

Down by the Riverside
By Dennis Payton Knight

Denver's grand old pioneer of a graveyard hasn't been manicured and watered for fifteen years. Her grasses have browned and her trees are thirsty, yet Riverside Cemetery stands well-loved on the banks of the South Platte River just four miles downstream from Denver's city center.

She began as a prairie cemetery in 1876, with native grasses and trees. Her secluded location along a flowing stream made it a popular resting place for Colorado's well-to-do, and rich green lawns soon took root. But barely a decade later the Burlington Railroad rolled in and intruded on the tranquility, spurring industrial development, refineries and smokestacks right up to her fences.

With that encroachment, some wealthy families had their relatives' remains exhumed and moved to Fairmount Cemetery in southeast Denver. Other prominent denizens stubbornly stayed, however, and more arrived over the years. But then counties from all over Colorado began to send their paupers and indigents for burial at Riverside and it became Colorado's Potter's Field, if without the name.

A stroll through Riverside Cemetery is a connection to Denver's earliest years. It is the burial place of Clara Brown, a freed slave, the first black woman in Colorado, and a founder of St. James Methodist Church. There is David Day and two other Medal of Honor recipients. Territorial governors John Evans and John Long Routt rest there, as does Silas Soule, the courageous officer who defied Colonel John Chivington's orders to fire on defenseless Indians. An unmarked grave holds Oliver Marcelle, a popular black baseball player who died penniless in 1950.

Riverside's ownership and assets were acquired in 1900 by the Fairmount Cemetery Association which operates it today. The verb 'operate' may be an overstatement, though, as Fairmount management in 1981 lost a battle with Denver Water and by 2003 quit watering altogether. Further, in 2005 management quit accepting burials because they were losing money on each sale.

The cemetery appeared in the 1990s to be abandoned and on the verge of shutting down, whetting the thirst of developers. Fairmount's executives were criticized heavily for Riverside's state, but that was countered by Patricia Carmody, executive director of the Fairmont Heritage Foundation. "Fairmount didn't walk away from it," she insists.

Carmody has led volunteers in a rejuvenation program that includes prairie grasses and native trees, hand watering to get them established. The pioneer roses and iris that survived are once again lovingly cared for.

And there is a model right on site for them to work with, the northwest section of the cemetery which was never planted with non-native plants. "It's an area rich with native grasses and wildflowers. We want to establish that in other parts of the cemetery. We plan to do a different section every year," Carmody told columnist Dick Kreck of the Denver Post in 2013.

They are selling lots again. Carmody reports an average of 15 burials a year at Riverside Cemetery. The reports of her death have been greatly exaggerated.