker detailing the history and significance of the site placed just outside the front gate. A Facebook group called “Make Potter’s Proper” was established, and community members got to work to place the Historical Marker. Former state senator Ernie Chambers spoke at its dedication saying Will Brown is “every Black Man” because of the ingrained negative associations made about black men. He also remarked: “There is hope, even if we don’t always reach the goals we seek. We work within our own spheres of influence, and we do what we can, and sometimes that just has to be enough.”[[10]](#footnote-11) The addition of the historical marker makes the site more inviting to visitors by making it an obviously public space, as well as giving context to the space.

What was difficult about crafting the story of Potter’s Field was the different amounts of background, analysis, and interpretation to put into each form with different audiences. The podcast had mainly a popular audience that would not have known much about Omaha history and have not had the discussions and readings we had in class, so it was mainly an informative lesson, rather than an interpretive dialogue or report on methods. The in-class presentation had different challenges. I opted to omit some of the historical explanation to be able to discuss methods and challenges in the research with the class because I thought it would be more beneficial and relevant to my classmates.

1. Donald R. Hickey, Susan A. Wunder, and John R. Wunder, “The Influenza Epidemic of 1918 and Nebraska’s Doctors,” essay, in *Nebraska Moments* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 182–91. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Vural, Leyla. “Potter’s Field as Heterotopia: Death and Mourning at New York City’s Edge.” *Oral history* (Colchester) 47, no. 2 (2019): 106–116. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. McKanna, Clare V. “Black enclaves of violence: race and homicide in Great Plains cities, 1890-1920.” *Great Plains Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2003): 147–60. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Educational Publishing Company. *Omaha’s Riot in Story and Picture*. Educational Pub. Co., 1919. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The Omaha Daily Bee. “Charred Body of Lynched Negro Is Buried by County,” October 1, 1919, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Honan, Katie. “New York City Councilman Pushes Easier Access to Country’s Largest Public Cemetery; Hart Island’s Potter’s Field, Run by City’s Department of Correction, Holds More Than 1 million Remains.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Eastern Edition. New York, N.Y: Dow Jones & Company Inc, 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Chapman, Ben, and Katie Honan. “Island Prepped for Temporary Burials --- As Private Cemeteries Struggle to Handle Rising Deaths, Officials Look to Potter’s Field.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Eastern Edition. New York, N.Y: Dow Jones & Company Inc, 2020, Eastern edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Leila Haq. "Potter's Field Cemetery." Clio: Your Guide to History. February 4, 2023. Accessed December 10, 2023. https://theclio.com/entry/159017 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Anuska Dhar, “Potter’s Field Historical Marker Dedication Honors Those Laid to Rest,” NOISE, November 1, 2020, https://www.noiseomaha.com/news-now/2020/10/28/potters-field-historical-marker-dedication-honors-those-laid-to-rest?fbclid=IwAR2lsRB0nCmaW70qv4WQCtyVcEpOfcrPbTmsMAKt6yNyf7\_lq-vnUvdnnbQ. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)