

DESCENDANT COMMUNITY OF MILWAUKEE COUNTY GROUNDS CEMETERIES, INC.

by Judy Klimt Houston, President

<https://descendantcommunity.org>

PART 2: CEMETERY ONE aka WINDSOR TRACT CEMETERY



This article traces the history of the first of four County Grounds cemeteries that together served approximately 10,000 Milwaukee County residents.

Map on left depicted Cemetery 1 in Section 28: H. Belden & Co. 1876 *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Milwaukee County*.

Present location: Windsor Ct. and Wisconsin Ave.

Milwaukee County death certificates were not a legal requirement until it became law in 1852; however, it was not strictly enforced until roughly 1880.¹

To identify undocumented burials in Cemetery 1, Milwaukee County Genealogical Society researcher Robert Felber reviewed death certificates from 1872-1890. Using these records and 1882 burial ledger entries, a dedicated team created Find-A-Grave (FAG) memorials for those interred.² Our descendant community is continuing this work by transcribing additional certificates and archival documents to create new memorials and strengthen existing ones, supporting family historians and descendants. When complete, this effort may help establish an approximate number of burials in Cemetery 1, including those from about November 1852 and through August 1882.

1878: County Board of Supervisors' Proceedings (at right) raised concerns about the cemetery's limited suitability, with only one third of the 2.5-acre plot deemed suitable for graves.³

This prompted the need for another cemetery, leading to establishment of Cemetery 2 – four years later.

"The Potter's Field Desecration", Sheriff confirmed novice grave-robbers desecrated this site. (Fig. 1)

The immediate attention of the Board is directed to the present condition of the cemetery of the Poor Farm. It is situated on the Southeast corner of the premises, and contains less than two and a half acres of land. One third of which is comparatively high ground and nearly filled up with graves. Most of the remainder is low meadow and at certain seasons of the year in digging a grave the water will rise to within six inches of the top and even overflow portions of the land. There are at present some ten or fifteen buried in this low land. Even on ground sufficiently dry the graves are not as they should be, six or seven were dug on such a spot in readiness to receive corpses for interment. Thinking the empty graves looked (37) rather shallow, a tap-measure was applied and their depth was ascertained to be two feet ten inches. Allowing sixteen inches as height of a full sized coffin, the corpses lay only eighteen inches below the surface of the earth. This truly is "giving little earth for charity".

THE POTTER'S FIELD DESECRATION.

Some degree of interest still attaches to the sad fate of the old couple found drowned in the Menomonee Valley last week. The fact that their graves were despoiled has served to perpetuate for awhile remembrance of the tragic affair. Yesterday forenoon an old man inquired at police headquarters whether any clue to the desecration of rest in death had been developed. He declared himself to be disinterested, yet his call impressed all with the idea that he felt disposed to fathom the matter, quietly and methodically. His call developed the truth that Sheriff Van Vechten and several deputies visited the Potter's Field and examined the graves. To the mind of the Sheriff the resurrection was not the undertaking of professional unearthers. The graves were shallow, scarcely three feet below the surface, requiring very little labor, and yet

the visitors had spent more time and trouble than the average body snatcher would have accorded on a possible return of from \$30 to \$50. Then the method of opening the coffin appeared to be the work of a novice. A hole had been bored in the lid. Then the cover was pried off so bunglingly that it was splintered and rendered useless to reveal the body for transportation.

Sheriff Van Vechten's researches also satisfied him that the remains were carried away in a light spring wagon. The tracks of the vehicle were traced past Ludington's farm. Inquiries among the physicians of the city confirmed his idea that the body was not such an one as would be desirable for dissection. The man had drowned on a warm day, his body had been conveyed miles under a hot sun, and had thus lost its value as a subject for the student. It was said that drowned persons are not much sought after by purveyors for medical colleges. Bodies recovered from streams in

the winter, even, are not deemed satisfactory. An intimated, there is sufficient interest in this peculiar case to warrant a hope that the mystery will be cleared, sooner or later.

STRIKING TANNERS.

The tanners employed in the establishments of Ald. Zehrlaut, Troske & Gallon and William Becker, to the number of over 200, who were receiving wages ranging from \$1.25 to \$2.50 per day, demanded an increase of 10 per cent. yesterday, and upon being refused united in a strike. The employers subsequently offered to grant the increase to such men as they might select and discharge the others. The strikers would not accept the proposition, declaring that all must go back at the advance or none. Terms were affected so far as Mr. Zehrlaut's men are concerned, but the others are still out. It is hinted that a general strike throughout the city will ensue, as the men are strongly handed together under a

union. No disturbances of any kind occurred, although the police were notified and held themselves in readiness. A number of the tanners under the influence of liquor indulged in some loud talk among themselves but did not go near the place of work. The men now out were out the 10 per cent. they ask to be restored about six months ago. Business is reported dull by the manufacturers, who insist that the increase is not justified. They have not determined upon any course of action as yet.

Fig. 1 - Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, 18 July 1879.

Disclaimer: Aerial images showing cemetery map placement(s) are from a 2022-2023 WHS slideshow presentation and are subject to minor changes when provided by the WHS.



The 1937 aerial photo by the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) (Fig. 2), depicts headstones at Cemetery 1.

- Windsor Tract has headstones visible
- Old hospital is already built on cemetery grounds
- Major impact on burials in area

Fig. 2 - 1937 aerial.



Wisconsin Historical Society



Later, in 1951, the WHS aerial (Fig. 3) indicated headstones were removed.

- Headstones removed from Windsor tract
- Development to the east and into Windsor tract has taken place

Fig. 3 - 1951 aerial.



Wisconsin Historical Society

Excavators Find Bones of 4 People

By Harry S. Pease
of The Journal Staff

Sewer excavators have dug up bones of at least four people on the County Institutions grounds at the southeast corner of 84th and Wisconsin and confronted Milwaukee Museum anthropologists with a minor mystery.

1971: Remains disturbed during pipeline excavation adjacent to north side of Wisconsin Ave at the west 8500 block.⁴

<Milwaukee Journal, 19 May 1971: Remains delivered to Museum.

1975: Remains disturbed along Wisconsin Ave due to water main project.^{5 6}



September 2023, a witness informed the descendant community that in 1971, two dump trucks (above arrow) transported excavated soil and human remains westward and dumped them near ponds north of Wisconsin Avenue. Remains later discovered at the site supported this account.^{7 8}

2014 and 2025: WE Energies-related site disturbances in 2014 and 2025 resulted in significant discoveries at Cemetery 1. In 2014, a single mandible of unknown origin was recovered.⁹ In 2025, a subsequent disturbance led to the discovery of two boxes of fragmented human remains, likely originating from Cemetery 2—Froedtert Tract burials used as landfill during the 1930s desecration of approximately 55% of the graves.¹⁰

Cemetery 1 held 500-700 adult burials and over 1,000 if the area also included infants.¹¹

2026: No signage exists at Cemetery 1 to honor these Milwaukee County residents.

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WORKS CITED

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