Hallowed Ground: 
Rapid City’s Historic Cemeteries¹

Executive Summary 
Cemeteries hold more than the remains of our forebearers. They preserve significant elements of community history and memory. Cultural markers on gravestones and tombs bear the racial, ethnic, and artistic heritage of a place. Epitaphs reflect the values and beliefs of the dead and those who buried them. Clusters of graves help document natural disasters and other mass death events. Flags and memorials honor service and sacrifice. Cemetery landscapes speak to patterns of land use, development, and planning. And well-manicured burial grounds demonstrate the intentionality of mourning and remembering. Dilapidated or unmarked graves can show the opposite.

Since its founding in 1876, Rapid City has had at least six organized cemeteries: the Plateau Cemetery off St. Cloud Street, Mountain View Cemetery and Mount Calvary Cemetery off Sheridan Lake Road, Evergreen Cemetery off Highway 44 in Rapid Valley, Pine Lawn Memorial Park and Gardens on Tower Road, and the cemetery at St. Martin’s Monastery. Three other significant burial sites are known to have existed in or near the city. One was by the Rapid City Regional Airport and was known as the Mentch Methodist Cemetery. The other, a group of unmarked graves of Native Americans who died at the Rapid City Indian School or the Sioux Sanitarium, has no name. Finally, a few references suggest that another, long-forgotten cemetery may have existed on Rapid City’s north side, near what is now St. Therese the Little Flower Church.

This essay pulls together the limited material presently available about the cemeteries in Rapid City. It focuses on the burial grounds noted above because they exist either within or very near the city limits. This document offers a starting point from which the Rapid City Historic Preservation Commission could sponsor additional work to research, interpret, and preserve the community’s places of burial.

Historical Research & Narrative
For the first decade of Rapid City’s history, residents had a problem. The young community lacked a good place to bury its dead. The Black Hills Weekly Journal called it “the cemetery question,” and Rapid Citians needed an answer.²

The paper’s readers, of course, had pragmatic reasons for desiring a cemetery. Many regional Indigenous peoples honored their dead by placing them on above-ground funerary scaffolds. There, the physical form could rejoin the natural world.³ The Judeo-Christian traditions of non-Native settlers, however, demanded burial, which required designated cemetery space.

Rapid City, meanwhile, was establishing itself as a key cattle camp, a regional supply stop, and a community of permanent residents. Founded in 1876, Rapid City was a roughshod frontier town on Lakota treaty land. Without a formal cemetery for its first two years, residents buried bodies

¹ NOTE: This is a working draft of a research essay developed for the Rapid City Historic Preservation Committee. Please do not cite without checking with Vantage Point Historical Services. Images included are for reference only and should not be published or reused without permission of the copyright holder.
where they were discovered or placed them in an early burial ground just north of Rapid Creek, likely on or near the base of Cowboy Hill. In 1878, the community created the Plateau Cemetery south of town, off what is now St. Cloud Street near the Star Village housing development. Plateau became Rapid City’s primary cemetery, but problems quickly arose. In poor weather, horse-drawn funeral processions struggled to trudge up the steep hill to the burial grounds. Community members, encouraged by Black Hills Weekly editor Alice Gossage, began building support for alternative, and more accessible, locations. Indeed, locals established four cemeteries in the 1880s. Religious groups organized two of them, and neither lasted long. The first, known only as the “Old Catholic Cemetery,” is referenced vaguely in the historical record. According to one newspaper article from 1975, the plot was “said to be [located] a mile north of Rapid City on the old school section in 1883 . . . perhaps near the present St. Therese [The] Little Flower [Church].” No further documentation of the location or number of burials at the site seems to survive.

The second early, church-sponsored burial ground was known as Mentch Methodist Cemetery. It sat roughly six miles east of town along Highway 44 near what became Rapid City Regional Airport. Around 23 bodies were interred at Mentch between 1889 and 1902. According to an entry in A History of Pennington County, a Methodist congregation built a church and established a small cemetery on the grounds. Within a few years, the congregation relocated, steeple and all, to rural Caputa several miles further east on Highway 44. They left the burial site behind, where it remained, largely forgotten, for decades.

Meanwhile, Rapid Citians organized two major cemetery associations and began laying the groundwork for large burial complexes. The first was the Mountain View Cemetery Association, which acquired 80 acres of land at the base of the western slope of the Rapid City ridgeline. The group received its charter from the secretary of Dakota Territory on August 21, 1888. That same month, the Evergreen Cemetery Association met at the town library and began planning their plot, which was located a quarter mile east of the city limits in Rapid Valley.

The planning and promoting of the Mountain View and Evergreen cemeteries echoed patterns of cemetery design popular earlier in the 19th century. Between the 1830s and 1860s, Americans reimagined the roles cemeteries could play in the death of individual people and the life of burgeoning communities. For the dead and their survivors, the gravestones, epitaphs, mausoleums, and decorations that adorned a resting place were mediums for conveying values and identity. As historian Richard Meyer writes, cemeteries “take on distinctive flavors relating to regionalism, ethnicity, religious influence, and a whole host of other factors. They also allow for considerable personal innovation, as can be attested to by anyone who has spent much time exploring their infinite variety.”

For many 19th century communities, cemeteries were also important assets, understood as opportunities to beautify the community, promote outdoor recreation, and even attract tourists. Elaborate “garden” cemeteries were established across America. As Blanche Linden-Ward writes,

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8 “Mountain View Cemetery,” Rapid City Journal, September 14, 1888.
they were “more than a plain and simple burial place.” Before public parks filled urban greenspaces, erudite citizens took long nature walks and these “pastoral places also functioned as ‘pleasure grounds’ for the general public, often to the dismay of their founders.” Many cemeteries were popular tourist attractions, with cities’ visitor guides enticing out-of-town guests to stop by and take a stroll through manicured rows of headstones and flora. In this way, bucolic cemetery grounds became open spaces where visitors could immerse themselves in an exploration of the juxtaposition of life and death.

Although Mountain View and Evergreen were established a few decades after the garden cemetery movement had peaked, rural design clearly influenced both cemeteries’ impressions of how patrons should perceive their plots. On August 3, 1888, both cemetery associations ran dueling descriptions of their burial grounds on the same page of the Black Hills Weekly. Mountain View enthusiastically described the beauty of its newly acquired, 80-acre plot: “The land could not lay nicer for the purpose intended than it does,” the members wrote. “It is slightly rolling, enough to secure natural drainage, and yet not sufficient to make the land what is called broken. It will permit of most picturesque decoration…and the unanimous opinion of all who have looked over the land is that it is by far the most desirable that can be obtained in this vicinity for that use.”

Not to be outdone, Evergreen promoted its 71-acre cemetery grounds as “picturesque” and “laid out to conform to the topography, which is undulating, with gentle sloping hills” east of Rapid City. The cemetery’s plan included a sprawling, rural landscape with “numerous parks with lakes and broad avenues,” which would be lined by trees.

Few residents got to enjoy Evergreen. Around 50 people were interred there. They included several bodies that had been relocated from other parts of Rapid Valley, including the remains of the three men executed on Hangman’s Hill early in Rapid City’s history. Just a few years after the cemetery opened, however, a flood washed out a main road and bridge. Visitation dropped, and when convenient access was not restored, Evergreen went bankrupt. Pennington County sold part of the cemetery’s land for taxes in 1893. The cemetery struggled along until 1910, when the last burial occurred there.

Mountain View, on the other hand, thrived. It steadily added plots over the years and became the resting place for thousands of area residents including Rapid City’s earliest settlers; prominent civic and business leaders; some children and staff from the Rapid City Indian School; veterans of various conflicts from the Civil War forward, including some African American “Buffalo Soldiers” from the 1880s; and Rapid Citians representing a wide array of faith traditions and backgrounds.

Mountain View’s success derived in part from the fact that the cemetery comprises half of what is now a large, two-cemetery burial complex in west Rapid. Shortly after Mountain View was planned in 1888, a group of Catholics—perhaps seeking a new, permanent home for the cemetery they had previously used on the north side—secured permission to acquire ten acres adjacent to Mountain View Cemetery for a burial ground of their own. Known as Mount Calvary Cemetery, this

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burial place grew alongside Mountain View and now holds several thousand graves. Today, the two cemeteries are separated by West Flormann Street, and both are managed by the City of Rapid City.  

Rapid City added two other cemeteries in the 20th century. In the 1920s and 1930s, the south side of Rapid City expanded as Highway 16 extended towards Mount Rushmore and Custer State Park in the southern Black Hills. Meanwhile, Works Progress Administration developments on Skyline Drive made the area more accessible. Pine Lawn Memorial Park and Cremation Gardens opened near the intersection of Tower Road and Skyline Drive in 1936. The complex offers burial plots, mausoleums, and spaces for interring urns for the more than 5,200 souls who rest there.  

Pine Lawn’s design—an oblong path with trees, landscaping, and scenic overlooks—reflects earlier traditions of cemetery planning as well as new developments that were underway in the mid-20th century. Although cemetery designers continued to emphasize natural beauty, as Elisabeth Walton Potter and Beth M. Boland write, memorial parks were “comprehensively designed and managed by full-time professionals,” who sought to “extend perpetual care to every lot and grave” by smoothing out rough features with new, industrial landscape tools, and creating a sense of visual uniformity among the graves.  

The design at Pine Lawn intertwines natural beauty with a vision of a restful afterlife to provide a peaceful experience of mourning and remembrance.  

The most recent cemetery founded in Rapid City is located on the campus of the St. Martin’s Monastery. Nearly 80 nuns who lived and worshipped at the monastery are buried there, with the oldest gravestone dating to 1961.  

The expansion of cemeteries and the growth of Rapid City also created market demand for mortuary and funeral services. Several long-running businesses have served Rapid City and its cemeteries for generations. The earliest was operated by Henry Behrens, who established his still-running mortuary service in Rapid City in 1879. In 1961, while Rapid City was undergoing a major postwar population boom, Herman Rausch founded Rausch Monuments, which has continued to craft many of the gravestones and memorials that honor deceased members of the Rapid City community for sixty years.  

As Rapid City grew and evolved, officials relocated bodies from abandoned cemeteries several times. This process was poorly documented and has long vexed local historians and genealogists. As early as 1892 and 1893, for example, some bodies were taken from Plateau and moved to Evergreen, presumably due to accessibility issues. About a decade later, eight bodies

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18 Walton Potter and Boland, Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Cemeteries and Burial Places, 5.  
were moved from Mentch to Mountain View. Then, when Evergreen went out of business, many of the bodies were relocated to either Plateau or Mountain View. Plateau then closed in 1920, and three years later, the city undertook the removal of all the graves to make room for a “water works plant” on the site. According to one local researcher, the city failed to account for all the bodies moved to Mountain View, and some either remain at Plateau or were moved without being indexed or recorded, so their descendants are unlikely to find records of their burials. Documentation of cemeteries like Mentch, Evergreen, and Plateau—including exact details of who was buried where and when—remain open for further research.

Perhaps the greatest mystery of Rapid City’s cemeteries, however, regards the unmarked graves from the Rapid City Indian School and the Sioux Sanitarium. The Rapid City Indian School operated from 1898 to 1933, and after the Great Depression, was converted to the “Sioux Sanitarium,” a tuberculosis clinic for Native American patients. This facility became an Indian Health Service hospital in the 1950s and today operates as the Oyate Health Center.

During the boarding school era, an unknown number of Native students died either traveling to the school, while enrolled, or in attempts to escape the campus. Around 10 of these children were buried at Mountain View Cemetery. Others were interred on the school’s campus. Their graves were either never marked or the headstones deteriorated and disappeared over time. In either case, knowledge of these graves was preserved only in the local Lakota community. For decades, Lakota families maintained that a significant number of children, and perhaps patients from the early sanitarium days, remained buried somewhere on the former campus of the school. Around 2013, a group of volunteer researchers undertook an effort to document the names of those who had died and find and protect the graves. To date, they have identified about 50 children who died at the boarding school, but the list is incomplete, since a substantial portion of the school’s records were destroyed. After several years of research and consultations with Lakota elders, spiritual leaders, and representatives from state and tribal historic preservation offices, the research team identified the likely location of the graves on a hillside across from West Middle School and the Oyate Health Center. Research into these children’s deaths, their resting place, and efforts to protect and memorialize the site are ongoing.

Rapid City’s cemeteries are vital resources for understanding the history and development of the community. Their history, however, is only sparsely documented. In some cases, research projects by members of the Rapid City community, including entries on websites like Findagrave.com, appear to be the only investigations into locating and preserving graves or memorializing the dead buried there. The RCHPC faces a rich opportunity to further study, explore, understand, and preserve Rapid City’s hallowed ground.

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Bibliography/References

* A History of Pennington County, SD: Presented by the Pennington County History Book Committee (Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1986), 13.


* Findagrave.com (Mountain View, Mount Calvary, Pine Lawn, Mentch, St. Martin’s Monastery, Evergreen).


* Keith Egggener, Cemeteries (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).


### Preliminary Documentation

**Table: Rapid City Cemeteries**

* Information from Don Barnes, “Pennington County Cemeteries” in *History of Pennington County*, 14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>First Burial</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Church</em></td>
<td>Mount Calvary Cemetery</td>
<td>SW ¼ x NE ½ Sec 10 T1N R7E</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td>Active (now city run)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Church</em></td>
<td>Mentch Methodist Cemetery</td>
<td>NW ¼ x NW ¼ Sec 32 T1 R9E</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>Abandoned 1906</td>
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<td><em>Church</em></td>
<td>St Martin’s Monastery Cemetery</td>
<td>St. Martin’s Monastery, 1851 City Springs Road</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Active</td>
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<td>Church</td>
<td>“Old Catholic Cemetery”</td>
<td>Near St. Therese The Little Flower Church,</td>
<td>1883</td>
<td>Abandoned, Date Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Community</em></td>
<td>Mountain View</td>
<td>NW1/4 x NE ¼ Sec 10 T1N R7E</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td>Active</td>
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<td><em>Community</em></td>
<td>Plateau Cemetery</td>
<td>Near Center Sec 1 T1N R7E</td>
<td>1878 or 1879</td>
<td>Abandoned 1888</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Privately Owned</em></td>
<td>Evergreen Cemetery</td>
<td>NE ¼ x SE1/4 Sec 5 T1N R8E</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td>Last Burial 1922</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Privately Owned</em></td>
<td>Pine Lawn Memorial Gardens</td>
<td>W ½ x SW ¼ Sec 14 T1N R7E</td>
<td>1936</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal?</td>
<td>Rapid City Indian School/Sioux Sanatorium</td>
<td>Hillside adjacent to West Middle School</td>
<td>Unmarked, likely early 1900s</td>
<td>Abandoned/Date Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Mountain View Cemetery

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RCHPC Interpretive Essay – Historic Cemeteries

*Preliminary Draft – Vantage Point Historical Services – March 2021*
Mount Calvary Cemetery
Pine Lawn Memorial Park and Cremation Gardens
Map of Pine Lawn

Unmarked Graves from Rapid City Indian School/Sioux San
Top: Looking west from West Middle School
Bottom: Looking northwest from Canyon Lake United Methodist Church
Mentch Methodist Cemetery

[TBD: According to Ellen Bishop, the cemetery is “about directly south of Highway 44 from the turn off of Highway 44 to the airport on the south . . . it is behind a hill as you go toward it and you can’t see the stones on the ground until you are around the curve. Bishop provided a Township and Range map identifying the location, but it could not be photographed due to snow.]

Maps/Historic Photographs

Maps TBD

Map to Mentch Cemetery
Ellen Bishop
Alpha Chase headstone, 1880, Mountain View Cemetery
Minnilusa Historical Association

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Behrens-Wilson Funeral Home was established as Henry Behrens, Inc. in 1879. 
https://www.behrenswilson.com/our-story/
Mountain View/Mt. Calvary Cemetery, 1971-1972
Minnilusa Historical Association

Gravestones at Mentch Methodist Cemetery in 1998
Photos by Ellen Bishop, Rapid City
Ellen Bishop at Evergreen Cemetery
*Rapid City Journal*, 1999

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### Potential Projects

The RCHPC could lead or partner in the following community history and historic preservation projects related to the history of cemeteries in Rapid City:

**Sponsored Research on Cemeteries in Rapid City**

Ellen Bishop is a local genealogist and probably the most knowledgeable person in the area when it comes to cemetery research. She has compiled lists of those buried at several of Rapid City’s historic cemeteries. The Rapid City Society for Genealogical Research, Inc., is another community group interested in this work. The RCHPC could engage Ms. Bishop and/or the RCSGRI to assemble a detailed history of local cemeteries. Additionally, the RCPHC could engage a specialist on the history of cemeteries to evaluate the design, iconography, and other elements of the burial sites in Rapid City. This project could include partnerships with Osheim & Schmidt Funeral Home, Behrens Wilson Funeral Home, and Kirk Funeral Home and Cremation Services to survey mortuary records.

**Support for Rapid City Indian School Children’s Memorial**

As detailed in the accompanying “Indigenous Presence” and “Rapid City Indian School/Sioux San Lands” essays, a group of community researchers has spent the last several years locating the unmarked graves of Native American children who died at the Rapid City Indian School. As the community continues to search for and protect these graves and support the creation of a Children’s Memorial at the site, the RCHPC could provide research support and/or serve as a community liaison for this work.
Driving or Walking Tours of Historic Cemeteries

Some cemeteries install interpretive signage and sponsor guided or self-guided walking or driving tours. Others maintain lush gardens and promote programming that emphasizes botany and landscape. Some historic cemeteries even host concerts. The RCHPC could engage the community to determine the comfort level with these creative uses, then work with cemeteries and other stakeholders to enrich the program and community interaction with local cemeteries. Over time, these projects could expand to include historic cemeteries beyond Rapid City.

Develop Cemeteries Website

To capture the historic character of cemeteries, showcase headstones and landscapes as both monuments and historical sources, offer families of the deceased an opportunity to virtually visit their loved ones or research earlier generations, and promote programming or wayfinding, some cemeteries develop interactive websites. The RCHPC could develop a website for Rapid City’s historic cemeteries, either as a stand-alone project or a component of picturercpast.com. (See for example: Albany Rural Cemetery, Menands, New York https://albanyruralcemetery.org/; Oakland Cemetery, Atlanta, Georgia; https://oaklandcemetery.com/; Woodland Cemetery, Dayton, Ohio, https://woodlandcemetery.org/; Congressional Cemetery, Washington DC, https://congressionalcemetery.org/)

National Register Eligibility

None of Rapid City’s cemeteries is listed on the National Register. Evaluating any of Rapid City’s cemeteries for eligibility or nomination would require a significant investment of time and resources, since according to the National Parks Service, “cemeteries and graves are among those properties that ordinarily are not considered eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places unless they meet special requirements. . . a cemetery or grave must meet not only the basic criteria, but also the special requirements of Criteria Considerations C or D, relating to graves and cemeteries.” In short, cemeteries may be eligible, but only if a clear case for the specific contribution that the place makes is demonstrable.

Resources

The following is a list of existing public and private community groups, organizations, and institutions who would make strong partners on any RCHPC initiative focused on exploring and understanding the Indigenous history of Rapid City.

Rapid City Society for Genealogical Research, Inc.
Rapid City Indian Boarding School Lands Project
Mountain View / Mount Calvary Cemeteries
St. Martin’s Monastery
Pine Lawn Memorial Park and Cremation Gardens
Mount Moriah Cemetery (Deadwood)

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Osheim & Schmidt Funeral Home
Behrens Wilson Funeral Home
Kirk Funeral Home and Cremation Services
Rausch Monuments