

What's to become of the keepsakes left at Arlington Cemetery?

Thousands of mementos have been placed on the graves of those lost to America's post-9/11 wars. The collection needs a new home.

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By Kelsey Baker

May 27, 2024 at 5:00 a.m. EDT

During one of their winter visits to Arlington National Cemetery, Mark and Nancy Umbrell placed a colorful patchwork quilt beside their son Colby's grave. It had arrived in the mail years earlier from a sender they did not know after the 26-year-old's 2007 death in Iraq.

They had observed other visitors leaving mementos, a gesture that felt to them like a fitting way to both honor the fallen Army officer and thank the quilt maker whose kindness meant so much in their moment of grief, Nancy Umbrell said.

Days later, Rod Gainer set out on his weekly walk through Section 60, the cemetery's 14-acre parcel where Colby Umbrell and other U.S. service members lost to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and counterterrorism missions elsewhere. As Gainer, the cemetery's historical curator, surveyed the thousands of snow-dusted headstones, he spotted the quilt and approached, gently tucking it under his arm while tagging it with the plot number and date, Feb. 2, 2019.

Today, the Umbrells' quilt belongs to a collection of more than 3,250 keepsakes gathered over the past 15 years from Section 60. Each is packed in a transparent red plastic bag, placed inside a white corrugated cardboard box, like the kind that holds printer paper, and locked out of sight in a climate-controlled underground corridor not far from the Tomb of the Unknowns.

Among them is a wooden plaque bearing the names of two Marines killed in 2005. A diamond cross necklace. There are letters, photographs, patches and pins. A high school football helmet. Even an old Nintendo Game Boy.

"It's an amazing slice of life in the early 21st century of America," Gainer said, adding that it humanizes the cost of these conflicts.

Yet Arlington Cemetery, in the midst of an expansion to accommodate tens of thousands of future burials, has no plan for the long-term storage of Section 60 mementos, and it lacks the space and budget to properly conserve and display them, Gainer said. He said that because the boxed archives are not official U.S. government property, they are ineligible for taxpayer funding.

Instead, Gainer said, he wants the Army, which oversees the cemetery, to have the objects appraised and then pay an outside organization to take possession of and curate them in a manner befitting their historical significance. To date, no candidates have been identified, leaving these artifacts to languish — out of sight and out of mind.

“We’d like to get it conserved,” Gainer said of the collection. “We would also like to park it somewhere, with an institution that would appreciate it and take good care of it.”

At the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, families and friends visiting those interred in Section 60 began adorning the white marble headstones to mark birthdays and anniversaries or otherwise pay tribute to their lost loved ones. In 2009, the Army Secretary, Pete Geren, asked the cemetery’s museum staff to hold on to items possessing artistic or historical significance.

For the next decade, once collected they were transferred to Fort Belvoir, an Army post in D.C.’s Virginia suburbs about 20 miles south of the cemetery. About four years ago, Gainer and his team retrieved what he calls the “core collection.” They brought the items back to Arlington to be inventoried with the aim of one day handing them over to another caretaker.

Mementos left on the graves of those lost to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan at Arlington National Cemetery.



Inside a chapel adjoining the storage area, Gainer unfurled Colby Umbrell's quilt on a pale slab of Vermont marble. The collection includes at least one memento for every service member interred in Section 60 who died as a result of America's post-9/11 conflicts, Gainer said, with a small number having been displayed here.

Not every memento that is collected gets marked for preservation, he said. Many are too damaged by the elements or mold while others just don't have much historical import. Those items, stored at Fort Belvoir, will be disposed of, eventually.

The Army sought to shutter the program in 2014, but items kept appearing — and the cemetery staff has continued to retrieve and catalogue them. There aren't as many these days, though. The covid-19 pandemic forced a lull in visits to Section 60 that, for now, seems to have stuck.

Recalling the frigid winter mornings when the Umbrells, of Ocean City, Md., would visit their son's grave, Mark Umbrell noted how in years past, "there was never a time somebody wasn't in Section 60." He paused. "It's becoming lonelier now."

Arlington Cemetery's dilemma over how to permanently care for these objects bears a striking similarity to that faced by the National Park Service starting in the early 1980s, when the Vietnam Veterans Memorial opened on the National Mall and "offerings" began to appear at the site, the agency wrote in a report published in 2021.

In 1984, a decision was made to preserve them. The full collection, which now numbers in the hundreds of thousands, was moved to the National Capital Area's Museum Resource Center in Landover, Md., where it remains. It is not available for public viewing, though some items can be seen online and sometimes they are shared with museums like the Smithsonian. "The Wall That Heals," a mobile exhibit, also includes some replicas of mementos.

Janet Folkerts, who oversaw the curation effort for many years, said that for long-term preservation, "you're really trying to mitigate what we call the agents of deterioration," such as humidity, light and pests drawn to organic materials like wood and certain fabrics. The keepsakes stored at Arlington Cemetery may be fine for now, she said, but "once you've decided that you're making a commitment to care for those objects, putting them into an environment where they're safe, and all of those agents are mitigated, it is really the best choice."

The "comfort quilt" Nancy and Mark Umbrell received in the mail is one of an estimated 3,000 that Spring Valley, Ill., resident Susan Scheri said she helped craft over 10 years. She recalled that when she made Colby Umbrell's quilt in 2007, the war in Iraq dominated the news cycle.

A network of military families made and often scrawled messages on individual quilt squares for Scheri to sew together and then ship to grieving families. She joined the quilting group to help her endure the stress of having her own son serving abroad as a Marine, she said.

"I would lay awake at night, and I'd hear a car pulling into our subdivision and stop," Scheri said. "I would hold my breath and wait for my golden retriever to go to the door and bark, or to stay in the bedroom. That's a hard thing for a mother to do."

The quilt "was a beautiful thing to receive," Nancy Umbrell said. People often avoid mentioning their son for fear of upsetting her, she said. But it makes her feel good when people want to remember Colby and talk about him.

"Ninety-nine point nine percent of Gold Star parents," she said, "would say the same thing."

The Umbrells said they did not know what would happen to their son's quilt when they left it at Arlington Cemetery. Asked about the cemetery's desire to properly archive the Section 60 mementos, Nancy Umbrell acknowledged harboring some concern about the cost to taxpayers but said that if funding were no issue, then "in a perfect world, I would want everybody to see them."

INSPIRED LIFE

They met at the Capitol in the aftermath of Jan. 6. Now they're married.

He was a Guard member on duty. She was a Capitol press secretary in need of directions. A day later, they matched on Tinder.

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By [Kelsey Baker](#)

September 12, 2024 at 6:15 a.m. EDT

Emily Carlin's hands gripped her red Jeep's steering wheel as she struggled to navigate the maze of barricades that had sprung up overnight around the Capitol. The then-congressional press secretary was trying to get back to work, but strict security measures in the week following [Jan. 6, 2021](#), made her return seem futile.

As she entered the same entry-control point for the third or fourth time, a burly National Guard soldier gave her new directions. His face was masked, but Carlin couldn't help noticing his demeanor was a little more amiable than those of others who'd tried to help her.

The chance encounter was just the beginning of a love story that could only unfold in Washington.

Last month, the pair tied the knot at Carlin's family home in Michigan. The [engagement](#) and [wedding announcements](#) were even included in the bible of the Beltway, Politico's Playbook.

"God puts people where they need to be," Carlin said of the encounter and the serendipitous Tinder match that came next.

Her future groom, Matthew Ellis, was a Maryland National Guard soldier living in West Virginia at the time. On Jan. 6, he was preparing for a day of work as an electric meter reader when his phone buzzed with word that his Guard unit might be preparing for an emergency deployment to D.C. He thought little of the rumor at first, assuming the violence would be quelled quickly by local authorities.

“I wake up the next morning and my team leader’s calling me, telling me I need to get to the armory right now,” Ellis told The Washington Post. He arrived at the Capitol later that day, Jan. 7, and got to work beefing up security, erecting heavy-duty fencing, and then helping to control the trickle of approved traffic once lawmakers and staffers began returning to work days later.

Carlin was one of those staffers returning to work the next week. She couldn’t determine how to exit the highway from her home in Alexandria, Va., and arrive at her usual House side, getting stuck instead around the Senate. Barriers shifted frequently, further complicating commutes that kept funneling her too far north.

“It took me hours to figure out how to get across the bridge and into D.C.,” Carlin said.

After circling Union Station one morning around Jan. 14, Carlin pulled up in her car to the same National Guard checkpoint yet again. Despite the stress, she couldn’t help wondering about some of the clean-cut Guard members surrounding her. “I was single, and some of them were there waving and saying hi,” she said. But it was hard to tell if she’d seen them before since they all wore masks.

Alone in her car, Carlin was maskless while navigating the checkpoints. She couldn’t see the soldier’s faces, let alone remember them.

But one remembered hers.

Intrigued by the dozens of soldiers she passed, Carlin opened up Tinder that evening and the next to see what she might find.

She quickly matched with a dark-haired soldier with thick brows and a warm smile. He was in town temporarily, he said, posted to the northeast of the Capitol building for security duties.

“I was just over there today,” Carlin recalled telling her new Tinder match. “I keep not being able to find my way to work, so I probably passed you about five times today.”

From there, “everything just started clicking,” Ellis told The Post. He thought to himself, “Wait a second, I’ve seen the face somewhere,” he said.

“Oh my god,” he messaged her. “Were you the blonde in the red Jeep Compass?” A longtime Jeep owner and devotee, Ellis recognized Carlin’s as a newer model. He also had a good sense of direction from studying atlases on family road trips.

The pair marveled at the strangeness of their encounter at the Capitol and then again soon after on Tinder.

Their first date had to wait until Ellis’s orders and subsequent quarantine period ended the first week of February. The day his quarantine ended, he drove two hours from his home in West Virginia to take her out.

In keeping with their nontraditional meet-cute, the date would be unusual too — a visit to a shooting range. Carlin wasn't a newbie to guns, but she wasn't an expert either.

“I was a little spooked post-January 6, and I wanted to be able to defend myself,” Carlin explained. Ellis told her he was a good shot, so, “I figured if I got nothing else out of this date, at least he would teach me how to shoot,” she said.

Ellis, who prefers the calm countryside to D.C.'s hustle and bustle, attracted Carlin with his quiet confidence and unflappable nature. He found her laughter and bubbly spirit charming.

An 85-mile dating commute was on the horizon for the pair, but pandemic-era fate intervened again.

Ellis received orders for a second National Guard mission not long after returning from the Capitol — this time, helping to roll out coronavirus vaccines. He was just 30 minutes away from Carlin for five months.

Despite the initial hurdles of distance and pandemic deployments, “they definitely both came into it with an open mind,” said maid of honor and longtime friend Robin Eberhardt.

“Life put them in a situation that you wouldn't expect,” Eberhardt said. “But they really got along, and now they're really happy together.”

The pair became engaged in 2023. Before popping the question, Ellis hid the engagement ring in his Army boots, correctly deciding they were too odoriferous for Carlin to stumble upon the jewel.

Priest Alyse Viggiano — herself well-acquainted with D.C. romance — officiated the wedding ceremony. Ellis saw Viggiano regularly for Episcopalian confirmation classes, culminating in his baptism, an important step for the couple.

“It's incredible to want to understand somebody's spiritual life and religion to that capacity,” Viggiano said. “That you're willing to give up a lot of your time to understand a person's faith.”

Unfortunately, Ellis's wedding ring didn't survive the honeymoon in Greece, slipping off his finger while swimming in the ocean. But the couple said they consider the loss an unintentional marital offering to the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite.

“Happy spots come when you're not looking for them,” Carlin said.

NATIONAL

‘Ferrari in a junkyard’: Mules sold at auction are rare, endangered horses

The horses, which scientists say are endangered Przewalski’s, surfaced at rescues in Colorado and Utah.

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By [Kelsey Baker](#)

August 9, 2024 at 1:00 p.m. EDT

Hannah Huckabay regularly combs livestock auctions online for horses she can rehabilitate and train at her Colorado ranch. But when she saw a video in February of a mule for sale in Kansas, she could hardly believe what she was seeing.

The stocky animal’s short black mane shot straight up like a mohawk, and its white belly stood out against its tan coat. As it nervously paced in its corral, Huckabay said it bore a striking resemblance to Przewalski’s horse, a critically endangered species she’d learned about while studying equine science.

“I was like, ‘There is no way. That is not a mule,’” Huckabay recalled thinking. “That’s a purebred Przewalski.”

Such a find would be incredibly rare. Once extinct in the wild, around 2,500 Przewalski’s horses remained worldwide as of 2022. They’re native to Mongolia and in June, seven were reintroduced to nearby Kazakhstan as part of an effort to return them to their natural habitats. They are the only truly wild horse remaining (mustangs are feral horses).

But scientists say Huckabay’s hunch appears to be correct. Hair samples from the animal Huckabay purchased — along with a second horse recently surrendered at a Utah sanctuary — were sent to Texas A&M University’s animal genetics lab. Both appear to be Przewalski’s horses, said Rytis Juras, the genetics lab’s director who tested both samples.

The hair test looks for genetic markers associated with different horse breeds to determine an animal’s likely ancestry. Unequivocally confirming that the horses are purebred Przewalski’s and not hybrids would require advanced blood tests that are expensive and would mean sedating the equines.

The blood tests look at the number of chromosomes in a horse's cells — 66 in a purebred Przewalski, versus 64 in a common horse or 62 in a donkey. An even more advanced version could sequence the horse's entire genome.

But Juras and two other scientists who reviewed the findings said the hair-test results are reliable.

“If I would have gotten it from a zoo ... that would be one thing,” Juras said of receiving the samples. But two random tests with Przewalski's results were “surprising and a little bit disturbing,” he said. “This is weird.”

How the horse Huckabay found — and the second in Utah — ended up in livestock auctions is a mystery, said Christopher Faulk, a professor of animal science at the University of Minnesota who has studied Przewalski's horse genetics and also reviewed the DNA results.

“Someone had to have known what they were, they don't just appear out of anywhere,” Faulk told The Post. “Especially to have been disposed of in that way is even weirder,” he said, since livestock that aren't purchased at auction can end up in slaughterhouses.

“That's like finding a Ferrari in a junkyard,” he added.

Huckabay bought the animal for \$1,375 in February and, after three weeks in quarantine, the ragged and underweight animal sold as a mule arrived at her ranch outside Denver.

Seeing its features in-person left her even more convinced it was a Przewalski's horse, she said. Her daughter said the horse, with its large clunky head and stiff black mane, was so ugly that he was cute, Huckabay recalled. They named him Shrek, after DreamWorks's beloved ogre.

After almost two months of helping Shrek acclimate, Huckabay's daughter stumbled upon a video posted on June 9 from a sanctuary in Utah.

“Did we just have a Przewalski mare surrendered?!” the caption read.

Watch now

@lazybequinerescue

Replying to @Torrey

bounce (i just wanna dance) - фрази & joyful

Kelsey and Gunnar Bjorklund — who own the Lazy B Equine Rescue and Sanctuary in Utah — suspected their mare was also a Przewalski. But they had no idea there was a second possible Przewalski, saved from another auction.

The Bjorklunds' horse was brought to their facility after being purchased for \$35 in January at an auction in Utah, where she was advertised as a mule.

“It takes more money to get your nails done,” Kelsey said, adding that her previous owner decided to surrender the mare after she flunked out of a professional training program.

When the horse arrived and was unloaded from the trailer, “we were just in shock,” Gunnar said. It was clear the animal wasn’t a mule or a mustang, he said.

“Anyone getting possible Przewalski vibes!?” the Bjorklunds posted. “A true wild, endangered species of equine!! How cool would that be!”

In response to seeing the Bjorklunds’ viral video, Huckabay’s daughter posted her own videos of Shrek two days later. One got over 11 million views.

After coming across Shrek’s video, it was easy for the Bjorklunds to settle on a name for their mystery horse — Fiona, the princess-heroine from the Shrek movies.

The rescuers were stunned that two possible Przewalski’s horses could have surfaced almost simultaneously. The Endangered Species Act allows private ownership of endangered animals, but only with a permit, and under strict stipulations. The law prohibits the possession of illegally obtained endangered animals or their transport across state lines without permits.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declined to comment on whether officials are investigating the horses’ chain of custody.

Some livestock auctions have occasionally served as hubs for illicit trade in exotic animal species.

Because most Przewalski’s horses descend from only about a dozen surviving individuals, scientists closely manage breeding genetics for diversity. Compared to the feral mustang, Przewalski’s are more resilient, said Dolores Reed, a biologist who helps oversee a small herd of the endangered horses at the Smithsonian’s National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute. Przewalski’s horses are built for the Mongolian steppe’s harsh climate, she said, adding, “they’re very tough,” and can be unpredictable.

There are about 100 Przewalski’s horses in U.S. zoos, Reed said.

Shrek and Fiona are adjusting to their new environments, their owners said. After keeping his distance from people and trotting in circles in his pen while stressed, Shrek has relaxed and moved to a larger field. He has bonded with two gentle mares and while he won’t accept treats from people’s hands, he loves when apples and carrots are left in his feed bucket, Huckabay said.

“He’s very piggy,” she said.

In Utah, Fiona has put on weight and made friends with a miniature mule and a quarter horse filly at the Bjorklunds’ sanctuary.

The rescuers wonder what would’ve happened if Shrek and Fiona hadn’t been saved. The endangered animals might’ve been sent to slaughter “and nobody would have known about it,” Gunnar said.

Huckabay and the Bjorklunds plan to care for the horses as long as needed, but said they'd prefer to see their rescued Przewalski's move to a professional conservation program.

Shrek is happy on the ranch, but Huckabay said she'd rather see him with "a herd of his own."

"That would be the best-case scenario," she said.