Quincey Epley

Jeanne Reames

Historical Methodology

11 December 2023

Douglas County Potter’s Field Bibliographic Essay

Because of the specific nature of my topic, the historiographic record is limited. There is little scholarly work done about Potter’s Field, so I have had to rely on news articles and blog posts to understand the significance to the community and the various volunteer restoration and maintenance projects over the years.

The concept of a Potter’s Field originally comes from the bible. In the Gospel of Matthew 27:9-10, Judas uses his 30 pieces of silver to buy a plot of land for public burials.[[1]](#footnote-1) He called it the Potter’s Field, and it is likely to have gotten this name from the clay in the soil in these fields. Potters, people who made pots, would dig it up and leave holes in the ground, which would be expanded for public burials.

The cemetery was an active burial ground from 1887-1957, but it was largely ignored during this period. 3,912 people were buried in Potter’s Field, about half of which were babies who died under the age of two or were stillborn. The rest of the burials were for unidentified persons or those who could not pay for a burial in a private cemetery. Many were sex workers and murder victims as Omaha’s underground vice economy boomed, and many were victims of disease like the flu and typhoid.[[2]](#footnote-2) Because of the large volume of people who would die due to these outbreaks, burial expenses would burden families, so they would opt to have a county burial. Other reasons for these county burials would be to prevent the spread of disease from the bodies. The gravediggers at Potter’s Field were all people of color because cemeteries were segregated, so the risks were seen as more acceptable for them. This mindset has not escaped us. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, New York City was having problems storing the bodies of COVID victims, so they turned to the largest Potter’s Field in the nation at Hart Island for temporary burial.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Hart Island Potter’s Field was a very interesting case study. Most public cemeteries fall into obscurity just because of the lack of familial ties and the lack of maintenance and upkeep funding, but Hart Island has been managed by the Department of Corrections, which means that it is part of the prison system. Incarcerated inmates are the workers who take care of the landscaping and gravedigging, again an undervalued demographic that is taking on extra risk to bury victims of disease. The jurisdiction of the Department of Corrections also limits public accessibility because of security concerns. Community efforts to increase access had been successful prior to the pandemic, with plans to shift jurisdiction from corrections to parks and recreation and establish a ferry line to the island[[4]](#footnote-4) but were halted when the COVID fatalities started becoming unmanageable.

Insights into the demographics of those buried in Potter’s fields came in the study of the Milwaukee County Poor Farm Cemetery, which was being excavated for commercial development.[[5]](#footnote-5) This study also looked at physical markers on their bones and teeth,[[6]](#footnote-6) disease rates,[[7]](#footnote-7) as well as any physical items included in the burials. They concluded that their segregation in death mirrored their segregation and low status in life.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The *Omaha Bee* article “Charred Body of Lynched Negro Is Buried by County,” records the burial of Will Brown at Potter’s Field,[[9]](#footnote-9) a 40-year-old man who was lynched at the Douglas County Courthouse by a mob of 20,000 whites in 1919 after he was falsely accused of raping a white woman. Brown’s burial in Potter’s Field is the most significant as his unmarked burial is symbolic to the black community in Omaha. The summer of 1919 is commonly known as “The Red Summer” because of the racially motivated violence nationwide as the great migration brought more black people into northern cities, but Omaha was one of the most violent and hostile cities for people of color during this time with extremely high rates of arrests, convictions, and hate crimes for Omaha’s residents of color.[[10]](#footnote-10) The riot went on for hours into the night and was finally broken up by the soldiers stationed at Fort Omaha when they declared martial law. Many consider this day to be the darkest in Omaha’s history, and the Educational Publishing Company immediately published the book *Omaha’s Riot in Story and Picture* to properly record and educate the masses about the violence on that day.[[11]](#footnote-11) The book describes the events as they happened, and printed photos taken during the riot. This includes photos of Brown’s body being burned in the street with the perpetrators standing around him smiling and posing for the photo, knowing there would not be any consequences to their actions. It also shows the damage done to the courthouse costing over $1 million, describes the hanging of the mayor, and the military presence on the streets of Omaha following the riot. In order to ‘protect’ the black residents of Omaha, the soldiers of Fort Omaha drew a line on the map segregating the black North Omaha from the rest of the city, which Adam Fletcher Sasse argues in his three-part book series *North Omaha History*, is the main cause of the high rate of segregation in today’s Omaha and was exacerbated by the redlining practices of the FDR administration.[[12]](#footnote-12)

I could piece together the restoration efforts from blogs “Clio”[[13]](#footnote-13) and “Adventures in Cemetery Hopping.”[[14]](#footnote-14) After Potter’s Field closed in 1957, the field overgrew with weeds, like most public graveyards do,[[15]](#footnote-15) and became a popular site for local teens to visit to engage in their illicit activities, which included vandalism of the few headstones and grave markers. In 1985, former Douglas County Sheriff Richard Collins spearheaded the campaign to restore the field and have it reconsecrated. He partnered with community organizations and raised $22,000 to restore the field. With these funds, they were able to install a new gate, replace the fence, and pave a walkway and meditation garden. The meditation garden forms a circle with a sundial as the centerpiece. The perimeter alternates benches and plaques, starting with one giving background on the field, demographics, and restoration efforts, and the other plaques list all people buried in the cemetery in the Forest Lawn cemetery records, the year of their burial, and their age at death. Researchers and genealogists have identified others unnamed in the record, and new headstones have been placed over the last 20 years to recognize them as well. 108 people remain unidentified. This project brought the community together around a central cause to dignify those buried and forgotten in Potter’s Field in a lasting way. These types of projects educate and bring attention to systemic problems and inform the future generations of where we have been and how far we have come as a people.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In 2019, one hundred years after Brown’s lynching and burial, an effort to recognize Potter’s Field with a historical marker was organized by members of the Omaha History Club on Facebook. Stu Burns, Michaela Armetta, and Johnny Pain created the group “Make Potter’s Proper” to organize the community and track the progress of the project.[[17]](#footnote-17) Partnering with History Nebraska and funding from the Hollis & Helen Baright Foundation, the historical marker was established in 2020, and dedicated in the company of local civil rights activist and former state senator Ernie Chambers who spoke on the significance of the marker and the legacy of Will Brown as “every black man.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Once again, the community came together toward a common goal, and a lasting legacy of the black struggle. The addition of the historical marker made the entrance to the field more official and establishes the site as a public place with historical significance and will likely grab the attention and increase the patronage to the field and interaction with this piece of history.

References

Dhar, Anuska. “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.

Burant, Eric E. “‘Penniless and Unknown’: Temporality of the Milwaukee County Poor Farm Cemetery - A GIS Analysis”. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2020.

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.

“Charred Body of Lynched Negro Is Buried by County,” *The Omaha Daily Bee.* October 1, 1919, p. 3.

Hickey, Donald R., and 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.

Dodd, J. Thomas. "Matthew 27:9, 10." The Old and New Testament Student Vol. 13 (1891): 370-372.

Drew, Brooke L. “Death in Anonymity: Population Dynamics and the Individual Within the Milwaukee County Poor Farm Cemetery, 1882-1925”. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018.

Educational Publishing Company. *Omaha’s Riot in Story and Picture*. Educational Pub. Co., 1919.

Goosen, Kristin. Vandals, “Cow Pies Plague Poor Farm Cemetery.” *TCA Regional News.* Chicago: Tribune Content Agency LLC, 2017.

Haq, Leila. "Potter's Field Cemetery." Clio: Your Guide to History. February 4, 2023. https://theclio.com/entry/159017.

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.

“Make Potter’s Proper.” Facebook. Accessed December 1, 2023. https://www.facebook.com/groups/751476938646561/.

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.

Olson, Greg. “’Poor Farm’ Cemetery Is Effort Focus: Students to Learn History While Cleaning Burial Grounds.” *TCA Regional News*. Chicago: Tribune Content Agency LLC, 2018.

Rylands, Traci. “Lest We Forget: Walking through Omaha’s Potter’s Field.” Adventures in Cemetery Hopping, March 22, 2019. https://adventuresincemeteryhopping.com/2019/03/22/omahas-potters-field-walking-over-unmarked-ground/.

Sasse, Adam F. *North Omaha history*. 3 vols. CommonAction Publishing, 2016.

Skinner, Jessica L. “Like Pulling Teeth: Relationships Between Material Culture and Osteology at the Milwaukee County Poor Farm Cemetery, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, USA.” *Archaeologies* 16, no. 2 (2020): 228–264.

Werner, Helen M. “That Other Form of Madness: A Multidisciplinary Study of Infectious Disease Within the Milwaukee County Poor Farm Cemetery”. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019.

1. Dodd, J. Thomas. "Matthew 27:9, 10." The Old and New Testament Student Vol. 13 (1891): 370-372. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hickey, Donald R., and 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)
3. 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-3)
4. 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-4)
5. Drew, Brooke L. “Death in Anonymity: Population Dynamics and the Individual Within the Milwaukee County Poor Farm Cemetery, 1882-1925”. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Skinner, Jessica L. “Like Pulling Teeth: Relationships Between Material Culture and Osteology at the Milwaukee County Poor Farm Cemetery, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, USA.” *Archaeologies* 16, no. 2 (2020): 228–264. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Werner, Helen M. “That Other Form of Madness: A Multidisciplinary Study of Infectious Disease Within the Milwaukee County Poor Farm Cemetery”. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Burant, Eric E. “‘Penniless and Unknown’: Temporality of the Milwaukee County Poor Farm Cemetery - A GIS Analysis”. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Charred Body of Lynched Negro Is Buried by County,” *The Omaha Daily Bee.* October 1, 1919, p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 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-10)
11. Educational Publishing Company. *Omaha’s Riot in Story and Picture*. Educational Pub. Co., 1919. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sasse, Adam F. *North Omaha history*. 3 vols. CommonAction Publishing, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Haq, Leila. "Potter's Field Cemetery." Clio: Your Guide to History. February 4, 2023. https://theclio.com/entry/159017 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rylands, Traci. “Lest We Forget: Walking through Omaha’s Potter’s Field.” Adventures in Cemetery Hopping, March 22, 2019. https://adventuresincemeteryhopping.com/2019/03/22/omahas-potters-field-walking-over-unmarked-ground/. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Goosen, Kristin. Vandals, “Cow Pies Plague Poor Farm Cemetery.” *TCA Regional News.* Chicago: Tribune Content Agency LLC, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Olson, Greg. “’Poor Farm’ Cemetery Is Effort Focus: Students to Learn History While Cleaning Burial Grounds.” *TCA Regional News*. Chicago: Tribune Content Agency LLC, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “Make Potter’s Proper.” Facebook. Accessed December 1, 2023. https://www.facebook.com/groups/751476938646561/. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Dhar, Anuska. “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-18)