

DeKalb Township operates the two oldest cemeteries located in the city of DeKalb. Evergreen Cemetery at South 7th and East Taylor Streets dates from 1855. Oakwood (originally Oakland) was established in 1865 on the west side of North 1st Street, behind where the First congregational Church building of 1954 was constructed. Prior to the 1990's, both cemeteries had long been administered by the Union Cemetery Association.

Russell Huntley is the recognized founder of DeKalb, arriving here in 1837. The coming of the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad – later the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad, now the Union Pacific Railroad – in 1853 led to the formal platting of the village which became DeKalb.

History records the fact that deaths were known to have occurred here as early as 1837. As no cemeteries then existed in this area, it was customary to bury the dead on their own property or at places where it was safe to do so. Most such burials would later be moved to the early cemeteries, although it is possible that the last resting places of some of these pioneers may have been built over by other settlers as the years went by. Burials are even said to have been made at locations in what is today downtown DeKalb.

Evergreen Cemetery occupies a slightly raised site just south of Roosevelt Street, the southern boundary of DeKalb. While the original grounds were donated, it soon became impossible to acquire land for future expansion. Among the noteworthy early settlers who lie at rest here are farmers Benjamin Gurler and Elisha Foster, blacksmith Phineas Vaughan and co-founder of DeKalb, Lewis Huntley. Vaughan is in a family plot, where his blacksmith's anvil has marked his grave site since 1897.

Oakwood Cemetery is set back a generous distance from North 1st Street, accessed via a long lane which also serves the parking lot of the Congregational Church. Oakwood stood northwest of the city when it was established, later being surrounded by barbed wire entrepreneur Isaac Ellwoods' local land holdings. (Ellwood attempted unsuccessfully in the 1880's to relocate Oakwood.) In spite of how the church is in front of the cemetery, they are totally separate entities.

Oakwood's natural setting, beneath a mantle of mature trees, makes for an attractive scene. Among the historic figures at rest here are George Gurler (115-year veteran of the Civil War), Dry Goods dealer H.H. Wagner, Judge Harry McEwen and early Justice of the Peace Eli B. Gilbert (moved here in 1952 from the old Pleasant Street Cemetery).

A number of persons originally buried in Oakwood were subserviently moved from here to Fairview Cemetery after it began operations in 1902. Some of those persons included Mrs. Joseph (Lucinda) Glidden, Hiram Ellwood and Isaac Ellwood's 7-year-old son Oakley who died in 1872.

The old Union Cemetery Association turned over all of its assets to DeKalb Township in 1997, as their financial situation continued to deteriorate. The Township and Springfield then worked to bring about the actual legal transfer in ownership.

For a historic last resting place, consider Evergreen or Oakwood Cemetery.

*Written by prominent area historian, Steve Bigolin, 1949-2026*