

Wreath-laying Ceremony at Riley Tomb

The memory of famed Hoosier poet, James Whitcomb Riley, for whom Riley Hospital for Children was named, has been honored regularly on the occasion of Mr. Riley's birthday, October 7, with a simple and solemn wreath-laying ceremony at Mr. Riley's Memorial Tomb on the crest of the summit of Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis.

Mr. Riley's Memorial Tomb is on one of the highest elevations in Marion County and from there, one can see a panoramic view of all of Indianapolis. At this breath-taking location, many wreath-laying ceremonies have taken place for generations where those visiting have included James Whitcomb Riley Memorial Association (today the Riley Children's Foundation) leaders, Riley Hospital physicians and administrative leaders, state and local politicians, and schoolchildren. James Whitcomb Riley reenactors dressed in late Victorian period attire and lovers of Riley's poetry would read memorable Riley poems and Riley tributes at these ceremonial gatherings.

While Riley died on July 22, 1916, his body was held temporarily after his July 25, 1916 funeral service in Crown Hill Cemetery's specially ventilated Gothic Chapel for the next 15 months while Greenfield and Indianapolis made appeals to Riley's family over what city the Hoosier poet was to be buried. Eventually, Riley's family decided that his final resting place would be Indianapolis and Riley's remains were buried on the summit (called Strawberry Hill or "The Crown") of Crown Hill Cemetery on October 6, 1917. On October 7, 1917, the Indianapolis Public Library (built on land donated to the City by Riley) was dedicated and then on October 12, 1917, School No. 43 in Indianapolis was named the James Whitcomb Riley School. While Riley was buried on the summit of Crown Hill in October 1917, the Memorial Tomb over his grave that we see today had yet to be built. Riley's family awarded the \$15,000 contract to build Riley's Memorial Tomb over his grave in October 1919 to Charles G. Blake & Company of Chicago, a nationally recognized designer and builder of monuments and mausoleums for prominent individuals and families. The historical record, however, is silent as to a specific date when Riley's Memorial Tomb was completed, which appears to have been anywhere between 1920 and May 1922, the earliest newspaper photo of Riley's Memorial Tomb located to date. It is likely that Mr. Riley's Memorial Tomb was probably built within approximately 7 months as specified in the October 1919 contract announcement.

The historical record suggests that the custom of laying of a wreath on Riley's tomb by members of the Riley Memorial Association began quietly on the 74th anniversary of Riley's birthday, October 7, 1923, a year before the hospital was officially dedicated. A simple ceremony at the Riley grave in Crown Hill cemetery and a special vesper musical service at the Second Presbyterian Church were the only formal ceremonies. James W. Fesler, president of the Indiana University Board of Trustees, laid a wreath on the monument. Standing with Mr. Fesler were RMA leaders Hugh McK Landon, Meredith Nicholson, Dr. Carleton McCulloch and Frederick Schortemeier, and Indianapolis journalist, poet, and close friend to Riley, William Herschell. No speeches were made at Riley's grave on that day.

James W. Carr, executive secretary of the RMA, explained the simplicity of the 1923 service: “Riley was a simple man. He did not approve of pomp and ceremony. We felt that he would not have approved of an elaborate ceremony.” One year later, before the official dedication ceremonies for Riley Hospital on October 7, 1924, a lone Hugh McK Landon, first President of the Riley Memorial Association, quietly visited Riley’s tomb where he placed a wreath in tribute. Landon would carry out this custom with faithful dedication for decades until his passing in 1947.

Historical newspapers and other publications provide reports of a wreath being laid on Riley’s memorial tomb on October 7 for many years, including: 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1936, 1938, 1939, 1941, 1944, 1945, 1949 (centennial year of Mr. Riley’s birth), 1956, 1959, 1963, 1965, 1974 (50th Anniversary of Riley Hospital), 1975, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1986, and 1994. Indiana Governor Henry F. Schricker joined with others to pay paid respects to Mr. Riley at his tomb in early October 1950, the year when the new Riley Research Wing was built with state funds with the RMA and Indiana University underwriting staffing, equipment and maintenance costs; The 100th anniversary of James Whitcomb Riley’s birthday and Riley Hospital’s 25th Anniversary inspired the launch of the Riley Centennial Fund in 1949 that led to the 1950 Riley Research Wing. Perry W. Lesh, President of the RMA, laid a wreath at Riley’s Tomb on October 7, 1956, flanked by Herman B Wells, President of Indiana University, and others. Perry Lesh, President of the Association and John W. Ryan, President of Indiana University, placed a wreath at Riley’s tomb on October 7, 1974 (50th anniversary of Riley Hospital and 125th anniversary of Riley’s birthday) and did the same together again in 1978. In 1986, Omer Foust, Riley Memorial Association Executive Director joined with Stewart Tomkins, Executive Vice President of Crown Hill Cemetery, to honor Mr. Riley with a wreath on the poet’s Memorial Tomb.

The simple and solemn act of laying a wreath at Riley’s Memorial Tomb on the poet’s October 7 birthday remains a part of our hospital’s history as an eloquent tribute and reminder of our hospital’s namesake, the great Hoosier poet, James Whitcomb Riley. In this centennial year for Riley Hospital for Children, we remember too that October 7, 2024 marks the 175th anniversary of Riley’s birthday.

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Hugh McK Landon lays wreath at James Whitcomb Riley Tomb in Crown Hill Cemetery

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James Whitcomb Riley Tomb at Crown Hill Cemetery (10-6-50)

Indiana Governor Henry F. Schricker (left) and a group lay a wreath on James Whitcomb Riley's tomb at Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis, Indiana.

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