

Forest Home Chapel

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Forest Home Chapel:

Historical Overview

By the mid nineteenth century, Milwaukee was a city on the rise. The community had received a city charter in 1846 and its population began to grow rapidly as the former porttown grew into a city. This soon led to changes in the city's religious landscape. Because it was around this time St. Paul's Episcopal Church (1838) began discussing establishing a cemetery to serve the whole city. At the time, it was common practice for each church to have their own cemetery. However, many residents started to complain about the maintenance and conditions of these cemeteries. One common complaint was when heavy rain occurred bodies would float above ground from their burial sites. Also, the separate cemeteries were considered deterrents to development. Because these individual church cemeteries were causing difficulties, St. Paul's Episcopal Church board decided to establish a new cemetery on the outskirts of the city center consisting of one hundred and sixty acres in what was then a mostly rural setting. The church took it upon itself to provide Milwaukee with a cemetery that would be open to all. The cemetery would be unique for its period for being nondenominational. Milwaukee continued to grow and develop, and the cemetery evolved right along with it building a chapel and crematory in the 1890's.

The cemetery would be built on land that was once known as "Indian Fields" where an Indian reservation and burial mounds were located. By 1838, the federal government had released their claim on the land, and the indigenous communities who lived there had been forcibly removed to reservations located in Iowa and Minnesota. The area was the ideal location for the St. Paul's Episcopalian Church board as grounds for a new cemetery. They had decided that the cemetery was going to be a "garden cemetery" meant to preserve the natural landscape as much as possible and provide a dignified resting place. The Forest Home Cemetery was meant to be a place of rest that escaped the bustling city. By late May in 1850 Increase Lapham completed the cemetery and by August the first burial would take place. As more people had loved ones buried at the cemetery it became a place of leisure to spend Sundays to visit and picnic at family burial sites. So many people would visit the cemetery on Sunday that the cemetery committee issued tickets and employed a gatekeeper to manage compacity. The Forest Home Cemetery served in essence as Milwaukee's first public park. The Milwaukee Park system wouldn't come into existence until the 1890s, so the cemetery functioned as a park that provided a place of leisure outdoors. As the cemetery continued to grow in popularity the cemetery committee decided to build a chapel on the cemetery grounds.

Even though, plans for a chapel on the cemetery grounds started as early as 1851 discussions didn't become serious until 1889. After the decision was finalized the cemetery committee asked several Milwaukee architects for drawings of a chapel. The cemetery committee placed a \$20,000 budget for the new chapel, received numerous submissions than paid each architect \$100. The winning submission would be George Ferry and Alfred Clas, whose other prominent projects in Milwaukee include the Pabst Mansion and Central Library. The architects went with an English Gothic design made of Lake Superior sandstone with an interior of enameled brick walls, oak millwork pews, and glass conservatories on both sides of the worship area. The final cost of the Forest Home Chapel would be \$35,000 exceeding the original budget. The Chapel construction was completed in 1892, and the first service would take place on July 11, 1892. A main reason it was decided to build a chapel on the cemetery grounds is the convenience of location. Up until the First World War funerals were huge events with large groups of people. The chapel became popular as a place that provided funeral services close to the burial site making transportation for burial services easier. The chapel would draw families of Milwaukee and outer-Milwaukee and within a few years a crematory would be added to the basement of the chapel.

In 1886 a group of Germans in Milwaukee founded the Milwaukee Cremation Society. The society consisted of many prominent Milwaukeeans who begun trying to interest the cemetery committee in their project for a crematory in the chapel's basement. The committee declared that it wouldn't use cemetery funds for the crematory and promised the society that if they raised \$10,000 the committee would approve their plan. However, after The Cremation Society failed to raise the \$10,000 the cemetery committee took matters into their own hands and raised the funds to build a crematory in the lower level of the chapel. The construction of the crematory would be completed in 1896. It has been rumored that the crematory may have been anticipated in the initial construction, because there was already an elevator for the casket to be lowered. Keep in mind that a crypt exists in the basement of the chapel and was used during the wintertime to store bodies when the ground was too frozen for the gravediggers. So, it is possible the elevator was used for that purpose before the crematory. The basement and crematorium would consist of white marble walls. It would be the first crematory in Wisconsin and the upper Midwest. A waiting room would be included near the crematory for families to wait and possibly pray. During the early history of cremation, the family participated in the cremation process. A family assisted with the lowering of the casket, helped push it to the crematorium, and placed it into the two-chamber oil-fueled crematory. The first cremation took place on July 7, 1896. The crematory would increase the popularity of the already popular chapel, and as the 20th century continued, the Forest Home Chapel and crematory would become in competition with local funeral homes.

The chapel would continue to serve all denominations throughout the twentieth century. Although it remained heavily Protestant, the cemetery eventually also welcomed Catholics and Jews to its grounds. As the city continued to develop the once rural area that surrounded the cemetery eventually became urbanized. However, the cemetery would evolve with the growing urbanism around it and keep its nature appeal. By 1956, the Chapel Gardens would be constructed across from the chapel functioning as an above ground mausoleum for friends and families to visit. The crematory located beneath the chapel would cease operations in 1997. Forest Home would build a new cremation facility which uses natural gas unlike the old crematory which was oil fueled. The chapel is still in use for funerals and a variety of other services for example, lectures, weddings, and tours. The Forest Home Chapel was designated as a historic landmark of Milwaukee in 1973 offering a spot for tourists to visit. It's been 130 years (1892-2022) and the Forest Home Chapel continues to serve as a gathering place for Milwaukeeans and others.

Timeline

5/1850- Cemetery is complete
9/5/1850- First burial at Forest Home Cemetery
1890- Forest Home Chapel approved
1892- Chapel construction completed
7/11/1892- First funeral service inside chapel held
1895- Crematory approved
1896- Crematory construction completed
7/7/1896- First Cremation
1900- Cemetery reaches current acres size
1929- Chapel Floral Shop opened
1954- Chapel Gardens approved
1956- Chapel Gardens completed
1973- Designated as Historical Landmark
1982- Chapel Floral Shop closed
1992- First Wedding
1997- Old Crematory Closed
2002- First tour

Annotated Bibliography

Forest Home Cemetery Records. Forest Home Cemetery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The Forest Home Cemetery records are located on the top floor of the Forest Home office building. When one first gets to the top floor there is a table where old maps of the cemetery grounds are located. Next, is a back room where majority of the records are held. One desk of the backroom is where most of the photos are located. There are folders for each type of photos, for example photos of the Chapel are in a folder labelled "Forest Home Chapel". In the back right corner are desks where books published about the cemetery are placed. Also, on these desks are newspapers and any records mentioning the cemetery, such as Milwaukee Record books. There are numerous boxes located in the back room. These boxes can consist of old pamphlets, previous tours info, or other photos. Also, located in the back room are more maps of the cemetery grounds. There is one desk completely dedicated to the tours. On this desk are folders that provide background knowledge of the prominent people that are showcased on the tours. Each person has their own folder. Lastly, there are records of every single person buried or cremated at Forest Home. The collection dates to the beginning of the cemetery's history up until present day.

Gurda, John. *Silent City: A History of Forest Home Cemetery*. (Forest Home Cemetery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 2000).

John Gurda's book gives an excellent history of the Forest Home Cemetery. It begins with a detail description of the reasons behind why the St. Paul Episcopalian Church board decided to establish the Forest Home Cemetery. It explains why the board choose the location it did and the decision making behind wanting a garden cemetery. The book goes behind the scenes as to why the Chapel was desired on the cemetery grounds and the process of how the cemetery board choose the architects to build it. Next, the author provides how the German Cremation Society of Milwaukee approached the cemetery board to build a crematory in the Chapel basement. Gurda explains the early troubles of raising funds for the crematory and how it was finally achieved. What follows is a thorough history of individuals associated with the cemetery and of prominent people buried at the cemetery, such as the famous Milwaukee beer barons. The second half of the book focuses on the add-ons of the cemetery such as the Chapel Floral Shop and Chapel Gardens. It ends with explaining how the cemetery continued into the late 20th century. The challenges the cemetery went through to remain operations and how it succeeded and transitioned with the changing practices of cemeteries in the United States.