

Woodlawn Cemetery

A UNIQUE HISTORICAL PLACE IN THE BRONX

DAVID DAVITT

Bronx Journal Staff Reporter



PHOTO: LENORE SCHULTZ

Although Woodlawn is considered one of the earliest cemeteries in the outlying boroughs of New York, no one is quite sure (even cemetery historians) where the name “Woodlawn” actually derived from. There are many cemeteries named Woodlawn throughout the United States and it is unclear if Woodlawn in the Bronx was the first one to use the name.

Woodlawn Cemetery opened its gates as a non-sectarian cemetery on 313 acres in the North Bronx in 1863. The cemetery, through its inhabitants, is linked to an array of events in American history. George Washington’s forces built a defense to cover the old Post Road after their retreat from White Plains in August of 1776 using the

land that Woodlawn now sits on.

During guided tours of the cemetery that take place during the fall season, cemetery officials often refer to R.H. Macy, J.C. Penney and F.W. Woolworth, the founders of the first department stores, and interred here in spectacular mausoleums, as the Merchant Princes of Woodlawn. Two victims from the ill fated Titanic, Ida and Isidor Strauss (of the Abraham & Strauss department store chain) have statues dedicated to them outside of their family mausoleum in Woodlawn. The era of the American Civil War is represented in Woodlawn by the remains of General Archibald Gracie, a Confederate General (whose New York home, Gracie Mansion has served as the official residence for New York Mayors for over a century) and by those of David Glasgow Farragut, who became America’s first naval Admiral.

The cemetery was featured in the infamous Lindbergh baby kidnapping case of 1932. Charles Lindbergh, the first man to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, had his baby son taken from the family home by unknown abductors. John Condon, a retired schoolteacher from the Bronx, offered to act as an intermediary between the Lindbergh family and the kidnappers.

Several clandestine meetings took place in

Woodlawn Cemetery between Mr. Condon and one of the alleged kidnappers prior to the grisly conclusion of this case, when the battered and decomposed body of the infant was found in a wooded area not far from the Lindbergh residence in New Jersey.

Susan Olsen, Executive Director of the Friends of Woodlawn Cemetery, (a preser-

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vation non-profit organization) states that currently the cemetery averages 2,200 burials annually, 1000 of them being cremations.

There are currently 300,000 people buried in Woodlawn. Future plans for the cemetery include the construction of a new administration building, which will house a new hi-tech computer and telephone system. Throughout the year, the Friends of Woodlawn sponsor many educational programs for schools and community groups. During Black History Month 2001, the cemetery held an essay writing competition for the children of Middle School 80. The children were asked to write an essay about one of the famous Black Americans buried in Woodlawn. Most noted are Billie Holliday, Miles Davis and WC Handy.

Thomas Farrelly, 53, Marriott Hotel Security Officer, remembers working in the cemetery in the early 1970’s and witnessing the funeral of another great Jazz composer and performer, Duke Ellington. He likened the funeral to a New Orleans Mardi Gras festival with the Jazz musicians giving the deceased a raucous send-off. Other famous people buried in Woodlawn include Fiorello

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