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A Short History of Fresno County Owned Cemeteries for Indigents: Paupers and Potters Fields

By Eugene Sibley

In the Beginning

After floods in the early 1870s severely damaged the town of Millerton, and the Central Pacific railroad granted land for the establishment of a new town, the county seat was moved from Millerton to Fresno. Thereafter, the new community began to expand rapidly. Fresno's first cemetery was reported to be at the corner of M street and Calaveras. It is unclear if it was publicly or privately owned. In any event, it could have been no more than three acres in size, and it became clear that it would not meet the community's needs for very long.

In April 1880ⁱ the County Assessor **William H. McKenzie**, County Clerk/Recorder **A.M. Clark**, and the owners of Fresno's water company, **George McCollough** and **Lyman Andrews**, banded together to buy eighty acres of land at the eastern edge of town west of First Street between Tulare and Ventura avenuesⁱⁱ. In October 1880, William McKenzie recorded a map for a cemetery named Graceland on the northwest most ten acres of the property, at what is today the intersection of Freeway 41 and Tulare Ave. In 1881 he filed another cemetery map (Odd Fellows) on the ten acres immediately south of Graceland Cemetery, and in August 1881 sold the five acres to the east to Lodge 247 of the Free and Accepted Masons.

On December 5, 1881, the Fresno County Board of Supervisors created a commission to appraise of a portion of that tract of land owned the McKenzie group, for the purposes of establishing a cemetery for the burial of deceased indigents. On December 6th, the commission reported back to the Board, and the Board ordered that five acres of the McKenzie group's tract be selected for the indigent cemetery, and that the McKenzie group be paid two hundred a fifty dollars (\$250) for it. A deed was recorded that same day from McKenzie, et.al., to the County of Fresno for five acres of land that presently sits under the Holmes Playground at the northwest corner of First Street and Huntington Boulevardⁱⁱⁱ. No map was recorded.

Catastrophe - the 1884 flood

On February 17, 1884 the town of Fresno experienced a catastrophic flood. As reported by the newspaper at the time, not only did the town suffer massive damage, so also did the new cemeteries at the eastern edge town, which were the first areas hit by the flood^{iv,v}.

On March 11, 1884, the Board declared the existing indigent cemetery unfit for use, and ordered the Clerk of the Board to publish a notice in the Fresno Weekly Expositor that it was the Board's intent to purchase ten acres southwest of town from **Thomas Hughes** at fifty dollars per acre for a new public cemetery^{vi}. It should be noted that the property was acquired in February 1885 by undertaker **William J. Bennett**, to develop a cemetery^{vii}.

Moses Church, several family members, and neighbors protested the location, claiming it was susceptible to flooding, which might contaminate their wells. Mr. Church offered a piece of property one mile north of Hughes to the Board^{viii}. The Board ignored his offer at that time. So began the controversy (and some misdeeds^{ix}) of where the new indigent cemetery would be located, and which lasted for a year. On June 5, 1884, the Board formally dismissed the idea of buying the property southwest of town.

Words were exchanged for some time between Church's supporters and those of Bennett, as the latter began the development of a cemetery on the disputed property southwest of town. The matter was finally settled in April 1885, when Church promised to provide ditch water to the Bennett property, and Bennett ceased development of that cemetery. Bennett later sold the property to his brother-in-law and partner **H. C. Warner**, the noted jeweler. On April 15,

1885, Moses J. Church filed his subdivision map for Mountain View Cemetery and began selling five acre lots to fraternal and church organizations for from one to ten dollars each. Mr. Church sold four of his sixteen lots to the County of Fresno for one dollar on the same day he filed his map^x.

Fresno County Cemetery # 1

The County developed a cemetery for the indigent dead on the south three hundred and fifty-five feet of lot #4 of Mountain View Cemetery subdivision. That cemetery is now known as Fresno County # 1. No map was recorded. In September 1885, a newspaper item indicated that the new cemeteries were not yet in use:

If we are to have a new cemetery the sooner the better. Why do not the several societies to whom tracts have been given by Mr. Church get together and arrange for the survey and enclosure of the proposed grounds west of town so that they can be used for burial purposes? The Masons, Workmen, the Episcopal and the Roman Catholic Churches and perhaps other societies are interested. Why not do something about it?^{xi}

By January 1886 the County indigent cemetery was open^{xii}, and later that year the Board ordered and paid for the removal of indigents in other cemeteries, and had them reburied in the new indigent cemetery^{xiii}.

In an October 10, 1891 meeting, the Board ordered all undertakers burying bodies in the county cemetery to provide the sexton at Mountain View the names and grave locations of all such burials^{xiv}. It further ordered the sexton of Mountain View to record the name, grave location, and the undertaker of burials in the county cemetery in a book. The sexton was already doing much of that (except noting grave locations) from 1888 through 1894, and recorded up to sixty (60) burials per year in the indigent cemetery. However, from 1895 through 1909, there are only twenty-seven (27) total burials recorded in the Mountain View Cemetery book for the county cemetery. Either the sexton refused to record the burials, or they were recorded in a separate book, which has since been lost. After 1909 there are once again a large number of county burials in the Mountain View Cemetery log. However, grave locations continued not to be recorded. No accurate map of the cemetery was ever recorded, although one is referenced in the January 1886 newspaper item, only a rough plot map was ever maintained by Mountain View Cemetery.

In 1897 after a report on the condition of the indigent cemetery by a commission, the Board contracted with **T. J. Kelley**, Sexton of Mountain View Cemetery to maintain the county cemetery in good order^{xv}. The contract for maintenance of the cemetery by the sexton of Mountain View was reaffirmed by the Board in 1897.

On November 11, 1898, after hearing from a Board appointed commission, the Board ordered that persons who belonged to no "Order or Sect" would be allowed to acquire a burial plot in the indigent cemetery from the Sexton of Mountain View for ten dollars. The sexton was ordered to record the burial information and to deposit the money in the County Treasury.^{xvi} Only a few were records for such burials were discovered, although there are more than a dozen family placed markers to indicate that there were several burials of that type. At this time, it is unclear when the Board changed the policy back to allowing only indigent burials in the county cemeteries.

Transition to Fresno County Cemetery # 2

By 1919 it became obvious that Fresno County Cemetery # 1 would not be sufficient to meet the needs for indigent burials much longer. Therefore, in April 1919, the County bought five acres of land west of Mountain View Cemetery for Fresno County Cemetery # 2^{xvii}. The new County # 2 opened in 1921 or 1922. Burials continued to be recorded, but not always indicating in which cemetery, or grave location.

In 1937 a card file system was implemented and grave locations began to be regularly recorded. From that point on, most burials occurred in County # 2, until the carriage ways at the west end and in the middle of County # 1 were filled in primarily between 1960 and 1962. At that point, County # 1 was closed, and the small round markers for the individual burials were removed to reduce maintenance as grass was planted^{xviii}. The three rows in the old carriage ways are marked with concrete curbs with grave numbers stamped in them. That explains why there only about fifty grave markers remaining in the County # 1, which were placed there by family members, and why other graves in only three rows can be readily located.

All of the rows in County # 2 are marked on the west side of the row with a concrete curb, with the row and grave numbers stamped into the concrete^{xix}. This makes it relatively easy to find graves in County #2, as long as the concrete curbs have not been covered in sand by wind storms or other disturbance.

In 1963, the County adopted an ordinance that requires all indigents buried in the county cemetery to be cremated^{xx}. As a result, up to four hundred and fifty remains can be buried in a single grave. The first mass burial was made in County # 2, South section, Row 37, Grave # 51 in December of 1968. An additional six graves in the same row have been similarly filled. It is said that only one grave remains to be filled in County # 2, and that will happen soon. A new

cemetery would appear to be needed.

However, if the alley ways in County # 2 were filled in with additional graves as was done in County # 1, then it is probable that County # 2 would likely suffice for a century or two. The width of the alleys would allow for up to one hundred additional graves with a size of ninety square feet (roughly 3 times larger than the average grave).

Maps

The Mountain View map for County # 1 has equal numbers of rows and graves indicated on both sides of the interior carriage way. Additionally, all graves were indicated to be the same size, regardless of whether for infants, children or adults. However, the area west of the interior carriage way is more than thirty feet narrower than the east side. This, along with the lack of physical row markings, and lack of access to the original map, has created a stumbling block to the development of an accurate map for County # 1.

A 1921 unrecorded map for County # 2 has the same type of configuration as the Mountain View map for County #1, and based on the observable development of County # 2, it was never utilized^{xxi}. Fellow Library volunteer Bill Fenton, with my help, has developed a preliminary map for County # 1^{xxii}, and an accurate and dimensioned map for County # 2^{xxiii}. It should be noted here that as we developed the map for County # 2, it appears that the east four (4) rows actually lie on property that belongs to the Chinese Cemetery. I suspect that this error occurred because no survey of the land was made when the cemetery was developed. Instead, it appears the County merely wrapped the development around the the Ben Gow (AKA Sam Yup) cemetery in accordance with it's deed. The Ben Gow cemetery was established in 1916, and it also appears to partially sit on the Chinese Cemetery property.

The Other County Cemetery for Indigents

In 1887, Fresno County still included the area that is today Madera County. In a meeting in April 1887, the Board agreed to pay the Ladies Social Aid Society of Madera fifty (\$50) dollars for a one half acre plot in Madera's "Arborvita" [sic] cemetery for a "Potters Field" for indigents of that community, now beyond the borders of Fresno County^{xxiv}.

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Primary Sources

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Endnotes

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ⁱⁱ CD. Davis and Co. Surveyor and Engineer. Graceland Cemetery, Fresno Co., California. October 1880. Original held in the Fresno County Records Office, Fresno, California.

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Original article with links to copies of deeds, newspaper articles, Board of Supervisors minutes, and maps may be viewed at the San Joaquin Valley Heritage & Genealogy Center in the main branch of the Fresno County Public Library.



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