



Ferguson Has a History Museum

We have a very active Historical Society in Ferguson. Along with some Open Houses in 2023, The Ferguson Christmas Lights Tour in December, the display on Slavery in St. Louis in February and finally on March 21st a special tour of Bellefontaine Cemetery to visit some important Ferguson grave sites. If you have not joined the Ferguson Historical Society, you are missing out on some great activities – membership information is available at the end of this article.



If you are new to the North St. Louis area, you may not be aware that there are two historically significant and beautiful final resting places. Both are just a short south drive down Florissant Avenue. The first you come across is Calvary Cemetery, a Catholic cemetery (and the largest of the two). Calvary dates back to 1854 and was established as a final resting place for Catholics

– however, there is a section for other Christians. The grave sites in this cemetery contain the remains of many famous people: August Chouteau, Dred Scott, General William T. Sherman, Tennessee Williams along with numerous additional historic people. The grounds are beautiful, the mausoleums and statuary are amazing and a free guide for driving the grounds is available at the office. But – this article is not about Calvary – it's actually about our visit to Bellefontaine Cemetery – a little further south on Florissant Avenue.

There is some history to tell first. The Victorian Age is named for the Reign of Queen Victoria of Great Britain beginning in 1837 and ending around the time of her death in 1901 (she reigned for 64 years – Only Queen Elizabeth II has ruled longer). In America this was a period of great growth and idealism. It was a time when cities began to grow in size and importance. In the St. Louis area, prior to the 1840's, burials were generally in small family plots or small church cemeteries. As the city grew the real estate that these grave sites occupied became too valuable – many graves needed to be moved – or just built over. People began to see the need for cemeteries beyond the city limits (health reasons) and being the idealistic Victorian age, for pleasant grounds to place the remains and enjoy a visit. Often called “Cities of the Dead”.



In 1849 a group of prominent St. Louis citizens established Bellefontaine Cemetery along north Broadway. They hired Architect Almerin Hotchkiss to plot out the

grounds. Broadway was the main road north and south of St. Louis during this time period. While we currently enter Bellefontaine from Florissant Avenue, the original (and still an entrance) entry point was on Broadway. In that same year a cholera epidemic hit St. Louis taking about 10% of the population. Along with plagues, life expectancy at the time was around 40 years (high infant mortality considerably lowered the average age). There were 4500 burials in 1849 – many came to the new cemetery just beyond the city limits – Bellefontaine.

Bellefontaine Cemetery was established as a permanent resting place for people of any religious denomination – or no religion. According to the book by Carol Ferring Shepley, *“Tales from Bellefontaine Cemetery: Movers and Shakers:”*



Scalawags and Suffragettes” – Bellefontaine took almost everyone and continues to be a cemetery open to all. Currently the cemetery has over 90,000 graves in the 314 acres. Many are famous: William Clark, Susan Blow, Thomas Hart Benton, James Eads to mention a few. Bellefontaine was the 14th “Great Rural Cemetery” in the United States and the 1st west of the Mississippi River. Along with being a cemetery, Bellefontaine is also a nationally recognized arboretum with over 9000 inventoried trees and shrubs. The beautiful grounds feature two lakes, magnificent mausoleums and scenic drives. It is a peaceful place to escape a busy city. The cemetery is located at 4947 W. Florissant Avenue and is open from 8 AM to 4:30 PM daily. Phone (314) 381-0750 - website: bellefontainecemetery.org.



The History House crew took a special tour of the grounds arranged by the Cemetery Chronicler, Daniel Fuller. Along with a normal tour, our tour featured some grave sites of well-known Ferguson citizens. Included were the graves of William Ferguson and Thomas January. While there is a photo of Ferguson’s grave, Mr. January does not have a marker. The cemetery has exact

locations for all who are interred even though there is no marker. Also included was the grave site of Cornelia C. Coulter, a noted 20th Century educator and author, currently being researched by FHS President, Mary Haux. We were also invited to visit the mausoleum interiors of two well known St. Louis leaders: the Wainrights and the Lemps. Shown above is the interior of the Wainright mausoleum.



It is also interesting to note that there are five cemeteries located on Broadway north of St. Louis starting with Bellefontaine and followed by Calvary, Evangelical Friedens, St. Johns (just west of Broadway) and New Bethlehem. There is only one along south Broadway, Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery. I don’t know what that means, but – something to think about.

Both Calvary and Bellefontaine offer u-drive tours of the grounds. Bellefontaine offers guided tours in addition, with costs involved. Both are beautiful and peaceful places to visit, explore or just find a quiet spot in the middle of the noisy metro area.

This story came from documents in the Ferguson Historical Society archives.

Membership in the Ferguson Historical Society is open to anyone – membership levels range from \$20.00 to \$50.00 a year. If you are interested in joining or have any suggestions, questions, or items to donate to the Ferguson Historical Society, please contact Jerry Benner at fjbenner@mindspring.com. You are also welcome to visit the History Museum at 1064 Smith (behind the Community Center) by e-mailing the above address. Note: we will need to schedule a date for you, so ask well in advance

“The Ferguson Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the history of Ferguson Missouri. Membership is open to all sharing our interest.”