

“The Land Remains”

The story of Beltrami Park above and below

BY CHARLIE MAGUIRE

Laws change; people die; the land remains.

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN

WHAT STORIES CAN BE KNOWN within the boundaries of a piece of land? I would suggest that there are as many stories in any plot of land as there are books on a shelf in a library. An excellent two-tiered above and below example of this would be Beltrami Park, located at 1111 Summer Street Northeast, Minneapolis.

Bounded by Broadway, Polk, Summer, and Fillmore Streets, there is history above ground, and history below. The first thing

The “turning” of the soil for what was to come next, started in 1894 when the Minneapolis City Council condemned some of the cemetery land to open Fillmore and Polk Streets between Summer and Broadway. Approximately 1,321 graves and 82 stones, just a fraction of what was there, were moved from Maple Hill to Sunset, Hillside, and Lakewood cemeteries. The majority that remained behind fell into serious disrepair and vandalism for the next 22 years.

The road construction was just the beginning. City authorities

What a country chooses to save is what a country chooses to say about itself.

you see when you pull up is a restful little square with bocce courts, trees, open space, and playground equipment. On a little hill near the Broadway side of the park, there's a plaque dedicated in 1947 to Mississippi River explorer Giacomo Constantino Beltrami (1779–1855). This memorial will be 75 years old in 2021.

However, just off to the right of that monument is another plaque. A plaque that speaks to what was under the present-day topsoil of historical memory — something less endearing than Beltrami's romantic quest to find the headwaters of the Mississippi River. Something darker, both in word and deed.

Before the Italian community came to claim that neighborhood for themselves, Beltrami Park held the pioneer and Civil War-era graves of more than 5,000. Established as a private cemetery of 20 acres by Robert W. Cummings in 1849, and established officially as the Maple Hill Cemetery in 1857, it was the resting place of some of the oldest generations of Minneapolis settlers. Not as well known, say, as the Pioneers and Soldiers Cemetery on Lake Street and Cedar Avenue in South Minneapolis, Maple Hill faithfully served early Minneapolis both as a burial ground and a potter's field. The land cradled the known and the unknown.

Here was a different kind of green space from what is seen today, a place where according to a 1978 article on the cemetery “absolutely no records were kept.” As people built and settled in around the cemetery, the city health department finally forbade further internments in what was not only crowded acreage, but presumably uneven burials, as caskets were lowered into the hand-dug graves to a depth of about five feet.

accused the Maple Hill Improvement Association in 1905 of doing exactly the opposite, when its members took their work horses and clear-cut part of the cemetery not only of garbage and debris, but the markers as well. Their plows and scrapers deposited everything, including a Civil War monument, into ditches nearby.

Gray-bearded elders of the Dudley P. Chase Post of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) who administered the cemetery at that time protested the damage, and in 1908 the Minneapolis Park Board purchased what was left of the cemetery for \$8,000 and erected a seven-foot mesh fence around the perimeter. Vandalism of the veterans' sacred ground remained a problem due to the fact that the thriving population around the cemetery wanted the park topsoil for the living, not the dead. Stones were carried away to such an extent that city workers came upon broken and discarded markers well into the 1940s. In 1973, the marker of Janet Sleight was uncovered in the bushes on the edge of the park when a rain storm exposed her discarded stone.

And so it went with the old Civil War-GAR graves trampled and discarded until 1916, when the Minneapolis Park Board officially dedicated Maple Hill Cemetery as Beltrami Park. The move effectively put one major conflict in the rearview mirror while America's entry in the Great War loomed just around the bend.

The Civil War monument rescued from the roadside ditch was updated with new language that ironically used the same somber thematic language of loss and remembrance that would soon be found on World War I memorials to come, and war memorials to follow:



“WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF THIS PARK WHICH IN PAST DAYS WAS MAPLE HILL CEMETERY, THERE REST IN THE SLEEP OF THE AGES 46 SOLDIERS OF THE GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC. COURAGEOUSLY THEY RESPONDED TO OUR COUNTRY'S CALL IN THE WAR OF THE REBELLION. GALLANTLY THEY FOUGHT TO ACHIEVE THE VICTORY. ALTHOUGH MEN'S THOUGHTLESS ACTIONS HAVE DEPRIVED THEM OF THEIR RIGHT TO INDIVIDUALLY MARKED AND CHERISHED GRAVES, THE CHILDREN OF FUTURE AGES WILL GATHER HERE TO HONOR THEM.”

—MOLLIE BEATTIE, DIRECTOR U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE (1993–1996)

PUT ON YOUR FLASHERS: Drive or bike over. Imagine 46 Union veterans under the command of Lt. Robert Wood still standing guard. An on-site flagpole was rededicated in 2019 by the Beltrami Neighborhood Council and Sunbeam Grange.

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SOURCES

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- Mary Treacy, “Giacomo Constantino Beltrami — A Count Who Counts in Northeast Minneapolis,” marytreacywordpress.
- Dan Haugen, “Buried History Remains Beneath Beltrami Park Property,” tcdailyplanet.net, 2007.

Photos courtesy the author.