HISTORIC

Forest Cemetery

History & Tour

ESTABLISHED 1857

Forest Memorial Gardens
2501 Pacific Avenue SE
Olympia, Washington
History of Forest Cemetery

In 1849, 25 year-old Harvard law student Daniel Bigelow visited Mt Auburn Cemetery near Cambridge Massachusetts. Mt Auburn was then a new kind of cemetery, built outside town and landscaped as a park. Of his visit, Bigelow wrote, “It is a delightful place for a walk, for contemplation, for reflection, and to obtain instruction from the silent, though impressive voice of the tomb.”

After earning his degree, Bigelow crossed the Oregon Trail and arrived in the newly settled town of Olympia in late 1851. In 1854 Bigelow married a young school teacher, Ann Elizabeth White who also arrived in 1851. Together Daniel and Ann Elizabeth were active in many local and national causes.

In 1856 Ann Elizabeth’s father William was killed near Olympia during a conflict between settlers and natives. William’s death and Daniel’s affinity for Mt Auburn likely prompted the Bigelows to help create a cemetery for Olympia. In February 1857 Bigelow, along with pioneer Presbyterian minister George Whitworth, (who later founded Whitworth University,) William Ayers, and George A Barnes organized the Forest Cemetery Association, the first official cemetery association in the area. The founders stipulated it be open to anyone, regardless of religious affiliation and many of Olympia’s earliest residents purchased $10 memberships in the association.

They chose a site along the wagon trail to Steilacoom, about a mile east of town, part of the James and Sarah Head donation claim adjoining Bigelow’s. Head served as a Justice of the Peace and later as Territorial Librarian. The Forest Cemetery Association’s records show they hired “Indians Tom & Jack” to clear and grade the land. Burials began taking place in late 1857.
Within a few years the Masonic and Odd Fellows Lodges organized cemeteries near Olympia as well. By the late 1800s many families opted for those cemeteries and some early burials were removed from Forest. By the 1880s Olympia’s Chinese community began using a portion of Forest Cemetery and in 1893 the association sold a section to Thurston County for burial of the poor. By then, Forest Cemetery was lacking in regular upkeep.

In 1912 members of the St Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church formed the Mt Tabor Cemetery Association to purchase and operate Forest Cemetery. Many families with relatives in the cemetery expressed appreciation that it would finally receive consistent care. After the sale the name changed to Mt Tabor Cemetery.

By 1916 automobiles were becoming more common and the wagon trail east of Olympia was, by then, part of the new Pacific Coast Highway. That year a widening and paving project necessitated the removal of burials along the road. However, many early interments in the oldest part of the cemetery lacked markers and some unidentified burials were relocated with scant documentation.

It was clear by 1921 the Mt Tabor Cemetery Association was falling behind on maintenance. A community volunteer cleanup day in August 1921 saw a large turnout. While men cleared brush, women cleaned and reset the markers. That year, locals founded a new Forest Cemetery Association to assume ownership of the cemetery. Incorporators included Ira Wogomon, WJ Frazier, John Norris, Nora Rose, Susie Bennett. Also prominent among the incorporators were Ann Elizabeth White Bigelow, widow of Daniel Bigelow, and two of their sons, George and Duncan Bigelow.

After World War II the cemetery opened new sections south of the original sections and in the early 1970s the Forest Funeral Home was built. By the 1980s the Forest Cemetery Association decided it was time to disband and the Burgman Family, managers of the Forest Funeral Home, took on ownership of the cemetery.

Another road widening project along Pacific Avenue 1987 led to the discovery of several unmarked early burials. Among the items found was the last remaining early Chinese marker.

Today Forest Memorial Gardens is a modern, full-service burial park, accommodating families of all backgrounds. It also honors its pioneer roots and the values envisioned by its founders serving as a place where visitors can connect with the generations that lived and worked in Olympia and the South Sound from its earliest days.
[1] Jacob O Eckler (d. 1858)
The oldest original marker in the cemetery, 24 year-old Eckler was the victim of a logging accident a few miles from Olympia. During the 1855-56 conflict between settlers and natives, Eckler served in Co. C, 1st Regiment of the Washington Territorial Volunteers.

James K Hurd (d. 1857—No Marker, near Eckler)
One of the first interments at Forest Cemetery, Hurd lost his life trying to corral an angry steer. Born in Indiana, Hurd arrived in Olympia in the early 1850s. He joined an expedition of gold seekers to the Queen Charlotte Islands in 1851 only to be held captive by the Haida for 54 days until the US government ransomed the miners. Hurd returned to Olympia and resumed his trade as a butcher and married Eliza Woodard in 1855 shortly before war with local tribes erupted in late 1855. During the war Hurd served as 2nd Lieut. in Gilmore Hays’ volunteers and saw battle on the White River southeast of Seattle. Afterward, Hurd was active in local affairs and was instrumental in building the first bridge to Swantown (Olympia’s eastside) from downtown and helped develop the first immigrant road across the Cascade Mountains.
Born in Ebensburg, Pennsylvania, Evans earned his degree from Allegheny Theological Seminary in 1859 and accepted a position at the Presbyterian Church at Olympia. Evans arrived in 1860 and succeeded founding pastor George Whitworth. Under Evans’ leadership the congregation dedicated a new church in Olympia at the corner of Legion Way and Franklin St. Evans succumbed to illness at age 28, leaving a wife and child.

The first school teacher in Olympia, Moore began conducting classes in 1852. He also served as Olympia’s postmaster from 1853-54. Over the following years Moore was elected Olympia City Treasurer, County Auditor, and served as clerk of the US District Court for Thurston County.

The Henry and Martha Kinney Family were early settlers of the Pleasant Glade area, north of Lacey. Sleater-Kinney Road is named for their family and their neighbors, the George and Ella Sleater Family who were relatives.

[5] Shizu Izumi Doi (1891-1917)
By the early 1900s Japanese immigrants were a large part of the industrial labor force in Washington. Juichi and Shizu Doi resided at Union Mills, east of present day Lacey, one of the many Japanese families that lived and worked in Thurston County at the time. Shizu died at St Peters hospital in Olympia of complications from childbirth; she is buried here with their infant son.

“Kanaka Jack” (d. 1906—location unknown)
In 1833 the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) established Fort Nisqually near what is now DuPont, Pierce County, predating American settlement on Puget Sound by more than ten years. A critical part of the HBC labor force were Hawaiian men, known as “Kanakas.” They served throughout the Pacific Northwest and place-names including Kalama Washington and the Owyhee River in Oregon reflect their early presence. “Kanaka Jack” came to this area in the early 1800s and settled on Johnson Point with his native wife “Katie” after leaving the HBC service. They made their living cutting wood to fuel the numerous steamships that plied Puget Sound in the late 1800s.

“Indian Louie” Quityamlis (d. 1916— location unknown)
Quityamlis, known by his nickname “Indian Louie,” was born in what is now south Thurston County prior to the arrival of American settlers. He and his wife lived near Tenino and Quityamlis made his living as a day laborer. Quityamlis was also well liked by his neighbors and participated in Tenino’s annual 4th of July parades, riding his white mule. At the time of his death he was one of the oldest native residents of Washington with an estimated age of 95.
[6] Bigelow Family Section

Daniel R Bigelow (1824-1905)
Lawyer Daniel R Bigelow crossed the Oregon Trail by wagon in 1851 bringing his books and desk. He arrived in Olympia in November by schooner on the same voyage that carried the Denny Party, founders of Seattle. Bigelow became a force in local politics, elected to the commission to revise the laws of Oregon, to the Council (Senate) after the creation of Washington Territory in 1853, served as County Treasurer and later as school superintendent and on the board of regents for the University of Washington. In 1854 he married Ann Elizabeth White, and they began a family. Bigelow devoted his life to several causes, including voting rights for women, equal protection under the law for non-whites, public education and temperance. When he died in 1905 he was the last surviving member of the first territorial legislature, interviewed by historians and reporters for insights on the founding of Washington. Today their 1850s home is open as Olympia’s Bigelow House Museum.

Ann Elizabeth White Bigelow (1836-1926)
Ann Elizabeth White crossed the Oregon Trail with her mother and siblings in 1851 at age 15. By 1852 the family arrived near Olympia and Ann Elizabeth found work as one of the first schoolteachers in Washington. She married Daniel in a ceremony at her parents’ home and began married life in his two-room cabin near Olympia. Daniel and Ann Elizabeth helped found the Methodist Church in Olympia and served as one of the host families for the “Mercer girls,” single women who came west seeking husbands in 1865. An accomplished businesswoman, Ann Elizabeth looked after the family’s financial affairs, managing their extensive land holdings until her death.

William White (d. 1856)
White came west in 1850 to scout a homestead for his family. After his wife Margaret and children joined him in 1851, they homesteaded along the Columbia River, but seasonal flooding drove them away. By 1852 the Whites took up a claim on the east part of Chambers Prairie, in Thurston County. In 1856, as they returned home from Sunday services, he and his family were attacked by natives engaged in a war with settlers. William hurried his family away in their wagon and stayed behind to engage the attackers. Afterward he was buried on Chambers prairie near where he was killed; the Bigelows later moved him to Forest Cemetery.

Margaret Stewart White Ruddell (1819-1893)
Margaret led her children across the Oregon Trail in 1851 as part of a 50 wagon train to join her husband William. During the trip she stopped to tend to a dying woman while the train kept moving; she caught up on horseback after the woman died. After William’s death in 1856, Margaret married Stephen D Ruddell, another prominent Thurston County settler. In her later years Margaret resided in Olympia and, along with her daughters Ann Elizabeth Bigelow and Clara Dunbar, was active in Washington’s early women’s suffrage movement.
Chinese Community
As early as the 1880s Chinese immigrants used Forest Cemetery for burials and in the following decades many Chinese immigrants were interred here. Each year the Chinese community made pilgrimages here to observe “Ching Ming” or “Tomb sweeping day” on the 104th day following the winter solstice. On the appointed day Chinese gathered at the cemetery, tidied the site, and paid their respects by leaving offerings of food and incense.

Chinese tradition required the bones of the dead be returned to their family burying grounds if possible and most buried at Forest were later shipped home. In the 1970s a fire destroyed the Chinese association’s records and the number of early Chinese burials that remain today is unknown.

[7] Lock Mai Tuck (d. 1914)
25 year-old Lock My Tuck lost his life working in the oyster beds on Henderson Inlet when he slipped off a float and drowned. He arrived in Olympia around 1910 from San Francisco and was learning English from a tutor. His is the only remaining early Chinese marker in Forest Cemetery, rediscovered during a road-widening project in 1987.

Su He (d. 1880—Location unknown)
The funeral for Su He, fatally injured while working at the Tumwater Pipe Factory, attracted a large crowd of spectators. The ceremony took place downtown, on the street in front of Olympia’s Chinese district, followed by a procession to the cemetery. Along the way and at the cemetery the mourners lit firecrackers and burned incense to keep malevolent spirits at bay. The traditional service, a novelty to non-Chinese, was covered in detail by the local press.

“Billy” Don Yin (d. 1904—Location unknown)
Don Yin was one of several Chinese vegetable gardeners growing commercial produce on Olympia’s east side. In 1904 he was shot while returning home late in the evening after socializing in Olympia’s Chinatown. He survived long enough to implicate rival vegetable gardener Lum Joe and a white co-conspirator as his attackers. Lum Joe was jailed for several months but finally released for lack of evidence; he left town shortly afterward.

“Hong Hai” (d. 1912—Location unknown)
One of the most successful Chinese merchants in Olympia, “Hong Hai” was actually the name of his business, but non-Chinese assumed it was his name as well. He began his mercantile business shortly after he arrived from San Francisco in the late 1870s. Hong Hai also served as a contractor, providing Chinese laborers to local industries. Around 1900 he traveled to China and married. After their return to Olympia his wife fell ill and died in 1902 and was buried at Forest Cemetery.
Civil War Veterans
There are at least three veterans of the American Civil War interred at Forest Cemetery. Their graves are marked with government issue headstones procured by the Olympia chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) through their efforts to mark all veterans’ graves.

[8] John Wenger (d. 1900)
An immigrant from Switzerland, Wenger arrived in the US in 1862 and enlisted in the Union Army. He served in the Ohio 20th Light Artillery Battery until mustered out at wars end. Wenger was a member of the Olympia George H Thomas Post GAR.

[9] Hugh Adair (d. 1911)
Born in Scotland, Adair served with "E" Co. Pennsylvania 54th Infantry from 1861 to 1865. He married Annie McMathe and together they raised eight children. He died at their farm on South Bay near Olympia at age 73; Annie died in 1917.

A resident of Olympia for 31 years, Foster was an active member in the Olympia GAR. He enlisted in 1862 and served in Co D, Indiana 86th Infantry until mustered out in 1865.