

## **EASTERN CEMETERY**

Eastern Cemetery is one of Louisville's oldest cemeteries as well as one of the country's first "rural cemeteries". Rather than being laid out in the traditional flat, square style as most cemeteries of the time were, Eastern offered panoramic rolling hills accented by beautifully planned landscaping, and both native and non-native species of flowers, shrubs, Ivy and what would become the mature tree canopy that in large part, still remains today. Walking paths and horse & buggy paths were additional features that were added to create a soothing environment to the friends and families visiting their dearly beloved who lay nestled in the 29 acres.

Eastern was first incorporated in 1848. It was named the Methodist Cemetery as it was started by three local Methodist churches wanting a place to bury their own, as well as anyone, from any faith in the community. At that time, integrated burial was almost unheard of in the United States, but this didn't ring true for Eastern. Initially, Eastern had "White" and "Black" sections as well as a four acre "Slave" section, which was highly uncommon to find and shows the progressive thinking of our fair city as compared to the rest of the country in those times. Eastern is home to over 1,000 Veterans, people of all faiths, colors and economic classes, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and children, and people who have led to great changes in our city, state and country.

Around the turn of the century a corporation was formed that took over Eastern and all goings on at the cemetery. As it turns out, this corporation would be the demise of what should be regarded as one of the most culturally rich, sacred grounds in America. In the late 1980's the ugly truth surfaced that the corporation had been performing mass amounts of over burial on the grounds unbeknownst to the public. After many years of court battles, the case was dismissed due to some technicalities. The cemetery was officially abandoned along with all of the people who have loved ones buried there. For decades now people have desperately tried to find answers, resolution, and closure, to this nightmare; -all the while, the grass kept growing, the trees began to die off, dropping branches and limbs which toppled and destroyed gravestones. People vandalized the structures and stones, dumped garbage, and used the property as an unregulated dog park. The shrubs grew wild and in many cases covered gravestones, slowly pushing them underground as if to add further injury to insult to all of the families who came trying, with no avail, to find the spot their loved one was supposed to be "resting in peace".

In March of 2013 the Friends of Eastern Cemetery was born. We are a volunteer group that works every Sunday from April through December to improve the conditions at Eastern Cemetery. Our group is solely funded by our volunteers and others who hear about our work and are kind enough to donate money or equipment. For the most part we use our own equipment and pay for our own supplies and materials out of pocket. For the past three seasons, on average we have

somewhere around twenty people show up weekly. Sometimes more, sometimes less.

We have been working on an Event Coordination Team helps us continue to grow by getting more people and volunteer groups in the community involved. Some examples include:

- Memorial Day weekend 2015 we teamed up with Northeast Christian Church as part of their Love The Ville community outreach volunteer program. We had well over 400 volunteers show up that day. All 29 acres were cut, weed wacked, raked, and all of the grass clipping were blown off of the stones. It was an unbelievably touching experience to say the least.
- Summer 2015 we hosted a stone cleaning event as part of the Nazarene Youth Conference brought 6,500 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders into Louisville from all over the country.

Since 2013 we have contracted with Jonathan Appell, the most respected person in the historic cemetery preservation/restoration field. Mr. Appell has delivered hands on workshops, so those in our city and state, as well as those in surrounding states could come learn the correct methods, techniques, materials and equipment used, to safely and responsibly preserve/restore these historic cemeteries. The turnouts were higher than expected and drew people from five states. The interest and demand for cemetery preservation is not only real, it is also a source of tourism. We have met people who traveled from all over the country to visit Eastern, to either see this place that they have heard so much about in the news, the internet or social media. They come trying reconnect with their lineage, to locate the plots of their ancestors they had all but given up on finding after unsuccessfully trying for decades.

We have been contacted by groups of people wanting to start cemetery preservation/restoration groups as they see the momentum that we have created at Eastern and want to do the same for the cemetery that they have a connection to. These people come from all over the United States and from other countries such as the UK and Ireland. We are extremely proud to see what we have started, spread, especially the impact it has locally. We are thrilled to have helped the Fenley Cemetery and the Warsaw Pioneer Cemetery get their groups up and going and to watch them successfully keep growing.

In this day and age where there is a shortage of respect for the living, there isn't much respect for the dead either, however and we have witnessed this first hand with some of the younger people that have served court ordered community service with our group; when you put a young person to work in a historic cemetery in their community, they learn their own history. They learn how to give back to someone who will never be able to thank them. They learn respect for the dead and they learn respect for their community as well as those who live in it.

PLEASE help us get the Jefferson County Cemetery Board back in place, as it would be a tremendous step in the right direction for our community as a whole. These old, abandoned cemeteries, rather than being a black cloud looming over our city, can instead be assets that give people the opportunity to make a positive change in their community as well as learn new, useable skills. Above all it promotes respect in its most ultimate form.

Thank you,

Andy Harpole  
President/Founder – Friends of Eastern Cemetery