

NOVEMBER 12, 2012, 9:40 AM

# Denver's Cheesman Park was once a place of final repose for thousands of pioneers

By **JOEY BUNCH** |  No Comments

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[1]

[Denver Public Library, Western History Collection] Mount Prospect Hill Cemetery was created in 1859 on land picked out by William Larimer, but decades later when the cemetery fell into disrepair, the bodies were moved and the site became [Cheesman Park](#) [2].

Every town has to have one, a place to keep and remember its dead. And to Denver founder William Larimer, a 320-acre hillside on the east edge of his city seemed big enough and lovely enough for the departed to rest in peace. In 1859, a year after the city was established on Arapaho land along the South Platte River, Larimer drew up Mount Prospect Hill Cemetery on a spot Native Americans had considered sacred, where they, too, had observed the customs of death and passage.

Today Denver knows this land primarily as Cheesman Park, a place for picnics, running and relaxing. Sounds of mourning have long since been replaced by giggling children, weddings and outdoor concerts. When they took away 4,200 bodies, they planted trees in the open graves of pioneers, which the city had paid \$1.90 apiece to remove.

Not all made it out, and some remains could still be hidden beneath the well-tended lawns there today. Just two years ago, [skeletons were unearthed](#) [3] at Cheesman Park while ground crews did irrigation work. Unidentified, they were reburied in Olivet Cemetery.

“Cheesman’s cemetery had a lot of criminals and paupers buried without headstones or any records,” then-city [parks](#) <sup>[4]</sup> spokeswoman Jill McGranahan told me in 2010. Indeed, the first two men buried there was John Stoefel, who shot his brother-in-law over a bag of gold dust, and gambler Jack O’Neal, who was shot down outside a saloon for being a cheat and a jerk. The cemetery filled quicked. Sure, there was the regular rate of death for a fast-growing city, but there were also regular eruptions of illness and violence.



[5]

[Department of Parks and Recreation] Skeletons were found at Cheesman Park when grounds crews were doing irrigation work. Left behind when thousands of others were relocated from [Mount Pleasant Cemetery](#) <sup>[6]</sup> in the 1890s, they were never identified before they were relocated.

The use of the space had not been wisely planned, and there were no death records other than the headstones, many of which were made of wood, if they existed at all. Prospect Hill, as it was commonly called, sprawled and segregated. Races, religions, Civil War veterans and fraternal organizations staked claims. The Catholic church bought 40 acres. As the city grew, competition proved troublesome for the pioneer of burial. Riverside Cemetery opened in 1876, and more reputable people buried their dead there, taking much better care of the grounds, according to the Denver Public Library’s Western History and Genealogy section. By the late 1880s, Mount Prospect Hill had fallen into bad shape, worse management and deep controversy. As homes spread to the area, residents called on city leaders to act, and city leaders appealed to the state and federal governments.

By necessity or choice, the federal government moved. Congress wrenched the land from John Walley, saying his ownership violated an Indian treaty, even though violating Indian treaties was the standard for almost anything else white men wanted. An act of Congress in 1872 provided the first 160 acres of the property to the city of Denver for \$1.25 an acre, according to city records. The land was to remain a cemetery, however.

Gov. John Evans had designs for a park, however. And because of the federal government’s help, the first tract carved out of the graveyard was Congress Park. (The site today also is home to the Denver Botanic Gardens.) The Catholic and Jewish portions of the cemetery, however, continued into the next century, before relocation. It’s not clear to me why that was allowed, as scalawags, Civil War veterans and Odd Fellows quickly got a new Boot Hill.

“In 1893 burials were ordered stopped and an initial 788 bodies were removed to Riverside Cemetery,” according to the Denver Public Library. “In August 1893 the Denver Park Commission gave notice that families had 90 days to remove their loved ones’ remains and that after that time no bodies were to be removed as the entire area would be planted in grass.”

The city paid the E. P. McGovern Undertaking Co. 15 bits for each body its gravediggers removed, most of them to [Riverside Cemetery](#) <sup>[7]</sup>. Legend has it McGovern used wooden coffins meant for small children and spread bones for different bodies to increase his pay, but I have strong doubts that's true, even though Denver leaders were [notably corrupt](#) <sup>[8]</sup> at the time. Most credible, verifiable public records portray Edward P. McGovern as a reputable and responsible city leader. He operated a successful business at 1442 Arapahoe St., which today is near the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, a block and a half west of 16th Street Mall clock tower. McGovern was chosen coroner in 1900 and his son, Paul, succeeded him in 1909.

The graveyard was reborn in 1907 as Cheesman Park, named for a pioneer leader a jewel in Mayor Robert [Speer's City Beautiful](#) <sup>[9]</sup> master plan. The park was named for [Walter S. Cheesman](#) <sup>[10]</sup>, a politically well-connected pioneer of the city's real estate and railroad industry. He also is the namesake of a vital city reservoir.

Today, the city [tells the tale](#) <sup>[11]</sup> this way:

“Cheesman Park's history is a story of the evolution of urban green space. Between the years of 1858 and 1910, the future Cheesman Park evolved from an undeveloped landscape to the final resting place for many of the City's Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish community members, and then into a renowned public park.

“It is a story of the commitment of the people of Denver to a quality of life that required action by elected officials, landowners, the federal government and the City and County of Denver.”



[12]

[Denver Public Library Western History Collection] The lawns at Cheesman Park

were lush a year after the former cemetery was emptied out and re-landscaped into one of Denver's most scenic locations.

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**<http://blogs.denverpost.com/library/2012/11/12/denvers-beautiful-cheesman-park-place-final-repose-citys-pioneers/>**

URLs in this post:

- [1] Image: **<http://blogs.denverpost.com/library/files/2012/11/Denver-Cemetery-at-Cheesman-park.jpg>**
- [2] Cheesman Park: **<http://blogs.denverpost.com/library/tag/cheesman-park/>**
- [3] skeletons were unearthed: **[http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci\\_16496050](http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_16496050)**
- [4] parks: **<http://blogs.denverpost.com/library/tag/parks/>**
- [5] Image: **<http://blogs.denverpost.com/library/files/2012/11/Cheesman-Park-skeleton.jpg>**
- [6] Mount Pleasant Cemetery: **<http://blogs.denverpost.com/library/tag/mount-pleasant-cemetery/>**
- [7] Riverside Cemetery: **<http://friendsofriversidecemetery.org/>**
- [8] notably corrupt: **<http://blogs.denverpost.com/library/2012/07/23/soapy-smith-cultivated-skill-con-denver-streets-died-alaskan-legend/>**
- [9] Speer's City Beautiful: **<http://coloradovirtuallibrary.org/content/robert-speer>**
- [10] Walter S. Cheesman: **<http://www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite/GovernorsResidence/GRES/1212052629678>**
- [11] tells the tale: **<http://www.denvergov.org/Portals/626/documents/02.Park%20History.pdf>**
- [12] Image: **<http://blogs.denverpost.com/library/files/2012/11/download.jpg>**

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