

A Visit To Woodlawn Cemetery

(Established 1895)

4611 Benning Road, S.E.
Washington, DC



Historic Woodlawn Cemetery is the final resting place for thousands of Washingtonians, many of whom were known locally and nationally. However, the once beautiful grounds have deteriorated over the years due to the lack of perpetual care funds. Today, it is a continuing challenge to keep these hallowed grounds free of overgrowth and clear of debris.

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John Mercer Langston, born during slavery in 1829, became a lawyer, educator and representative in Congress from Virginia. He was also Inspector General of the Bureau of Freedmen (1868), Dean of the Howard University Law School (1869-1879), Vice-President and Acting President of Howard University (1872), and a delegate to the Republican National Convention (1876).

Winfield Scott Montgomery, born in 1853 in Mississippi, served in several prestigious positions elsewhere before making Washington, DC, his home in 1892. During a long career in the District of Columbia school system, he earned a medical degree from the Howard University School of Medicine in 1890.

Other Prominent Woodlawn Interments

Amanda Bowen: Founder of the Teachers' Benefit and Annuity Association.

Roscoe Bruce: Assistant Superintendent of colored schools, 1907-1921.

Mary Powell Burrill: A teacher of dramatics at Dunbar High School.

Will Marion Cook: Writer, intellectual and noted musician and violinist.

John W. Cromwell: Writer, historian, intellectual, and first president of the Bethel Library and Historical Society.

William Andrew Joyner: Writer and scholar.

Frank Langston: Assistant Assessor and son of John M. Langston.

Jesse Lawson: Community organizer and leader.

Whitfield McKinlay: Collector at the Port of Georgetown.

Daniel Murray: The first Negro Assistant at the Congressional Library.

Major Frederick Revels: A commander of the First Separate Battalion, DCNG (colored).

James C. Wright: Teacher at Dunbar High School, "Father of the Three Cent Car Fare," and ardent fighter in the 1930s for the preservation of Woodlawn Cemetery.

Noteworthy Interments

Among the thousands of departed loved ones resting at Woodlawn Cemetery are those whose names are recognizable for their extended contributions to local and national history. Following is a listing of several of these individuals, many of whom have schools in Washington, DC, named in their honor:

Blanche K. Bruce was born a slave in 1841. By 1864, he had organized and taught school in Hannibal, Missouri. He later became Sergeant at Arms in the Mississippi State Legislature, a member of the Mississippi Levee Board, Sheriff and Tax Collector of Bolivar County, and County Superintendent of Education. In 1875, Bruce was elected to the U.S. Senate and served there until 1881. He held several political positions in Washington, DC, and was a trustee of Howard University and of the public schools of the District of Columbia.



James F. Bundy, born during slavery in 1862, was educated at Oberlin College and later at Howard University. In 1890, Bundy was appointed Secretary/Treasurer of the Howard University Law School in Washington, DC, where he served until his death in 1914.

W. Bruce Evans, born in 1866, graduated from the Howard University Medical School in 1891. He developed Armstrong High School, the District of Columbia's first technical school, and was its initial principal in 1901.

John R. Francis was born in 1859 in Washington, DC. He graduated from Howard University and later from the University of Michigan School of Medicine. Francis was the first Assistant Surgeon at Freedmen's Hospital and in 1894 was acting Surgeon-in-Chief. From 1886-1889, he was a trustee of the public schools of the District of Columbia.

WOODLAWN CEMETERY PERPETUAL CARE ASSOCIATION (WCPCA) MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Yes! I would like to become a member of the WCPCA and have enclosed the following annual membership fee:
(PLEASE CHECK ONE) Individual \$ 60.00 Business \$150.00

No, I do not wish to become a member at this time, but as a Friend of Woodlawn Cemetery, I have enclosed the following donation for the care and maintenance of the cemetery:
(PLEASE CHECK ONE) \$ 25.00 \$ _____

Name

Mailing Address

Phone

Email

Please detach this form and mail it with a check or money order made payable to the "Woodlawn Cemetery Perpetual Care Association, Inc." to WCPCA, PO Box 29506, Washington, DC 20017. *Membership fees and donations are tax-deductible.*

1800-1895

Designated as the seat of the federal government in 1800, the citizenry of Washington, DC, was indeed diverse. Free white persons, free colored persons and slaves interacted to develop the city into a thriving metropolis. Among the many social needs to be addressed was the need for cemeteries. In 1802, the city established two public cemeteries: the Western Burial Ground (formerly Holmead's Cemetery) and the Eastern Burial Ground.

Subsequently, several cemeteries dedicated to the interment of the black population were founded. These included Harmonion (Harmony) Cemetery (1828), the Female Union Band Cemetery (1842), and Mt. Zion Cemetery (1879), all located in the northwest section of the city. Graceland Cemetery was founded in 1872 near the intersection of Benning Road and H Street, NE, and convenient to the section of the city near the Anacostia River. Eventually, disuse and city expansion caused Graceland's management to seek burial ground elsewhere and to establish a new cemetery. Thus, Graceland, a predominantly black cemetery, became the forerunner of Woodlawn Cemetery.



1895-1930

Woodlawn Cemetery was established in 1895 at its present site. The original officers of the association were Jesse E. Ergood, President; Charles C. Van Horn, Secretary/Treasurer; Seymour W. Tullock, Director; William Tindall, Director; and Odell S. Smith, Director. Many of these individuals also were founders of, or associated with, Graceland Cemetery. The initial interments at Woodlawn Cemetery consisted primarily of more than 6,000 reinterments from Graceland Cemetery. These were made from May 11, 1895, to October 7, 1898.

No specific information remains regarding the appearance of Woodlawn Cemetery during its early years. However, there is little doubt that it conformed in upkeep to other popular cemeteries of that time and remained a desirable interment area. This becomes evident by reading the list of recognizable names of those interred there and by looking at the large and imposing grave monuments standing in the grounds. However, overwhelming factors caused this status to change. Foremost was that the sales of burial sites diminished while upkeep expenses increased. Thus, any funds once intended for perpetual care purposes were used for continuing maintenance and repair needs. By 1930, Woodlawn's beauty began to fade and numerous complaints arose regarding its untended appearance.

1930-1965

In 1933, civic leader J. C. Wright led one of the first efforts to highlight the need for maintenance at the cemetery. He circulated a petition that was signed by plot owners who complained of Woodlawn's appearance. Noted were miserable roadways, inconvenient briar-grown aisles and antiquated vault facilities. In his plight, Wright proclaimed that the cemetery was a sad and humiliating challenge.

In 1936, Wright's action brought about new management of the cemetery. Known as Elmwood Memorial Park, Inc., this group improved the entranceway and added

fencing and a small brick office building inside the main gate. The Elmwood efforts apparently failed, however, since Wright again complained that the deplorable conditions had returned by 1938. Woodlawn's care increasingly depended upon individual efforts.

Throughout these trying times burials continued at Woodlawn Cemetery. In 1940, for instance, the remains of 129 bodies removed from the Colored Union Benevolent Association Burial Ground were reinterred there. In 1958, there were 1,271 interments at Woodlawn. Since 1960, however, interments there have diminished significantly.

A second attempt to revitalize Woodlawn took place in 1961 when land speculator Louis Bell acquired a number of lots and became, in effect, majority stockholder in the Woodlawn Cemetery Association. From 1961-1970, Bell attempted to rehabilitate the cemetery through grading, clearing and restoring fences. Operating at a loss, however, Bell dissolved his interest in the cemetery.

1965-Present

From 1967 to 1969, the condition of Woodlawn somewhat improved as the Bell management responded to cleanup notices served by the District of Columbia Health Department. By 1970, though, maintenance of the grounds again reverted to volunteer efforts. On November 15, 1972, Bruce O. Hawkins led a group that incorporated as the Woodlawn Cemetery Perpetual Care Association. Its goal was to accumulate enough funds through donations to restore the area to a level of respectability.

During the 1990s, Woodlawn Cemetery was added to the District of Columbia's Register of Historic Sites and the National Register of Historic Places.

Today, the Woodlawn Cemetery Perpetual Care Association seeks financial and volunteer support to restore and preserve the beauty of this historic treasure.



Woodlawn Cemetery survives as a memorial in many ways. Not only are departed loved ones commemorated within its grounds, but distinctive periods in history can be regenerated by reviewing its extant records. The above photo provides some idea of the abundant overgrowth that annually envelops Woodlawn Cemetery.

Various types of volunteer assistance are needed to restore and maintain the physical appearance of the grounds as well as to formulate long-range plans for its future.

Please join us in our preservation efforts by becoming a member of the Woodlawn Cemetery Perpetual Care Association.