

Driving Over Granny: The Battle between Urban Development versus Pioneer Cemeteries

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What purpose does a pioneer cemetery provide to urban community life? Are there cultural and social aspects that should be considered in advocacy for preservation of this type of rural public space against modern development? As the rural landscape evolves into a metropolis can there be a balance between urban development and preserving and protecting pioneer cemeteries that threaten to interrupt the template of growth of the city? A pioneer cemetery is a repository of “great historical importance recording the exploration and settlement patterns by the earliest individuals who have been part of our collective humanity¹.”

This paper will introduce the reader to two pioneer cemeteries in and near the city of Los Angeles and their struggle for survival against the growing needs of the city for transportation and commercial spaces; as city life stretches outward the rural past usually meets obliteration by bulldozer. I will also focus on the price tag of paving over history and consider options to keep the bulldozer at bay.

I collected data from a variety of resources such as archived newspapers, the Chinese Historical Society website, the Savannah Cemetery Association website, cultural resource management rules and regulations, and a few anecdotal stories. For participant-observation research I visited two pioneer cemeteries to see first hand what they have to offer as a cultural or social public space in Los Angeles. I volunteered to sell raffle tickets at Savannah Cemetery’s third annual Harvest Festival fundraiser. At the fundraiser I was able to take a tour of the cemetery with a member of the El Monte Cemetery Association; including an interview with him. I spoke with several other board members hoping to gain their frame of reference of why it is so critical to protect and preserve pioneer cemeteries from the bulldozer and urban developers.

Of all the places on the earth one would hardly think a cemetery filled with dead people could be an interesting public space, but by ‘digging deeper’ everyone alive today can use such an environment to make a connection with the historic identities and places that have the “power to serve as a lookout for future generations, who are trying to plan the future, having come to terms with the past².” As a genealogist and family historian I have come to understand the indispensable historical, cultural and social qualities revealed only in pioneer cemeteries and even smaller family cemeteries, burial grounds set up on a hill or in the ‘back forty’ of the original deed holder. These are places where the past, present and future intersects with the living, where we look at the thumbprint of history to acknowledge past mistakes, rejoice in successes, and to plan for a responsible future.

Economic hardship, the need for expansion, and lack of public interest culminates in legal battles as small groups of committed individuals fight to save these repositories that tell of the struggles of ordinary people to meet daily needs, marry, raise families, work, and eventually die. Looking at any family tree, by the time you count back to a second, third or fourth great grandfather or grandmother, you will personally have an ancestor buried in a pioneer cemetery or

family cemetery. Sue Silver, state coordinator for the California Saving Graves project said: “by removing a cemetery you remove the evidence of all those people and the history their lives represented to the very community the cemetery represents. The history of the community is, in essence, often entirely removed.”³ Eminent domain solutions to modernize a city should not be the only facet to deliberate when contemplating a forced removal of the dead – cultural, social, and historic features should also be considered.

Examples of two pioneer cemeteries are the Evergreen Cemetery¹ and the El Monte Cemetery² (hereafter called Savannah). Pioneer cemeteries are public landscapes whose physical boundaries were predetermined while the area was still primarily a rural environment. Without seeing into a crystal ball urban developers could have no idea how future city needs would transform and eventually encroach upon this “silent” landscape. For the Evergreen Cemetery³, the Metro Gold Line would claim a portion of their land (and those laid to eternal rest), and Savannah⁴ would lose space from the widening of Valley Boulevard and Mission Street, the construction of a modern strip mall, and the fire department and Moose Lodge.

What purpose does a pioneer cemetery provide to urban community life? As a community setting, “these old resting places have a natural ambiance often missing in modern manicured parks.”⁴ While some might think it odd (ghoulish?) to wander around a cemetery, this open space is very tranquil and landscaped with “pines and the palms, the willow and the wisteria⁵,” an environment filled with native birds, squirrels, rabbits and sometimes deer, with stained glass windows and examples of turn-of-the-century architecture⁵ to enjoy. Evergreen Cemetery has an “old Chinese Shrine built in 1888. This Shrine was used for the “burning of clothes, paper money and incense for the purpose of insuring the decedent had plenty of these items in the next world. To this date, this custom is still practiced by many Chinese as part of the Funeral ritual⁶.”

Both Evergreen and Savannah have canons from old wars as an expression of public art to honor war veterans; cemeteries seem to have sentimental attachments to old canons. Evergreen holds two public events⁶ for visitors, one to “honor our War Dead, our relatives and friends” and the second, when a Buddhist Priest honors the memory of the unknown Japanese who have pioneered and settled in the Los Angeles area.⁷ Savannah hosts a Veteran’s Day service open to the public, a Harvest Festival in October to raise funds for the needs of the cemetery, and play a part in Rosemead’s 4th of July Parade.

¹ Evergreen Cemetery: 204 North Evergreen Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90033-3654.

² El Monte Cemetery: (aka Savannah Pioneer Cemetery and Savannah Memorial Park, 9263 Valley Boulevard, Rosemead, California, 91770.

³ Picture One: Historic Los Angeles Cemetery Summary Report: Proposed MTA land use.

⁴ In the 1920, when the city began to widen Valley Boulevard, construction crews unearthed dozens of corpses outside the cemetery fence. Most of the skeletons were reburied in a mass grave inside the cemetery, but some had deteriorated so much that workers left them untouched and simply paved over them.

http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/la/cemeteries/la_cemeteries_el_monte.html.

⁵ Picture Two: Evergreen Chapel.

⁶ Each year on the Memorial Day Weekend, Evergreen Cemetery is host to a Memorial Day Program. It is our privilege to host this event and we extend an invitation to all to attend.

If dead men tell no tales, what cultural, social, and historic aspect could advance the argument to preserve and protect a pioneer cemetery against the bulldozer? The history of Los Angeles (or any city) contains the memories and experiences of the original urban planners, the workers and residents. The Anglo-American history written by the “city’s most prominent early families⁸” excluded the importance of numerous ordinary citizens, who also took part in making Los Angeles. The majority of those ordinary citizens were women, people of color, and even the earliest indigenous population. It is important to tell the stories of every human being, especially of ordinary people, because each one contributed to the making of the urban landscape; but because of their gender, culture or social structure, they have been silenced from recorded history. The disadvantage being denied a cultural or historical memory or the freedom to use the places Los Angeles has to offer obstructs “cultural citizenship⁹” where identity and place qualify as a dynamic force to the individual and the community. As Maya Angelou points out: “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story.” The only way to tell a story of someone who died long ago is to reconstruct their lives from the evidence they left behind. To do that, the first place to go is the cemetery, where the final proof of their existence is still present.

An example of one pioneer history that needs to be resurrected comes from a discovery made during construction of the Metro Gold Line through East L. A. and Boyle Heights. In the past one hundred years about 902 Chinese were known to have been buried in the vicinity of the transportation project, but the location had been forgotten over time and instigated from prejudice for the Chinese culture and class. In a newspaper article¹⁰, David Pierson describes a segment in Los Angeles history that isn’t the pleasant Anglo-American version taught in school but rather tells the story of the “reminders of bigotry unearthed¹¹.” Lost chapters in human history rediscovered reminds us of people who were scorned for what they were based on: superficial qualities like gender, ethnicity, or class, and this should open opportunity to redress injustices. Pierson states:

“A recent discovery by a new generation of railway workers building the extension of the Gold Line commuter rail line through Boyle Heights has unearthed a dark but largely forgotten period of Los Angeles history, where an estimated 10,000 Chinese workers from the late 19th Century, who came to America to work on the railroads and ended up in desperate straits, crowded into a filthy Chinese ghetto near what is now Union Station.

They could not marry, they could not own property, and they performed the most undesirable jobs: ditch diggers, canal builders, house boys. They were banned from most shops and public institutions and were the target of racist violence that went unpunished. Three-quarters of the remains were adults and most were male.

The finding supports the belief among Chinese American historians that the bones belonged to Chinese male sojourners who died a century ago at a time when immigration laws sought to reduce the Chinese population by prohibiting Chinese women from entering the country. Historians have long believed that there was a potter’s field⁷ for Chinese workers in Boyle Heights but did not know precisely where. The remains belonged to men who lived at a time when Chinese were relegated to the lowest rung of society.

⁷ Picture Two: Evergreen Cemetery. Illustration of land taken for the Gold Line, a potter’s field.

They treated the Chinese just as bad when they were dead. They were treated like animals. The Chinese were not permitted to be buried in Evergreen Cemetery, where some of the city's most prominent early families—such as the Van Nuyses, Lankershim's, Hollenbeck's and Workman's—were laid to rest.

The Chinese were given a corner of the city potter's field next to the indigents. While historians said they hope the find will broaden their understanding of the sojourners' lives, some expressed anger that the MTA tried to conceal the fact that the bones were of Chinese immigrants for months so that it would not delay the extension of the Gold Line. 'It's a slap in the face,' said Ken Chan, president of the historical society. 'These men weren't respected when they were buried, and it's like they're not being respected now.' 'These guys probably had a friend or two to bury them, they probably threw wine over the grave, burned some incense and paper money, and if they were lucky, had a eulogy read with some kind words.'¹²,

Another specific aspect to advocate preservation of pioneer cemeteries pertains to the "knowledge of identity"¹³." In my work as a genealogist and family historian, the focus is all about 'the person' and 'the places' associated with them. The client wants names, dates and places of their ancestors; ancestral identity seems to bring a sense of heritage and identity to the living. As I was researching the Evergreen Cemetery I came across a website where individuals wrote their memories or thoughts on this place that illustrates how important the knowledge of identity is, even if you are just four years old:

"When our son was about 4 years old, we had trouble locating my dad's plot (Evergreen). We went into the office and they looked up his name with no results. They said, "Is there another name he might be listed under? Our son looked at them feeling very exasperated, "You know...Grandpa Henry!" They finally found his name under his Japanese middle name."

Beyond the nameless Chinese workers buried in the forgotten potter's field outside of the Evergreen Cemetery is another person, buried inside Evergreen, who represents the importance of preserving pioneer cemeteries from the bulldozer; her name was Bidy Mason (1818-1891). Mason was born a slave, won her freedom in California, went on to become a philanthropist, humanitarian, and founding member of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church. It took until the year 1989 for Mason to have a tombstone⁸ erected to mark her final spot in the Los Angeles landscape. Only after details of her remarkable life began to surface did the city finally recognized that this woman of color had played a leading role and they eventually reciprocated her achievements with a lasting expression in the form of public art wall⁹, a tombstone, and a citywide celebration of "Bidy Mason Day." Mason's story is another part of Los Angeles that the bulldozer 'claimed' as it paved over her residence in order to put up a parking lot; she was one of the first women of color to purchase real estate in Los Angeles. As I stood at Mason's memorial marker contemplating how much she contributed to Los Angeles, to being a woman, to being a person of color, and who began life as a 'piece of property,' I think she would agree in the social value for preserving pioneer cemeteries: "Most importantly, visiting a gravesite is a way of keeping the memory of someone alive"¹⁴."

⁸ Picture Three: Evergreen Cemetery, Bidy Mason's tombstone.

⁹ Picture Four: The Power of Place Project, Bidy Mason's Wall. Downtown Los Angeles.

As the rural landscape evolves into a metropolis there can be a balance between urban development and preserving pioneer cemeteries that threaten to interrupt the template of growth in the urban landscape. Several options to this problem begin with getting community sponsorship to support preservation. Most people would agree a cemetery is the last place they want to be. Modern life has become so transient in regard to how long a person or family stays in one place; this creates a sense of disconnectedness from the city, especially the city's pioneer cemetery. That means cemetery associations must find ways to connect people to a past that probably does not belong to them; as I have seen, this is a very difficult task.

A second example I would like to share is from an article where Jason Kosareff¹⁵, reports on statements made by Bob Bruesch, vice president of the association and a Garvey School District board member, addressing pioneer cemetery verses urban developers, and lack of community support:

“The bones of Pallet (1796-1889) and thousands of other San Gabriel Valley pioneers buried at Savannah Memorial Park could be moved to make way for a future development. Developers have an eye for the cemetery site and the community of Asian businesses and residents nearby would like to see it gone because they think it brings bad luck.

But Savannah is rich in history and should be preserved. The pioneers from the Santa Fe Trail would bring their dead along with them, preserved somehow, and bury them here. More than 3,000 graves fill the cemetery, dated as early as 1847. More graves are scattered under Valley Boulevard and beneath area businesses. The area also was an Indian burial ground before the corpses of settlers filled the place.

One of the remaining plots was bought by Harry Trepanier, owner of Harry and Sons Radiator Shop on Valley Boulevard, the oldest family owned business in Rosemead. He would be heartbroken to see the Savannah developed, but said most in the community wouldn't notice if it was gone. ‘They just drive by it, they don't know anything about it,’ Trepanier said. Trepanier's father bought the radiator shop 62 years ago from famous turn-of-the-century prize fighter Jim “The Boilermaker Jefferies.” It's across the street from Savannah, and Trepanier remembers the time in 1952 his father found a husband-and-wife suicide in the cemetery. It was one of three suicides Trepanier can remember happening in the cemetery. In the late 1950s, Savannah was the site of a fatal shootout between police and fleeing robbers. When Trepanier was 9, an ice cream truck crashed right in front of the graveyard and neighborhood children were treated to free ice cream under the shade of the old oak in the middle of the cemetery.

Trang Hoang owns Hoang's Video at 9240 Valley Boulevard, across from the graveyard. ‘People don't want to go here because they're scared, because of the ghosts,’ Hoang said. Hoang continues, ‘The area has a strong Vietnamese community, many of whom fear Savannah as a source of evil spirits. He said he doesn't believe in ghosts, but business has been slow since he moved in about five years ago, probably because Asian customers do not want to shop near a cemetery.

Asian people, they believe in spirits, they believe they're still around here and they make the business slow.'

Bruesch continues, 'as an interesting footnote to the cemetery, two Japanese buried in Savannah during the 1920s and 1930s are historically significant. Their gravestones are written in Chinese, a sign of social status for Japanese at the time. This is the first known use of Chinese characters in a public area outside of Chinatown in Los Angeles. They likely owned farms in the area and were quite wealthy. Their families are likely still living in the region. Also buried in the cemetery are a slew of Civil War veterans, and even a veteran of the War of 1812. And founding families who settled in the region, like the Whislers and the Wiggins, live under the grassy fields of Savannah. This could be a tool, to let children know what our community was like 150 years ago.'

Interactions from young people and corporate efforts to preserve Savannah, local Eagle Scouts and the M. C. Gill Corporation became involved with the cemetery to make the environment a more attractive component of the city. Their goals were to xeriscape with colorful native plants as well as replace an old chain link fence with a more attractive wrought iron fence. The 4th of July, Memorial Day and Veteran's day, small American flags are placed at the grave markers of the veterans, to encourage those who pass by the cemetery on that day, a moment or two to reflect on the commitment to community these men gave. The annual Harvest Festival is used to generate cash flow and expose the residents to preservation work. Several teachers at Rosemead High School take their students to visit the Savannah Cemetery for part of school assignments. I think this helps broaden young adults' viewpoints and for a few minutes open them up to local history. Not everyone becomes president or a general in some war, but each one has the potential to think and act like Biddy Mason or to put an end to actions like burying nameless Chinese worker in a potter's field. William Ewart Gladstone¹⁶ (1809-1898) said: "Show me the manner in which a nation or community cares for its dead, and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender sympathies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land and their loyalty to high ideals." Possibly the high school students will walk away from this experience with that sentiment.

In conclusion, I hope that the reader can empathize with the importance of protecting and preserving the pioneer cemeteries that are still standing. As the city fights for urban space against the silent cemetery landscape, society stands in the balance of losing the priceless history of the ordinary people who worked and built the city. Growing up we are taught about the historic leaders, explorers, and religious leaders and their deeds—but nothing about the local people who carried the burden of the growing city. What needs to occur now is for individuals to rediscover and rewrite history to include the memories and experiences of those who lived, worked, and died in the city represented by a pioneer cemetery. Edmund Burke (1729-1797) said: "People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors." We can learn a great deal about culture and social attitudes by looking backward to our ancestors, who are buried in pioneer cemeteries, to build better community ties today (and maybe flourish in the future).

Fieldwork for Ethnography Paper
Endnotes of Works Cited
Interview with El Monte Cemetery Association Member
Photographs

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- ¹ www.findagrave.com
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- ⁴ Rasmussen, Cecilia. Los Angeles Times 21 November 1994. "Curbside L.A. Home Edition; Metro. Page B-3.
- ⁵ Evergreen Memorial Park brochure.
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- ⁸ Pierson, David. Los Angeles Times 15 March 2006.
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- ¹⁴ www.findagrave.com.
- ¹⁵ Kosareff, Jason. San Gabriel Valley Tribune. 24 July 2004.
- ¹⁵ www.Ancestry.com: Quote from newsletter.

Further References Used

Interview with Virgil, El Monte Cemetery Association Member.

Photographs:

One: Historic Los Angeles Cemetery Summary Report, Los Angeles Metro Gold Line Project.

Two: Evergreen Cemetery-Evergreen Chapel.

Three: Evergreen Cemetery-Biddy Mason Tombstone and great granddaughter's memorial marker.

Four: Los Angeles, Power of Place Project. Biddy Mason Wall. Sheila de Bretteville artist.

Evergreen Cemetery brochure: Map location of Biddy Mason's grave.

Original Proposal for Anthropology 433, October 13, 2009.

Presentation photographs from the Chinese Cemetery in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles County, California.