CONGRESSIONAL CEMETERY BECOMES THE WORLD’S LARGEST OUTDOOR ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN HISTORY

WASHINGTON, D.C., JULY 2, 2012: The 205-year-old Congressional Cemetery in Washington is now the world’s largest outdoor encyclopedia of American history. While touring the grounds, visitors may call up an article from Wikipedia on, for example, the life of John Philip Sousa by scanning a QR code (Quick Response code) with their smartphones. Sixty QR codes on the grounds link to articles on people ranging from Congressman Henry Clay, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, David Herold, who was convicted and hung for his part in Abraham Lincoln’s assassination, and Leonard Matlovich, America’s first openly gay serviceman.

“There’s never been anything like this before in America” says Peter Ekman, a Wikipedia volunteer who installed the codes as part of a larger Wikipedia project, known as Project GLAM, which reaches out to cultural institutions. GLAM stands for Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums.

The Congressional Cemetery is a privately owned National Historic Landmark that has been closely tied to Congress over its history, but is now supported mainly by individual donations. It is home to the distinctive Latrobe Cenotaphs, 165 stone memorials, erected for congressmen who died in office before 1876. It also served as one of the most fashionable cemeteries in Washington, housing burials of Washington mayors, socialites, entrepreneurs, visiting Native American diplomats, many cabinet members, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a Supreme Court Justice. Mary Ann Hall, who ran her brothel a few blocks from the Capitol, has one of the most lavish and beautiful monuments in the cemetery.

“Since its founding in 1807, Congressional Cemetery was always intended to be a place of recreation, learning, and imagination, not simply a burial ground for the dead,” says Rebecca Roberts, Program Director at Congressional Cemetery. “The QR codes project is the twenty-first century way to encourage a nineteenth century ideal of the cemetery as an appealing and interesting place to visit.”

QR codes are already used in Wikipedia projects, mainly inside museums, where they link to articles on individual objects or art works. The Derby Museum in England and the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis pioneered these efforts using a form of QR code called QRpedia. If a Wikipedia article is available in the language to which the smartphone is set, the code will automatically direct to the article in that language. Otherwise, the code will direct to the list of available languages, from which the user can select.

“QRpedia provides access to deeper levels of information while you are standing right in front of a landmark, and has huge implications for multilingual accessibility to this information. There’s really nothing else like it,” says Lori Byrd Phillips, US Cultural Partnerships Coordinator for the Wikimedia Foundation.

Outdoor use of the QRpedia technology has so far been limited. In Bulgaria, the Sophia Zoo has posted a few dozen QR codes. But the city of Monmouth, Wales, has turned itself into “Monmouthpedia” by posting over 1,000 QRpedia codes, both indoors and out. Bridges, statues, a historic courtroom, and even pubs now sport the codes.

For more information, please visit
http://www.congressionalcemetery.org/
http://outreach.wikimedia.org/wiki/GLAM/QR_codes/Congressional_Cemetery

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