

Peabody's Tomb and St. Innocentius

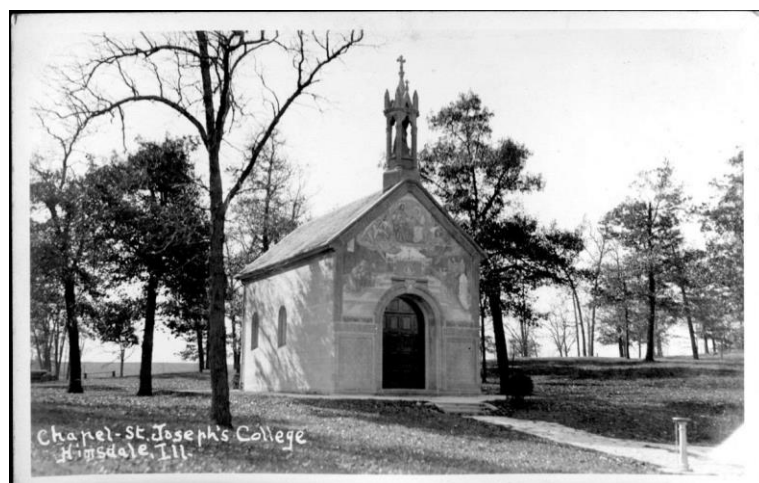
The Curious Connection Between a Legend and a Saint

By Linda Freeman, Volunteer Researcher

On August 27, 1922, while participating in a drag hunt on his property, Francis Stuyvesant Peabody began feeling ill and dismounted his favorite riding horse, Dunbar. He never rejoined the hunt party and was found dead on the south side of Mayslake with Dunbar standing beside him. His widow and heirs decided not to keep the property, and so, in March of 1924, ownership of the 840-acre country estate known as *Mayslake Farms* changed hands to the Franciscan Province of the Sacred Heart, Order of the Friars Minor. The large home on the property, now known as Mayslake Hall, was converted into the St. Francis Retreat House.

Shortly after the Franciscans purchased the property, Mr. Peabody's son, Stuyvesant "Jack" Peabody and his widow, Mary Sullivan Peabody, commissioned the Franciscans to build a chapel in honor of F.S. Peabody on the site of his death. It was to be a replica of the Italian Portiuncula Chapel of St. Francis of Assisi, Francis Stuyvesant Peabody's saint's name. It was dedicated on May 12, 1926, and ten years later, Jack obtained permission to inter his father, who had been buried in Bronswood Cemetery, beneath the Portiuncula Chapel. It is probably at this time that the legend of 'Peabody's Tomb' began to take root, attracting late-night visits, mostly by teenagers, to the dark, secluded site, guarded over by hooded monks.

The stories of 'Peabody's Tomb' became widespread and varied. One of the most commonly told tales had Mr. Peabody's corpse floating in oil or formaldehyde within a glass coffin. As morbid as this sounds, like most urban legends, this story began with some kernels of truth and morphed into a myth



over time. So, other than the fact that F.S. Peabody died and was buried on-site, where did the other elements originate from? Research offers some insight and shifts our focus from the legend to facts we know about the property and the story of a young saint.

In the year following the purchase of Mayslake from the Peabody family, the Franciscans began construction of St. Joseph Seminary, a preparatory school for young men wishing to join the priesthood. A large Gothic-style stone-

and-brick structure, it was located on a wooded knoll about a quarter mile west of the Retreat House. On October 4, 1927, the St. Joseph Seminary was dedicated.

During that same year, the nuns of St. Cosimato Monastery in Rome presented the Sacred Heart Province with a special gift in appreciation for the financial aid they had received from the order during WWI. The gift was a relic—the mummified remains of St. Innocentius (St. Innocent), a boy no more than eight years old who was martyred by the Romans in the early second century. The young boy's body had been discovered in the catacombs of Rome in the eighteenth century and moved to the St. Cosimato Monastery.

Arrangements were made to send the gift to the new St. Joseph Seminary in Illinois. An American professor from the Antonianum, a Franciscan university in Rome, brought the relic to Paris on July 16, 1927, where it was received by Friar Provincial Martin Strub. He then brought the remains to Old St. Peter's Church at Clark and Polk Streets in Chicago. The Poor Clare Sisters dressed the body and put a wax mask over the face, encasing the hands and feet in gold mesh. Children from St. Augustine School collected money to pay for a glass-and-gold plated case. Finally, on May 30, 1929, the glass repository with the reposing St. Innocentius was placed at a side altar in the St. Joseph Seminary Chapel.

When the seminary closed in 1977, the reliquary was brought to the St. Francis Retreat House. After the retreat house closed in 1991, permission was granted for St. Innocentius to be transferred to the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America, located in Washington, D.C. That is where the glass case holding the young martyr is still on display today, in a crypt within a replica of the Roman catacombs.



While we cannot be certain how the story of Mr. Peabody floating in a glass coffin originated, a connection to St. Innocentius certainly seems plausible. The Franciscans did not hide that Mr. Peabody was indeed buried on the property, nor did they hide that they possessed a relic in a glass case. Over time, perhaps these two facts (with the help of a healthy dose of imagination) became joined into one fantastic story.

Those who did come searching for Peabody's tomb may have found the task difficult, because after F.S. Peabody's interment at Mayslake, his body was moved several more times. In 1974, the Franciscans moved the chapel to its current location after selling the land of its original site. Mr. Peabody's remains were moved to the new Friars' Cemetery behind the chapel. His remains were moved once again after the Franciscans sold the Mayslake property to the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County in 1992 and all of the burials were reinterred in the Queen of Heaven Cemetery Hillside.

This should have brought an end to the legend of Peabody's Tomb. However, while the nighttime quests for Peabody's Tomb have ceased, the story lives on. Countless visitors to Mayslake Peabody Estate eagerly tell their own versions of the tale and of friars chasing them at night. We love hearing how the story changes from person to person and witnessing oral history in the making, but it is nice to be able to respond with some idea of where the legend found its inspiration.