

Hallowed Ground: Rapid City's Historic Cemeteries

For the first decade of Rapid City's history, residents had a problem. The young community lacked a good place to bury its dead. The *Black Hills Weekly Journal* called it "the cemetery question," and Rapid Citizens needed an answer.¹¹⁷

The paper's readers, of course, had pragmatic reasons for desiring a cemetery. Many regional Indigenous peoples honored their dead by placing them on above-ground funerary scaffolds. There, the physical form could rejoin the natural world.¹¹⁸ The Judeo-Christian traditions of non-Native settlers, however, demanded burial, which required designated cemetery space.

Rapid City, meanwhile, was establishing itself as a key cattle camp, a regional supply stop, and a community of permanent residents. Founded in 1876, Rapid City was a roughshod frontier town on Lakota treaty land. Without a formal cemetery for its first two years, residents buried bodies where they were discovered or placed them in an early burial ground just north of Rapid Creek, likely on or near the base of Cowboy Hill. In 1878, the community created the Plateau Cemetery south of town, off what is now St. Cloud Street near the Star Village housing development.¹¹⁹

Plateau became Rapid City's primary cemetery, but problems quickly arose. In poor weather, horse-drawn funeral processions struggled to trudge up the steep hill to the burial grounds. Community members, encouraged by *Black Hills Weekly* editor Alice Gossage, began building support for alternative, and more accessible, locations. Indeed, locals established four cemeteries in the 1880s. Religious groups organized two of them, and neither lasted long. The first, known only as the "Old Catholic Cemetery," is referenced vaguely in the historical record. According to one newspaper article from 1975, the plot was "said to be [located] a mile north of Rapid City on the old school section in 1883 . . . perhaps near the present St. Therese [The] Little Flower [Church]."¹²⁰ No further documentation of the location or number of burials at the site seems to survive.

The second early, church-sponsored burial ground was known as Mentch Methodist Cemetery. It sat roughly six miles east of town along Highway 44 near what became Rapid City Regional Airport. Around 23 bodies were interred at Mentch between 1889 and 1902. According to an entry in *A History of Pennington County*, a Methodist congregation built a church and established a small cemetery on the grounds. Within a few years, the

¹¹⁷ "The Cemetery Question," *Black Hills Weekly Journal*, August 3, 1888.

¹¹⁸ Elisabeth Walton Potter and Beth M. Boland, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Cemeteries and Burial Places* (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Interagency Resources Division, National Register of Historic Places, 1992), 4.

¹¹⁹ Don Barnes, "Early Rapid City Burials, Burial Grounds and Cemeteries," in Pennington County History Book Committee, *A History of Pennington County, SD* (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, nd), 14; "In Memoriam," *Black Hills Weekly Journal*, June 4, 1897.

¹²⁰ "Woman Seeks to Solve Mysteries of Unmarked Graves," *Rapid City Journal*, December 16, 1999.

congregation relocated, steeple and all, to rural Caputa several miles further east on Highway 44. They left the burial site behind, where it remained, largely forgotten, for decades.¹²¹

Meanwhile, Rapid Citians organized two major cemetery associations and began laying the groundwork for large burial complexes.¹²² The first was the Mountain View Cemetery Association, which acquired 80 acres of land at the base of the western slope of the Rapid City ridgeline. The group received its charter from the secretary of Dakota Territory on August 21, 1888.¹²³ That same month, the Evergreen Cemetery Association met at the town library and began planning their plot, which was located a quarter mile east of the city limits in Rapid Valley.¹²⁴

The planning and promoting of the Mountain View and Evergreen cemeteries echoed patterns of cemetery design popular earlier in the 19th century. Between the 1830s and 1860s, Americans reimagined the roles cemeteries could play in the death of individual people and the life of burgeoning communities. For the dead and their survivors, the gravestones, epitaphs, mausoleums, and decorations that adorned a resting place were mediums for conveying values and identity. As historian Richard Meyer writes, cemeteries “take on distinctive flavors relating to regionalism, ethnicity, religious influence, and a whole host of other factors. They also allow for considerable personal innovation, as can be attested to by anyone who has spent much time exploring their infinite variety.”¹²⁵

For many 19th century communities, cemeteries were also important assets, understood as opportunities to beautify the community, promote outdoor recreation, and even attract tourists. Elaborate “garden” cemeteries were established across America. As Blanche Linden-Ward writes, they were “more than a plain and simple burial place.” Before public parks filled urban greenspaces, erudite citizens took long nature walks and these “pastoral places also functioned as ‘pleasure grounds’ for the general public, often to the dismay of their founders.” Many cemeteries were popular tourist attractions, with cities’ visitor guides enticing out-of-town guests to stop by and take a stroll through manicured rows of headstones and flora.¹²⁶ In this way, bucolic cemetery grounds became open spaces where visitors could immerse themselves in an exploration of the juxtaposition of life and death.

Although Mountain View and Evergreen were established a few decades after the garden cemetery movement had peaked, rural design clearly influenced both cemeteries’ impressions of how patrons should perceive their plots. On August 3, 1888, both cemetery associations ran dueling descriptions of their burial grounds on the same page of the *Black Hills Weekly*. Mountain View enthusiastically described the beauty of its newly acquired, 80-

¹²¹ “Woman Seeks to Solve Mysteries of Unmarked Graves.”

¹²² Ramona Wickenkamp, “‘Genealogy’ of a Forgotten Cemetery,” *Rapid City Journal*, October 12, 1975.

¹²³ “Mountain View Cemetery,” *Rapid City Journal*, September 14, 1888.

¹²⁴ Wickenkamp, “‘Genealogy’ of a Forgotten Cemetery,” “Evergreen Cemetery,” *Rapid City Journal*, August 3, 1888.

¹²⁵ Meyer, “Origins and Influences,” 105.

¹²⁶ Blanche Linden-Ward, “Strange but Genteel Pleasure Grounds: Tourists and Leisure Uses of Nineteenth-Century Rural Cemeteries,” in *Mere*, 293.

acre plot: “The land could not lay nicer for the purpose intended than it does,” the members wrote. “It is slightly rolling, enough to secure natural drainage, and yet not sufficient to make the land what is called broken. It will permit of most picturesque decoration...and the unanimous opinion of all who have looked over the land is that it is by far the most desirable that can be obtained in this vicinity for that use.”¹²⁷

Not to be outdone, Evergreen promoted its 71-acre cemetery grounds as “picturesque” and “laid out to conform to the topography, which is undulating, with gentle sloping hills” east of Rapid City. The cemetery’s plan included a sprawling, rural landscape with “numerous parks with lakes and broad avenues,” which would be lined by trees.¹²⁸

Few residents got to enjoy Evergreen. Around 50 people were interred there. They included several bodies that had been relocated from other parts of Rapid Valley, including the remains of the three men executed on Hangman’s Hill early in Rapid City’s history. Just a few years after the cemetery opened, however, a flood washed out a main road and bridge. Visitation dropped, and when convenient access was not restored, Evergreen went bankrupt. Pennington County sold part of the cemetery’s land for taxes in 1893. The cemetery struggled along until 1910, when the last burial occurred there.¹²⁹

Mountain View, on the other hand, thrived. It steadily added plots over the years and became the resting place for thousands of area residents including Rapid City’s earliest settlers; prominent civic and business leaders; some children and staff from the Rapid City Indian School; veterans of various conflicts from the Civil War forward, including some African American “Buffalo Soldiers” from the 1880s; and Rapid Citians representing a wide array of faith traditions and backgrounds.¹³⁰

Mountain View’s success derived in part from the fact that the cemetery comprises half of what is now a large, two-cemetery burial complex in west Rapid. Shortly after Mountain View was planned in 1888, a group of Catholics—perhaps seeking a new, permanent home for the cemetery they had previously used on the north side—secured permission to acquire ten acres adjacent to Mountain View Cemetery for a burial ground of their own. Known as Mount Calvary Cemetery, this burial place grew alongside Mountain View and now holds several thousand graves. Today, the two cemeteries are separated by West Flormann Street, and both are managed by the City of Rapid City.¹³¹

Rapid City added two other cemeteries in the 20th century. In the 1920s and 1930s, the south side of Rapid City expanded as Highway 16 extended towards Mount Rushmore and Custer State Park in the southern Black Hills. Meanwhile, Works Progress Administration developments on Skyline Drive made the area more accessible. Pine Lawn Memorial Park and Cremation Gardens opened near the intersection of Tower Road and Skyline Drive in

¹²⁷ “Mountain View Cemetery,” *Rapid City Journal* August 3, 1888.

¹²⁸ “Evergreen Cemetery.”

¹²⁹ Wickenkamp, “‘Genealogy’ of a Forgotten Cemetery.”

¹³⁰ “[Mountain View Cemetery](#),” Findagrave.com, accessed February 19, 2021.

¹³¹ “The Catholic Cemetery,” *Black Hills Weekly*, September 14, 1888.

1936. The complex offers burial plots, mausoleums, and spaces for interring urns for the more than 5,200 souls who rest there.¹³²

Pine Lawn’s design—an oblong path with trees, landscaping, and scenic overlooks—reflects earlier traditions of cemetery planning as well as new developments that were underway in the mid-20th century. Although cemetery designers continued to emphasize natural beauty, as Elisabeth Walton Potter and Beth M. Boland write, memorial parks were “comprehensively designed and managed by full-time professionals,” who sought to “extend perpetual care to every lot and grave” by smoothing out rough features with new, industrial landscape tools, and creating a sense of visual uniformity among the graves.¹³³ The design at Pine Lawn intertwines natural beauty with a vision of a restful afterlife to provide a peaceful experience of mourning and remembrance.¹³⁴

The most recent cemetery founded in Rapid City is located on the campus of the St. Martin’s Monastery. Nearly 80 nuns who lived and worshipped at the monastery are buried there, with the oldest gravestone dating to 1961.¹³⁵

The expansion of cemeteries and the growth of Rapid City also created market demand for mortuary and funeral services. Several long-running businesses have served Rapid City and its cemeteries for generations. The earliest was operated by Henry Behrens, who established his still-running mortuary service in Rapid City in 1879.¹³⁶ In 1961, while Rapid City was undergoing a major postwar population boom, Herman Rausch founded Rausch Monuments, which has continued to craft many of the gravestones and memorials that honor deceased members of the Rapid City community for sixty years.¹³⁷

As Rapid City grew and evolved, officials relocated bodies from abandoned cemeteries several times. This process was poorly documented and has long vexed local historians and genealogists. As early as 1892 and 1893, for example, some bodies were taken from Plateau and moved to Evergreen, presumably due to accessibility issues.¹³⁸ About a decade later, eight bodies were moved from Mentch to Mountain View.¹³⁹ Then, when Evergreen went out of business, many of the bodies were relocated to either Plateau or Mountain View. Plateau then closed in 1920, and three years later, the city undertook the removal of all the graves to make room for a “water works plant” on the site.¹⁴⁰ According to one local researcher, the city failed to account for all the bodies moved to Mountain View, and some either remain at Plateau or were moved without being indexed or recorded, so

¹³² “[St. Martins Monastery Cemetery Memorials](#),” Findagrave.com, accessed February 19, 2021,

¹³³ Walton Potter and Boland, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Cemeteries and Burial Places*, 5.

¹³⁴ “[Pine Lawn Memorial Park and Cremation Gardens](#),” accessed February 19, 2021.

¹³⁵ “[St. Martins Monastery Cemetery Memorials](#),” Findagrave.com, accessed February 19, 2021.

¹³⁶ “[Our Story](#),” Behrens Wilson Funeral Home, accessed February 19, 2021.

¹³⁷ “[Four Generations of Excellence](#),” ModaStone, accessed February 19, 2021.

¹³⁸ “Removing Bodies,” *Black Hills Weekly Journal*, September 14, 1888; “Woman Seeks to Solve Mysteries of Unmarked Graves,” *Rapid City Journal*, December 16, 1999; Wickenkamp, “‘Genealogy’ of a Forgotten Cemetery.”

¹³⁹ Barnes, “The Case of the Missing Cemetery,” 13.

¹⁴⁰ “Notice,” *Rapid City Journal* January 30, 1923.

their descendants are unlikely to find records of their burials.¹⁴¹ Documentation of cemeteries like Mentch, Evergreen, and Plateau—including exact details of who was buried where and when—remain open for further research.

Perhaps the greatest mystery of Rapid City’s cemeteries, however, regards the unmarked graves from the Rapid City Indian School and the Sioux Sanitarium. The Rapid City Indian School operated from 1898 to 1933, and after the Great Depression, was converted to the “Sioux Sanitarium,” a tuberculosis clinic for Native American patients. This facility became an Indian Health Service hospital in the 1950s and today operates as the Oyate Health Center.

During the boarding school era, an unknown number of Native students died either traveling to the school, while enrolled, or in attempts to escape the campus. Around 10 of these children were buried at Mountain View Cemetery. Others were interred on the school’s campus. Their graves were either never marked or the headstones deteriorated and disappeared over time. In either case, knowledge of these graves was preserved only in the local Lakota community. For decades, Lakota families maintained that a significant number of children, and perhaps patients from the early sanitarium days, remained buried somewhere on the former campus of the school. Around 2013, a group of volunteer researchers undertook an effort to document the names of those who had died and find and protect the graves. To date, they have identified about 50 children who died at the boarding school, but the list is incomplete, since a substantial portion of the school’s records were destroyed. After several years of research and consultations with Lakota elders, spiritual leaders, and representatives from state and tribal historic preservation offices, the research team identified the likely location of the graves on a hillside across from West Middle School and the Oyate Health Center. Research into these children’s deaths, their resting place, and efforts to protect and memorialize the site are ongoing.¹⁴²

Rapid City’s cemeteries are vital resources for understanding the history and development of the community. Their history, however, is only sparsely documented. In some cases, research projects by members of the Rapid City community, including entries on websites like Findagrave.com, appear to be the only investigations into locating and preserving graves or memorializing the dead buried there. The RCHPC faces a rich opportunity to further study, explore, understand, and preserve Rapid City’s hallowed ground.

¹⁴¹ “Removal of Bodies from Plateau Cemetery,” *Rapid City Journal*, March 3, 1923; Wickenkamp, “‘Genealogy’ of a Forgotten Cemetery;” “Woman Seeks to Solve Mysteries of Unmarked Graves.”

¹⁴² “[Deaths: Rapid City Indian Boarding School.](#)” Rapid City Indian Boarding School Lands Project, accessed February 18, 2021.

Documentation

Table: Rapid City Cemeteries

* Information from Don Barnes, “Pennington County Cemeteries” in *History of Pennington County*, 14

Type	Name	Location	First Burial	Status
*Church	Mount Calvary Cemetery	SW ¼ x NE ½ Sec 10 T1N R7E	1888	Active (now city run)
*Church	Mentch Methodist Cemetery	NW ¼ x NW ¼ Sec 32 T1 R9E	1889	Abandoned 1906
*Church	St Martin’s Monastery Cemetery	St. Martin’s Monastery, 1851 City Springs Road	1961	Active
Church	“Old Catholic Cemetery”	Near St. Therese The Little Flower Church,	1883	Abandoned, Date Unknown
*Community	Mountain View	NW1/4 x NE ¼ Sec 10 T1N R7E	1888	Active
*Community	Plateau Cemetery	Near Center Sec 1 T1N R7E	1878 or 1879	Abandoned 1888
*Privately Owned	Evergreen Cemetery	NE ¼ x SE1/4 Sec 5 T1N R8E	1888	Last Burial 1922
*Privately Owned	Pine Lawn Memorial Gardens	W ½ x SW ¼ Sec 14 T1N R7E	1936	Active
Federal?	Rapid City Indian School/Sioux Sanitarium	Hillside adjacent to West Middle School	Unmarked, likely early 1900s	Unmarked/Date Abandoned Unknown

Mountain View Cemetery











Mount Calvary Cemetery





Pine Lawn Memorial Park and Cremation Gardens



Map of Pine Lawn

<http://pinelawnrapidcity.com/html/garden.html>



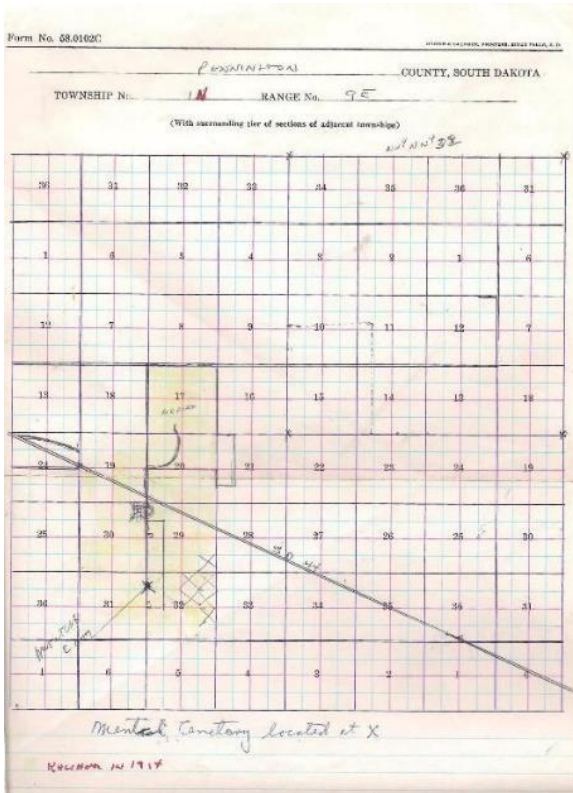
Unmarked Graves from Rapid City Indian School/Sioux San

Top: Looking west from West Middle School

Bottom: Looking northwest from Canyon Lake United Methodist Church



Map to Mentch Cemetery
Ellen Bishop



Alpha Chase headstone, 1880, Mountain View Cemetery
Minnilusa Historical Association



Behrens-Wilson Funeral Home was established as Henry Behrens, Inc. in 1879.

<https://www.behrenswilson.com/our-story/>



Mountain View/Mt. Calvary Cemetery, 1971-1972

Minnilusa Historical Association



Gravestones at Mentch Methodist Cemetery in 1998
Photos by Ellen Bishop, Rapid City



Ellen Bishop at Evergreen Cemetery
Rapid City Journal, 1999

