

Missoula Burial Sites (1800s-present)



Burial marker found in field off Mullan Rd.

Prior to establishing formal cemeteries in Missoula, burials occurred throughout the valley alongside wagon trails and rail lines, on the family homestead, and in outlying areas near town. By 1884 Missoula City Cemetery was formally established as Missoula's public cemetery option and St. Mary's Cemetery, established in the same year, was the Catholic congregation cemetery option. Some families disinterred individuals from their original locations and moved them to one of the two newly established cemeteries. Many others buried throughout the valley remained in place and their gravesites have simply disappeared with time. As development grew, many times

bones were unearthed denoting a burial site of some kind. Records of early burials are scarce if documented at all resulting in many "unknowns".

Missoula City Cemetery has a similar mystery. A common question remains unanswered, "Who was the first person buried in the cemetery?" An undated stone lies within the cemetery inscribed "In Memory of John R. Reynolds, First Person Buried in This Cemetery." To date, no record of this individual has ever been found.

Below are a few of the more well-known burial sites in the Missoula valley:

- **Prescott School** – Prescott School sits at the base of Mount Jumbo and the entrance to the Rattlesnake Valley. Early Missoula had a substantial population of Chinese immigrants who lived and established businesses in this location. Chinese have profound and legendary respect for their ancestors which led them to choose an area with a clear and prestigious view of the Missoula valley for their final resting place. Records state the Chinese regularly buried in this location as early as 1883 and maintained a secondary burial site a short distance away on Poplar Street. No documentation has been found to determine the exact number of gravesites that were "covered up" with the later development of the area. Likewise, no documentation has been found showing any of those bodies were ever moved elsewhere. In 1937 excavation work to level Cherry Street unveiled a silver handled casket which contained silk trousers, kimono, shoes and a brick that read "Foo Lim is buried here" written in Chinese. It is unknown what happened to that casket.
- **Rattlesnake School** – Rattlesnake School sits about two miles up the Rattlesnake Valley and is located above a documented burial ground. Missoula County's Poor Farm and Pest House regularly buried there. It is believed some of the buried were removed from the site and re-interred in the Missoula City Cemetery; however, this information has not been fully researched. Today, a memorial plaque sits outside the school in Pineview Park to pay tribute to the sacredness of the site.
 - **Poor Farm / County Hospital** – In the early 1880s, Missoula was developing as the 'Garden City' and a major industrial hub. Along with the industry came transients and local poor who could not always care for themselves. As these indigents grew in number, citizens petitioned the County Commissioners to find a place to house them so as not to deflect from Missoula's 'quality of life'. Henry C. Hollenbeck sold the County 40 acres in the lower Rattlesnake to develop housing and care facilities for this group. A Pauper's Application for County aid was necessary for admittance onto the farm. Length of stay depended on individual circumstances. Most residents had physical, emotional, or addiction disorders. Residents were given three meals a day, shelter, and medical attention. Able workers assisted the resident superintendent with chores on the farm. Those who died on the property were buried there. Funeral records in 1987 stated approximately 1,000 individuals were buried under the current school baseball field. Burials ceased in the mid-1920s. The Poor Farm burned down in 1936 and was not re-built.
 - **County Pest House** – was virtually the only public health program in early Missoula. Small houses were used to quarantine people with contagious diseases, small pox being the most dreaded. The walls were built of two thicknesses of brick with iron shutters on the windows. The purpose of the precautionary measures can only be surmised since most of the patients sent there were too weak to need such restraints. Family members left food and supplies outside the doors. Upon death the rooms were quickly and completely scrubbed and disinfected in preparation for the next resident.
- **Missoula County Cemetery** – The current Rimrock Apartment buildings on Missoula's north side were once the site of Missoula County Cemetery. This cemetery was established December 1, 1939 as a replacement option for pauper burials after the Poor Farm burned down. Missoula City Cemetery trustees did not want this new cemetery so they took action by sending a letter to the county commissioners agreeing to lower pauper burial rates and accept the re-interment of the few bodies buried in the county's cemetery. Terms were accepted and Missoula County Cemetery was vacated on December 3, 1940 by Missoula County Commissioners: H. P. Glasscock, L. M. Felton,

and J. D. Finefrock. Stucky Bricker Funeral Home handled the dis-interment, transfer, and re-interment of the cemetery's eight bodies to Missoula City Cemetery in July 1940.

- **Safeway Store on West Broadway Street** – During 1950 a small Indian bone skeleton packed in a wooden box with a pocket full of tiny white beads was found. The moccasins were of a three-piece type worn by Indian tribes of the interior and eastern Canada according to the Montana State University anthropologists. It is estimated that the burial preceded the founding of Missoula by several decades. Local legend notes many other Indian burial grounds located throughout the Missoula valley.
- **South Higgins Avenue and Pattee Creek** – At the base of Whitaker Hill was ranch land owned by Christopher P. Higgins. The family fenced a small section of pasture land and meticulously cared for their private family cemetery for many years. Eventually Higgins descendants began selling ranch land for continued development of Missoula. The bodies of Higgins family members were dis-interred in 1914 to their permanent resting site in Missoula City Cemetery. A large monument inscribed with “Higgins” sits in the middle of the gravesites surrounded by small cement markers depicting where each member lies.
 - **Left Behind.** One body from the Higgins cemetery was “left behind” in 1914. Eighteen year old Alfred McConnell worked on the ranch. He was bitten by a tick while plowing and died from Rocky Mountain spotted fever on May 20, 1889. He was buried in the Higgins family cemetery. The McConnell family cared for Alfred's gravesite until the war caused the family to leave Missoula. Around 1950 Alfred's headstone was found in a shed at the local city hall. How it arrived there was a mystery. The headstone remained unclaimed until the 1960s when McConnell relatives arrived in Missoula for the funeral of Alfred's brother, David S. McConnell. Upon learning of Alfred's forgotten grave, these descendants set out to correct the situation. Their original plan to dis-inter Alfred's casket after almost 80 years was discouraged by local officials. Instead, a bucket of earth was taken from the original grave location, the wayward headstone retrieved from city hall, and both were ceremoniously placed between the graves of Alfred's parents who were already buried in Missoula City Cemetery.
- **Fort Missoula Post Cemetery** – Missoula's oldest cemetery still in operation today lies at Historical Fort Missoula. Fort Missoula Post Cemetery consists of one acre and was established in 1878. At that time Fort Missoula was a bustling military post full of soldiers and their families. An acre of land was set aside for the cemetery and outlined with a crude wood corral fence. In 1905 the military took action to care for the cemetery after the local newspapers ran a story stating the cemetery was a disgrace to the military. At that time, the army replaced the crude post fencing with the wrought iron fencing that exists today. Fresh soil was spread over the weeds, boulders, and shallow gravesites. Trees were planted, grass was sown, dilapidated board markers were replaced with marble stones, and eventually water lines were placed. The cemetery was deeded to Missoula County in 1939 as the army believed Fort Missoula would soon be no longer in operation. Once again the cemetery fell into disrepair. The army reclaimed ownership and care of the cemetery in the 1960s through present day. As of 2011 there were 264 individuals buried there. Fort Missoula Post Cemetery will continue to bury veterans until it reaches its quota of just under 500 graves. Those eligible for burial in the cemetery must be veterans with a lifetime of service or who died in active duty or who are documented with a 100% service-related disability. Historians and researchers have placed historical documentation regarding the cemetery and its residents on file at Fort Missoula Historical Museum and the Mike and Maureen Mansfield Library.
 - **Unknown Soldier.** An unnamed marker dated 1860 places a soldier's death before the cemetery was established. It is believed this soldier was originally buried at Fort Ellis near Bozeman, Montana. If the date is correct, this soldier would have served in the War of Mexico (1846-1848). Upon military orders to abandon Fort Ellis, the final 37 unclaimed bodies were unceremoniously exhumed, shipped, and re-buried in Fort Missoula Post Cemetery. It was March, 1887, when this soldier's casket and wooden head board arrived at its final resting site. The soldiers brought from Fort Ellis can easily be detected in the post cemetery because all their monuments list their service in the Second Cavalry whereas Missoula was not a cavalry post.
 - **Sergeant Bozo - the dog.** One small broken marker in the cemetery has caused great controversy. Some believe it to be the final resting place of Sergeant Bozo – the dog. Sergeant Bozo was three weeks old when he was commissioned into service as the mascot for Fort Missoula. At four years old he was promoted to the rank of honorary master sergeant and adopted by the men of the Fourth Infantry. Sergeant Bozo tragically was killed October 23, 1940 when he was struck by a Conservation Corps truck near the guardhouse. Local newspapers throughout the state ran tributes to the dog. The military stated the beloved dog was given full military honors and laid to rest “in a place of honor” at the post. His footprints and name are scratched into the cement step in front of the powder magazine. No proof has been found that the small broken marker is the actual site of the dog's burial. Disagreement continues as to its possibility.

Government officials remain firm that rules were followed and no animal burials were ever allowed in the cemetery. Researchers define the description “a place of honor” at the fort would have been in only one of two places: under the flag pole or in the post cemetery. Then again, could the beloved dog have been placed near his name and prints? No documentation has ever been found to confirm or refute the burial location. The government has its own mystery as there remains no record of a burial in this site, yet it clearly has a marker. The small broken marker has few clues to aid in solving this mystery except the signs of its longevity on this sacred location.

- **St. Mary’s Cemetery** – is the only cemetery in Missoula devoted to the Catholic congregation. It was established in 1884. When Father L. B. Paladino arrived in Missoula in 1873, he was intent on “solemnizing” life’s major passages of birth, marriage, and death. Father Paladino was revered for establishing the first Catholic school and Providence Hospital in Missoula. The Catholic Diocese officially purchased the cemetery on February 11, 1901 for \$100. Original restrictions allowed burial rites for only those in good standing with the Catholic Church. In fear of filling the historic cemetery, the diocese purchased additional cemetery land from the city of Missoula. St. Mary’s Cemetery and new annex actively conduct burials today.
- **The University of Montana** – This area was an active Indian camping ground so burials were common across the campus area. In 1952, boys were digging a cave in an embankment west of Maurice Avenue when they unearthed the remains of a 35-year-old Indian woman buried with tribal ritual from around 1850. The local newspaper reported, “Hundreds of ornamental beads, some brass jewelry, and fragments of dyed buckskin clothing accompanied the body. A portion of the woman’s hand was mummified by a large ring of coiled brass wire wrapped about a center finger. A piece of abalone shell was also found near the body, indicating that the woman’s tribe was in contact with west coast inhabitants. Tribal ceremonial burial was apparently indicated by several small animal bones found near the head of the Indian skeleton.”
- **Grant Creek** – This area was a well-known Indian burial ground. Prior to the development of the area, the hillsides were littered with Indian relics and signs of burial rituals. As late as 2005 Missoula City Cemetery was notified of the unearthing of ancient bones by contractors during excavation on the site of the new Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation headquarters.
- **Sunset Memorial Gardens** – is located west of Missoula on Mullan Road. It is Missoula’s only privately owned cemetery. It sits on a rise overlooking the Missoula valley adjacent to the location of the first trading post established in 1860 by C. P. Higgins and Frank Woody. Sunset officially opened for business on December 31, 1953 with its first interment for Mary Van Houten. From inception, Sunset Memorial Gardens envisioned a new type of cemetery service for the Missoula area.
 - **Flush cemetery.** Sunset broke with tradition and is dedicated to lawn level markers instead of the traditional upright monuments found in most cemeteries.
 - **1978-Crematory.** Sunset opened the first crematory in western Montana. Prior to that, funeral directors transported deceased individuals to Spokane, Washington for cremation.
 - **1984-Columbarium.** Sunset built its first columbarium for niche interments.
 - **1986-Mausoleum.** Sunset built the first mausoleum building in western Montana designed for crypt entombments.
 - **1988-Funeral Home.** A funeral home was opened on-site at the cemetery.

Sunset Memorial Cemetery is currently home to almost 7,000 interments.

- **Country Legend.** Lloyd D. “Doug” Dugger was buried at Sunset on June 1, 2005. As a Missouri youth he sang and played banjo. In 1946 he left naval service and moved to Missoula, Montana. His musical break came when he attended a show by country artist T. Texas Tyler and was asked to come on stage to play with the band. He was hired and toured with the band until 1956. Doug joined the ABC television network as the host of the talent search show “Ozark Jubilee.” Doug was an old-time country crooner and songwriter whose religious style of music led him to be dubbed the “Chaplain of Country Music.” In 2003 Doug Dugger was inducted into the Country Legends Association Hall of Fame as a “living legend.”
- **Baha’i Sect.** Dr. Leland Jensen was buried at Sunset on August 8, 1966. Dr. Jensen was a third generation Baha’i. In 1960 he was excommunicated from the mainstream Baha’i community. He formed his own sect “Baha’i’s Under the Provisions of the Covenant” (BUPC). In 1959 Dr. Jensen served a short prison sentence. While incarcerated he believed he was chosen by God. His religion focused on natural and manmade disasters in the Bible. He believed he had been gifted with the ability to predict the end of the world. One such nuclear holocaust prediction made national headlines in 1980 when Dr. Leland led a group of followers into a fallout shelter in Missoula to await the end of the earth. Dr. Jensen believed all of his predictions came to fruition. His explanation was “the prophecy was fulfilled spiritually or physically but simply not in the manner expected.”

- **Western Montana Veterans Cemetery** – is located in the Target Range area on Tower Street. WMVC is Missoula’s newest cemetery. A September 11, 2008 dedication ceremony, filled with an abundance of military pomp and circumstance and attended by hundreds of individuals, marked the opening. The State of Montana owns and operates two other veteran cemeteries, one in Helena and one in Miles City. WMVC consists of 14 acres developed and 10 acres undeveloped and is currently home to 434 veterans and their spouses. All major military conflicts since World War One are represented there:

1 – WWI	169 – WWII	55 – Korean War	56 – Vietnam War
3 – Operation Desert Storm	2 – Iraq War	1 - Afghanistan	65 – Served during peace time
80 - spouses			

The establishment of WMVC was a long awaited dream of area veterans. In fact, numerous veterans left written instructions over the years for their families to hold or move their remains to Missoula once the cemetery became a reality. The cemetery contains numerous niche walls but it is the white marble military markers in direct alignment that bring a sense of real pride to the community.

- **First Burial.** One month after the grand opening the very public first burial occurred. Steve Koski was 83 years old when he began writing letters to petition the military and Montana politicians to establish a veteran cemetery in Missoula. Koski was a veteran of WWII and served with the Army’s Merrill’s Marauders. He passionately believed that Missoula’s size and military history warranted a veteran cemetery for western Montana. Prior to his death, he left written instruction to hold his remains until his vision came to fruition and he could be placed in Missoula’s very own veteran cemetery. Koski was given honorary placement in the first niche on the top row of the first columbarium wall known as Plot A-1.
- **WWI Burial.** William A. Hover was a WWI veteran and had died almost thirty years prior to the opening of WMVC. That did not prevent his family from placing their family veterans in the new prestigious veteran cemetery. In January 2009 Hover descendants placed the remains of William A. Hover (WWI veteran), his spouse Ercell G. Hover, and their son, William G. Hover (WW II veteran) alongside each other in a touching ceremony of honor.

Researched by Mary Ellen Stubb, Missoula City Cemetery Sexton. Information sources: Historian - Wally Long, original plat maps, local historical researchers, archived news articles, and historical cemetery documents on file with Missoula City Cemetery, Western Montana Veterans Cemetery, Sunset Memorial Gardens, City of Missoula, Missoula County, and the Mike and Maureen Mansfield Library.