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By Tim Engle – The Kansas City Star.

AT 150 YEARS OLD CEMETERY HAS MEMORIES SET IN GRAVESTONES.



PHOTOS BY TIM ENGLE – ONE OF UNION CEMETERY'S FAMOUS RESIDENTS IS GEORGE CALEB BINGHAM, A PAINTER, POLITICIAN AND ORATOR.

People die. Cemeteries live on.

Today and Saturday, Kansas City's oldest public cemetery observes

its 150th birthday. That's Union Cemetery, just south of Crown Center (near Grand Boulevard and 28th Terrace), which tonight will have some of its most famous residents on hand – at their graves – to tell stories.

Actually these long-dead citizens will be played by actors in period costumes. Take a free lantern tour of the nine gravesites every 30 minutes between 8 and 10pm.

About 55,000 people are buried in Union Cemetery, a peaceful green spot in the middle of the city. These are just a few of them.

JOSEPHINE ANDERSON

The 14-year-old sister of “Bloody” Bill Anderson, a member of the pro-Confederacy Quantrill's Raiders, died in August 1863. She, her 10-year-old sister and other female relatives of Quantrill's men were being held in a building at 1409 Grand that was used as a Union prison. When it collapsed, four died. Quantrill's bloody raid on Lawrence was a week later.

GEORGE CALEB BINGHAM

Probably the most famous resident of Union Cemetery, Bingham was a painter of frontier life. One of his best-known pieces: “Fur Traders Descending the Missouri” (1845). He was also a politician and orator. After serving as a

captain in the Union Army during the Civil War, he was named treasurer of Missouri's provisional Union government. His third wife was Mattie Lykins, the widow of Johnston Lykins. She outlived Bingham, too.

JOSEPH A. BOGGS

The one and only Revolutionary War veteran buried in Union Cemetery. Sometime after serving in the Pennsylvania militia, he moved to this area. When he died in 1843 at age 93, he was buried in the old Westport cemetery. His remains were later moved to Union.

MINA CRAIN

On May 11, 1886, she was working at the Haar Brothers shirt and overall factory on Third Street when a tornado demolished the building. Crain, 18, was one of 28 people killed in the storm. Her monument is one of several at Union that look like tree stumps.

NATHANIEL M. GWYNNE

At just 15 he was awarded a Medal of Honor after rescuing a Union flag from Confederate captors in Petersburg, Va. His injuries: a severed arm and two bullets in his right leg. After receiving a medical discharge, Gwynne moved to Memphis, Mo., and later Kansas City, where he sold real estate and became a lawyer. He was elected to the Missouri House of Representatives in 1879.

JAMES M. HUNTER

Hunter owned a large farm at what is now Linwood and Main streets. In 1857 he deeded 49 acres of his property for

the new Union Cemetery. Hunter also owned an outfitting firm at Westport and Pennsylvania.

HATTIE DRISDOM KEARNEY

She was 11 when she was sold at a local slave auction on Christmas Day 1855. She was afraid of one of the buyers, so she pleaded with another man to intervene. He did, and after Charles E. Kearney bought the girl, he set her free. She had no place to go, so Kearney hired her to work for his family, a job she kept for the rest of her life. She was the first African-American to be buried in what was then a whites-only section of the cemetery.

JOHNSTON LYKINS

He moved to this area in 1831 as a medical missionary and later became a real-estate developer, bank president and postmaster. He was also one of KC's earlier mayors. His first wife was Delilah McCoy, sister of John C. McCoy. His second wife, Martha ("Mattie") was forced to leave Jackson County by Order No. 11, which called for the evacuation of parts of four Missouri counties. The Union Army blamed the Lawrence Massacre partly on rural Southern sympathizers on the Missouri side. Legend has it that as she rowed across the River to Clay County, she called to Lykins not to wear damp underwear.

JOHN CALVIN MCCOY

He's the man who filed the plat for the Town of Kansas in February 1835. McCoy arrived in this area just five years earlier as part of a surveying party establishing the boundaries of the

military reservation “Cantonment Leavenworth”. He built a store at what is now Westport and Pennsylvania, believing that spot to be a good jumping-off point for settlers heading west. When the Civil War broke out, the McCoys and another clan, the Campbells, placed all their silver in a trunk and buried it on the Union Cemetery site.

A ‘UNION’ OF TWO TOWNS

Veterans of the Civil War make up the largest group of military dead at Union Cemetery. But the cemetery doesn’t take its name from the “Union” of that era.

Thanks to a cholera epidemic in 1849, cemeteries in the Town of Kansas (later Kansas City) and Westport were filling up. The solution: Union Cemetery, opened in 1857. Because the site was between the towns and would be used by citizens of both, it was a ‘union’ of the two.

The cemetery was originally 49 acres. Around 1910 the cemetery association sold 18 acres at what’s now 27th and Main streets – a questionable deal because the buyer, Evergreen Land Co., included members of the association.

These days Union is about 27 acres. Since the late 1930s, it has been owned and maintained by Kansas City.

About 55,000 people are buried there, although many no longer have markers or stones. Kevin Fewell, president of the Union Cemetery Historical Society, estimates that 15,000 or so headstones

remain, although some have eroded almost to nothing.

Only one or two people a year are buried there these days, and those are folks with family plots.

The cemetery is open daily from 7a.m. to 3:30p.m.

150TH ANNIVERSARY EVENTS

Tonight:

- 8 to 10p.m.: Guided tours every 30 minutes, with actors playing some of the early KC citizens buried at Union. Civil War encampment in place.

Saturday:

- Cemetery open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Shuttle buses available 9 a.m. to 1:30pm from KCPT, 31st and Grand.
- Commemoration ceremony 10 – 11a.m. – Speechifying, an American Indian blessing, unveiling of Sonny Wells Memorial Military Trail honoring the late KC area historian. The new trail showcases graves of veterans representing wars from the Revolutionary War to Vietnam. Re-enactors will dress as soldiers of each era. Afterward, grave rubbings, other activities. No food will be sold. Donations accepted.

More information:

816-472-4990 or kcmo.org/parks (click Museums and Attractions, then Union Cemetery)