

## Potters Field is a small cemetery with a big history – October 8, 2023

There are many small cemeteries in Carroll County. Some were family cemeteries that in the past were on family farms. Now they are located in housing developments. You may still see the cemetery in a small open area in the development. But there is one small cemetery in Westminster that is different.

It's not in a community. It's in Landon C. Burns Park on Gist Road close to the Carroll Hospital Center, two baseball fields, and a parking lot. It was not on a family farm. The park property was part of the original Almshouse Farm and the cemetery is known as Potters Field, the resting place for residents of the Almshouse who had nowhere else to be buried.

The term "Potters Field" was first used in Jerusalem and was referenced in Matthew 27:3–27:8. It was a cemetery for strangers. The location was selected because local potters extracted the clay and what was left was not useful for any other purpose. The first known use in the "states" was in 1777.

The Carroll County Almshouse was built in 1852 and housed the poor until 1965. Potters Field only has 42 headstones. Upon close examination of them, they cover deaths between 1909 and 1935. This raises the question, where were the poor outside of those years buried? Searches in the Democratic Advocate and Carroll County Times newspapers, as well as Find A Grave, identified at least 72 total burials under the names Potters Field, Almshouse Cemetery, or County Home Cemetery. So, there are 30 unmarked graves somewhere on the original Almshouse property. It is likely they are close to the marked graves, but there is no way to prove it.

A more general question is — how many more Carroll County poor are buried in Potters Field? This is not easy to answer. Some Almshouse deaths were reported in the paper, but most of the notices did not contain burial information. Of those that did, some were buried in cemeteries across the county and others were buried in Potters Field. The Democratic Advocate had two 3-year lists of Almshouse deaths, 1894–1897 and 1902–1905. Over those 6 years, there were 43 resident deaths. Of those, 14 were buried at various Carroll County cemeteries and 3 at Potters Field. It is not known where the remaining 26 are buried. Either information was not included in the death notice or there was no death notice. Searches of Find A Grave also came up empty. The best theory is that they were buried in Potters Field. Many more Almshouse residents died over the 112 years the Almshouse was open. There could be dozens more unmarked graves in Landon Burns Park.

Another question is — why are there only headstones from 1909–1935? No reference to Almshouse headstones could be found in the Advocate or Times. There were two letters written by Mary Shellman on behalf of the Almshouse Committee. One in 1894 and one in 1898. She played the organ at funerals held there and felt the occasions were appropriate Christian ones, but found the burials in the Almshouse cemetery to be quite inadequate. She described the cemetery as being overgrown with briars and not fit for a Christian burial. She was disappointed that Carroll County couldn't provide a decent burial ground for the poor. Perhaps her letters instigated an effort to improve Potters Field. Headstones were referenced in Almshouse expenses some years between 1909 and 1935. J. L. Mathias, a Westminster monument dealer, was paid \$40 per year some of the years. Other years the headstone expenses were not included.

There are some other interesting observations. Not all people buried in Potters field died at the Almshouse. For example, an unidentified tramp was hit by a train and buried there. Several of the dead were not regular residents of the Almshouse but arrived there only for their last days. The first published death at the Almshouse with burial in Potters Field was in 1894. It referenced the poor

condition of Potters Field, so there had to be previous burials, but none were documented in the Democratic Advocate from 1865, when it was first published, to 1894. The most recent three burials in Potters Field were in 1966 and 1968. This was a surprise since the Almshouse closed in 1965. Two were residents of a local boarding house and one was a resident of Westminster.

The story of Carroll County's poor — where they lived, how they died, and where they were buried is incomplete. There is a list of Carroll County residents who lived at the Almshouse on the Carroll County Genealogical Society web-page, [www.ccgsm.org](http://www.ccgsm.org). Click on CCGS Collections.

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*Image 1: Source: Submitted photo    Caption: Potters Field in Landon C. Burns Park in Westminster. The park was originally part of the Almshouse Farm. Potters Field was the cemetery for the poor and indigent that had nowhere else to be buried.*

*Photo: Submitted photo*

*Image 2: Source: Submitted photo    Caption: Historical marker at Potters Field describing the history of the Almshouse and Potters Field.*

*Image 3: Source: Submitted photo    Caption: Headstone of an unknown child buried in Potters Field with a stuffed animal.*