

# Busy Body

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based on research by volunteer Linda Freeman*

On Aug. 27, 1922, Francis Stuyvesant Peabody failed to return from the drag hunt he was hosting on the grounds of his estate, Mayslake Farms. A search party found him dead with his favorite horse, Dunbar, standing next to his body. Two days later, on the afternoon of Aug. 29, Peabody Coal Company mines across seven states ceased operations to show respect during the coal magnate's funeral, a no-frills, no-flowers service funeral led by an Episcopal clergyman. Peabody was interred at Bronswood Cemetery in Oak Brook under a large granite memorial, but he wouldn't stay there for eternity. Over the next 70 years his busy body would be reinterred three times, and with each new burial would come a new grave marker.

The relative simplicity of Peabody's funeral service reflected recent change in American funerary customs. In 19th-century Victorian America, customs and practices associated with death were greatly emphasized; elaborate grave markers, statues and mausoleums acted as monuments to the dead, especially among the wealthy. Customary mourning periods deepened the effect of death on American society. Widows were expected to mourn for 2 1/2 years, but many extended that period. Mary Todd Lincoln, for example, wore black for 17 years; Queen Victoria, for 40.

American attitudes toward death evolved after the turn of the 20th century. Fewer people gathered around deathbeds, funerals were smaller and shorter, public mourning ceased, and people began to choose more modest grave markers. Why this transformation? Between 1914 and 1920, World War I and the influenza pandemic claimed 800,000 American lives. With the increased number of deaths, people often opted for more modest, standardized memorials. Additionally, the professionalization of the funeral industry resulted in the standardization of the embalming process, which meant families of the deceased no longer prepared bodies for burial.

Although Peabody's funeral may have reflected this evolution, his first grave marker did not. The large angular granite memorial featured a carved floral design and two plain crosses. While not nearly as extravagant as earlier markers, in comparison to its contemporaries; it conveyed wealth, power and importance.



Peabody's second grave marker was even more imposing. Four years after his burial at Bronswood, his wife, Mary, and son, Jack, commissioned the Order of the Franciscans Minor, the Catholic order that bought Mayslake Farms, to erect a copy of the Chapel of St. Francis of Assisi in Peabody's memory. They broke ground on the Portiuncula Chapel in May of 1926 on the spot where Peabody was found dead. In June of 1936, Jack had his father's remains reinterred under the chapel's altar. After Jack's death in June of 1946, he joined his father beneath the chapel.

Peabody's granite memorial and grave site at Bronswood were unused until 1947, when the Clarke family purchased both, re-engraving the granite marker to simply read "Clarke."

By the 1970s, the Portiuncula Chapel had fallen into disrepair. Vandalism and nature took a toll on the building, and moisture contributed to the deterioration of the interior plaster and the exterior mosaic.

When the Franciscans sold the land that contained the chapel, they dismantled the structure, salvaging the stonework, cupola and steel trusses from the roof, and rebuilt it in its current location. In 1974 Peabody and his son were moved to grave sites in the Friar's Cemetery behind the newly relocated chapel, their graves most likely marked with the simple rectangular gravestones of the Franciscans.



The Franciscans eventually decided to sell the remaining property, and the Peabodys were moved to Queen of Heaven Cemetery in Hillside on Dec. 22, 1991. The 161 friars also buried at Friar's Cemetery followed in March of 1992, and Francis and Jack continue to rest with them today. Francis Stuyvesant Peabody rests under a simple flat grave marker that reads "R.I.P." Hopefully this time he will.