

**Speech Delivered at Oak Ridge Cemetery  
on May 24, 2014,  
The 154th Anniversary of the Dedication of the Cemetery.**

by Richard Hart

In respect to the memory of our deceased veterans, family and friends who are buried here, let us all join in a moment of silent reflection.

**How solemn, how impressive the scene!**

These are the words spoken by former Springfield Mayor James C. Conkling 154 years ago today at the May 24, 1860 dedication of Oak Ridge Cemetery. Abraham and Mary Lincoln were present and heard these words. Later, Mary remembered Mr. Lincoln saying at the time that he wanted to be buried in this quiet place, Oak Ridge Cemetery.

Conkling's words remain true today. This is indeed a solemn place and an impressive scene. As has so often been said, it is the most beautiful jewel in Springfield's crown.

So how did Oak Ridge Cemetery come about? It didn't just happen. There was no "Create a Beautiful Cemetery" I-phone app that one could press and have an instant Oak Ridge Cemetery. No, it happened over time with God and Mother Nature first creating and nurturing this place —these ravines, these trees and the creek.

More recently in the 1820s, pioneers began coming to the Sangamo Country. Some settled and established a small frontier village about two miles south of where we gather today. They called their village Springfield. They soon dedicated two graveyards for the burial of their dead. The Old City Graveyard was on West Washington several blocks west of the Public Square. A second graveyard, called Hutchinson Cemetery, was located just a block or two further west where Springfield High School now stands and where Eddie Lincoln was buried in 1850.

By the mid 1850s, Springfield had grown and both cemeteries were inadequate and created issues for healthy development around them. They were no longer used for burials.

Enter Charles H. Lanphier, a member of the Springfield City Council and editor of Springfield's Democrat newspaper, the *Illinois State Register*. In 1855, Lanphier proposed that the City acquire land for a new rural cemetery. The City followed his advice and purchased seventeen wooded acres about two miles north of the State House. This was the beginning of Oak Ridge Cemetery. It was a beautiful site, with an "undulating surface and a pleasing blend of hill and dale, interspersed with a natural growth of deciduous trees. Forest oaks of various species prevailed and prompted Mayor John Cook to suggest the name Oak Ridge Cemetery.

The following year the Cemetery was expanded to 28 ½ acres when the City purchased an additional land parcel.

In August of 1857, a cottage was built on the cemetery grounds to house the cemetery manager and his family.

On April 18, 1858, the Springfield City Council appointed the first Board of Managers and the first cemetery manager. Later in the same year the first burials were made in the new cemetery.

And here we are back at Thursday, May 24, 1860, the day when Oak Ridge Cemetery was dedicated and James C. Conkling said — *How solemn, how impressive the scene!*

It was a bright, beautiful early spring day as the Mayor, members of the City Council and a large gathering of citizens formed a procession at the Public Square at the State House and marched north to Oak Ridge Cemetery. It was just a few days before Abraham Lincoln's nomination for the presidency.

The dedicatory services were held at three o'clock in the afternoon. A band played and Rev. John G. Bergen, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, prayed and then the Hon. James C. Conking spoke and this is what he said:

*How solemn, how impressive the scene! Far away from the haunts of busy life, far distant from the ceaseless rush of active enterprise, far removed from the giddy whirl of fashion and of pleasure, we are assembled to consecrate this ground, not to the living, but the dead. Here we erect no stately edifice to supply the demands of commerce.*

*We are assembled, my friends, for no such purpose. But here, with naught but the pure arch of heaven above us, and Nature in all her silent beauty and loveliness around us, we dedicate the City of the Dead. Here we consecrate this sacred enclosure for the last demands of frail humanity.*

The band played once more, Mayor Sutton dedicated the ground for the burial of the dead and Rev. James Leaton, Pastor of the First Methodist Church, delivered the benediction. As one historian put it, "And thus Oak Ridge Cemetery was dedicated as a City of the Dead, which it will ever be the duty and privilege of successive Boards of Managers to preserve and improve."

And from that time, that duty and privilege has been faithfully carried out by successive Boards of Managers and City Councils and citizens of Springfield and the nation.

Since that day in May 1860, generations of Springfield citizens of diverse religions, ethnicities, cultures and races have made this a special place. They have selected it, dedicated it, planned for its use, implemented their plans and used it as the burial place for their loved ones and their most beloved fellow citizen and leader — Abraham Lincoln. They have ornamented it with thousands of personal memorials. They have constructed magnificent military memorials to honor our deceased veterans who served our nation. They have provided for and honored the nameless, the poor and the angelic little orphans. They have advocated for the maintenance, improvement and preservation of Oak Ridge Cemetery. Finally, they have chosen it as their final resting place. If any place deserves to be called sacred, this place must be so called — it is indeed a sacred place.

On a lighter note, someone once famously and humorously observed, "One day we will all be North Enders."

Once properly dedicated, the early Board of Managers and the Sextons went to work improving the Cemetery. By 1865, they had selected a design, constructed a Receiving Vault, enclosed the grounds and planted appropriate trees and shrubs.

Perhaps the oldest and most notable improvement was the design for the original old cemetery — the North or Old Section.

The original design was made by William Sides, the Springfield City Engineer. Sides was a good engineer, but not much of a romantic or landscape architect. He laid out the cemetery lots in squares as if it were flat ground. He ignored all natural slopes and ravines and the general topography of the ground. His one dimensional plan for this beautiful site was impossible to implement in a three dimensional world and was soon abandoned.

In 1859, the Board of Managers selected a second designer — a man who most of you have probably never heard of — William Saunders, of Washington, D. C. Saunders was a genius whose cemetery plans paid particular attention to the natural features of the grounds. His classic and historic design is with us today, 154 years later, in the beautiful North or Old Section of Oak Ridge Cemetery.

So who was this man William Saunders? He has become famous in his own right as the landscape architect of three important Lincoln related sites. As I have said, he designed the old section of Oak Ridge Cemetery in 1859. In 1863, he designed the Soldiers National Cemetery at Gettysburg, the well-known site of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Finally, in September 1865, at the suggestion of General Ulysses S. Grant, he was charged with designing the grounds for the Lincoln Monument where we gather today.

Saunders was a Scotsman who studied horticulture and landscape gardening and worked briefly in London before immigrating to the United States in 1848.

By 1859, he was a landscape designer and horticulturist who designed Rose Hill Cemetery in Chicago and Oak Ridge Cemetery's Old North Section.

As we commemorate Memorial Day with today's events and the walking tour of 12 special trees, it is altogether fitting to note that in 1862 during the Lincoln administration, Saunders was appointed the first superintendent of the Propagating Gardens in the U. S. Department of Agriculture. There he developed hundreds of plants, trees and shrubs that are grown throughout the United States. He designed Washington, D. C.'s park system and oversaw the planting of 80,000 trees there. He introduced the seedless Navel Orange which became the foundation of California's successful citrus industry. He was the Guy Sternberg of his time.

In about 1860, the Board of Managers authorized construction of the Receiving Tomb, one of the most significant early cemetery improvements. It was to benefit those who have not chosen lots, and who, "in sudden bereavement, are not prepared to make immediate selection of a final resting place for deceased friends, and also for the accommodation of those who may be awaiting the arrival of absent friends."

Sometime prior to 1858, the cemetery grounds were enclosed with a common post and board fence. Early in the year 1865, the Board of Managers authorized enclosing about forty acres on the east, north, and northwest boundaries of the cemetery with an Osage orange hedge. Today, remainders of that hedge can

be seen along the east property line, north of the original Third Street entrance where there are 2 or 3 large old trees remaining.

Historical coincidence saw these improvements completed by 1865. The cemetery was ready – the stage was set — for the most important performance the cemetery would ever host, a performance that brought it forevermore into the eye of the nation and the world. Here to these sacred grounds the remains of Abraham Lincoln were brought on May 4, 1865, just short of five years from the May 24, 1860 dedication that he and Mary had attended.

Today, we take for granted that Lincoln is buried here. But we must remember that the journey from that terrible April day when Lincoln died to the day when he was placed in Oak Ridge's Receiving Tomb was a tumultuous one, fraught with controversy and uncertainty. The story of that journey is one worth the telling.

On April 14, 1865, Lincoln was shot in the head while attending the theater. He died the next morning and the immediate question for the Lincoln family was "Where should he be buried?"

On April 16, Mary Lincoln told her son Robert that she did not wish to go back to Springfield, and did not want Mr. Lincoln's remains taken there, but to Chicago, if any where in Illinois, or perhaps the empty crypt in the U.S. Capitol that had been prepared for George Washington.

Coincidentally, a large number of Illinois politicians were in Washington when Lincoln was assassinated. A few hours after Lincoln's death, they met in Sen. Richard Yates's room at the National Hotel, to arrange a burial in Springfield. Lincoln's close friend Gov. Richard J. Oglesby was selected to confer with the Lincoln family on a burial place. He did so and it is said that Robert Lincoln persuaded his mother to allow a Springfield burial by promising to take Willie Lincoln's body along to Springfield for burial with his father. Willie died and had been buried in Washington, D. C. By the end of day, April 17, 1865, Governor Oglesby had obtained Mary Lincoln's permission to return Lincoln's body to Springfield.

But that is not the end of the story. Once Mary decided that Mr. Lincoln would be buried in Springfield, the next question was, "Where in Springfield?" The choices were either Oak Ridge Cemetery or Mather Place. Mather Place is the present site of the Illinois State Capitol. It was a 6-acre block owned by the family of Col. Thomas Mather and on this hill one could be seen from the Chicago and Alton Railroad line just a block east.

Before noon on April 17, 1865, a committee for the selection of the Springfield burial site met and visited both of the proposed sites. They choose Mather Place. Its location it was believed would draw visitors into downtown Springfield. The committee observed that Oak Ridge Cemetery was "distant from town, and many times during the year hard to reach."

On April 18, 1865, the *Illinois State Journal* endorsed the selection of the Mather Place.

But thank goodness, that was not the end of the selection process. Enter Mary Lincoln.

Our best view into Mary Lincoln's world at this time comes from correspondence and telegraphs between the White House and relatives and friends back in Springfield. They provide us with a fascinating account

of the tug of war that occurred between Mary who favored Oak Ridge and the powers that be in Springfield who favored Mather Place.

The first hint of a conflict was in a letter written by Springfield's Ozias Mather Hatch, who was a passenger on the Lincoln funeral train as it slowly made its way home. He let his wife Julia know that Mary had decided on the "vault," subject to her future determination.

The President of the Board of Managers of Oak Ridge Cemetery, Clark M. Smith, who was also Lincoln's brother-in-law, happened to be at the White House after Lincoln's assassination. On April 24, 1865, the Springfield City Council received a letter from Smith directing that the Oak Ridge Cemetery vault and main entrance gate on Third Street be properly draped and arranged for the reception of President Lincoln's remains. The Board of Managers complied with Smith's request and began making all necessary arrangements for the funeral. Arrangements included putting the Oak Ridge Cemetery roads and grounds in suitable condition for the funeral. They also ordered iron grated doors for the Receiving Tomb. So it was settled, Oak Ridge it would be.

But not so fast. The following day, April 25, 1865, the Committee on the Selection of Grounds for the Tomb selected the Mather Block rather than Oak Ridge Cemetery, as the site of the permanent tomb of Abraham Lincoln. A dispatch was sent to various newspapers giving notice that the Mather Block had been purchased for \$50,000. Jared Pinckney Irwin, a Springfield mechanic and brick contractor, volunteered to build a temporary vault free of charge, and began work immediately. The vault was designed to be a resting place for the remains until a grand monument could be erected. By men working night and day, through sunshine and rain, it was ready for use on May 4, the day of the burial.

The *Register* of Wednesday, April 26, 1865, reported:

*The Mather property having been decided upon as the burial place of our late president, the erection of a temporary receiving tomb has already been begun. The tomb when completed will be a most important and appropriate structure.*

And since Mather Place rather than Oak Ridge was to be the burial site, Mayor Thomas J. Dennis told the Oak Ridge folks that: *You will at once suspend all work, and preparations in Oak Ridge Cemetery for the reception of the mortal remains of our late President Abraham Lincoln, until further orders.* This terse message was written out on the official letterhead of the City Clerk's Office.

The drama was heightened when on April 27, 1865, the burial date was changed from May 6 to May 4. This change was prompted by the rapid deterioration of Lincoln's remains.

On April 28, 1865, John B. S. Todd, a Springfield Todd who was in Washington at the time of the assignation wrote from the White House on behalf of his cousin, Mary Todd Lincoln, to his uncle in Springfield — John T. Stuart. This is what Todd wrote:

*Mrs. Lincoln desires me to say to you that her final & positive determination is that the remains of the President shall be deposited in Oak Ridge Cemetery, and nowhere else — see that this is done.*

On the same date, April 28, Mary sent a message to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, stating that her decision was final — Lincoln's remains must be placed in Oak Ridge Cemetery.

The following day, the Committee on Selection of Grounds for the Tomb received both of these communications and replied to the Secretary of War that the Committee would comply with Mary's wishes.

*To the Secty of War*

*I have received your telegram. The committee instruct me to say that the wishes of Mrs. Lincoln shall be complied with.*

*J. T. Stuart*

*Chge Finance Committ.*

Even so, work on the vault at Mather Place continued.

On April 30, 1865, another telegram from John B. S. Todd to John T. Stuart again expressed Mary Lincoln's strong demands that her husband be buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery.

*Have your dispatch of 29th.— The remains of the President must be placed in the vault of Oakridge Cemetery — and no where else — This is Mrs. Lincoln's fixed determination.*

On May 1, 1865, Robert Lincoln wrote to Illinois Governor Richard J. Oglesby that his mother's wishes that burial must be in Oak Ridge Cemetery could not be disregarded. "There seems to be a disposition at Springfield to disregard my mother's wishes in regard to the interment. Both the temporary and final interment must take place in Oakridge Cemetery."

On May 1, 1865, John B. S. Todd telegraphed Clark M. Smith, President of the Board of Managers of Oak Ridge Cemetery, who by then had returned to Springfield:

*Mrs. Lincoln desires you to see that the remains of the President are placed in the vault of Oak Ridge Cemetery & nowhere else. — Robert leaves for Springfield this P.M.*

It was now a mad rush to prepare Oak Ridge Cemetery for the funeral.

On May 1, Edmond Beall and the other carpenters climbed onto lumber wagons and creaked out to Oak Ridge to build a speaker's stand and seats for a three-hundred-voice choir. Beall recalled the event:

*There was only a temporary vault in Oak Ridge on the side of a hill. Seats had to be built for the choir, and we all hurried off to the cemetery to erect the seats. The choir of three hundred voices must be provided for. We had to work two days and one night to complete the work in time, and when through, we were a tired lot.*

The Oak Ridge Receiving Tomb was readied, as was the Mather vault — as a "contingency."

When Robert Lincoln arrived in Springfield, the group advocating burial at Mather Place requested Robert to ask his mother to reconsider. Robert did so sending her a telegram in Washington. He was still waiting for her reply as the funeral procession assembled at the State House on May 4, 1865.

As the procession was ready to leave, Robert received his mother's telegram. She stated as firmly as a telegram can convey firmness, that her husband's body was to be placed in Oak Ridge Cemetery or she would have it returned to Washington, D. C. and there placed in the crypt in the National Capitol. The

message was clear and the Funeral Procession proceeded slowly to Oak Ridge Cemetery where Abraham Lincoln and his son Willie were both placed in the Receiving Tomb on May 4, 1865.

Charles R. Page, of the *New York Daily Tribune* was present and reported:

*Up to this morning it had not been finally determined whether the remains would be deposited at Oak Ridge Cemetery or in a vault hastily built on the "Mother [Mather] Place," which is a fine property of ten acres in the western part of the city, and which the citizens, on hearing of his death, bought (paying \$50,000) as a place for his tomb and monument. Preparations were made at each place, but this morning, on the arrival of Captain Robert Lincoln and John G. Nicolay, late private Secretary, from Washington, the question was decided in favor of Oak Ridge, though it is quite possible that the body may finally rest at the "Mother [Mather] Place."*

And the *New York Weekly Tribune*, reported:

*The public has a confused understanding of the fact that there was an earnest struggle over the final resting place of the mortal remains of Abraham Lincoln, which was not terminated till the day of their interment; Robert Lincoln ...announced the unanimous and unchangeable resolve of the family that the ashes of him they loved should repose in a cemetery — that of Springfield, if that were allowed; if not that, in some other. While doing justice to the liberality and public spirit which dictated the purchase of an eight acre lot for the tomb, at a cost of \$55,000, we must say that the decision of the family seems to us that which good taste and right feeling would naturally prompt. And the monument to Mr. Lincoln will rise over his remains in Oak Ridge Cemetery.*

On May 5, 1865, the day following the funeral, Robert Lincoln and United States Supreme Court Justice David Davis visited Oak Ridge Cemetery and selected the site for the construction of a permanent tomb for Abraham Lincoln. The site selected is where we gather today.

Three days later, on May 8, 1865, Robert Lincoln wrote to John T. Stuart that his mother had examined the map of Oak Ridge Cemetery and he thought she was pleased with the site selected.

So it was finally final. Lincoln's remains would forever remain in Oak Ridge Cemetery. Again, not so fast.

Despite Mary Lincoln's wishes, a group of fifteen men led by Governor Richard J. Oglesby had every intention of constructing Lincoln's tomb in the Mather Block. On May 11, 1865, they incorporated as the National Lincoln Monument Association, and stated that the "object of the Association shall be to construct a Monument to the memory of Abraham Lincoln, in the city of Springfield, State of Illinois."

The Monument Association proceeded with plans for a grand tomb in the Mather Block. Within two weeks of the funeral, the Monument Association was busily soliciting funds to pay for the shrine. Circulars were sent to universities and colleges, public schools, and Sunday schools across the nation, asking for donations.

By June 1865, Mary had moved from the White House to Chicago and learned of the activities of the Monument Association. Again, the insensitive Monument Association approached Mary, traveling to Chicago to make a personal appeal for the Mather Place. However, word of the planned trip got to Mary and she refused to see the Governor. Robert Lincoln handed him a letter that, in part said "My determination is unalterable."

On June 5, 1865, Mary sent an ultimatum letter to Richard Oglesby, Chairman of the Monument Association.

*I feel that it is due to candor and fairness that I should notify your Monument Association, that unless I receive within this next ten days an official assurance that the Monument will be erected over the Tomb in Oak Ridge Cemetery, in accordance with my oft expressed wishes, I shall yield my consent, to the request of the National Monument Association in Washington & that of numerous friends in the Eastern States & have the sacred remains deposited in the vault, prepared for Washington, under the Dome of the National Capitol, at as early a period as practicable.*

Five days later she repeated this message.

On June 14, 1865, by a vote of 8 to 7, the members of the Monument Association reluctantly agreed to the Oak Ridge site. At last, the National Lincoln Monument Association acceded to Mary's wishes. Oak Ridge Cemetery would be the site of the Lincoln Tomb and the final resting place of the remains of Abraham Lincoln.

And thus we gather here on this Memorial Day Weekend and respectfully look back and pay our respects to him, and to the veterans and to those who have gone before us and who are now buried here. We thank them all. We pledge to them that we will be good stewards of this place and we will someday happily join them as North Enders.

## The Future

So where do we go from here? As I see it, Oak Ridge Cemetery is flourishing. I believe that this will continue not only for the next few years but well beyond. And why do I say that it is flourishing and should continue to do so?

First and foremost, we are most fortunate and grateful to have the strong support of our present City government – our Mayor and City Council. We thank them for that support.

Second, we are thankful for our excellent Director and outstanding staff, both office and grounds. They make the wheels turn here 24/7/365.

Third, we are blessed to have a new Oak Ridge Cemetery Foundation that is working with the Board of Directors to improve the cemetery. At present the Foundation provides the leadership for the recreation of the Third Street Entrance in time for the 2015 commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lincoln's burial.

Fourth, we have very cooperative relations with our friends at the Lincoln Tomb and the Veteran Memorials and we thank them for planning and hosting today's program. We look forward to future such events.

Finally, and most importantly, we have the strong support of our community—the many City residents and businesses who share their skills and treasure with the Cemetery. Without a doubt the star in this category is Bob Voss. Bob has been the most productive citizen and leader on behalf of the Cemetery in our lifetimes and we trust that his support will continue in the future. In thanking Bob for his service, the Board thanks every other volunteer and contributor.



As we approach the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lincoln's burial here, we must prepare Oak Ridge for the eyes of the nation and indeed the world. We are taught today that we must tend to our trees, both those living and those that are dead. Let us all resolve to make Oak Ridge shine as the most beautiful jewel in the City's crown as the 2015 anniversary events are reported from this site.

Beyond 2015, we all must resolve to do our best to protect and preserve this sacred place. We must be constant in our vigilance to see that it is neither neglected nor minimized in either good times or bad.

Thank you for coming today and thank you for being good advocates and stewards for our beloved Oak Ridge Cemetery.

