

# Post Cemetery, Landscaped 100 Years Ago, Reflects 1907 style



## A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

### Post Cemetery

During the working life of Fort Mackinac (1781-1895), the soldiers and officers who died on duty were interred in a series of burial plots above and behind the fort. Before the Civil War, the burial ground for soldiers who died at Fort Mackinac was standardized at a location next to the military reservation's "Garrison Road," at the foot of the Turtle's Back hill that is the highest point on Mackinac Island.

Here the soldiers, some of the officers, and some of the civilians of Mackinac Island were buried. Some of the officers' families had the remains of their loved ones embalmed and returned to their home towns for burial there; because of this, some of the officers who are known to have passed away at Fort Mackinac are not buried here.

When Fort Mackinac was closed and transferred to the state of Michigan in 1895, the Fort Mackinac burial plot was not the organized, landscaped cemetery we see today. Some of the men were buried under standardized marble headstones bearing the words "U.S. Soldier," some of the officers and civilians were buried under personalized headstones, which their families had paid for, and some of the men were buried under wooden headboards or with no marker at all.

The condition of the abandoned Fort Mackinac burial plot raised an outcry, and supporters of the Island asked Washington, D.C., for a grant to improve the conditions under which men who had served their country were experiencing their final rest. Congress granted \$1,000, which was a large sum of money in those days, to the Mackinac Island State Park Commission for the work. In 1906-07 the Commission hired men to clear, landscape, and fence the grounds.

This work was completed in early 1907, and the newly land-

scaped cemetery was inaugurated on Memorial Day. Today's Post Cemetery, seen by tens of thousands of Island visitors annually, is the product of this 1906-07 landscaping, now itself one century old. This Memorial Day will mark the 100th anniversary of this landscaping work.

The Post Cemetery, as landscaped in 1906-07, reflects what attitudes were toward the honored dead at the time this work was done. The Progressive Era strongly valued cleanliness and order. The State Park rearranged some of the grave-stones, especially those that covered anonymous soldiers and members of their families, into neat rows aligned with larger individualized monuments within the burial plot. The cemetery was named and marked with an arching name-board typical of the era. Visitors to the cemetery walk underneath this arch today to enter the cemetery.

Parks of that era were carefully designed with a centerpiece meant to serve as a visual focus of attention. Mackinac Island's Marquette Park, which was being designed and built at the same time as the Post Cemetery landscaping, was designed to focus the eye on a statue of Father Jacques Marquette. For similar reasons, the State Park needed a visual focus for the newly redesigned Post Cemetery. The Army sent a surplus cannon to the Island, which had pointed outward from Fort Sumter, in South Carolina. This venerable artillery piece was re-mounted in the center of the small cemetery.

Fort Sumter would have been a significant name for many visitors to Mackinac Island at that time, because they would have known that the Civil War had started there. In 1907, many Civil War veterans were still alive and enjoying their peak years of earnings or



Fort Mackinac, Mich.

These two postcard views depict Post Cemetery on Mackinac Island. The gravestones shown are those of unknown soldiers. (Postcards courtesy of Tom Pfeiffelmann)

early retirement; a man who was 21 when the war broke out would have been 67 in 1907.

There were free-range cattle on Mackinac Island at this time, and it was necessary to protect the grave grass from being sacrilegiously eaten by hungry cows. The white fence surrounding the cemetery dates back to this time. The nearby Catholic and Protestant cemeteries were enclosed at about the same time.

Several major changes to the Post Cemetery came in mid-century. As the scouting program expanded on Mackinac in the 1930s, the Boy Scouts took on their present duty of detailing an honor troop to perform a daily flag ceremony at Post Cemetery. In line with the Flag Code, the nation's colors always fly at half-staff here as a

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