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Going to Graceland

A stroll through one of Chicago's oldest cemeteries unearths the stories of the men and women who built the Windy City BY ELISA DRAKE

Whoever said you can't take it with you has clearly never seen the final resting places of some of Chicago's original movers and shakers. Buried among the majestic maples and elms of Graceland Cemetery in Lakeview, you'll find plots for the Marshall Fields, the Potter Palmers, the Pullmans, the Gettys, and many others whose names now grace Chicago streets and cultural and commercial institutions. In life, these big shots hobnobbed in posh Prairie Avenue and Gold Coast homes; in death, their grandiose tombs maintain an elite clique.

Established in 1860 and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2001, Graceland is a tranquil, 119-acre oasis of winding roads, gentle hillocks and naturalistic landscaping—really more like a sculpture garden than a cemetery. Lilac and forsythia bushes, daisies and astors, and hawthorn and oak trees surround the graves. "They wanted to have someplace as nice for the living as for the dead," says Polly Sippy, a Chicago Architecture Foundation docent.

In fact, Graceland's personality was a departure from the era's norm. "Graceland, in design and intent, was always supposed to be a family cemetery," says city historian Al Walavich. "It doesn't even have a veterans section." Perhaps that focused all the attention on the flashy, high-priced graves of the rich and richer. "During the 19th century, it was definitely a competition of whose site was the best-looking," Walavich says.

Take the gravesite of Potter Palmer (1826-1902) and Bertha Honore Palmer (1849-1918), for example. You can't miss it: The couple is buried in two huge stone sarcophagi encircled by 14 Greek columns, making it the largest tomb in Graceland. This unabashed expression of opulence suited the couple, who Sippy describes as "the king and queen of society in Chicago." Palmer built his fortunes in retail and real estate, and his luxurious Palmer House Hilton hotel at State and Monroe streets is still the height of elegance. When his philanthropist-socialite wife died, the elaborate funeral included velvet ropes between columns and a guard to keep out the riffraff.

Nearby is the equally impressive gravesite of Palmer's friend, retail giant Marshall Field (1835-1906). The highlight of this tree-hugged area is a statue by Daniel Chester French, one of the premier sculptors of his time. The thoughtful, seated woman was French's precursor to his Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., a decade later.

One of the loveliest and most elegantly understated sites of the cemetery belongs to renowned Chicago architect Daniel Burnham. Fittingly, the man who ensured public access to the city's Lake Michigan shoreline is buried on an island in the cemetery's quaint Lake Willowmere. A small footbridge leads to the tiny island, where rough-edged glacial granite boulders mark the Burnham family gravesites amid leafy trees and patchy grass. Note the dates for his wife, Margaret—she lived to a ripe 95 years old.

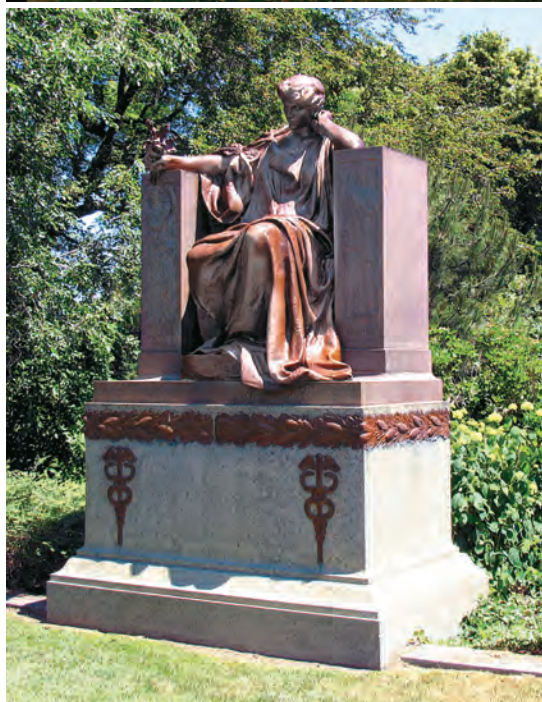
PHOTO BY JOSEPH T. KELLEY

Though it was added only to solve drainage problems, the man-made Lake Willowmere somehow became the “it” place to be buried. Palmer’s Greek temple abuts the lake, as do the gravesites of architect Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), whose sleek black granite stone reflects his modern, “less is more” aesthetic; and George Pullman (1831-1897), whose single Corinthian column is flanked by stone benches. Interesting fact: Because Pullman made so many enemies in his railcar business, his family feared his coffin would be vandalized, so they covered it in tar paper and asphalt, sunk it in concrete, then topped it with railroad ties and more concrete.

Also near the lake is the famous Getty tomb. Lumber merchant Henry Harrison Getty certainly got his money’s worth when he hired hot-shot architect Louis Sullivan to design this mausoleum for his wife, Carrie Eliza (1842-1890). Now a city landmark, this graceful limestone structure showcases Sullivan’s artistry with ornate detailing in its bronze doors and arched ornamentation reminiscent of his Auditorium Theatre downtown.

Besides what Walavich refers to as “marquee names,” there are plenty of lesser-known occupants here, like John B. Dickey (1831-1857), one of the first Chicago firefighters killed in the line of duty, whose monument is topped with a sculpted fireman’s helmet; and William Hulbert (1832-1882), founder of the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs and president of the Chicago White Stockings (later renamed the Cubs), whose grave is marked with a baseball-shaped stone. “People rub it for good luck,” Sippy says.

Whether you know their names or not, the gravesites here all have stories. Some are flamboyant, others are more humble; all are pieces of Chicago’s remarkable history, and we’re fortunate that after almost 150 years, Graceland is still the beautiful, welcoming place it was meant to be. “It’s a great open-air museum of Chicago history,” says Walavich, who urges visitors to explore the cemetery. After all, the people who are buried here spent plenty of money for just this type of posthumous appreciation. 4001 N. Clark St., (773) 525-1105, www.gracelandcemetery.org. **W**



Clockwise from top left: The grand Palmer tomb; the pyramidal gravesite of brewery owner Peter Schoenhofen; the landmark, Louis Sullivan-designed Getty tomb; a pensive female figure marks the grave of retailer Marshall Field. Opposite page: The view across man-made Lake Willowmere.

Exploring Graceland

Want to learn more about Graceland’s rich history? Stop by the cemetery’s main office (open daily 8:30 am-4:30 pm) and pick up a map, which points out some of the notable graves. Feel free to tour the grounds at your leisure, or join one of these official tours:

»**Chicago Architecture Foundation.** CAF docents give an overview of Graceland on tours every Sunday in October (2-4 pm; \$10), while this month’s “Graceland: A Second Look” tour explores one of the oldest sections of the cemetery (Oct. 15, 29; 1:30-3:30 pm; \$10). 312-922-3432, ext. 226.

»**Chicago History Museum tour.** Historian Al Walavich, who works part-time at the cemetery, leads these in-depth tours. Oct. 28, 29, 10 am-noon and 1-3 pm; Oct. 31 1-3 pm. \$15. Tour starts at cemetery. 312-642-4600.

»**Elegant Chicago Tour: Graceland Cemetery and the Boulevard System.** This Chicago Botanic Garden “fall adventures” bus tour of Chicago’s boulevards includes a walking tour of the cemetery. Boxed lunch is included in the \$124 fee. Oct. 12; 9 am-4 pm. Tour starts at Chicago Botanic Garden Visitor Center, 1000 Lake Cook Rd., Glencoe, 847-835-5440.