

# Shadows of Eastern State Hospital

By Cheri Daniels

From her blog: [Journeys Past](#)

Earlier this year I learned about and joined the Facebook group "Eastern State Hospital Cemetery Preservation Project". I did so for two reasons: 1. Cemetery preservation is something I believe to be vital to our cultural heritage. 2. Lewis P. Mockbee. Over my years of family history research, I kept stumbling upon G-G-G-Great Uncle Lewis. He was listed in the family rosters as he should be, but I always made a mental note when I passed by his records because there was a notation included that mentioned his passing and burial at Eastern State Hospital in Lexington, KY.

In the back of my mind, I had always intended to research him further. The ESH Preservation group was a reason, but even with this new impetus, life intruded and I was not able to aid their cause as I would have liked. Recently, Uncle Lewis came back to my mind as I read the latest article in a local paper: [Tomb of the Unknowns](#) by Bruce Burris.



## *Second Oldest Mental Institution*

For those of you not familiar with this particular case, ESH is the second oldest mental hospital in the country. Started in 1822, it carried a stigma for families and local officials that continues to serve as an obstacle in properly remembering those who died and were buried on the grounds of the ESH.

Here are the gut-wrenching facts about burial at ESH:

- a) No one knows how many bodies are buried there since the records are scattered, lost, and in some cases refused access, even for loved ones of the deceased.
- b) Physical remains are so hard to locate because the bodies were moved so many times, or buried over by development, that most are in a "scattered" state.
- c) Estimates on body count run into the thousands, and random skeletal remains sometimes surface or are stumbled upon within a few inches of the soil line.

According to the article, access to any of the patient/burial records - even for those 100 years or older - are stonewalled, flat denied access, require court order prior to release, or are held hostage at the capital archives. The efforts by the official preservation group include researchers seeking out other records to fill in the names of lost patients. In many cases, obituaries and death records are enough to place an ancestor at the hospital, and Mary Hatton, the lead genealogist for the group has started a spreadsheet that allows families to add their loved ones as they are discovered.

A complete list of the efforts, as well as the spreadsheet can be found at the ESH Cemetery Preservation Project's official site called: [Naming the Forgotten](#). Wonderful assistance, history, and a small number of records can be accessed there if you suspect you had a loved one that spent some time or their last days at this facility.

Without the official records, the trail of each patient from ESH can be hugely complex or confusing. As I mentioned before, the stigma attached to the loved ones who ended up at ESH has clouded some of the past accounts. I will use Uncle Lewis as an example.

### *Lewis Mockbee*

Lewis P. Mockbee was born September 2nd 1842, in Pendleton County Kentucky, the son of Charles Wesley Mockbee and Mary Malinda Moore. He served during the Civil War in the Union army: Co. A 18th KY Volunteer Infantry. During this service, he was wounded and taken prisoner at Richmond KY. By 1864, he was in a Chattanooga Hospital where he was later released. He married Rachel Fields on April 24th, 1867. To their union, ten children were born. Rachel died in 1888 at the age of 43.

Within approximately four years of his wife's death, Lewis was sent to the "asylum in Lexington." Nothing has been passed down to explain his condition or why he was sent there to live for the next 30 years before his death on February 27th, 1922. What has been published out there online has perpetuated the "fact" that Lewis died and was buried at ESH. This repetition of "fact" made me feel a little closer to the project's efforts.

However, after a simple search for Uncle Lewis's obituary, the "facts" became somewhat altered. That old-fashioned microfilm search turned up the following result:

*"L.P. Mockbee, aged 80 years, died Monday at the State Hospital, Lexington, where he had been for the past thirty years.*

*Mr. Mockbee was a native of this county and is survived by five children: C.P. Mockbee, Mrs. Calvin, Mrs. William Davis, Mrs. L. Mattox, of this county, and Anna Ellis of Ohio.*

*Mr. Mockbee had many friends in this county who will be sorry to learn of his passing.*

*The remains were brought back to his old home Tuesday morning. Funeral services were conducted Wednesday at Short Creek, and interment took place in the Short Creek Cemetery."*

Taken from the Falmouth Outlook, March 3rd, 1922

There was a small bit of irony that I noted about the placement of Uncle Lewis's obituary. It was not hidden in a back page, but prominently placed on the front page with other obituaries, right at the top under the masthead. This man's life was celebrated by his children and not hidden as other ancestors have been according to fellow researchers. They did not mention his Civil War service in his obit, but rather, mentioned the fact that he had many friends. They did not hide his illness and chose to list it in the opening paragraph.

So many other ESH residents were not as lucky. Some families sent loved ones there and never heard from them again. Even if the family was still in contact with the loved one, financial constraints and the logistics of moving the body back to the home county, was frequently insurmountable - which meant the loved ones were interred at the ESH, with no chance for future visitation by relatives as is customary with a standard burial. They truly did join the ranks of the forgotten. I remember sighing a little bit in relief when I saw Uncle Lewis's final resting place as Short Creek Cemetery. It was comforting to know his remains were in an undisturbed, peaceful place, with a stone for identification. Immediately after that thought, I felt guilty that thousands were not as fortunate.

I urge everyone to support the efforts of this preservation group. The ESH burial issue is larger than the state it belongs to. As they work toward securing a permanent and respectful resting place, we must remember that each loved one buried there has an identity and story that needs to be discovered and restored to our collective memory. As Burris noted, these scattered remains include many veterans who deserve a resting place of honor.... not these scattered acres of namelessness.

How to get involved:

Visit the main site to learn more: [Naming the Forgotten](#)

Join their Facebook Group: [Eastern State Hospital Cemetery Preservation Group](#)

If you suspect you have any relatives that spent time there or died there, now is the time to put their research at the top of your list - to give them back their identity.