

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

## 1. Name of Property

historic name Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District

other names/site number N/A

Name of Multiple Property Listing N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

## 2. Location

street & number 4400 W. 127<sup>th</sup> Street

☐

not for publication

city or town Alsip

☐

vicinity

state Illinois

county Cook

zip code 60803

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this \_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance: \_\_\_ national \_\_\_ statewide \_\_\_ local

Applicable National Register Criteria: \_\_\_ A \_\_\_ B \_\_\_ C \_\_\_ D

Signature of certifying official/Title: Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

Date

Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official

Date

Title

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

## 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

\_\_\_ entered in the National Register

\_\_\_ determined eligible for the National Register

\_\_\_ determined not eligible for the National Register

\_\_\_ removed from the National Register

\_\_\_ other (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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## 5. Classification

### Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- |                                     |                  |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | private          |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | public - Local   |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | public - State   |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | public - Federal |

### Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- |                                     |             |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | building(s) |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | district    |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | site        |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | structure   |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | object      |

### Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
	3	buildings
1		site
	1	structure
2	3	object
3	7	<b>Total</b>

Number of contributing resources previously  
listed in the National Register

## 6. Function or Use

### Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

FUNERARY/CEMETERY

### Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

FUNERARY/Cemetery

## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

### Materials

(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: \_\_\_\_\_

walls: \_\_\_\_\_

roof: \_\_\_\_\_

other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District**

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**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity).

**Summary Paragraph**

The Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District is in Alsip, a suburb in Worth Township (Cook County), that is about 16 miles southwest from Chicago's primary business district, known as the Loop. It is bounded by 123<sup>rd</sup> Street and 125<sup>th</sup> Street on the north; 127<sup>th</sup> Street on the south; Kostner Avenue and Loveland Street on the east; Cicero Avenue on the west; and an interchange of the I-294 expressway on its southwest corner. The district is about 150 acres in size, has an L-shaped footprint, and features approximately 33,000 graves. It is characterized by a parklike landscape with sweeping lawns, an abundance of mature trees and shrubbery, and headstones lying flat on the ground. The only upright grave monuments are clustered together in a patch of lawn near the front entrance.

The district has three contributing resources: 1) the site itself, 2) the bronze and granite headstones that lie flat on the ground, which together are counted as one object, and 2) the wrought iron fence that surrounds the property and has three sets of double-leaf gates, which is also counted as one object. There are seven non-contributing resources, all of which were built/installed post-2000. They include three buildings (office building, maintenance garage, shed), one structure (mausoleum), and three objects (2 memorials and 1 kiosk). The district's period of significance is from 1927, the year that Burr Oak Cemetery was established, until 1975, the fifty-year cutoff for significance for the National Register.

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**Narrative Description**

The Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District is located at 4400 W. 127<sup>th</sup> Street near the center of Alsip, a southwest suburb of Chicago that was incorporated in 1927 as part of an unsuccessful attempt to halt the establishment of this cemetery, which was intended to serve the Black community. Although the first order of business for the new village was an ordinance to control cemeteries, there are five on its borders and three within Alsip. One of these three cemeteries is Restvale at 11700 S. Laramie Avenue, about a mile north of Burr Oak, which also opened in the late 1920s to accommodate the burials of Black Chicagoans. Alsip grew slowly until after World War II, after which time it experienced rapid growth due to the construction in the 1950s of the Tri-State Tollway (I-294) along its south boundary. The Burr Oak Cemetery District is bordered by residential development to the east and north that is mainly comprised of Ranch type houses built in the 1960s. Cicero Avenue and 127<sup>th</sup> Street, which comprise the west and south boundaries of the district, respectively, are busy thoroughfares that intersect at the I-294 interchange and feature recent commercial development.

The Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District was established in 1927 on a 40-acre parcel at the northwest corner of 127<sup>th</sup> Street and Kostner Avenue. Its current size of about 150 acres was attained by 1962, as evidenced by an aerial photograph from that year. The district has an L-shaped footprint surrounded by a wrought iron fence that is 6'-7" in height. The main entrance at the northwest corner of 127<sup>th</sup> Street and Kostner Avenue features a pair of double-leaf wrought iron gates flanked by square granite piers. The words "Burr" and "Oak" in metal lettering are set atop these gates, one on each leaf. The fence has two other sets of double-leaf wrought iron gates: one each on 123<sup>rd</sup> and 127<sup>th</sup> streets that are flanked by brick and granite piers, respectively.

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Burr Oak Cemetery features a “memorial park” design, characterized by its park-like, natural setting with sweeping lawns, an abundance of trees and shrubbery, and curvilinear roads paved with asphalt. The landscape is filled with a wide variety of maple tree species and a variety of pine, hickory, and oak trees. There are 25 defined areas within the cemetery, including Acacia Lawn, Fair Lawn, Front Lawn, Maple Wood, Mugho Pine, Edge Wood, West Edge Wood, Evergreen, West Evergreen, Locust Lane, North Locust Lane, Burr Oak, South Lawn, Rose Lawn, West Rose Lawn, North Rose Lawn, North Fair Lawn, Northland, Elm Grove, East Elm Grove, and Baby Land.

The district has an estimated total of 33,000 graves which are marked with bronze or granite headstones that lie flat on the ground.<sup>1</sup> Emmett Till’s simple, flat bronze headstone is in the Maple Wood section, Lot 218, Grave 10. Traditional, upright funerary monuments are largely omitted with three exceptions. The above-ground marble monument for Mamie Till-Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till, is in the Elm Grove section near the main entrance. The monument is fronted by two flat headstones on the ground: one each for Mrs. Till-Mobley and the other for her husband, Gene Mobley. A small group of vertical grave monuments are clustered together near the main entrance, on a grassy parcel that was the site of the original chapel. In addition, the south end of the cemetery includes some granite benches that serve as grave memorials.

The cemetery has very good integrity, retaining its original memorial park design with sweeping lawns, an abundance of trees and shrubbery, curvilinear roadway pattern, and bronze and granite headstones lying flat on the ground. A one-story, gable-roof chapel with clay tile roof, built in the late 1920s within the cemetery grounds, adjacent to the main entrance, was demolished sometime between 1973 and 1983, as evidenced by aerial photographs from those years. Also demolished at an unknown date was a superintendent’s house and garage that were built just north of the chapel in the late 1930s.

The district has seven non-contributing resources, all of which were built/installed post-2000. They include a one-story office building, a six-car maintenance garage, and a small storage shed—all of which have concrete block walls—that are located near the cemetery’s main entrance, as is the Burr Oak Cemetery Memorial Monument, designed by Michael Johnson. A kiosk directory is adjacent to the office building’s rear façade. A granite memorial honoring those individuals whose remains were disturbed during Burr Oak Cemetery’s 2009 grave selling scandal is at the northernmost end of the cemetery, near its 123<sup>rd</sup> Street boundary. It contains unidentified remains from the graves involved. A large mausoleum with 144 niches was constructed in the West Roseland section of the cemetery in 2019. It has granite walls, one of which features a depiction of Leonardo da Vinci’s “Last Supper.” Portions of roads winding through the cemetery were repaired in recent years, and storm sewer lines installed to reduce flooding.

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<sup>1</sup> The exact number of graves in the district is uncertain. Records in the cemetery office were incomplete and in disarray when the property was declared a crime scene and temporary closed for several months in 2009 due to a grave selling scandal in which four employees were convicted. (See essay titled, “History of Burr Oak Cemetery.”) All records on-site were seized at that time by the Cook County Sheriff’s Office, which provided the figure of approximately 33,000 graves.

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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☒ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or grave.
- ☒ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

### Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Ethnic History: Black

Social History

### Period of Significance

1927 to 1975

### Significant Dates

### Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Emmett Till

### Cultural Affiliation (if applicable)

N/A

### Architect/Builder

N/A

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**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations).

The Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District is locally significant under Criterion A in the areas of Ethnic History and Social History as an early Black cemetery in the Chicago area. The property is also nationally significant under Criterion B for its association with Emmett Till and meets Criterion Consideration D for it contains graves of persons of transcendent importance and is associated with historic events. The period of significance is from 1927, the year it was established, until 1975, the fifty-year cutoff for significance for the National Register.

Burr Oak Cemetery opened in 1927 in Worth Township (Cook County) in the face of local White opposition as one of the few cemeteries in the Chicago region that catered to Chicago's Black population; of these, it was the only one that was Black-owned and managed. The cemetery is the final resting place of many prominent members of Chicago's Black community, many of whom attained national reputations in their respective fields. They include an impressive array of doctors, attorneys, musicians, professional athletes, journalists, businessmen and women, and civil rights activists. The most prominent individual buried in the Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District is Emmett Till (1941-55), a 14-year-old Black youth whose lynching in Mississippi was a catalyst event in the nascent Civil Rights movement. Till's mother, Mamie Till Mobley (1921-2003), who became an educator and a leading civil rights activist after Emmett's death, is also buried at Burr Oak Cemetery.

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

### **The Great Migration to Chicago**

Nearly 90 percent of Black Americans lived in the South in 1910. That statistic changed dramatically in the ensuing decades that comprised the Great Migration—the movement of Blacks from the rural South to the urban North—which transformed Chicago and other northern cities between 1916 and 1970. In 1910, Blacks comprised only 2 percent of Chicago's population; by 1970, they were 33 percent. Southern Black migrants sought to escape the racist oppression of Jim Crow laws in the South and pursue factory jobs that were plentiful during both World Wars due to labor shortages and an increased need for manufactured goods.<sup>2</sup>

The *Chicago Defender*—a weekly newspaper that was widely read throughout the South—encouraged Blacks to migrate to Chicago with glowing images of everything Northern cities had to offer, from jobs to entertainment to education. Local religious and other institutions helped Black migrants find housing and employment and adjust to their new environment in the early twentieth century. The established AME and Baptist churches experienced considerable growth, exemplified by Olivet Baptist Church, which, with 10,000 members in 1920, was the nation's largest Black church. The migrants also added new elements to Chicago's religious culture by establishing Pentecostal and Spiritualist storefront churches.<sup>3</sup>

Although Black southerners found opportunities for better wages and emancipation from formal Jim Crow, they also discovered that Northern cities like Chicago were not free from segregation, discrimination, and racist violence. Housing for Chicago's southern Black migrants was mainly restricted to the Black Belt, an area that stretched 30 blocks along State Street, southward from Roosevelt Road (then 12<sup>th</sup> Street), that was rarely more

<sup>2</sup> James R. Grossman, "Great Migration." *Encyclopedia of Chicago* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

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than several blocks wide. The Black Belt was comprised of densely populated, White-owned housing that was largely dilapidated yet more expensive than housing in White areas.

Chicago's Black population increased from 30,000 to 110,000 between 1910 and 1920, an increase of 150 percent. By 1930, the Black population reached 234,000. The rapid influx of newcomers raised tensions in the city, especially in White neighborhoods located near the Black Belt. These tensions exploded in the summer of 1919, when five days of rioting left 23 Black Chicagoans dead and 300 wounded.<sup>4</sup> Blacks Chicagoans seeking to move outside the Black Belt were met with resistance, as many Whites responded by forming neighborhood associations to pressure property owners not to rent or sell to them. Carl Hansberry, who is buried at Burr Oak Cemetery, was the plaintiff in *Hansberry v. Lee* (1940), in which the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the Woodlawn Property Owner's Association's housing covenant against Black homeowners. Attorney Earl Dickerson, a co-founder of Burr Oak Cemetery who is also buried there, led Hansberry's legal team.

Black residents of Chicago who were concentrated in the Black Belt established a thriving commercial district around the intersection of State and 35<sup>th</sup> Streets in the early decades of the twentieth century. Nicknamed "the Metropolis" and later known as Bronzeville, the area was the nexus of Black Chicago's economic and cultural life, featuring Black-owned banks, businesses, and important institutions. Supreme Life Insurance Company, housed in a building at 3501 S. King (formerly Grand Boulevard) Drive, was established in 1919 as the first Black owned and operated insurance company in the northern United States.<sup>5</sup> Two officers of Supreme Life—Earl Dickerson and W. Ellis Stewart—were co-founders of Burr Oak Cemetery. Many officers of Supreme Life served as directors of Burr Oak Cemetery.

The Sunset Café at 315 E. 35<sup>th</sup> in the Black Metropolis area was one of the most important jazz clubs in the U.S. from the 1920s through the 1940s, hosting nationally famous singers such as Dinah Washington, who is buried at Burr Oak Cemetery. The Chicago blues scene dates to the 1930s, but in 1948 Aristocrat Records established the tone for rhythm and blues with the release of Muddy Waters's "I Can't Be Satisfied." Throughout the 1950s Aristocrat, which became the famous Chess Records label, produced a steady supply of R&B hits with some of the nation's most popular artists, including Little Walter, Jimmy Rogers, and Howlin' Wolf. Many of those hits were produced by Blues legend Willie Dixon, who is buried at Burr Oak Cemetery and worked as a producer at Chess Records for decades, where he also composed, sang, and played at recording sessions.

Migration to Chicago from the South slowed during the 1930s but accelerated when World War II production created new jobs. The increased use of the mechanical cotton picker during the 1950s spurred another wave of Black agricultural workers out of the South. Between 1940 and 1960, Chicago's Black population grew from 278,000 to 813,000. Blacks continued to encounter widespread employment discrimination in the post-World War II period. Stores in the Loop refused to hire Blacks as clerks, while Black bus drivers, police officers, and firefighters were limited to positions serving their own community. Construction trades remained closed to Black job seekers.<sup>6</sup>

Housing shortages during the second phase of the Great Migrations incentivized Black residents to seek housing outside Black Belt. Such efforts were met with continued housing discrimination in the form of restrictive covenants and redlining, which created segregated neighborhoods. In the 1960s, housing and educational issues sparked the creation of the Chicago Freedom Movement, in which civil rights activist Timuel Black, who is

<sup>4</sup> Joe W. Trotter, Jr. "Migration: U.S. Migration/Population." *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History* (Thomson Gale, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> "The Black Metropolis-Bronzeville District," City of Chicago Landmark nomination report, revised December 1944.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Manning, "African Americans." *Encyclopedia of Chicago* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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buried at Burr Oak Cemetery, was actively involved. The Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO) sponsored a series of school boycotts and a court case to end Black school overcrowding, which stemmed from widespread White opposition to school desegregation. Their efforts drew Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to Chicago in 1965. In conjunction with the CCCO, King led a series of protests against housing discrimination in Chicago's Marquette Park.<sup>7</sup>

The post-World War II period saw the establishment of Chicago's public housing projects, such as the infamous Robert Taylor Homes, which replaced the Black Belt's dilapidated low-rise walk-up buildings with high-rise elevator buildings occupied mainly by Black Chicagoans. Many of the city's Black residents relocated during the 1950s and 1960s to Chicago's southern suburbs, including Chicago Heights, Riverdale, and Harvey.

### Chicago's History of Segregated and Black-Only Cemeteries

The Great Migration—and its exponential increase in the Chicago's Black population—spurred anti-Black sentiments that extended to the dead. Chicago cemeteries undertook discriminatory practices and prohibited the burial or cremation of Blacks that weren't overturned until the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Such practices included charging Black Chicagoans more money for burial plots, and then, an altogether refusal to sell burial plots to Blacks following the Great Migration. Catholic, Jewish and Protestant cemeteries in the Chicago suburb were generally open to members of their respective faiths, regardless of race. Discrimination came from the non-sectarian cemeteries.

Mount Hope Cemetery, located south of Chicago in Worth Township, placed advertisements on State Street streetcars in 1910, announcing that the graveyard was “exclusively for the White race.” The city's leading Black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, called this a “vicious affront to the race.” Crusading Black journalist Ida B. Wells rode a streetcar to see the ads with her own eyes. “Everyone seems indignant and feels that something should be done, but no one seems to know just what may be done to have the objectionable sign removed,” she wrote in a letter to the editor in the *Defender*. Oak Woods Cemetery at 1035 E. 67<sup>th</sup> Street in Chicago had been excluding Black burials since around 1913, when it sent out a circular ad that declared, “Chapel, vault and cemetery are for the exclusive use of the Caucasian race.”<sup>8</sup>

As Chicago's non-sectarian cemeteries refused to sell new burial plots to Blacks, several cemeteries were established in the early twentieth-century in the city's far south suburbs that catered to the Black community and were accessible by train. **Mount Glenwood Cemetery** in Thornton Township, located 23 miles south of Chicago's Loop, was the earliest such cemetery in the Chicago region. The cemetery was just north of Glenwood, a small farming village that had been incorporated in 1903, adjacent to Cook County Forest Preserves to the east, and had its own stop on the Chicago & Eastern Illinois Railroad Line.<sup>9</sup>

A 1911 promotional leaflet for Mount Glenwood Cemetery, which was published in the *Chicago Defender*, highlighted its selling points. “Beautiful Mount Glenwood does not segregate the colored people in a cemetery under an assumed name because they are not thought good enough for burial in a white cemetery....is the only Chicago Cemetery whose charter does not allow discrimination and the only one where funeral trains stop at the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Rambling about Chicago,” *Chicago Defender* (5 March 1910); “Early Black Burials at Oak Woods,” in: <https://www.hydeparkhistory.org/oak-woods-cemetery-project/antiblackpractices>.

<sup>9</sup> “The Origin of Mt. Glenwood Cemetery,” *Chicago Defender* (22 October 1910). This cemetery is extant, and its address is: 18301 Glenwood-Thornton Road, Glenwood.



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entrance in center of the grounds...is the only Chicago Cemetery that makes it possible for every colored family to secure a family burial lot on account of the low prices and easy terms.”<sup>10</sup>

**Mount Forest Cemetery**, also in Thornton Township, was established in 1913 as announced by a notice in *The Inter Ocean*, titled, “Negroes Buy New Cemetery.”<sup>11</sup> The Black-only cemetery was located just north of Mount Glenwood Cemetery and was near the Village of Thornton, which was incorporated in 1900. The Cook County Forest Preserve District assumed ownership of the small, 2.51-acre cemetery in 1977, as all owners of the property were deceased.<sup>12</sup> Today Mount Forest Cemetery, located on the east side of Chicago Road, at about Eleanor Street in Thornton, is surrounded by a tall, chain link fence and not open to the public.

**Lincoln Cemetery** in Blue Island was the third cemetery established outside Chicago’s southern border during the 1910s for the Black community. In 1911, a group of Black funeral directors approached Raymond Olson, the owner of Oak Hill Cemetery in Blue Island, and asked that a portion of his undeveloped property be opened as a Black cemetery. Olson agreed, and Lincoln Cemetery began accepting burials in April 1911.<sup>13</sup> The cemetery, located at 12300 S. Kedzie Avenue in Blue Island, was derisively called a “Jim Crow affair” by the *Chicago Defender* in a 1927 article about Burr Oak Cemetery, which stated: The other cemetery in the Chicago district where our people can be buried is a “Jim Crow” affair. The white people who own it have two cemeteries with a fence dividing them. They won’t bury our people in one, but wish to retain a monopoly on their burials in the other.”<sup>14</sup> Historian Tammy Gibson later discovered that 13 Black victims of the Chicago Race Riot of 1919 were buried in Lincoln Cemetery’s pauper section, with no marker of memorial to honor their memory.<sup>15</sup>

The late 1920s saw the establishment of **Restvale Cemetery** (11700 S. Laramie Avenue) and **Burr Oak Cemetery** in present-day south suburban Alsip (Worth Township), both of which were dedicated to Black burials. Unlike the three earlier Black cemeteries mentioned above, which featured traditional funerary monuments, Restvale and Burr Oak cemeteries both featured a “memorial park” design that omitted traditional vertical funerary monuments and instead emphasized a parklike setting with bronze and granite markers lying flat on the grassy plots.

The *Chicago Defender* railed against segregated cemeteries in editorials from the 1920s and 1930s. One editorial titled, ‘Why Segregate A Man After Life?’ noted that, “Certainly a black corpse is not going to disturb its eternal sleep to rise and burrow its way to the final resting place of a white neighbor. Why then segregated cemeteries?”<sup>16</sup> An editorial titled “Segregated Cemeteries Institution of South,” stated, in part:

Segregation for the dead is in force here as much as it is in Georgia. The only difference in the two forms is that here it is not an enforcement by legal law but by unwritten law. The organizations which control the burial grounds have agreed to refuse to sell lots to members of our group. We are forced to bury our dead in out-of-the-way places, which are in unkept condition.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “Beautiful Mount Glenwood,” *Chicago Defender* (1 July 1911).

<sup>11</sup> “Negroes Buy New Cemetery,” *The Inter Ocean* (19 December 1913).

<sup>12</sup> Jo Ellen Johnson (Ed.). *An Inventory of Cemeteries in South Cook County: Volume Three*. Chicago: South Suburban Genealogical and Historical Society, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> “Beautiful Lincoln Cemetery,” *Chicago Defender* (2 September 1916).

<sup>14</sup> “Whites Foiled in Burr Oak Cemetery Row,” *Chicago Defender* (5 March 1927).

<sup>15</sup> J. Coyden Palmer, “Half of victims of 1919 Chicago Race Riot located in unmarked graves at Lincoln Cemetery,” *Chicago Crusader* (29 February 2020).

<sup>16</sup> “Why Segregate A Man After Life,” *Chicago Defender* (27 April 1935).

<sup>17</sup> “Segregated Cemeteries Institution of South,” *Chicago Defender* (26 November 1927).

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Another *Chicago Defender* editorial issued a call for citizen action to eliminate segregated cemeteries:

This cemetery open to white only," is visioned by the citizens as they pass the many well-kept burying grounds in the vicinity of the city. These places, with laws created by whites, refuse to sell burial lots to dark skinned citizens solely on the grounds that the hates of the South have found a haven in Chicago. It is shocking to conceive that the intolerances of the living must control the selection of a final resting place for the dead. ... These segregated cemeteries can be wiped out when ever the citizens unite and demand laws prohibit them. Let us act for our dead!<sup>18</sup>

Discriminatory practices at Chicago's non-sectarian cemeteries and their crematoriums persisted into the 1960s. In May 1963, an estimated 2,000 people marched to Oak Woods Cemetery on Chicago's Side, following its refusal to cremate the body of a Black woman, Alvesta Wilson. The protestors included Black undertakers and ministers, as well as NAACP officials. They carried signs: "No Jim Crow in Heaven"; "Discrimination in Life. Segregation in Death."<sup>19</sup>

Also in 1963, the Chicago Commission on Human Relations convened a conference on discrimination in Chicago area cemeteries. Attendees included Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, members of the Chicago City Council, Chicago's Corporation Counsel, the Illinois State's Attorney, and the U.S. District Attorney. They learned that most members of the Cemeteries Association of Greater Chicago—an organization of 26 non-sectarian cemeteries—were unwilling to bury members of the Black community. However, some Association members stated they would sell lots on an unrestricted basis to Black individuals only if all the other members agreed to do the same.<sup>20</sup>

An ordinance making it illegal for crematoriums and cemeteries to discriminate against anyone on a basis of race or color was approved in June 1963 by the Chicago City Council Committee on Judiciary. The proposal was introduced by Alderman Leon Despres and the other six black Alderman.<sup>21</sup> Oak Woods Cemetery finally bowed to the pressure and changed its policy prohibiting cremation of Black individuals several months after the 1963 protest. In September 1963, the *Chicago Defender* reported that Oak Woods was finally integrated. A Black woman named Sue Walters was buried following a procession from Leak's funeral home. It's not clear exactly when segregationist policies ended at other non-sectarian cemeteries in Chicago.<sup>22</sup>

## History of Burr Oak Cemetery

Black Chicagoans gained a burial ground when Burr Oak Cemetery opened in 1927 amid threats of violence from White residents in Cook County's Worth Township. The history of Burr Oak dates to 1926, when a group of Black executives from the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company in Chicago formed the Burr Oak Cemetery Association for the purpose of establishing a cemetery to serve Chicago's rapidly expanding Black population. The five original officers of the Association were W. Louis Davis, president; Dr. M.O. Bousfield and Claude A. Barnett, vice presidents; W. Ellis Stewart, secretary/treasurer; and Earl Dickerson, general counsel, all of whom were nationally prominent business and/or civic leaders.<sup>23</sup> The Association's office was in the Supreme Liberty Life Building at 407 E. 35<sup>th</sup> Street.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> "Citizens Can Wipe Out Segregated Cemeteries," *Chicago Defender* (5 November 1927).

<sup>19</sup> "Protest at Cemetery Against Discrimination," *Chicago Tribune* (31 May 1963).

<sup>20</sup> "10 Cemeteries Here Admit Negro Ban," *The Chicago Defender* (2 March 1963).

<sup>21</sup> "Council Group Ok's Bias Law on Cemeteries," *Chicago Tribune* (28 June 1963).

<sup>22</sup> "Early Black Burials at Oak Woods," in: <https://www.hydeparkhistory.org/oak-woods-cemetery-project/antiblackpractices>.

<sup>23</sup> Biographies of Burr Oak Cemetery's founding officers are included in the essay titled "Significant Representative Black

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Association officials identified a large rural parcel for sale in Alsip, an unincorporated farming settlement in Worth Township. Earl Dickerson discovered that the owners were represented by a lawyer that he knew from the University of Chicago Law School. The two men came upon a proposal of \$50,000 for the purchase of this property, which Dickerson inspected with Alexander Flowers, president of the Roosevelt State Bank. Flowers agreed to lend \$40,000 for the land purchase provided that Supreme Liberty Life Insurance could raise the \$10,000 balance, which they did by subscription.<sup>25</sup> The sale of the Alsip property was reported by the *Chicago Tribune*, which published the following notice in its 1 January 1927 issue:

Friederika Schroeder and Ferdinand Schroeder, her husband, conveyed title to approximately forty-two acres at 127<sup>th</sup> street and 44<sup>th</sup> avenue to Thomas E. Breen for an undisclosed consideration. Mr. Breen in turn conveyed title to the property to the Burr Oak Cemetery association of Chicago. The land is now being improved for use as a general cemetery. Philip A. Weinstein represented all parties as attorney in the deal.<sup>26</sup>

Word of the establishment of a Black cemetery in Worth Township—which had 19 existing cemeteries at the time—drew the ire of White residents in the area, which consisted of farming families. Illinois law stipulated that for a cemetery to be officially dedicated, a human body had to be buried there. As a result, the strategy was to not allow a burial to take place, as discussed in an 8 February 1927 article in the *Chicago Tribune* titled, “Township Arms to Prevent New Cemetery Sites”:

Worth Township, where the population of the dead outnumbers that of the living, has drawn the line against any more dead ones, and will enforce with arms, its officers announced yesterday....Fifteen farmers, deputized as special constables and given shotguns, are patrolling a tract recently bought by colored Chicagoans for a burial group, and they profess determination to prevent any bodies being slipped in on the sly against the town board’s order. Alertness is essential, for the Illinois law holds, the officials point out, that once a body is laid within the land, that tract automatically becomes a cemetery, and no dint of village orders, protests, or wailings can make it otherwise without the consent of the owners of the property.<sup>27</sup>

The *Chicago Defender* also reported on the standoff on 12 February 1927:

The bogie of segregation reared its head against the dead as well as the living last week when officials of Worth, a township in the southern end of Cook County, organized to prevent the newly established Burr Oak Cemetery Association, made up of our people, from taking possession of the large tract of land which they have bought nearby and where they are planning to create a burial ground de luxe.

Armed guards were stationed near the tract, farmers in the vicinity being sworn in as special constables and the little town looked like a besieged village in a comic opera last Monday night when the township officials made their protest, having arranged previously with the daily papers to have photographers present to take pictures of the motley and belligerent army.

The village officers, with Chairman Charley Tietzel as spokesman, masked their racial feeling by declaring that they had too many cemeteries in the township already. There are 19, and one of those is

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Individuals Buried in Burr Oak Cemetery.”

<sup>24</sup> “Whites Open War On Race Burial Place,” *Chicago Defender* (12 February 1927).

<sup>25</sup> Robert J. Blakely, *Earl B. Dickerson: A Voice for Freedom and Equality* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2006) 54-55.

<sup>26</sup> *Chicago Tribune* (1 January 1927).

<sup>27</sup> “Township Arms to Prevent New Cemetery Sites,” *Chicago Tribune* (8 February 1927).

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Lincoln cemetery, owned by white people, but used exclusively by our people. Some observers are inclined to think that the prospect of competition may have helped in the development of the protest.<sup>28</sup>

Burr Oak Cemetery Association officials were reportedly “nonplussed” over the actions of Worth Township residents who threatened to dig up any bodies buried there. They contended that the village was not incorporated and thus had no rights to restrain owners of property from using it as they saw fit.<sup>29</sup> The same article noted the reaction of Association officials to the threats of violence:

W. Ellis Stewart, secretary-treasurer, said: “We are not in the least alarmed and are going right ahead with our plans to give our people in Chicago the finest burial ground of its kind in the country. We have purchased the tract of land in question. It is ideally and conveniently located and our plans are perfected. A number of our larger local churches have already shown their appreciation of a racially owned institution of this kind by subscribing for blocks of lots for members.”

Another official went a step farther and declared that the Association intends to stand by its legal rights, even if it becomes necessary to station a squad of armed men on the grounds and then land the first corpse by airplane. “When the time comes to make a burial in the new cemetery it will be done,” the official stated. “The grave will be dug under guard and the burial will take place under guard. “We have the law on our side this time, and we do not intend to allow any group of prejudiced persons to bluff us out of what is rightfully ours.”<sup>30</sup>

The first burial at Burr Oak Cemetery was attempted on February 23, 1927. A group of 75 Worth Township farmers armed with shotguns and their wives, enraged to find a grave dug for James Nimmer, arrested the two grave diggers on site, charged them with trespassing, and then with shovels filled the excavation. The funeral cortege arrived shortly thereafter, comprised of a hearse and seven cars carrying the mourners and officials of the Burr Oak Association, including W. Louis Davis, W. Ellis Stewart, and Claude A. Barnett. The cortege was preceded and flanked by motorcycle policeman of the county highway force, who were on hand to protect the funeral party. Carl J. Carlson, deputy sheriff, served Davis with a writ of injunction obtained earlier in the day from circuit court Judge Francis Wilson, restraining the Association from interring Nimmer’s body in their new burial ground. The procession returned the corpse to the morgue, with Association officials determined to make another attempt in the next couple of days.<sup>31</sup>

A group of attorneys, led by Earl Dickerson, immediately obtained their own injunction from Cook County Circuit Court Judge Ira Ryner that forbid anyone from interfering with Burr Oak Cemetery or its grounds. The funeral procession, with undertaker Fred Johnson in charge, returned to Burr Oak Cemetery on February 25, 1927, to bury the corpse of James Nimmer. The group was accompanied by five deputy sheriffs armed with writs given to Worth Township leaders who confronted the group. With the burial of Nimmer, Burr Oak Cemetery was officially dedicated as a cemetery that was “destined to be the final stop in life for thousands of Chicagoans of Color,” proclaimed the *Chicago Defender*.<sup>32</sup> President W. Louis Davis gave this statement on March 5, 1927:

Undertaker Frank Edwards buried our second body today, that of Elizabeth Bryant, and we are going right ahead with our plans to give Chicago one of the finest burial grounds in the country. Ten workmen today

<sup>28</sup> “Whites Open War On Race Burial Place,” *Chicago Defender* (12 February 1927).

<sup>29</sup> “Worth’s Armed Mobs Vow They’ll Dig up the Dead,” *Chicago Defender* (12 February 1927).

<sup>30</sup> “Whites Open War On Race Burial Place,” *Chicago Defender* (12 February 1927).

<sup>31</sup> “Burial is Halted by Writ in War over Cemeteries,” *Chicago Tribune* (24 February 1927); “Court Order Stops Burial at Burr Oak,” *Chicago Defender* (26 February 1927).

<sup>32</sup> “Violence Barred in Siege Over Negro Cemetery,” *Chicago Tribune* (26 February 1927); “Whites Foiled in Burr Oak Cemetery Row,” *Chicago Defender* (5 March 1927).

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are completing the fence about the cemetery, and our 50-foot sign goes up Monday. Our opponents haven't a legal foot to stand on. It has not been our desire to create any race friction, but we will fight to the last ditch to protect our rights and investments.<sup>33</sup>

Ongoing demand from Chicago's Black community for burial sites spurred Burr Oak Cemetery officials to expand the cemetery's acreage over the years by purchasing adjacent land to the west and north. The cemetery attained its present-day L-shaped footprint encompassing about 150 acres by 1962, as evidenced by an aerial photograph from that year. It was surrounded by a tall wrought iron fence with three sets of double-leaf wrought iron gates: one at the main entrance at the northwest corner of 127<sup>th</sup> Street and Koster Avenue, and one each on 123<sup>rd</sup> and 127<sup>th</sup> streets. A one-story, gable-roof chapel with clay tile roof, built by 1929, was originally set within the cemetery grounds, adjacent to the main entrance.<sup>34</sup>

Burr Oak Cemetery's establishment occurred just a few years before the onset of the Great Depression. In the mid-1930s, the mortgage for Burr Oak came due. The Association defaulted, and the bank was forced to foreclose. A Republican judge, Robert Gentzell, appointed a receiver and gave him authority to sell the cemetery at the very low price of \$15 a lot. Because the receiver was the brother-in-law of a member of the law firm that planned to sell the lots, Earl Dickerson, representing the Burr Oak Cemetery Association, persuaded the appellate court to set aside the receiver's authority. Bonds on the remaining mortgage of about \$19,000 were then sold in open bids. Supreme Liberty Life, the only bidder, redeemed the bonds at the rate of about ten cents on the dollar, thereby becoming the sole owner. The group accepted Dickerson's suggestion to reorganize the bankrupt Burr Oak Cemetery Association as the solvent Chicago Burr Oak Cemetery Association. This new corporation, with a mortgage from Supreme Liberty, bought the cemetery. In time it paid off the mortgage and thus became the sole owner of the property.<sup>35</sup> The *Chicago Defender* announced in 1936 that "Chicago Burr Oak Cemetery has recently been reorganized as an entirely Race-owned property."<sup>36</sup>

Burr Oak Cemetery underwent \$40,000 worth of improvements in the late 1930s following its reorganization. The chapel was remodeled and refurnished, and a new superintendent's house and garage were built nearby "giving a source of protection to the cemetery" while providing "someone whom the public may contact at all times." A combination steam and hot water plant was connected to the house, garage and chapel. The cemetery's curvilinear drives were paved and a new drainage system installed. New sections of the cemetery were laid out with new grass, and an abundance of new shrubbery, evergreens, and trees were planted.<sup>37</sup>

The *Chicago Defender* noted in 1938 that the Burr Oak Cemetery "has recently replaced the shrubbery surrounding the entrance and chapel with beautiful evergreens. The cemetery's landscape expert has supervised a unique and attractive arrangement of shrubbery and trees in all sections. Its roads are broad, smoother, and hard-paved."<sup>38</sup> Landscaping was undertaken under the supervision of Samuel R. Cheevers, who was referred to in a *Chicago Defender* article as a "well-known colored engineer who for ten years has served as a highway engineer and surveyor in the state of Illinois."<sup>39</sup> Samuel R. Cheevers was born in Albany, Georgia and came to Chicago 1924 after graduated from Howard University in Washington, D.C. as a civil engineer. He worked for the Illinois State Highway Department until the mid-1930s, when he entered private practice as a professional

<sup>33</sup> "Whites Foiled in Burr Oak Cemetery Row," *Chicago Defender* (5 March 1927).

<sup>34</sup> No historic photographs of the cemetery grounds were found during research for this nomination. However, images of the original chapel were featured in historic display advertisements, some of which are attached to the end of this nomination.

<sup>35</sup> Blakely, 55-56.

<sup>36</sup> "Cemetery Is Reorganized; Now Race-Owned, Operated," *Chicago Defender* (19 September 1936).

<sup>37</sup> "Church Buys Graves for Members," *Chicago Defender* (1 May 1937).

<sup>38</sup> "Report Vast Improvements at the Burr Oak Cemetery," *Chicago Defender* (28 May 1938).

<sup>39</sup> "Church Buys Graves for Members," *Chicago Defender* (1 May 1937).

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engineer, land surveyor, and building contractor. He was an authority on concrete design and was the professional engineer for the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company.<sup>40</sup>

Burr Oak Cemetery featured a “memorial park” design, a new idea in cemetery design that emphasized park-like, natural settings and omitted the use of traditional funerary monuments. Instead, graves were memorialized with bronze markers lying flat on the grassy plots. Lacking vertical, above-ground monuments, memorial park cemeteries feature grassy lawns, an abundance of trees, shrubbery, and curvilinear roads. Burr Oak Cemetery’s memorial park design was discussed in a 1936 *Chicago Defender* article:

The plan of operation of the cemetery is on the memorial park idea which is the most modern way of operating a burial ground. Expensive monuments are not allowed in the cemetery, and the only form of monument is the marker made of a beautiful bronze with the inscription enlarged in bronze which is set six feet in the ground and is kept level with the grave. This not only adds to the beauty of the cemetery but makes it possible for any family to have the same kind of monument that any other family has and does not offer such comparisons as frequently are found in cemeteries where those of great wealth have monuments which overshadow all others. This idea has been generally adopted by all modern cemeteries as being the most forward step of its kind.<sup>41</sup>

Display advertisements for Burr Oak Cemetery placed in the *Chicago Defender* during the 1930s and 1940s touted its memorial park design, noting that it had “no tombstones to mar the beautiful park; graves are marked simply with flat bronze or granite plaques.”<sup>42</sup> Another advertisement described Burr Oak Cemetery as a “Memorial Park where the whole cemetery is maintained as a lawn. All graves are sodded or seeded in and are kept level with the ground. No planting of any kind is permitted. Graves are decorated at Burr Oak with fresh flowers made into beautiful, colorful bouquets. The green, well-clipped lawns bordered with varied blooming trees and shrubs, and dotted with these bouquets makes Burr Oak a place of inspiration and hope...”<sup>43</sup>

Burr Oak Cemetery was consistently described in its display advertisements as “Chicago’s Most Beautiful Cemetery” and as “The only cemetery in Chicago owned and operated by colored people.” It was accessible by private automobile, streetcar, and later by bus. Visitors could take the streetcar to 111<sup>th</sup> and Kedzie Avenue, from which they could call the cemetery by pay phone for a ride in its car. Burr Oak Cemetery was also promoted through the distribution of movies that depicted its landscape before and after the late 1930s improvements, which were shown to churches, clubs, and interested groups.<sup>44</sup>

Burr Oak Cemetery officials fostered close ties with Chicago’s Black churches, as evidenced by a 1929 display advertisement for the burial ground, which noted that it was endorsed by the pastors of Good Shepherd Congregational Church and Olivet Baptist Church, then the largest Black church in the world.<sup>45</sup> Some Black churches purchased large plots for the use of their members. For example, in May 1937, Reverend T.E. Brown, pastor of Progressive Baptist Church, signed a contract with Burr Oak for a 400-grave plot in its new Maplewood section. Ebenezer Baptist Church and the Church of the Good Shepherd both purchased large plots in 1939 for the exclusive use of their respective congregations. The *Chicago Defender* noted that such purchases were “typical of the increasing present-day tendency of the church to bury its members together as did the churches of the days of old when their church yards were their burial grounds. Burr Oak has pioneered

<sup>40</sup> “S.R. Cheevers Rites Set Today,” *Chicago Defender* (24 March 1970).

<sup>41</sup> “Cemetery Is Reorganized; Now Race-Owned, Operated,” *Chicago Defender* (19 September 1936).

<sup>42</sup> *Chicago Defender* (17 July 1948).

<sup>43</sup> *Chicago Defender* (31 May 1947).

<sup>44</sup> “Stockholders of City’s Only Race Owned Cemetery Meet,” *Chicago Defender* (22 January 1938).

<sup>45</sup> Burr Oak Cemetery display advertisement, *Chicago Defender* (30 November 1929).

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in this respect by laying aside one of its most beautiful, landscaped sections for the exclusive use of many of Chicago's leading church congregations..."<sup>46</sup>

Burr Oak Cemetery served as the preferred burial place for thousands of Black Chicagoans since its 1927 establishment. The most prominent individual buried there is Emmett Till, a Black teenager who was lynched in 1955 while visiting relatives in Mississippi. His badly mutilated body, seen in person by thousands of mourners during the funeral and visitation held in Chicago, and by millions more through a graphic photograph published in *Jet* magazine, shocked the nation. Till's horrific murder served as a catalytic event in the nascent Civil Rights movement, in which his mother, Mamie Till Mobley, became an active figure. (See essay below titled, "Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley: Two Civil Rights Icons Buried at Burr Oak Cemetery.")

Burr Oak Cemetery is the final resting place of numerous notable individuals, many of whom attained national recognition in their respective fields. They include Claude Barnett (d. 1967), founder of the Associated Negro Press, and his wife, Etta Moten Barnett, an internationally famous concert singer and actress who performed both in Broadway musicals and Hollywood movies. Pioneering athletes at Burr Oak include Harold Bradley Sr., one of the first Black men to play in the National Football League; Ezzard Charles, a one-time heavyweight boxing champion; Inman Jackson, one of the first Harlem Globetrotters; and 21 players and one umpire from the Negro Baseball Leagues.

Business leaders at Burr Oak include Annie Malone, who founded a company specializing in black beauty culture with nationwide distribution. Burr Oak is also the resting place of jazz and blues legends such as Dinah Washington, Dan Gurley, and Willie Dixon; civil rights activists, such as Carl A. Hansberry, Sr., who was the plaintiff in the 1940 Supreme Court decision *Hanberry v. Lee* that helped to outlaw racially-restrictive housing covenants; as well as doctors, attorneys, engineers, and everyday people from all walks of life. Many of these individuals died after segregation in Chicago's non-sectarian cemeteries finally ended. Yet Burr Oak Cemetery remained their burial place of choice.

Post-2000 History

Burr Oak Cemetery underwent various changes of ownership over the years and by about 2000 its grounds were no longer well-maintained. Issues such as flooding hampered families from visiting graves and there were problems with grass cutting. Chicagoan Edward Boone, whose parents are buried at Burr Oak, started the Friends of Burr Oak Cemetery at that time to advocate for better conditions.<sup>47</sup>

Then in 2009, the cemetery became infamous as a crime scene when owned by Perpetua Holdings of Illinois, Inc. The Cook County Sheriff's Office discovered that four cemetery employees were digging up graves, dumping the remains in a lot on site, and reselling the plots to unsuspecting families. During a monthlong investigation at the cemetery that year, 1,500 bones belonging to at least 29 people were recovered at Burr Oak. Authorities said that anywhere from 200 to 300 graves were desecrated at the cemetery between 2003 and 2009. Bodies were either stacked in burial plots that were already occupied, or earlier remains were removed from graves, loaded on dump trucks and tossed in a "dump area," and new bodies buried in their place. The individuals involved were subsequently charged, convicted, and sentenced to prison. The cemetery's ownership changed following the 2009 scandal and the property is managed by a new staff.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> "Church Buys Graves for Members," *Chicago Defender* (1 May 1937); "Churchman Puts Faith in Burr Oak," *Chicago Defender* (22 July 1939); "Ebenezer To Dedicate Cemetery Plot Sunday," *Chicago Defender* (8 July 1939).

<sup>47</sup> Boone and historian Tammy Gibson are currently (June 2025) in the process of obtaining non-profit 501(c)3 designation for the Friends group.

<sup>48</sup> Wendell Hutson, "Group considers memorial at Burr Oak Cemetery," *Chicago Defender* (12 August 2009); "Burr Oak Cemetery Sold," *Chicago Defender* (29 February 2010); Mike Nolan, "Helping Burr Oak buried to rest in peace and dignity," *Chicago*

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Conditions at Burr Oak Cemetery began to improve in the years following the 2009 scandal. A one-story office building, a six-car maintenance garage, and a small storage shed—all of which have concrete block walls—were built in 2014 near the cemetery’s main entrance, as was the granite Burr Oak Cemetery Memorial Monument, designed by Michael Johnson. A kiosk directory was installed next to the office building at about this time. (See Images 25-28). A granite memorial honoring those individuals whose remains were disturbed in the 2009 scandal was installed in 2018 at the northernmost end of the cemetery, near its 123<sup>rd</sup> Street boundary. It contains unidentified remains from the graves involved. A large mausoleum with 144 niches was constructed in the West Roseland section of the cemetery in 2019. It has granite walls, one of which features a depiction of Leonardo da Vinci’s “Last Supper.” Sections of roads winding through the cemetery were repaired in recent years, and storm sewer lines installed to reduce flooding.

**Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley: Two Civil Rights Icons Buried at Burr Oak Cemetery**

The most prominent individuals buried at Burr Oak Cemetery are Emmett Till (1941-55), a 14-year-old black youth whose lynching in Mississippi shocked the nation and was a catalyst event in the nascent Civil Rights movement, and his mother, Mamie Till Mobley (1921-2003), who became an educator and a leading civil rights activist after Emmett’s death.

Mamie Carthan was born on November 23, 1921, in Webb, Mississippi. When she was two years old, her family moved to Argo, Illinois, as part of the Great Migration. Mamie visited her family in Mississippi during the summers, where she learned firsthand about the brutality of Southern racism. Mamie was the fourth Black student to graduate from the predominantly white Argo Community High School. At 18, she married Louis Till. The couple had Emmett, their only child together, in 1941. The relationship turned abusive, and Mamie was separated from Till when he died overseas in 1945 while serving in World War II. Mamie subsequently worked long hours in her secretarial jobs in Argo and Chicago, trying to provide for herself and her son as a single mother.<sup>49</sup>

Emmett Till and his mother lived on Chicago’s South Side in 1955, on the second-floor apartment of a two-flat building at 6427 St. Lawrence Avenue, now a designated Chicago Landmark. On August 20, 1955, Mamie Bradley, as she was then known after a brief second marriage, placed 14-year-old Emmett on an Illinois Central train heading south so he could spend two weeks visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi. Mrs. Bradley instructed her son how to conduct himself in the South, emphasizing that he had to be extra careful to avoid getting into trouble with white people. “I told him he would have to watch what he said, and how he said it,” she later said. “I told him to avoid trouble, even if you have to get on your knees and bow when they [White persons] pass, do it willingly, and stay out of towns as much as possible.”<sup>50</sup>

One afternoon Emmett and a few of his cousins went to Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market to buy some candy. According to accounts, Emmett allegedly whistled at Carolyn Bryant, a young White woman who worked at the store. That night, on Aug. 28, 1955, the woman’s husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, kidnapped Emmett from his great-uncle’s home in the middle of the night. He was brutally beaten, shot in the head, and tossed into the Tallahatchie River with a gin fan tied to his neck. Three days later, Emmett’s mutilated and swollen body was discovered in the muddy Tallahatchie.

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*Tribune* (31 May 2022); Steve Schmadeke, “Cemetery outcry grows: Anguish amid calls for reform,” *Chicago Tribune* (11 July 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Mamie Till Mobley and Christopher Bensen. *The Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America*. One World/Ballantine Books, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> “Ask Ike to Act in Dixie Death of Boy,” *Chicago Tribune* (2 September 1955).



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Mississippi authorities originally planned to bury Emmett locally, but his mother insisted that his body be brought home to Chicago for burial. Emmett's casket arrived at the Illinois Central Railroad Station (demolished) at 12<sup>th</sup> Street (now Roosevelt Road) on Friday, September 2, 1955, and was transported to the A.A. Rayner, Jr. & Sons Funeral Home at 4141 S. Cottage Grove Avenue (demolished).<sup>51</sup>

Mamie Bradley later said when her son's casket was returned, one of the conditions of being able to get the body was that the Mississippi state seal would remain affixed on the coffin. It was not to be opened. "I could not bury that boy without knowing for sure my son was inside," she later told the *Chicago Defender*. "I dared to open that casket....what I saw was beyond any stretch of imagination."<sup>52</sup> Emmett Till's body was terribly mutilated with a swollen face, protruding tongue, missing eye, and gunshot and axe wounds to his head. The only thing that identified him was a ring.

Mamie Bradley did something that would change history: she asked for an open casket at his funeral. She wanted the world to see the barbaric act committed against her son by White men in Mississippi. The visitation held on September 2, 1955, at the funeral home was intended to be followed by a funeral and burial that day. It drew thousands of mourners thanks to widespread Chicago newspaper coverage—led by the *Chicago Defender*—of Emmett's abduction and murder, the discovery of his body, and its transport Chicago. The size of the crowd convinced Mamie Bradley to delay the burial by several days to allow an extended visitation at the larger Roberts Temple Church of Christ at 4021 S. State Street to allow more time for mourners to view the body.

Tens of thousands of people saw Emmett Till's corpse during the four-day visitation in Chicago, which lasted from September 3-6, 1955. Emmett's disfigured face—which was displayed in a coffin behind a glass shield—made a profound impact on viewers, leaving both men and women shaking, crying, and fainting, as described in one contemporary account on the day of his burial:

A solemn graveside pledge was taken by thousands here today to wipe out the scourge of lynching and to being by pressing through the full prosecution of the Mississippi lynchers of 14-year-old Emmett Louis Till. By this fourth day the mutilated body of the Chicago boy has lain in state here before burial, several hundred thousand grief and horror-stricken persons had taken their turn in the long lines outside the chapel.

The crowds viewing the body here grew in size through the Labor Day weekend, with thousands answering the please of the slain child's mother that they "come as witnesses to the murder of my child."...No newspaper accounts have fully described the mangled condition of the child's head, visible in the casket to the multitude....<sup>53</sup>

After final prayers on Tuesday morning, September 7, 1955, fifty cars followed Emmett's hearse to the burial ground at Burr Oak Cemetery. Two hundred people gathered at the gravesite for one last round of tears and prayer and remembrance. His headstone reads simply, "Emmett Till, In Loving Memory" along with the dates of his birth and death, and a tiny photo of him from Christmas, 1954.

Shortly after Emmett's funeral, and in the face of death threats, Mamie Bradley traveled to Mississippi for the trial of her son's murder, held September 19-23, 1955, in the Tallahatchie County Courthouse. During the trial,

<sup>51</sup> Chinta Strausberg, "Mamie Till Mobley Fought a Lifelong Battle for Slain Son," *Chicago Defender* (8 January 2003).

<sup>52</sup> Chinta Strausberg, "Mother of Emmett Till to open centers for kids," *Chicago Defender* (10 April 1984).

<sup>53</sup> Carl Hirsch, "Thousands at Graveside Demand Death to Child's Lynchers," *The Daily Worker* (7 September 1955).

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she took the stand and testified that the body retrieved from the river was indeed that of her young son. Bryant and Milam were acquitted by an all-White, all-male jury after about an hour of deliberations, despite overwhelming evidence against them. Once safe from further prosecution, they confessed to Emmett's murder in a *Look* magazine article published the following year.<sup>54</sup>

Bryant and Milam's acquittal and later confession shocked and outraged the world, as did a powerful photograph of Emmett's badly battered body in the open casket, published on the cover of *JET* magazine on September 15, 1955. Simeon Booker, the journalist who took the photograph, later said: "*JET's* circulation just took off when they ran the picture. They had to reprint; the first time they ever reprinted *JET* magazine. And there was a lot of interest in that case. And the entire black community was becoming aware of the need to do something about it."<sup>55</sup>

The torture and murder of Emmett Till in 1955 and the acquittal of his killers was a pivotal event in the American Civil Rights Movement. It brought national attention to the brutal realities of racial violence and injustice in the South. Till's open-casket funeral, showcasing the horrific brutality he endured, shocked the nation and became a symbol of the struggle for equality. These events galvanized a generation of activists and helped propel the movement forward. Emmett's murder had a profound effect on Rosa Parks, a seamstress from Montgomery, Alabama. Within three months of Till's death, on December 1, 1955, her decision not to give up her seat on a municipal bus brought about a boycott of the Montgomery bus system, spearheaded by a young minister, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. She later said her anger over the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till and the failure to bring his killers to justice inspired her to make her historic stand.<sup>56</sup>

Mamie Bradley married Gene Mobley in 1957 and changed her surname to Till-Mobley. After the murder of her son, Mamie Till-Mobley went on to become a high-profile civil rights activist, speaking on tour with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and addressing rallies attended by thousands. She also enrolled in the Chicago Teacher's College, earning her degree in 1960. She taught in Chicago's public schools over the next 23 years, during which time she earned an M.A. in Administration at Loyola University.<sup>57</sup> Mamie Till-Mobley became something of a first lady of the Civil Rights Movement over the years. In 2000, at the commemorative march of the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famous march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, Mamie was at the head of the procession with President Bill Clinton and Coretta Scott King, among others.<sup>58</sup>

Mamie Till-Mobley died from heart failure at Jackson Park Hospital in 2003 as she was preparing to travel to Atlanta for a speaking engagement at Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Park. Reverend Jesse Jackson, speaking at her funeral, said her actions, "transformed a people and changed the course of a nation."<sup>59</sup> Mamie Till-Mobley's headstone at Burr Oak Cemetery states, "Her Pain United a Nation." She is buried next to her husband, Gene Mobley, who died in 2000 at the age of 76.

<sup>54</sup> James Ralph, "From despair to hope: Mamie Till-Mobley's story of the murder that changed her life," *Chicago Tribune*, (23 November 2003).

<sup>55</sup> "The Murder of Emmett Till," in: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/murder-of-emmett-till>. (Accessed June 15, 2025).

<sup>56</sup> "Emmett Till's death inspired a Movement," in: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/emmett-tills-death-inspired-movement>. (Accessed June 15, 2025).

<sup>57</sup> Vernon Jarrett, "Emmett Till's mom celebrates 80," *Chicago Defender* (24 November 2001).

<sup>58</sup> James Ralph, "From despair to hope: Mamie Till-Mobley's story of the murder that changed her life," *Chicago Tribune*, (23 November 2003).

<sup>59</sup> Dawn Turner Trice, "Farewell for rights pioneer," *Chicago Tribune* (12 January 2003).

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In 2005, Emmett Till's body was exhumed for the first-ever autopsy as part of an investigation to reopen his murder case, which could not be done unless it was proven that the body was Emmett's. The State of Illinois prohibits reinterment in the original casket. As a result, Emmett was reinterred in a new casket and his original casket with the glass lid was later donated to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart stated in 2009 that Emmett Till's grave was not disturbed during the 2009 grave reselling scandal at Burr Oak Cemetery.<sup>60</sup>

### **Significant Representative Black People Buried in Burr Oak Cemetery**

Burr Oak Cemetery has served as the final resting place for prominent members of the Chicago area's Black community since its establishment in 1927. They include an impressive array of doctors, attorneys, musicians, professional athletes, journalists, businessmen, and civil rights activists. Brief biographies of some prominent individuals buried at Burr Oak are below. Each of the notable individuals profiled was a migrant from the South, or the child of a migrant, who chose to settle in Chicago. Whether their time in Chicago was short or spanned their entire life, each individual played a vital role in their field. Some of them achieved national reputations. Yet in death, prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, they weren't welcome at non-secular White cemeteries.

#### **Claude Barnett (1889-1967)**

Claude Barnett, who was a vice president of the Burr Oak Cemetery Association in 1927 and one of its founders, was an internationally recognized newsman. Born in Sanford, Florida, he came to Chicago at the age of nine months and attended school in Mattoon, Illinois, Chicago, and Oak Park, Illinois. He graduated from Tuskegee Institute in 1906. Barnett was a member of the advertising staff of the *Chicago Defender* early in his career, promoting the newspaper in towns and cities throughout the country. Barnett in 1919 founded the news service, Associated Negro Press (ANP), serving as its director until shutting it down forty-five years later in 1964. The ANP—the first news-gathering agency for the black press in the U.S.—played a dominant role in the Black struggle for freedom and equality, as correspondents filed incisive reports on the progress made by the Black community worldwide. A world traveler, Barnett traveled to Africa at least 11 times as part of his work with the ANP. In 1952 he received the decoration as commander of the Order of Star of Africa from Liberia's president, William V. Tubman. He also served as a director of the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company and president of Provident Hospital and Training School (1938-42). Barnett was a trustee of Tuskegee Institute and was awarded an honorary doctorate of humanities in 1949 from that institution.<sup>61</sup>

#### **Etta Moten Barnett (1901-2004)**

Etta Moten Barnett, who married Claude Barnett in 1934, was an internationally famous and pioneering actress and concert singer, opening doors of the entertainment world that had traditionally been closed to Blacks. Barnett was born in Weimer, Texas, and moved to New York City after graduating from the University of Kansas in 1931. There, she performed in *Fast and Furious*, a 1931 all-black musical revue, and was cast in the Broadway musical *Zombie*. Barnett received her first Hollywood film role singing "My Forgotten Man" in *The Gold Diggers of 1933*, in which she received national acclaim. In 1934, she became the first black woman to perform at the White House, singing at a birthday celebration for President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the first

<sup>60</sup> Karen E. Pride, "Emmett Till returned to his final resting place," *Chicago Defender* (6 June 2005); "Remembering Emmett Till: Planned Smithsonian Black history museum to receive slain teen's casket," *Chicago Defender* (2 September 2009).

<sup>61</sup> "Claude Barnett is Back," *Chicago Defender* (26 October 1928); "Tuskegee Degree For Claude Barnett," *Chicago Defender* (18 June 1949); "Know the Negro: Claude Barnett and ANP," *Chicago Defender* (12 September 1964); "Funeral Rites Set for Writer, Claude Barnett," *Chicago Defender* (3 August 1967).

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Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers film, *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), Barnett sang the Oscar-nominated “Carioca” song wearing a fruit-loaded headdress. Barnett was widely known as the inspiration for George Gershwin’s character of Bess in the musical *Porgy and Bess*. She later portrayed Bess in the 1942 revival of the musical on Broadway, at the personal request of Gershwin, the production of which had a three-year run.

Etta and Claude Barnett represented the White House on numerous trips to countries throughout the African continent during the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Barnett hosted a radio show in Chicago called *I Remember When* during the 1950s and 1960s, recordings of which are housed at the Library of Congress. Barnett’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday gala, which drew Harry Belafonte and 400 guests, was a fitting celebration of her life and long career.<sup>62</sup>

**Timuel Dixon Black, Jr. (1918-2021)**

Timuel Black, an educator, author, civil rights activist, and Chicago’s unofficial historian of Black life and culture, was born in Birmingham, Alabama. He relocated with his family to Chicago as an infant and grew up in the city’s Bronzeville neighborhood during the first wave of the Great Migration. Black served in Europe during World War II, receiving four Battle Stars, the Croix de Guerre, the Legion of Honor, and an honorable discharge. After the repeal of racially restrictive covenant laws for returning veterans, Black and his family moved to Hyde Park-Kenwood area on Chicago’s South Side in 1953, where he remained for the rest of his life. He earned a master’s degree from the University of Chicago in 1954.

Timuel Black helped establish the Negro American Labor Movement, best known for its role in organizing the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Dr. Martin Luther King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech. Three years later, Black took part in Dr. King’s Chicago Freedom Movement, including its protest against housing discrimination in Marquette Park. Black taught at several high schools in Chicago and in 1969 he became dean of Wright College, part of the newly formed City Colleges of Chicago system. He taught at Loop college—later renamed Harold Washington College—from 1975 to 1989. He threw himself into registering voters and campaigning to help get Chicago’s first Black mayor, Harold Washington, elected. Toward the end of his life, Timuel Black turned to scholarly work, producing two volumes of his oral history project titled “Bridges of Memory,” which celebrated the everyday people who populated the South Side of his youth.<sup>63</sup>

**Dr. Midian O. (M.O.) Bousfield (1885-1948)**

Dr. M.O. Bousfield, who was a vice president of the Burr Oak Cemetery Association in 1927 and one of its founders, was a prominent civic and business leader. He was born in Pipton, Missouri, and was a graduate of the University of Kansas and Northwestern University. Following an internship at Freedmen’s Hospital in Washington D.C., he established an independent medical practice in Brazil. He subsequently relocated to Chicago, where he was elected president of Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company in 1925, following the death of its founder Frank Gillespie. Supreme Life thrived under Bousfield’s leadership. He later served as a medical director for Supreme Life and for the Rosenwald Fund. In 1939, Bousfield became the first Black member of the Chicago Board of Education. Bousfield resigned from this post at the start of World War II to serve as Lieutenant Colonel at Station Hospital No. 1, Fort Huachuca, Arizona. He was elevated to Colonel by

<sup>62</sup> “Etta Moten Barnett, premiere diva, dies at 102,” *Chicago Defender* (5 January 2004); “Etta Moten Barnett, 102: Film, Stage star broke barriers,” *Chicago Tribune* (4 January 2004).

<sup>63</sup> Aaron Gettinger, “Timuel Black, South Side historian and activist, is dead at 102,” *Hyde Park Herald* (13 October 2021); Darcel Rockett, “Civil rights activist, cultural icon and Chicago legend dies at the age of 102,” *Chicago Tribune* (14 October 2021).

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the War Department in 1944. Bousfield's wife, Maudelle Bousfield, served as principal of Wendell Phillips High School starting in 1939, the first Black woman to hold such a position.<sup>64</sup>

**Harold Bradley, Sr. (1905-73)**

Harold (Hal) Bradley was one of only 13 Black men to play in the National Football League prior to World War II. He was born in Coffeyville, Kansas, and moved with his family to Chicago as a boy, where he was raised in the Woodlawn community and attended Englewood High School. Bradley attended the University of Iowa in 1926 and joined the football team. Following in the footsteps of Iowa's Duke Slater, Bradley became one of the few Black men playing college football at the time. In 1928, Slater encouraged his Chicago Cardinals team to give Bradley a shot at a roster spot, and Bradley made the team. Hal Bradley started one game for the Chicago Cardinals in 1928 and played in two games, which made him the second Black lineman in NFL history, after Slater himself. A childhood injury, which resulted in a steel plate being placed in his leg, contributed to the end of Bradley's NFL career. Bradley's son, Harold Bradley, Jr., followed in his father's footsteps, first at the University of Iowa and then in the NFL, where he played from 1954-58. Together they became the first Black father-son combination in NFL history.<sup>65</sup>

**Daniel (Dan) Gardner Burley (1908-62)**

Dan Burley, a prominent jazz musician who specialized in new forms, helped popularize and explain the idea of jive through his writing. Burley spent his childhood in Lexington, Kentucky, later moving with his family to Chicago in 1915. He began working for the *Chicago Defender* as a copy boy and learned to play the piano while a student at Wendell Phillips High School. Burley moved to New York City in the 1920s to develop his music and journalism careers, eventually became managing editor of the *New York Amsterdam News*. He was associate editor of *Ebony* magazine for several years starting in 1951 and then returned to writing for the *Chicago Defender*. His work appeared in a variety of other popular magazines as well, including *Life*, *Look* and *Esquire*. His work as a sportswriter focused on key issues surrounding the Negro Baseball Leagues. Burley was also an accomplished musician who gave jazz concerts, was a composer, and authored the "Original Handbook of Harlem Jive." His obituary in the *Chicago Defender* noted that Burley "was known by jazz musicians around the world for his jive talk and jive poetry."<sup>66</sup>

**Ezzard Charles (1921-75)**

Ezzard Charles, a one-time heavyweight boxing champion, fought in boxing's golden age, when the sport was second only to baseball in popularity. He born in Lawrenceville, Georgia, but raised by his grandmother in Cincinnati. Charles won several amateur championships, including two Golden Gloves crowns—welterweight (1938) and middleweight (1939)—before turning professional in 1940. He defeated Jersey Joe Walcott in 1949 to win the National Boxing Association title before besting his idol Joe Louis on September 27, 1950, to claim the undisputed heavyweight title, which he held until July 18, 1951, when he was knocked out by Walcott. In attempts to regain the world championship, he lost to Walcott in 1952 and twice to Rocky Marciano in 1954. From 1940 to 1959 Charles fought 122 bouts, winning 96, of which 58 were by knockout. Ezzard was inducted into *Ring* magazine's Boxing Hall of Fame in 1970. In 1968, Muhammad Ali was among the 1,200 people who

<sup>64</sup> "Liberty Life Prospers Under Leadership of Dr. Bousfield," *Chicago Defender* (15 August 1925); "Dr. M.O. Bousfield Elected President of Liberty Life," *Chicago Defender* (17 April 1926); "Dr. Bousfield on School Board," *Chicago Defender* (28 October 1939); "Bousfield Made Colonel; 3 Other Doctors Elevated," *Chicago Defender* (11 March 1944); "Supreme Liberty Life Co. Commemorates Bousfield," *Chicago Defender* (29 May 1948).

<sup>65</sup> "African-American Pioneers in Hawkeye Sports History," in: <https://nealrozendaal.com/black-hawkeye-sports-pioneers/>. (Accessed May 29, 2025); Andy Piascik, *Gridiron Gauntlet: The Story of the Men Who Integrated Pro Football, In Their Own Words*. (Taylor Trade Publishers, 2009): 6-7, 171-180.

<sup>66</sup> Leslie Heaphy, "Daniel Gardner Burley," *Black Ball* (Fall 2009) 4; "Negro Editor Daniel Burley Dies at Age 55," *Chicago Tribune* (30 October 1962); "Newsman Dan Burley Dies," *Chicago Defender* (30 October 1962).

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attended a 1968 testimonial given in honor of Ezzard Charles in Chicago to raise money for his medical expenses. Charles, who had lateral sclerosis, was confined to a wheelchair during the last years of his life.<sup>67</sup>

**W. Louis Davis (1899-1981)**

W. Louis Davis, who was president of the Burr Oak Cemetery Association in 1927 and one of its founders, was a nationally recognized public relations consultant and businessman. Born in Columbus, Mississippi, he attended Alcorn College in Lorman, Mississippi and graduated from Columbia University in New York City with a business degree. He was a manager of the bond department of Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company during the 1920s, a period in which he began working in the fields of advertising and public relations. An early project was directing the promotion and rentals of the Michigan Boulevard Apartments in Chicago, the first large housing project built for blacks in the U.S. Davis founded the American Music Festival, Inc. in 1940 and directed its activities for the next decade. He also served as co-manager of the "Wings Over Jordan," a spiritual choir that he successfully booked in large cities throughout the county, during the 1940s. In 1951, Davis purchased a nationally known cosmetic line, known as Ja-Nol beauty products. Its salesmen did direct selling of its products throughout the U.S. Davis also joined Fuller Products Company, another cosmetics company that catered to the Black community, in the 1950s and remained there until his retirement.<sup>68</sup>

**Earl B. Dickerson (1891-1986)**

Earl Burrus Dickerson, one of the founders of Burr Oak Cemetery, was among the nation's most prominent Black leaders in business, politics, and law in the twentieth century. A native of Canton, Mississippi, Dickerson came to Chicago at the age of 15. He worked his way through high school, the University of Illinois, and in 1920, became the first black graduate of the University of Chicago Law School. Dickerson established his own law practice in 1921, the year he was hired as general counsel at Supreme Life Insurance Company, the first Black life insurance company to operate in the North. Dickerson led the legal team in *Hansberry v. Lee* (1940), which overturned the Woodlawn Property Owner's Association's housing covenant against black homeowners. Dickerson eventually became President and CEO of Supreme Liberty Life in 1955, a position he retained until his retirement in 1971.

Dickerson also served as assistant corporation counsel for the City of Chicago in 1923; Alderman of Chicago's Second Ward (1939-1943); President of the National Bar Association (1945-1947) and the National Lawyers Guild (1951-1954); Vice President (1937) and then President (1939-1940) of the Chicago Urban League; and a board member of the national NAACP (1941-1971). Dickerson was honored at an NAACP Legal Defense Fund dinner in 1975, garnered honorary doctorates from the University of Illinois and Northwestern University, and was the subject of a book titled: *Earl B. Dickerson: A Voice for Freedom and Equality* (Northwestern University Press, 2006).<sup>69</sup>

**Willie Dixon (1915-92)**

Blues legend Willie Dixon, who was a pivotal force in setting the urban blues style and laying the foundation for contemporary blues rock, was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Dixon began working as a session bassist at Chess Records in 1948, when the label was still known as Aristocrat. Over the next two decades, Dixon composed, sang, played at recording sessions, and worked as a producer, arranger and talent scout for Chess

<sup>67</sup> "The Ezzard Charles Story," *Chicago Defender* (9 July 1949); "Ezzard Charles, boxing's 'Quiet Tiger,' dies at 53," *Chicago Tribune* (29 May 1975); "Ex-champ Ezzard Charles a great one," *Chicago Defender* (31 March 1984).

<sup>68</sup> "W. Louis Davis Purchases New Cosmetic Firm," *Chicago Defender* (3 November 1951); "Circulation Expert Begins Dixie Tour Telling 'The Defender Story,'" *Chicago Defender* (21 October 1950); "Rites for W. Louis Davis Today," *Chicago Defender* (25 November 1981).

<sup>69</sup> "Dickerson dead at 95," *Chicago Defender* (3 September 1986); "Earl B. Dickerson: A Giant Among Men," *Chicago Defender* (20 July 1981); "NAACP to cite Earl Dickerson," *Chicago Defender* (20 October 1975).

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Records. He wrote prolifically for virtually every blues great on the Chess label, notably Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and Little Walter, and played bass on rock pioneer Chuck Berry's seminal 1950s hits. As a bass player, performer and composer, Dixon had a strong influence on the blues. He captured the imagination of many superstars in the contemporary music scene, including Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page and others during the 1960s. Later in life, he quietly did all that he could for the local blues community via his non-profit Blues Heaven Foundation.<sup>70</sup>

**Carl A. Hansberry, Sr. (1895-1946)**

Carl Augustus Hansberry was an American real estate broker turned civil rights activist who was the plaintiff in the 1940 Supreme Court decision *Hansberry v. Lee*. Hansberry was born in Mississippi and moved to Chicago as a young man, as part of the Great Migration. In 1937, Hansberry purchased a three-flat apartment building at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue, in the Washington Park Subdivision of Chicago that was restricted to Whites. Facing intense hostility and threats of violence, Hansberry lived here with his wife and four children until 1940, during which time he waged a legal battle culminating in a U.S. Supreme Court decision that was an important victory in the effort to outlaw racially-restrictive housing covenants. Hansberry's daughter, pioneering playwright Lorraine Hansberry, drew inspiration from her family's traumatic experience with racial segregation when writing *A Raisin in the Sun*. This groundbreaking play—which tells the story of a black family looking to move out of a cramped South Side apartment and defy social and political limits to realize their dreams—was the first drama by a Black woman to be produced on Broadway.<sup>71</sup>

**Edward Giles Irvin (1893-1982)**

Edward Giles Irvin was a civic and religious leader, journalist, and entrepreneur. He was born in Spencer, Indiana, and graduated from Indiana University. At only 17 years of age, Irvin was the youngest of ten black students who founded Kappa Alpha Psi® Fraternity, serving on its Incorporation Committee. Irvin pursued a career in journalism until World War I, where he served as a combat medic with the Expeditionary Forces in France and was cited for bravery. He received Distinguished Service Awards from Presidents Truman and Eisenhower for his work on the Selective Service Board during World War II and the Korean War. Irvin moved to Indianapolis in the late 1940s and later to Gary, Indiana, where he worked for various newspapers as a staff writer, founder, and/or editor. Irvin later moved to Chicago, working initially as a sports editor for *The Chicago Daily Bulletin* newspaper. He later became the owner and operator of the Afro-American Manufacturing Company, a distributor of candy, novelties, and specialty items.<sup>72</sup>

**Inman Jackson (1907-1973)**

Inman Jackson was the man credited with introducing the showman style of play that became the trademark of the Harlem Globetrotters. The famed 6-foot, 4-inch Harlem Globetrotter center was known to fans all over the world as "Big Jack." Jackson joined the Globetrotters in 1928, a year after the team was founded by Abe Saperstein. Jackson was an outstanding ball-handler, and it was this style—ball-handling finesse, incredible passes and amazing shots—that became a part of Globetrotter tradition. Jackson remained with the Globetrotter organization for more than four decades. He retired as a player in the late 1940s and served in several capacities

<sup>70</sup> "Goodbye from sweet home Chicago," *Chicago Tribune* (6 February 1992); "Services for Willie Dixon set for Liberty Baptist Church," *Chicago Defender* (3 February 1992); "Blues legend Willie Dixon dead at 76," *Chicago Defender* (30 January 1992); "Man behind the blues," *Chicago Tribune* (2 February 1992).

<sup>71</sup> "Hansberry Decree Opens 500 New Homes to Race," *Chicago Defender* (23 November 1940); "Chicagoans Pay Final Tribute to Hansberry," *Chicago Defender* (30 March 1946). Three-flat building at 6140 S. Rhodes Avenue in Chicago where the Hansberry family lived from 1937-40 was designated Chicago Landmark on Feb. 10, 2010 under the name "Lorraine Hansberry House."

<sup>72</sup> "Edward Giles Irvin, writer, Kappa founder, dead at 89," *Chicago Defender* (8 November 1982); "Edward Giles Irvin, Founder," in: <https://www.kappaalphapsi1911.com/edward-giles-irvin/>. (Accessed May 29, 2025).

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until his death. He was a head coach, assistant coach, talent scout, instructor of new talent, and consultant coach.<sup>73</sup>

**Annie Turnbo Malone (1869-1957)**

Annie Turnbo Malone, a millionaire businesswoman specializing in Black beauty culture, was born in Metropolis, Illinois, and raised in Peoria, Illinois. She took an early interest in hair textures, and during the 1890s began looking for a better method for hair care for Black women. By about 1900, Malone had developed a variety of hair straighteners and special hair oils and was the first to patent the hot comb. She moved her business to St. Louis in 1902, establishing a factory to produce her hair care products, which were sold under the name “Poro.” One of her sales agents was Madame C.J. Walker, who often shared with Annie Turnbo Malone the title of the first black millionairess in the U.S. Malone founded Poro College in 1917 in St. Louis, the first center in America dedicated to the study and teaching of black cosmetology. In 1930, Malone moved her entire operation to Chicago. She was also a generous philanthropist and donated large sums of money to Black schools and colleges and supported many students.<sup>74</sup>

**Baseball Players from the Negro Leagues**

The Negro Leagues—which were active from 1920 until the mid-1950s—were a significant part of baseball history, featuring Black players during the era of segregation in Major League Baseball. Andrew “Rube” Foster and his fellow black team owners came together in 1920 to create the Negro National League (NNL), in which Black stars could showcase their talents. The league also inspired rival organizations, like the Southern Negro League and the Eastern Colored League, whose teams would square off against NNL squads in the annual Negro League World Series. Together, the Negro Leagues proved that Black players could compete on even terms with their White counterparts and draw just as much interest from baseball fans. The onset of the Great Depression forced nearly every colored baseball league, including the NNL, to shut down. The league rose again in 1937 as the Negro American League (NAL), with many of the same teams from the old NNL. The NAL thrived until one of its own, the Kansas City Monarchs’ Jackie Robinson, broke Major League Baseball’s color barrier in 1947. Robinson’s breakthrough into the major leagues signaled the eventual decline of the Negro Leagues in the 1950s.<sup>75</sup>

Burr Oak Cemetery is the final resting place of 21 players and one umpire from the Negro Leagues, who are listed below:

William McKinley Cornelius  
John (Jimmie) Crutchfield  
Roosevelt Davis  
Elwood (Bingo) De Moss  
John Donaldson  
Robert Garrett (Umpire)  
Paul J. Hardy  
William J. Marshall

<sup>73</sup> “Big Jack began tricks,” *Chicago Defender* (28 December 1971); “Famed Harlem Globetrotter Inman Jackson Dies at 66,” *Jet* (26 April 1973); “Trotters star dies,” *Chicago Tribune* (9 April 1973).

<sup>74</sup> “Annie Malone, Black beauty,” *Chicago Defender* (6 May 2000); “Annie Turnbo Malone,” *Chicago Defender* (24 February 2001); “Annie Turnbo Malone: First to patent the pressing comb,” *Chicago Defender* (15 February 2002).

<sup>75</sup> Matt Kelly, “A 20<sup>th</sup> century Baseball Institution,” in: <https://www.mlb.com/history/negro-leagues/history> (Accessed June 11, 2025); Matt Kelly, “The Negro National League is founded,” in: <https://baseballhall.org/discover-more/stories/inside-pitch/negro-national-league-is-founded> (Accessed June 11, 2025).



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James McCurine Jr.  
Guy Ousley  
John Phillips  
Clarence Powell  
Othello L. Strong  
James Taylor  
Theodore Trent  
Armand C. Tyson  
Alec Radcliffe  
Woodrow Wilson (Woody) Williams  
Clarkson Brazelton  
Joe Green  
McAdoo Halley  
Admiral Walker Tullie

**W. Ellis Stewart (1892-1955)**

W. Ellis Stewart, a vice president of the Burr Oak Cemetery Association in 1927 and one of its founders, was born in Columbus, Indiana, where he attended the local high school. Stewart came to Chicago in 1920 after graduating from the University of Illinois to work at the fledgling Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company. Here, he met Earl Dickerson—another founder of Burr Oak Cemetery—who worked as general counsel for Supreme Liberty Life starting in 1921. Stewart initially served as secretary of the Supreme and held different positions through its various mergers over the years, eventually becoming executive vice president. The *Chicago Defender* published a profile of Stewart in 1943, in which one of his contemporaries stated: “[Supreme Life] has come through some 20 odd years of depression, business crises and reverses and during all this period Ellis Stewart has been one of the massive pillars of guiding strength—he has been a key cog in getting it over the shoals of failure.” At the time of Stewart’s death in 1955, Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company was the third largest Black insurance firm in the United States.<sup>76</sup>

**Dinah Washington (1924-63)**

Dinah Washington, a nationally recognized singer and one of the most popular Black female recording artists of the 1950s, began her career in Chicago as Ruth Jones, her given name. She performed and recorded in a wide variety of styles including gospel, jazz, blues, and traditional pop music. Her flexibility as a vocalist meant she was equally at home in front of big band orchestras as she was doing gigs in intimate, smoky jazz clubs. Between 1955 and 1961, Washington recorded with various orchestras conducted by the legendary Quincy Jones. One of their collaborations was on her tenth studio album, “What a Difference A Day Makes,” which won her a Grammy in 1959 for Best Rhythm & Blues Performance. Despite her tragically short life—she died at age 39 from an accidental overdose—her career was prolific and star studded. Celebrities that included Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, and Sammy Davis Jr. were among the estimated 6,000 people who attended Washington’s funeral at St. Luke’s Baptist Church, 3663 Indiana Avenue in Chicago, and her burial afterward at Burr Oak Cemetery. In 1993, Dinah Washington was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> “Stewart Blazed Way in Study of Insurance,” *Chicago Defender* (25 September 1943); “W.E. Stewart, Insurance Firm Officer, Dies,” *Chicago Defender* (9 April 1955).

<sup>77</sup> “Night Train Lane’s Wife Dies,” *Chicago Tribune* (15 December 1963); “6,000 Attend Funeral of Jazz Singer,” *Chicago Tribune* (19 December 1963); “Thousands Kiss Dinah Goodbye,” *Chicago Defender* (19 December 1963).

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## Conclusion

The Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District is an excellent candidate for the National Register of Historic Places and has sufficient integrity for listing. It is locally significant under Criterion A in the areas of Ethnic History and Social History as an early Black cemetery in the Chicago area. The property is also nationally significant under Criterion B for its association with Emmett Till and meets Criterion Consideration D for it contains graves of persons of transcendent importance and is associated with historic events. The period of significance is from 1927, the year it was established, until 1975, the fifty-year cutoff for significance for the National Register. Burr Oak Cemetery opened in 1927 in Worth Township (Cook County) in the face of local White opposition as one of the few cemeteries in the Chicago region that catered to Chicago's Black population; of these, it was the only one that was Black-owned and managed. The cemetery is the final resting place of many prominent members of Chicago's Black community, many of whom attained national reputations in their respective fields. The most prominent individual buried in the Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District is Emmett Till (1941-55), a 14-year-old Black youth whose lynching in Mississippi was a catalyst event in the nascent Civil Rights movement.

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- "Whites Open War On Race Burial Place," *Chicago Defender*, 12 February 1927.
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Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District

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Cook, Illinois

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)  
☐ previously listed in the National Register  
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register  
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark  
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

☐ State Historic Preservation Office  
☐ Other State agency  
☐ Federal agency  
☐ Local government  
☐ University  
☐ Other

Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):

Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District

Name of Property

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property** 150

(Do not include previously listed resource acreage; enter "Less than one" if the acreage is .99 or less)

### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: \_\_\_\_\_

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1 -87.73861

Latitude

41.66891

Longitude

3 -87.73624

Latitude

41.66208

Longitude

2 -87.7291

Latitude

41.66552

Longitude

4 -87.72902

Latitude

41.66212

Longitude

**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

See the Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District boundary map on the following page. The yellow line surrounding the cemetery indicates the district boundary. The district is located at 4400 W. 127<sup>th</sup> Street in Alsip, a suburb in Worth Township (Cook County). It is bounded by 123<sup>rd</sup> Street and 125<sup>th</sup> Street on the north; 127<sup>th</sup> Street on the south; Kostner Avenue and Loveland Street on the east; Cicero Avenue on the west; and an interchange of the I-294 expressway on its southwest corner. The district is about 150 acres in size, has an L-shaped footprint, and features approximately 33,000 graves.

Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District

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**Boundary Justification** (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The district boundaries encompass the current boundaries of Burr Oak Cemetery at 4400 W. 127<sup>th</sup> Street in Alsip. The cemetery attained its current boundaries by 1962, according to an aerial photograph from that year.

**Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District Boundary Map**

Non-contributing properties indicated with an x.





Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District  
Name of Property

Cook, Illinois  
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**11. Form Prepared By**

---

name/title Jean L. Guarino, Ph.D., Principal date 7/28/25  
organization Guarino Historic Resources Documentation telephone 708-386-1142  
street & number 844 Home Avenue email guarinojl@gmail.com  
city or town Oak Park state IL zip code 60304

---

**Additional Documentation**

---

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Photograph Log**
- **Photograph Map Key**
- **GIS Location Map (Google Earth or BING)**
- **Local Location Map**
- **Images**

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District

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### Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 3000x2000 pixels, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

### Photo Log

**Name of Property:** Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District

**City or Vicinity:** Alsip

**County:** Cook **State:** IL

**Photographer:** Jean L. Guarino

**Date Photographed:** June 2, 2025

**Location of Original Photographs** # Old State Capitol Plaza, Springfield, IL

**No. of Photographs** 25

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

### Contributing resources (Photograph Map Key follows this list and photographs are shown after the map.)

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0001:

Main entrance with double-leaf iron gates and granite posts, view northeast.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0002: Main entrance gate detail, view north.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0003: Main entrance gate detail, view east.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0004: Burr Oak Section, view west.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0005: Acacia Lawn section, view northeast.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0006: Burr Oak and Acacia Lawn sections, view west.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0007:

Mamie Till-Mobley and Gene Mobley grave monument in Elm Grove section, view northeast.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0008: Acacia Lawn and Elm Grove sections, view northeast.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0009: Elm Grove section, view north.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0010: Elm Grove section, view west.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0011: Sections 6-11 and 6-13, view south.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0012: Sections 6-9 and 6-11, view east.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0013: Section 12-1, view southeast.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0014: Section 11-1, view east.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0015: West Rose Lawn section, view north.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0016: Double-leaf wrought iron gates on 127<sup>th</sup> Street, view south.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0017: West Rose Lawn section, view west.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0018: West Rose Lawn section, view north.

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**Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District**

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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0019: West Evergreen section, view east.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0020: View north toward Emmett Till grave in Maple Wood section.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0021: Emmett Till bronze headstone in Maple Wood section.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0022: Annie Turnbo Malone headstone in Acacia Lawn section.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0023: Willie Dixon bronze headstone in Acacia Lawn section.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0024: Fair Lawn section, view south.

IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0025: Double-leaf wrought iron gates on 123<sup>rd</sup> Street, view south.

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# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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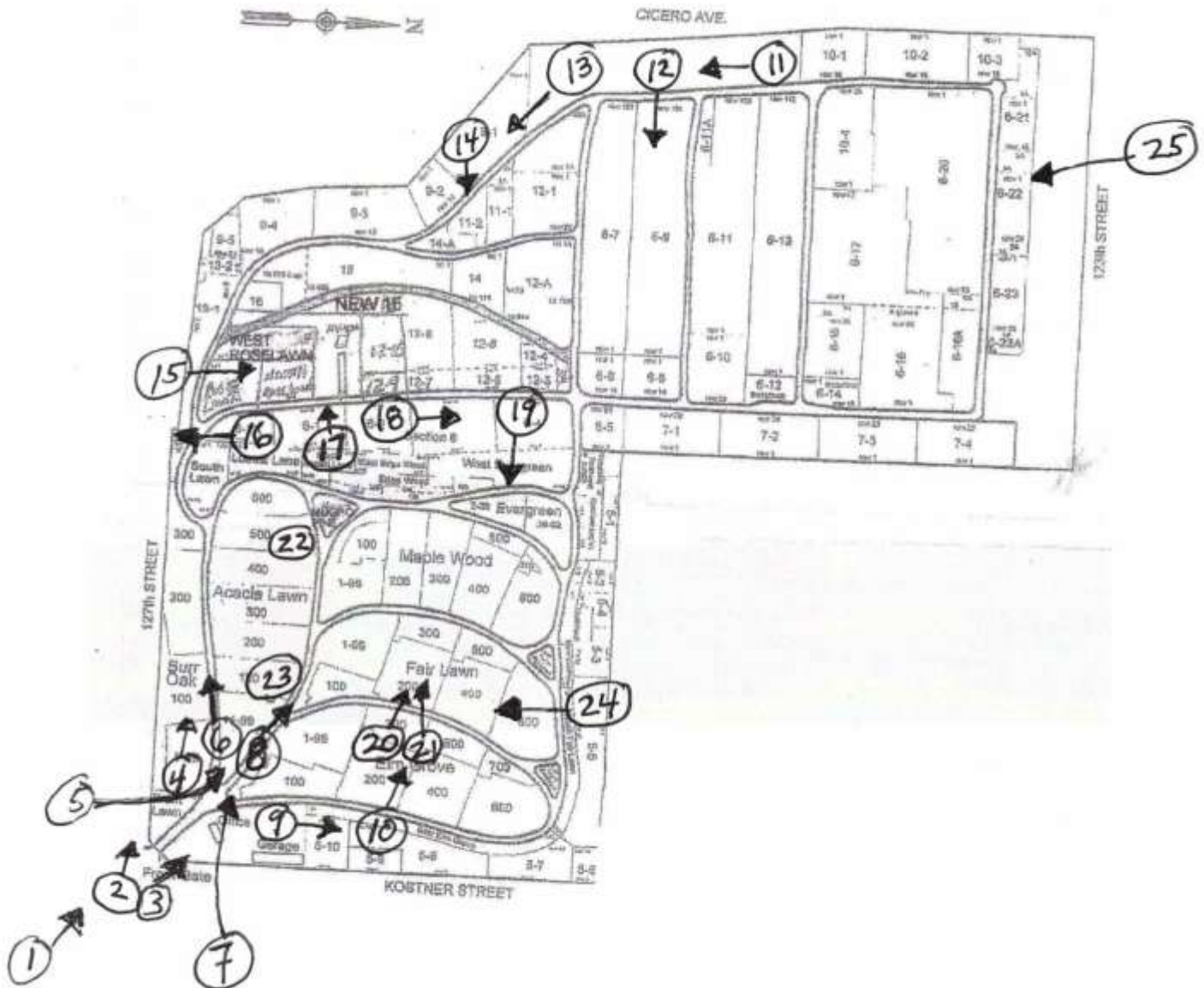
N/A

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## Photograph Map Key



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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0001:



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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0002:





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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0003:



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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0004:





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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0005:



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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0006:



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Name of Property

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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0007:





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Name of Property

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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0008:



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Name of Property

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N/A

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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0009:



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Name of Property

Cook County, IL

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N/A

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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0010:





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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0011:



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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0012:





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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0013:



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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0014:



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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0015:





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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0016:



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N/A

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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0017:



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Name of Property

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N/A

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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0018:





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Name of Property

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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0019:



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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0020:





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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0021:



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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0022:





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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0023:



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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0024:





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IL\_CookCounty\_Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District\_0025:



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### GIS Map



Burr Oak Cemetery

1 -87.73861, 41.66891

2 -87.7291, 41.66552

3 -87.73624, 41.66208

4 -87.72902, 41.66212



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### Local Location Map



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### IMAGES (Actual images follow on the next pages.)

- IMAGE 1: Emmett Till headstone.
- IMAGE 2: Grave monument for Mamie Till Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till, and her husband, Gene Mobley.
- IMAGE 3: Headstone for Annie M. Turnbo Malone, a millionaire businesswoman specializing in black beauty culture.
- IMAGE 4: Headstone for W. Ellis Stewart, an executive with the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company and one of the founders of Burr Oak Cemetery.
- IMAGE 5: Headstone for Dinah Washington, a nationally recognized singer and one of the most popular black female recording artists of the 1950s.
- IMAGE 6: Headstone for Earl B. Dickerson, general council for the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company and one of the founders of Burr Oak Cemetery.
- IMAGE 7: Headstone for Willie Dixon, a legendary blues musician.
- IMAGE 8: Headstone for Carl A. Hansberry, Sr., a real estate developer and civil rights activist.
- IMAGE 9: Headstone for Ezzard Charles, a one-time heavyweight boxing champion.
- IMAGE 10: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 30 November 1929.
- IMAGE 11: Photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery's entrance in the *Chicago Defender*, 26 September 1936.
- IMAGE 12: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 26 September 1936.
- IMAGE 13: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 11 February 1939.
- IMAGE 14: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 11 May 1940.
- IMAGE 15: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 25 May 1940.
- IMAGE 16: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 31 May 1947.
- IMAGE 17: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery showing its original chapel, 31 May 1947.
- IMAGE 18: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 29 May 1948.
- IMAGE 19: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 1938.
- IMAGE 20: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 1951.
- IMAGE 21: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 1962.
- IMAGE 22: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 1973.
- IMAGE 23: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 1983.
- IMAGE 24: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 2021.
- IMAGE 25: Front façade of administrative office building (2014) and the Burr Oak Cemetery Memorial Monument (2014), both of which are non-contributing resources.
- IMAGE 26: Rear façade of administrative office building (2014) with adjacent kiosk (post-2000), both of which are non-contributing resources.
- IMAGE 27: Concrete block garage (post-2000), which is a non-contributing building.
- IMAGE 28: Concrete block storage structure (post-2000), which is a non-contributing resource.
- IMAGE 29: Granite mausoleum that holds 144 niches (2019), which is a non-contributing resource.
- IMAGE 30: Memorial installed 2018 honoring the individuals whose remains were disturbed during the 2009 grave selling scandal. The memorial contains some unidentified remains from the graves involved. Non-contributing resource.



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### List of Figures

IMAGE 1: Emmett Till headstone.



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IMAGE 2: Grave monument and headstones for Mamie Till Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till, and her husband, Gene Mobley.



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IMAGE 3: Headstone for Annie M. Turnbo Malone, a millionaire businesswoman specializing in black beauty culture.





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IMAGE 4: Headstone for W. Ellis Stewart, an executive with the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company and one of the founders of Burr Oak Cemetery.



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IMAGE 5: Headstone for Dinah Washington, a nationally recognized singer and one of the most popular black female recording artists of the 1950s.





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IMAGE 6: Headstone for Earl B. Dickerson, general council for the Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company and one of the founders of Burr Oak Cemetery.



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IMAGE 7: Headstone for Willie Dixon, a legendary blues musician.





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IMAGE 8: Headstone for Carl A. Hansberry, Sr., a real estate developer and civil rights activist.



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IMAGE 9: Headstone for Ezzard Mack Charles.





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IMAGE 10: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 30 November 1929.

RELIABLE FOR 25 YEARS

# BURR OAK

*America's Most Beautiful Memorial Park!*



Has the recent stock market crash taught you a lesson?  
If so, it is—don't speculate—don't gamble!  
Real Estate is not gambling—it is a conservative investment.  
It is a "REAL" estate—solid—substantial—always there.  
SUPPLY AND DEMAND is the basis of all values.  
A cemetery is a NECESSITY to all humans.  
Everyone of us must use it at one time or another.  
A modern burial park with perpetual care is the finest of all cemeteries.  
There is only one such in Chicago for our group—there are

VERY  
LITTLE  
CASH  
DOWN  
PAYMENTS  
TO  
RENT

Endorsed by  
Dr. Harold M.  
Kingsley  
Pastor First Methodist  
Congregational  
Church

Endorsed by  
Dr. L. K. Williams  
Pastor of Olivet Baptist  
Church (the Largest  
Colored Church  
in the World)  
Pastor of National  
Baptist Convention

**No Taxes to Pay  
Free Forever**

# BURR OAK

A small investment in a plot there  
NOW will bring large returns in the  
near future.  
Take advantage of this OPPORTUNITY  
TODAY.  
Mail the coupon NOW.

**BURR OAK**  
Cemetery Association of Chicago

W. LOUIS DAVIS, President  
LIFE BLDG. 407 E. 5TH STREET  
TELEPHONE DOUGLAS 2222

CLIP-MAIL TODAY!

My little money  
of \$10.00 I will give to  
Burr Oak Cemetery, Chicago, Ill.  
for a plot in the same for my  
self and family. I will pay for  
the same in 10 years or less.  
Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_  
Zip \_\_\_\_\_



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Burr Oak Cemetery Historic District

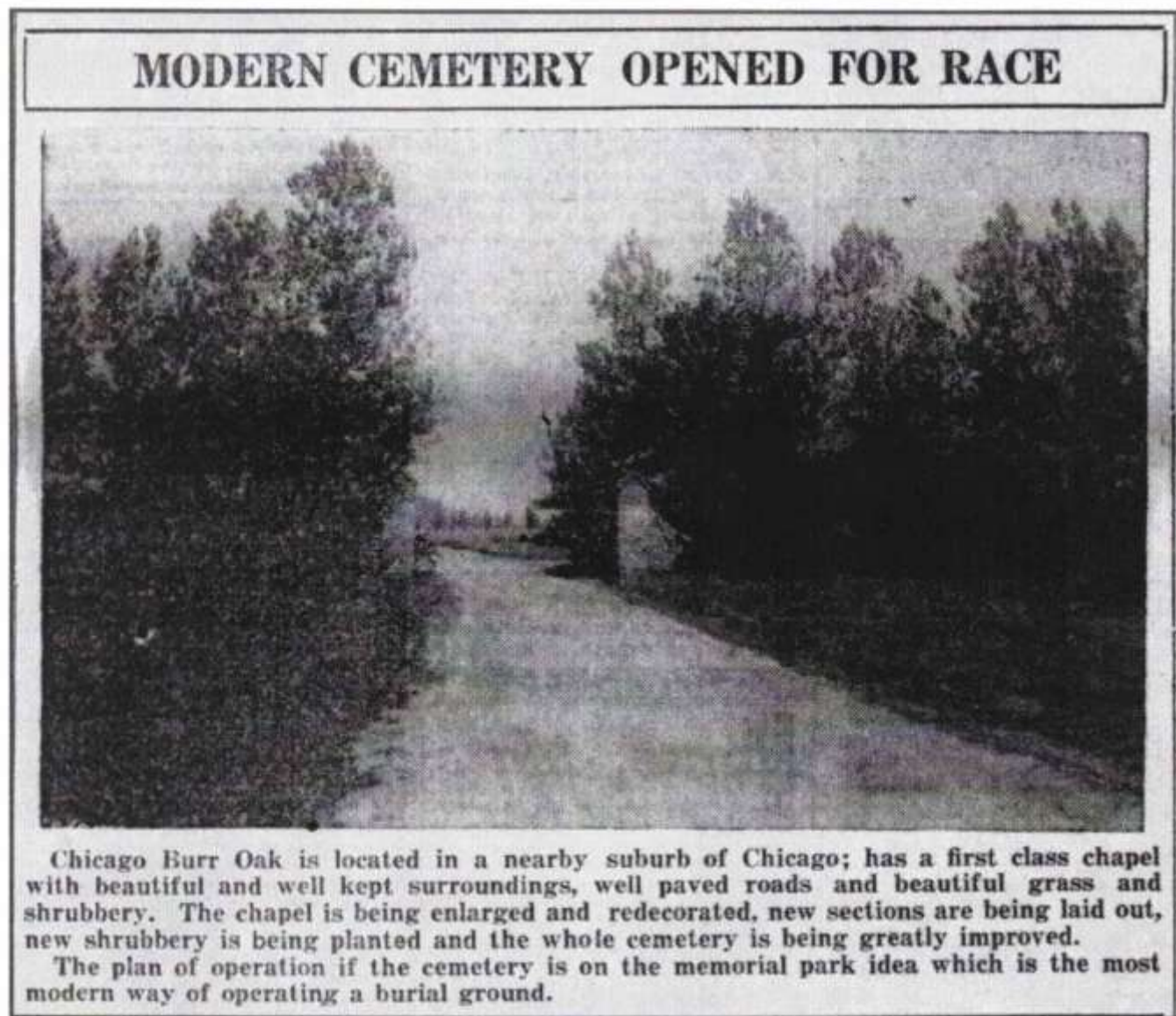
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IMAGE 11: Photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery's entrance, published in the *Chicago Defender*, 26 September 1936.



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IMAGE 12: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 26 September 1936.

# Chicago Burr Oak Cemetery

## REORGANIZED AND OPERATING AS The Only Negro-Owned Cemetery In Chicago

Developed like a park, conveniently near the city, yet far enough to escape intrusion. No expense has been spared in planting shrubs and trees to conform to a harmonious planting scheme.

**PERPETUAL CARE FUNDS** provide that permanent care be given the cemetery, so that as the years pass the beauty you see today will not fade, but increase in loveliness and charm.

**A CEMETERY LOT IS AS ESSENTIAL AS LIFE INSURANCE.** They are both purchased to meet a certain contingency. **WHERE THE HEAD OF A FAMILY DIES WITHOUT A BURIAL PROVISION, HE LEAVES THE FAMILY EXPOSED ON THE MOST HELPLESS DAY OF THEIR LIVES.** Therefore, purchase in advance of need, when you have an opportunity to get the best loca-

tion at the lowest price. It is better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it.

**FREE AUTOMOBILE SERVICE FROM YOUR HOME TO THE CEMETERY** to inspect our property, without any obligation on your part. It takes but little time to visit the cemetery and choose leisurely and with deliberation such a lot as you desire to own. If you do not find it convenient to pay cash for your lot, **YOU MAY MAKE MONTHLY PAYMENTS, TO SUIT YOU. YOU PAY NO MORE THAN THOSE WHO PAY CASH.** Phone our city office, **ATLANTIC 5061**, or call in person at 409 E. 35th Street for further information.

A cemetery lot is as necessary for your family as a home. Don't delay in rendering them this security. If you can't come in or call, fill out this coupon and mail today.

Mr. Kenner, Director of Sales, wishes to avail himself of this opportunity to express his sincere gratitude to the many friends for the business already received and for the great number of phone calls that continue to pour in daily.

**Chicago Burr Oak Cemetery.**  
Please have representative call and explain your easy payment lot service plan without any obligation on my part.

NAME .....

ADDRESS..... TIME.....

CITY .....



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IMAGE 13: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 11 February 1939.

### Burr Oak Chapel Was Designed and Built For Your Comfort



The above picture is that of the interior of the Burr Oak Cemetery Chapel and Administration Building. It is spacious, modern and beautiful. In building it our ideal was to construct more than just an ordinary edifice where people reluctantly come to hold final services.

Our ideal was to build a restful, inspiring place where people like to come and linger.

In attempting to achieve this ideal, Burr Oak has been equipped with sanitary rest rooms for men and women. The building is always kept at an ideal temperature; it is cool enough in summer and comfortably warm in winter. Soft cushion chairs are available for rest and relaxation.

## BURR OAK Chicago's Most Beautiful CEMETERY

SUPREME LIBERTY LIFE BLDG.  
15TH & SOUTH PARKWAY—Suite 20      TELEPHONE ATLANTIC 5061

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IMAGE 14: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 11 May 1940.

**What Is . . . .  
PERPETUAL CARE?**

When you purchase a grave or lot at Burr Oak Cemetery, you don't have to worry about keeping it up.

Burr Oak's Perpetual Care Fund provides for the continuous upkeep of your lot without any additional cost to you.

Burr Oak is investing its Perpetual Care Funds in mortgages designed to save and protect Colored homes.

**Telephone ATLantic 5061**

**Burr Oak**  
CHICAGO'S MOST BEAUTIFUL  
**Cemetery**



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IMAGE 15: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 25 May 1940.

**You Can Reach Burr Oak**  
By Street Car and Bus or Automobile



Located just outside of the city limits at 127th Street and 44th Avenue, Burr Oak Cemetery can be conveniently reached by street car and bus or automobile.

On May 26, 29 and 30 (Memorial Day) a Chartered Bus will meet the street car at 111th St. and Sacramento Ave., every half hour.

On all other days call the cemetery, Blue Island 1064 and our own car will meet you at the car line.

With all of its advantages — Beauty, Service, Perpetual Care and Convenient Location — Burr Oak still sells for less than many competitors and gives you far more value for your money.

**Burr Oak**  
CHICAGO'S MOST BEAUTIFUL  
**Cemetery**

Telephone ATLantic 5061



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IMAGE 16: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 31 May 1947.

**BURR OAK**  
*Chicago's Most Beautiful*  
**CEMETERY**

**MEMORIAL DAY NOTICE**

Burr Oak Cemetery is a Memorial Park where the whole cemetery is maintained as a lawn. All graves are sodded or seeded in and are kept level with the ground. No planting of any kind is permitted.

Graves are decorated at Burr Oak with fresh flowers made into beautiful, colorful bouquets. The green, well-clipped lawns bordered with varied blooming trees and shrubs, and dotted with these bouquets makes Burr Oak a place of inspiration and hope, a fit resting place for your Departed Loved Ones.

The station wagon will meet the surface line cars at 111th and Sacramento Streets all day, Memorial Day.

**Office – ATLantic 5061**  
**Grounds – Blue Island 1064**

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IMAGE 17: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery showing its original chapel, 31 May 1947.

**A Glorious Tribute For All Time  
To the Memory of Your Loved Ones**



*Inspirational Chapel and Accommodations Building*

**5 EXCLUSIVE BURR OAK FEATURES**

- Away from noise and confusion, yet within easy reach of all Chicagoland.
- The stately spiritual beauty inspires a peace of mind and heavenly solace.
- Exclusive insurance feature protects your plot—at no extra cost.
- The only cemetery in Chicago built, owned and operated by the race.
- Memorial Park Plan—no tombstones to mar the beautiful park. Graves are marked simply with flat bronze or granite plaques.

Phone ATLANTIC 5061 **BURROAK** 127th St. at 44th Ave. CHICAGO

*Chicago's Most Beautiful CEMETERY*



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IMAGE 18: Display advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* for Burr Oak Cemetery, 29 May 1948.



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IMAGE 19: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 1938. Source: Historicaerials.com.



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IMAGE 20: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 1951. Source: Historicaerials.com.





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IMAGE 21: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 1962. Source: Historicaerials.com.



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IMAGE 22: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 1973. Source: Historicaerials.com.



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IMAGE 23: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 1983. Source: Historicaerials.com.





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IMAGE 24: Aerial photograph of Burr Oak Cemetery, 2021. Source: Historicaerials.com.



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IMAGE 25: Front façade of administrative office building (2014) and the Burr Oak Cemetery Memorial Monument (2014), both of which are non-contributing resources.





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IMAGE 26: Cemetery kiosk (post-2000), which is a non-contributing resource.



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IMAGE 27: Concrete block maintenance garage (post-2000), which is a non-contributing resource.



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IMAGE 28: Concrete block storage shed (post-2000), which is a non-contributing resource.





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IMAGE 29: Granite mausoleum that holds 144 niches (2019), which is a non-contributing resource.





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IMAGE 30: Memorial installed 2018 honoring the individuals whose remains were disturbed during the 2009 grave selling scandal. The memorial contains some unidentified remains from the graves involved. Non-contributing resource.



DISTRICT OFFICE:  
1507 W. Morse Ave.  
Chicago, Illinois 60626  
773-784-2002  
E-Mail: info@rep Cassidy.com

ILLINOIS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPRINGFIELD OFFICE:  
269-S Stratton Building  
Springfield, Illinois 62706  
217-782-8088



**KELLY CASSIDY**  
STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 14TH DISTRICT

September 4, 2025

Andrew Heckenkamp, Survey and National Register Coordinator  
State Historic Preservation Office  
IDNR  
1 Natural Resources Way  
Springfield, IL 62702

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to express my strong support for the Friends of Burr Oak Cemetery, Inc. in its effort to have Burr Oak Cemetery listed on the Illinois Register of Historic Places.

Burr Oak Cemetery has acquired a rich history since its construction in 1927 by the late Earl B. Dickerson. Dickerson was a prominent African American attorney, community activist, and business executive who successfully argued before the U. S. Supreme Court in *Hansberry v. Lee*. Burr Oak Cemetery stands as a profound symbol of history, education, diversity, and inclusion. It is deeply tied to the Civil Rights Movement and the Great Migration, largely due to the many trailblazers and legends of African American history who are buried there.

Among the most notable is Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy who was kidnapped and brutally murdered in Mississippi on August 28, 1955, after being falsely accused of flirting with a white woman. His death galvanized the Civil Rights Movement. His mother, Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley—an unwavering activist for justice—rests there as well, alongside thousands of distinguished Illinois residents.

Because of the profound historical and cultural significance of those interred at Burr Oak and its essential role in shaping the social, political, and civil rights landscape of both Illinois and the United States, I strongly support the designation of Burr Oak Cemetery as an official Illinois Historical Site.

Please feel free to reach out if there are any questions you may have related to the above matter.

Sincerely,

Kelly Cassidy  
IL State Representative, 14<sup>th</sup> District