

## **In Search of Wyandotte's Oldest Cemetery**

By Mike McCloy

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Despite rumors and comments over the years that graves existed at one time south of Northline Road and east of Biddle Avenue in Wyandotte, Michigan, no factual evidence has ever been presented. Old timers in Wyandotte told stories that industrialist Eber B. Ward told people to bury their dead in the North burying grounds, and that some people just buried their dead and no records were kept. Several "old timers recall that there were more than one remaining grave marker east of the present day dog pound location, south of Northline extended."<sup>1</sup> One recalls playing in and around several such markers during World War I, when the site presently occupied by the police station and Department of Public Services buildings were used by citizen for 'Victory Gardens'.<sup>2</sup> Using an uncalled map, the Oakwood Cemetery Association, in 1975, made an unsuccessful attempt to convince the city that graves existed south of Northline near the city dog pound. Since that time, no further information regarding the matter has surfaced.

At the risk of 'stirring the coals' on this subject, I feel it is important to record further evidence I have uncovered regarding the possibility that graves existed south of Northline. I say 'risk' because of concern over the motive, though eight years have elapsed since its organization, of the Oakwood Cemetery Association. The group's overall goal was the proper maintenance and upkeep of the Oakwood Cemetery, north of Northline Road. They in addition, were insistent in showing that "city trucks were parking atop old gravesites".<sup>3</sup> What was the ultimate motive on this later issue? Was it to embarrass the city or to actually litigate the removal of the city building? Though I feel this could not happen, any new information on the matter might be used against the city.

At the risk of this happening, I, nonetheless, feel my study should be put on paper. I have no affiliation with the Oakwood Cemetery Association, if it still exists. The motive in researching the 'possible gravesites' was strictly from a historical standpoint. If, indeed, a burial ground existed south of Northline long ago, any discussion of it would be of interest to future writer of Wyandotte's folklore.

The information for this study is based primarily on a newspaper article which describes an 1892 sale of property which included a burial site. The sale was between the Eureka Iron Works and the buyer, R. E. Davis, a stockholder of the Davis Boat & Oar Company, both of Wyandotte.

My main goal of finding precise boundaries for the burial ground in question was failure. The best description found stated that a burial ground, consisting of three acres, existed "just below that of the Oakwood Cemetery and adjoined it to the south".<sup>4</sup> Unlike the Mt. Carmel and Oakwood cemeteries in Wyandotte, I found no plot layout or name index for any other cemeteries in the city. Because the site in

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<sup>1</sup> Siler, L., Director of Community Development, Report to Wyandotte City Council, August 18, 1975, "Investigative History of Oakwood Cemetery Area."

<sup>2</sup> Siler, L.

<sup>3</sup> Siler, L.

<sup>4</sup> Detroit News, July 3, 1893

question has no firm boundaries and no plot layout or name index, it will continue to be unrecognized by city and church officials as a third burial ground in Wyandotte.

Since I lack the precise information needed to show the burial grounds' exact location, the attempt of this study will, instead, focus on bringing its existence from the old-timers' rumors and stories stage to something more substantial, and submit evidence in support of the following claims:

1. The burial grounds, regarded by Wyandotte's first pioneer settlers as the "Old City Cemetery", was in use over thirty-five years, and at its peak held the remains of approximately five hundred bodies.
2. That, although linked to, and confused with, the Oakwood Cemetery, a separate and distinct burial grounds existed south of Northline Road. Each cemetery had separate owners whose business transactions never crossed.

Further, I will examine the unique story of how the burial grounds disappeared from all city and county maps.

To focus on these claims, the study has been structured into a chronology of the site and its owners. The chronology is part fact, part conjecture. Whether the evidence gathered here is enough to substantiate that a burial ground existed south of Northline Road will be left for the reader and history to decide.

To understand the history of the "Old City Cemetery", the acquisition of land in Wyandotte by industrialist Eber B. Ward in 1853 must be examined.

At that time, Ward was one of the greatest financiers in America, and among his business ventures he wished to furnish a site for his future Eureka Iron Works. Involved in the process of smelting and refining metals, the company representatives searched for an accessible site able to furnish timber to fuel its furnaces.

After a study of all available locations, the trustees of the iron works purchased from John Biddle a two mile strip of land located at present day Wyandotte. The land had a river access and was plentifully supplied with the material needed for production. With the purchase of the land secured, attention was directed to organizing the village which would soon surround the site of the new iron works.

Beginning in 1854, the iron works, on behalf of the village, helped establish hotels, grocery stores, housing, churches, social halls, and in general everything necessary for the "complete fulfillment of village life".<sup>5</sup> As complete as the organization of the village proper was planned, however, it soon became apparent to the benevolent officers of the iron works that arrangements for a nearby cemetery had been overlooked.

With the iron mills running strong, and with the village still in its infancy stage, Eber B. Ward answered the cemetery demand by "setting apart a plat of three acres near the river band to be used by the citizens as a free public burial ground".<sup>6</sup> The three acre plat chosen was on property owned by the iron works in Section 28, the northern border of which ended at present day Northline Road.

As great an organizer as Eber B. Ward was, the decision to simply set aside land at random within the confines of this corporate land holding, without formally donating the site by formal deed to the city, was an error which would cause grief and indignation amongst the citizens of Wyandotte in the years to follow.

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<sup>5</sup> The Rotary Club of Wyandotte, Michigan, Proudly We Record, 1955.

<sup>6</sup> Detroit News, July 3, 1893

Having little legal consciousness, the pioneer factory workers of Wyandotte did not consider the potential hazard of burying their loved ones on company owned land.

Because most cemeteries, now as before, are under the auspices of church, state, or county officials, there is virtually no chance the land which they occupy can ever be resold or developed for some other purpose. Some families did anticipate the potential legal problems of the iron works burial grounds, as evidence by the fact that some Wyandotters were buried in church run cemeteries in Detroit (Mt. Elliott) and elsewhere.

In justice to the trustees of the Eureka Iron Works, let us consider what options were available when the old city cemetery was staked out. During the 1850s in Wyandotte, neither the Methodist nor Catholic churches took any initiative in securing a cemetery for their respective parishioners. Mount Carmel Cemetery was not in use until 1865, over ten years after the platting of the City of Wyandotte.<sup>7</sup> The (Clark) Oakwood Cemetery, in what was then Ecorse Township, was not in use until 1869.<sup>8</sup> Because Wyandotte's city government was not in formal existence until 1867, no city council was in existence to purchase land for cemetery use. Clearly, between the heavy populating of Wyandotte which began in 1855, through 1865, Eber B. Ward took the only initiative in Wyandotte by offering the three acre plot on his property.

Though the donation of land from the iron works to the city was not unique, the donation of land for cemetery use differed from others in one important respect. Unlike the donations of land for fire department, school and other purposes, the donation of land for cemetery use was not accompanied with a formal deed to the city or a local church.

Though no such deed transfer was executed for the burial grounds, I believe the intentions of the Eureka Iron Works to supply the citizens with a burial site was an honorable one. The setting apart of "half Marshland" as a burial site as a "take it or leave it" proposition to the local populace. If the lore that no permanent makers were allowed in the burial grounds was true, it would seem a clear warning by the iron works that the land might, someday, be developed or resold. This along with the fact that no deed was executed to formally set apart the ground, appears not to have troubled those Wyandotters who buried their dearly departed there. Those who used the site were either unknowing or apathetic towards any future problems with respect to ownership. Other foresaw the problem, but because of financial reasons, used the site anyhow. Unlike Detroit, where cemetery lots had to be purchased, the old city ground in Wyandotte was closer and lots were free of charge.

From its establishment in approximately 1855 until the platting of the Mount Carmel Cemetery in 1865, it is likely the majority of Wyandotters, especially employees of the iron works, were buried in the "Old City Cemetery". Even after Mount Carmel was in popular use, plots in the Old City continued to be acquired until 1869 when the three acre plat reached its capacity and "it became necessary to secure addition ground".<sup>9</sup> But who would supply this additional ground, and how long before it would be available? By this time the Catholic churches in Wyandotte had established Mount Carmel and did not concern themselves with the additional burial ground issue. Would Eber B. Ward offer yet another few acres for burial usage as before?

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<sup>7</sup> Proudly We Record

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

In 1869, and in answer to the need for a new cemetery, land owner J. P. Clark fenced off a plot of land on his existing property, the southern border of which ran parallel to the northern border of land owned by the iron works. The land set up as a cemetery on Clark's property adjoined the Old City Cemetery and "was just above it on the river front".<sup>10</sup> Only Northline Road divided the two cemeteries. The new cemetery fenced off by J. P. Clark remains today as the Oakwood Cemetery.

Unlike the Old City Cemetery to its south, the plan for Oakwood was formally recorded in public files as such. The original deed in Liber 2, page 7 was recorded in the Wayne County Land Office under "Plan of Oakwood Cemetery Near Wyandotte". Its exact location was recorded in Section 21, signed by Clark on January 13, 1869, and reads as follows:

Beginning approximately 292' east of the middle line of the Detroit-Monroe Road [Biddle/Jefferson] and 33' north of the south line of Section 21 [approximately the center of what is now Northline].

Records show the intent was for that south thirty three feet of Section 21 to comprise one half the road, if and when it was constructed east of Biddle.

From that beginning point, 445' northward, thence 218' eastward, thence following an irregular (shoreline) route southward to a point 33' north of the south line of Section 21, thence westward to the point of beginning.

The original plan was set up with three hundred nineteen plots in forty four block, with provision made for two sixteen foot wide carriage rods running lengthwise, With the Old City Cemetery in Section 28 unable to accommodate any new family plots, Oakwood and Mount Carmel became the more commonly used cemeteries in the city through the 1870s and 1880s.

A few citizens, realizing that the Old City was neither a private nor religious cemetery, began exhuming the remains of family members in the Old City Cemetery and transferring them to the other two cemeteries. Though the Old City continued to be used by families who had established plots there, over the course of time it gradually came to be regarded as the cemetery where only deceased of the very poor were buried. The iron works remained committed to those families who had family plots in the Old City, but did not encourage any further burials, and did not claim responsibility for the grounds' upkeep. As a result, the grounds' condition deteriorated year by year. In addition to the poor, people who died from small pox, diphtheria and typhoid became the primary burials in the old cemetery.

As the Old City Cemetery became progressively worse the condition of the Oakwood, on the other hand, steadily improved. The different condition of the adjoining cemeteries became a contrast, and by 1886 their different appearances were commented upon the Wyandotte Herald of October 8, 1886:

A visit to the cemetery north of the city shows that the grounds have been greatly improved by the dredging recently done by John P. Clark, the drainage being now perfect. The old city cemetery on the south is now overrun with shrubbery and weeds, the wooden fenced enclosing the graves have fallen to the ground and the whole plat presents none of those attractions of vegetation and monumental decoration common to burial grounds. Most of the internments have taken place on the eastern portion of the lot. The Clark cemetery on the north side of the city limits is symmetrically laid out with walks and avenues, and the appearance of the grounds indicates they

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

have received a reasonable amount of care. Quite a number of new monuments have been erected during the past few months.

By 1890 the Old City Cemetery had become somewhat of a “potter’s field caused by the assorted vacancies made by the removal of bodies to the Clark (Oakwood) cemetery”.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the Old City Cemetery, the Detroit News remarked, “not one grave in 20 bears any mark. Rickety picket fenced surround some of the plats and half of these have fallen down. Rank weeds are plentiful, and ground is broken where many graves have been opened”. The Old City became an eye sore to those Wyandotters who traversed the Biddle and Northline intersection. For people who still had family members buried there, a feeling of insecurity and consternation developed.

The perplexing question of what to do with a burial ground not formally deeded and within the corporate boundaries of a business enterprise became a regular topic of conversation. The problem became pronounced in 1891 when the owners of the floundering Eureka Iron Works began a reorganization and consolidation of the company. The question arose concerning the possibility of the company land occupied by the Old City Cemetery begin put up for sale. The answer came in 1892, when, indeed, the trustees of the iron works, after a reassessment of its useful assets, advertised the land occupied by the Old City Cemetery and the several acres that surrounded it for sale. “It became evident to the Eureka Iron Works that eventually the ground would be deserted, and it was thought to accelerate the removal of bodies and realize upon the land.”<sup>12</sup>

About the time the iron works began offering section of its property for sale, a new enterprise in Wyandotte had begun a search for land in order to accommodate its expansion. Begun in the second quarter of 1891, the business was owned and operated by Edgar A. Davis and known as the Davis Boat & Oar Company. The company was involved in making boats of all sorts, and measured by its initial success, had the making of becoming a Wyandotte “institution”.<sup>13</sup> Between April and May of 1891 the company shipped out four carloads of boats, and by October of 1891 employed 125 men with the capacity of turning out nine hundred boats a year. By 1892 it became evident to the company that more property was necessary to accommodate any additional machine shops. For this reason, the company commissioned one of its stockholders, R. D. Taylor, to search for suitable land. Taylor concluded the land offered for sale by the iron works, which included the Old City Cemetery, to be the most suitable for manufacturing purposes and consummated its purchase with the iron works.

According to the Detroit News, July 1893, the land purchased by R. D. Taylor included the old burying grounds. Knowing the old ground was located within the confines of the land sold to Taylor, this writer set out to find the legal deed which described the land transferred in this sale. I determined the only hope of finding the exact perimeter of the old cemetery lay in the distant possibility that for some reason it was given with the description of land it was located on. I found the deed for this sale in Detroit at the City County Building Land Records Office, in Liber 396, page 518, and it reads as follows:

This indenture made this 22<sup>nd</sup> day of January, 1892, between the Eureka Iron & Steel Works of Detroit and the Davis Boat & Oar Company.

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<sup>11</sup> Detroit News, July 3, 1893

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Wyandotte Herald, June 5, 1891

All that certain parcels of land situated and beginning in the City of Wyandotte, County of Wayne and State of Michigan described as follows, to wit:

Commencing at a post on the north line of fractional section twenty eight (28) township three (3) south range eleven (11) east distant 707 ½ feet; east on said section line from its intersection with the center line of Biddle Avenue in said City of Wyandotte thence south 300 feet to a post on the north line of certain premises heretofore June 22, 1885 deeded by said first party (Eureka Iron & Steel) to D. H. Burrell, Walter W. Whitman, and Edward J. Burrell thence east along said north line of Said Burrell and Whitman's land to the channel bank of the Detroit River. Thence northerly along said channel bank to the said north line of section 28. Thence west along said section line to the place of beginning. Excepting however and reserving from the operation of this deed a strip of land thirty three feet wide from the north line side of said premises above described which is intended to be the south half of a public road extending on said section line to the Detroit River and until said section line road shall be opened through said grave yard to said Detroit River. Said first party hereby grants to said second party a right of way around the graves in said grave yard from the street leading from said grave yard to Biddle Avenue to the premises as conveyed.

Signed,  
W. K. Muir  
President, Eureka Iron Works

Received for record in Detroit, 01 December 1892.

Although the perimeter of the entire sale of land is given, the perimeter of the cemetery within was not, thus ending my hopes of ever pinpointing its location. The deed, nevertheless, exhibits evidence to substantiate that in addition to the Oakwood, another, now extinct, cemetery existed nearby. In J. P. Clark's deed of 1869 the location of the Oakwood Cemetery is described as being in Section 21. The sale of Eureka Iron Works property on land which included a cemetery is described in its deed as being in Section 28. By this reasoning, I believe this study at least exhibits that nineteenth century Wyandotte had not two (Oakwood and Mount Carmel), but three (including Old City) cemeteries.

What happened to the old cemetery after R. D. Taylor purchased the land it was located on is a unique story which could not possibly happen in today's society. The following excerpt relates what occurred after Taylor took possession of the land sold by the iron works:

Mr. Taylor laid out a new street, passing along the edge of his ground, and having the new cemetery fence on one side. He then posted the following notice on a tree:

Notice:

All persons having relation interred here will please remove the same as soon as possible and those in the road immediately.

There was a great commotion in town at once. The people who had intended to remove the bones of their friend became stiff-necked and rebellious when ordered to do so. Many complied without considering their rights in the case. Poor German women would go out to find the wee-covered spot where their husbands and children lay, dig them up, and gathering the mouldering bones in their aprons would bear them away to the new [Oakwood] cemetery. Sometimes they would drop

a bone beside the path. The Detroit News representative found the humerus bone of an adult person lying in the grass yesterday.<sup>14</sup>

An alliance of indignant citizens, headed by A. E. Woodruff, approached the state Attorney General, Frederick Ellis, as to whether the immediate removal of family remains could be enforced. With the threat of legal action a possibility, Taylor offered to charge the expense of removing the bodies to the Davis Boat & Oar Company. To further expedite the removal, the boat works stated its intention to deed the road (Northline extended) to the city and to build a new dock at the river front.

The objection to the immediate removal subsided and the citizens became resigned to the fact that the land was now, as before, commercially owned, giving its owners the right (though not morally) to realize upon the land. Though the citizens finally agreed to the immediate removal of the bodies, R. D. Taylor ran into yet another obstacle when the city board of health stepped in, and ordered the removal of bodies to be delayed. The following was recorded in the Wyandotte Herald of July 29, 1892:

R. D. Taylor, who recently purchased the old cemetery grounds at the north end of the town, ordered all bodies removed therefrom. Many began to comply with the order, until on Tuesday the board of health stepped in and took a hand. Many bodies of persons who died with smallpox, diphtheria, and typhoid fever are buried there and exhuming bodies in this hot weather cannot be done without great danger of spreading pestilence and death throughout the city. The board therefore ordered that no more bodies be removed until cold weather arrives. This cemetery was presented to the city about 40 years ago by Capt. E. B. Ward for a free public burial ground. No papers were passed, however, and at the recent auction sale the lot was sold by the Eureka Company to Mr. Taylor. The parties who were witnesses of the gift to the city are now all dead.

The theory that the bodies should be removed during the winter was contradicted when a letter received from the state recommended they be removed before the summer ended. The following was reported by the Wyandotte Herald of August 5, 1892:

Since the removal of bodies from the Old City Cemetery was first brought under discussion, Health Officer Cahalan has written to the state board of health in regard to the matter. Dr. H. B. Baker replies under date of July 30 as follows: "In reply to your letter of yesterday, if the bodies are to be removed, it is better that they be removed in warm weather than in cold weather as most of the dangerous communicable diseases of the climate are cold weather diseases, that is, they spread most easily and rapidly in cold weather. But the removal should be made under the direct supervision of the health officer, and proper precaution should be strictly enforced." Acting on this advice, the removal of the bodies will be allowed to proceed, but remains of persons who died from contagious diseases must not be disinterred except under direction of Health Officer Cahalan, who will take the necessary precautions to prevent the spread of disease.

It is likely that all the bodies intended to be removed were exhumed by September of 1892. The reason the Davis Boat & Oar Company purchased the land in the first place was in order to expand the business. By September 10, 1892, according to the Wyandotte Herald, the company had added a complete new machine shop on its land. If this new shop was near the old burial ground its construction would not have begun until those who wanted had had a chance to remove family remains.

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<sup>14</sup> Detroit News, July 3, 1893

The recognition of the Old City Cemetery as a burial ground ended in 1893 when, under the supervision of Dr. Cahalan, all those who requested had the remains of departed family members removed. Though traces of the old cemetery would remain, and its unofficial presence would continue to be known by the local populace, it, nevertheless, disappeared from all subsequent city, state, and county maps, directories and records from 1893 on.

The land occupied by the old cemetery has had only two other owners since 1892. The Davis Boat & Oar Company remained in business from 1891 until 1901 when, due to competition, it went out of business.<sup>15</sup> According to the Wyandotte Herald of July 22, 1904, a business named "Pouliot & Perry" came to Wyandotte in August of 1903 and began building boats at the old Davis Boat & Oar Company buildings. By 1912 the section (28) belonged to the Michigan Alkali Company. They, in turn, sold the land to the City of Wyandotte in the 1950s and the city located its police department and public works building in the section.

Today, no vestige of the old cemetery remains visible, but of course the question arises as to whether all the bodies were exhumed back in 1892. Do any still remain buried in this old ground? The Detroit News article of July 3, 1893 stated that "Before the new cemetery [Oakwood] was opened it is said there were 500 bodies on this spot, but more than half of them are already removed. In order to secure all, the ground would need to be dug over end to end." From this source it can be determined over half the remains were removed, yet it is doubtful that the site was unearthed from end to end. This writer feels it unlikely that all remains were removed.

Several Wyandotte Herald references report the stealing of bodies after the 1892 exhumation was completed. An 1898 article was entitled 'Ghouls at Work', and there is more than one report of bodies being stolen by medical students for school.

These reports, long thought to be referring to the Oakwood Cemetery, may have instead, been referring to the Old City Cemetery. During the 1890s the Oakwood remained in good condition. The Wyandotte Herald of May 15, 1891 acknowledges the forming of the Oakwood Cemetery Association, for the purpose of upkeep and organization. It is likely the 'ghouls' and medical students did not take unethical advantage of the organized and still up kept Oakwood, but of the citizens' indifference regarding the remains left in the Old City Cemetery after the exhumation from it in 1892.

Between the exhumations by Dr. Cahalan in 1892 and exposure to 'ghouls' and medical students during the years that followed, the great majority of the original five hundred bodies were removed. How many sets of mouldering bones still remain under the three acre plot set aside by the iron works of long ago is anyone's guess, and something which nothing less than a total excavation would determine. This would be very expensive, if not legally impossible.

Though probably covered over by buildings or pavement at present, the evidence supporting the existence of the Old City Cemetery is hard to ignore. It is certainly a challenge to the Oakwood and Mount Carmel cemeteries for holding the distinction of being the first and most historic cemetery in the city of Wyandotte.

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<sup>15</sup> Proudly We Record



## Maps

1. Wayne County Atlas of 1876, page 30, map of Ecorse Township. Scale 2 ½ inches to the mile.

This map exhibits three cemeteries for Wyandotte, marked by the typical cross symbol. Mount Carmel is west of the railroad tracks in Section 29, the Clark (Oakwood) is in Section 21, and the Old City Cemetery is in Section 28. Section 21 and 28 were divided at what was then Woodruff (Northline) Road.

2. General map of Wayne County, Michigan by William Savr, 1893. Scale: 1 / 8000.

This map exhibits R. P. Taylor and the boat works as the owners of the land marked by a cemetery cross in the map of 1876. The Oakwood Cemetery is not shown because it was located in what was then Ecorse Township; this being a map of Wyandotte only.