

UTE CEMETERY ASPEN, COLORADO

THE BIRTH OF UTE CEMETERY

The town of Aspen was settled in 1880-1881 by prospectors migrating over the Continental Divide from Leadville in search of mineral riches, particularly silver ore. Although the distance to Aspen is only 27 miles, the difficulty of crossing the 12,000' peaks of the Continental Divide was substantial at any time of the year. Even so, within one year 800 to 1,000 residents were in Aspen and more arrived each day. Mines were soon thriving and the valley filled with the sounds of log cabins, wood frame houses, and brick commercial buildings under construction along its dirt streets.

Accompanying the miners was the certainty that some would die there, and it did not take long for that to happen. In June 1880, a prospector from Texas by the name of "Colonel" Kirby was the first to die in Aspen, succumbing to "mountain fever" following a "wearying journey over the Red Mountain trail." He was the first person buried in a privately-owned vacant field southeast of town. Originally known as Evergreen Cemetery, the site's name was changed around 1900 to Ute Cemetery.

ASPEN BECOMES "METROPOLITAN"

With the Aspen mining district booming throughout the 1880s, the rate of deaths began to increase. Although the town gained a reputation for being peaceable, the weather occasionally unleashed its fury upon area residents. On March 11, 1884, heavy late winter storms blanketed the landscape with deep snow. An avalanche suddenly rushed down Aspen Mountain, burying the Valjeo Mine. Townsfolk hurried up the steep slopes, arriving at the site just when the survivors began to emerge. These men were working below ground when the disaster struck, climbed the vertical shaft, and dug their way out through the deep snow. All of the shafthouse workers were killed, among them Civil War veterans George Marshall and John Megnamy, both of whom are buried at the Cemetery.

Avalanches took the lives of many residents. Some early Aspenites were killed in the mines by falling boulders and timbers, by accidental blasting powder explosions, and by drowning in the Roaring Fork River. Still others took their own lives, died in fights, or succumbed to disease. Denver's Rocky Mountain News amusingly suggested in 1885 that "Aspen is becoming metropolitan." Two disappointed people

attempted suicide." While these two attempted, others succeeded and found themselves resting peacefully in Ute Cemetery.

BURYING THE DEAD

Quick to follow the growth of any pioneer town, particularly those with a propensity for accidental deaths, undertaking businesses soon emerged in Aspen. The first undertaker was E.C. Morse, who opened shop in 1885, followed by H.P. Orndorff (1889), and Allen & Wilson (1890s). Another local undertaker, J.C. Johnson, advertised his specialty of embalming bodies for shipment. These morticians prepared their clients for burial and made a number of trips to Ute Cemetery each year with their horse-drawn hearses carrying the

early remains of pioneer Aspen's most unfortunate working-class residents.

Family or friends without the financial means to hire an undertaker would typically take the deceased to the cemetery in a wagon and perform their own burial, erecting a wood monument on the grave. Many early Aspen residents were single and married working-class men who relied upon the assistance of fraternal lodges in times of need. Providing a form of life insurance, the lodges buried their members and offered support to loved ones left behind. Indigent members of the community were provided burials by the county at community expense in unmarked graves.

DECORATION DAY

Decoration Day celebrations were heavily attended in most American towns of the late 1800s, with many Civil War veterans still living and the carnage of battle unhealed. In Aspen, Ute Cemetery was the focus of these events throughout the 1890s. The ceremonies on May 30, 1885 began with a march to the cemetery, where a large crowd gathered to recite prayers, sing songs, and decorate the graves. The following year, members of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) cleaned the cemetery before the

crowd arrived. Pleased with the results, the *Aspen Times* admonished that future generations "should see to it that hereafter the place is kept halfway respectable."

CIVIL WAR VETERANS HONORED

In April 1890, a train arrived in Aspen carrying fifteen white marble, government-issue headstones, sent to mark the graves of Ute Cemetery's Civil War veterans, all of whom had served with the Union army. Typical of many early Aspen residents, the cemetery's Civil War veterans were mostly single men who died with no local family to coordinate and pay for a proper funeral and a carved headstone. According to the *Aspen Daily Times*, "These graves of our dead heroes are scattered all over the cemetery grounds. It is the intention of the Grand



ASPEN
CIRCA 1890

Army here to take up the remains of their comrades and bury them all in one lot. This work will require some time and will be finished just in time for the new graves to be decorated with flowers on the coming Memorial Day, May 30, 1890." The G.A.R. reburied their brothers-in-arms in the two lines of graves identified by the white military markers still found there. Others of the cemetery's 37 Civil War veterans were placed in line with them over the next thirty years.

THE QUIET YEARS

By 1893, Aspen's mines were outpacing those in Leadville and the town, with around 12,000 residents, had become the single largest source of silver in the United States. However, Aspen was devastated by the federal government's 1893 decision to return to the gold standard. This monumental change in the town's fortunes forced Aspen into what are known as its "quiet years," the period from 1893 through the 1940s, when it served as a sleepy county seat and market center for the surrounding farms and ranches.

Although the town's population began to decline after 1893, Ute Cemetery continued to be used. Death

certificates indicate that a number of people were buried there between 1891 and 1907, among them a laborer, farmer, prospector, housewife, ranch hand, and several children who succumbed to scarlet fever, cholera, diphtheria or complications at birth.

Although it was to have been replaced by two successor cemeteries in Aspen, Ute Cemetery continued to be used by the town's working class and poor. Records from 1922 through 1927 show that at least thirteen people were buried there during these years, most of them old-timers. One had committed suicide, another died of injuries sustained from a fall, two deaths were due to fires, one individual was stabbed to death, and others succumbed to age-related illnesses. All were indigent cases, buried at community expense, and none of their graves were marked with headstones.

By 1935, only 700 people remained in Aspen and the town looked as if it was bound for obscurity. The Depression ended the use of Ute Cemetery, and in the decades since 1930 only three burials have taken place there. Aspen's emergence as a ski resort following World War II breathed new life into the sleepy town. Outdoor enthusiasts began to visit and repopulate the town, but the Cemetery still fell into disuse and disrepair. With no family left in the Roaring Fork Valley to tend the graves, Ute Cemetery was abandoned and the site began a long slide into decay before restoration was begun in the late 1990s.

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REGULATIONS

- Park hours are from sunrise to sunset
- Dogs must be leashed at all times
- Bikes and motor vehicles are prohibited
- Please keep noise and activity to a minimum
- Please stay on designated paths
- Hunting, camping and equestrian use is prohibited
- For your safety and out of respect, do not lean on or push on gravestones
- The use of alcohol is prohibited

READING THE SITE



Access to fine carved stone markers was limited before the railroads arrived in Aspen in 1887-1888, and only a handful of the earliest burials at Ute Cemetery were identified with small carved markers brought over Independence Pass on horse drawn wagons. In addition, many of the poor families that used the cemetery could not afford costly headstones and either left graves unmarked or erected carved wood markers. Most of the existing stone markers date from the late 1880s to 1900, after the railroads connected the town with sources of cut stone such as black granite from quarries near Salida.

Other methods commonly used to mark the graves included wooden fence enclosures and the placement of cobblestones or flagstones on the ground to create boundaries around the grave sites. In a few cases, family plots were enclosed with durable wrought iron, cast iron, or pipe iron fencing. With harsh winter conditions and lack of upkeep, wood markers and fence enclosures deteriorated over the years and largely disappeared. While cobblestones and flagstones do not deteriorate rapidly, in many cases they have been covered by a buildup of soils and vegetative growth. Marble makes a beautiful, easy to carve grave marker, however these stones tend to decay quickly. As a result, many of the soft marble gravestones deteriorated over the years and broke into pieces.

Today the cemetery is filled with 78 marked graves and approximately 130 unmarked or unidentified burials. If you look carefully throughout the site, you will begin to see many cobblestone borders placed in straight lines on the ground, with right angles at the corners of the graves. The larger of these stone rectangles mark family plots. You might also notice numerous shallow depressions that indicate the presence of single unmarked graves. Collapsed wood fencing (sometimes in tiny pieces), patches of iris, serviceberry and lilac bushes, depressions, and base stones that are missing their markers all point to the presence of unmarked graves.

Can you find the one metal (zinc) marker in the cemetery? Where are most of the Civil War veterans buried and how is their area different? Can you spot

the serviceberry bushes, patches of iris, and very old pine trees? Do the burials seem to be concentrated in particular areas of the cemetery? What are the oldest and most recent gravestones on the site? Did you notice a set of gravestones that had to be recovered because the last name was misspelled? Can you find the one stone carved in a foreign language? What is the earliest birthdate shown on a gravestone? What kinds of trees dominate the site and why?

These are all questions that preservation experts, landscape architects, botanists, stonework restoration experts and others have tried to answer about this site. What do you notice? What unanswered questions are raised by your visit to the unique historical and natural environment that is Aspen's Ute Cemetery?

THE RESTORATION

Over the years since it was abandoned, Ute Cemetery became overgrown with native grasses, shrubs and trees. Its wooden markers and fences deteriorated and collapsed. Marble headstones decayed, toppled, and were broken into pieces. The site was taken over by aspen and took on the unkempt but picturesque appearance of a forgotten mountain cemetery. By the 1990s, Ute Cemetery suffered from decades of neglect and was largely unknown to all but a small portion of the Aspen community.

In the late 1990s, with historic preservation a high priority in Aspen, local residents began to urge the city to restore the cemetery. This resulted in a multi-year restoration process that began with the listing of the site in the National Register of Historic Places. In 2001, a detailed preservation plan was completed by a preservation consultant, landscape architect, and stonework consultant, providing guidance for the study and restoration of Ute Cemetery. Biographical information was collected about many of the persons buried there and the property documented in detail.

In 2002 and 2003, well-attended volunteer work days and efforts by Aspen Parks & Recreation Department staff resulted in the removal of debris, along with thinning of vegetation where it was impacting the condition of marked grave sites. Walking trails were improved and a new entrance gateway constructed. Two monuments dedicated to those who are buried at the cemetery were installed at the entryway. Perhaps most significantly, a professional stonework crew launched the detailed and lengthy process of restoring the carved stonework at the site. Ute Cemetery has become one of the few cemeteries in Colorado to have undergone complete restoration.

UNIQUE ECOLOGICAL CHARACTER

Originally an open, rolling field, the forest now occupying Ute Cemetery is an example of a native montane ecosystem. Native plants you will find here include gambel oak, serviceberry, mountain mahogany, aspen, woods rose, several species of conifer trees and woodland wildflowers. Exotic species such as lilacs and iris, brought in by people since 1880, have found a home among their native cousins.

The cemetery's aspen trees are symbolic of a forest in succession. Over the next few generations, the conifer trees will continue to increase in number and eventually shade out the aspen groves bringing the forest to a climax condition.



Lilacs are one of the few exotic plant species found in the cemetery. As they stand guard over graves, they are evidence of the landscape's cultural heritage.



Iris growing around the graves is a reminder of the flowers planted by families and friends who visited their loved ones here many years ago.



Serviceberries are one of the more abundant shrubs in Ute Cemetery. Folk tales say in the early summer the blooming of the serviceberry flowers foretold the right time for a funeral service. The blooms indicated the ground was soft enough to dig for a burial and conduct the service, thus, the name serviceberry.



These native conifers are estimated to be as much as 220 years old. From the time the Ute Indians occupied the valley, long before any settlers had come here, these trees were young saplings establishing their centuries-long watch over this hillside.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

To view more historical information about Ute Cemetery and those interred there, visit www.aspenparks.com/depts/41/utecemetery.cfm

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Historic Aspen photo: Courtesy, Denver Public Library

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