

From Heavenly Garden to COVID Haven: The Rural Cemetery as Bucolic Refuge

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Summary Statement

The COVID pandemic turned lives upside down, altering established behavior patterns in public space. Seeking respite from crowds, many took the novel approach of visiting cemeteries, especially those with exceptional landscape, architecture, and sculpture. Many of these were products of the “rural cemetery” movement in 19th-century America, which reflected new attitudes about death and reinvented the traditional “graveyard” into a place not only for the dead but also for the living, “...a vast temple to the transcendent being where the visitor senses the eminence of God in nature.”¹ During COVID such cemeteries experienced significant surges in visitors seeking refuge from crowds. In this way, these cemeteries functioned again as their designers had intended two centuries earlier.

Respite in Plain Sight

Within the first few weeks of the COVID pandemic in 2020, with social distancing and many working from home, people sought refuge outdoors. On extended walks around my town, I noticed more pedestrian visitors to local cemeteries. A colleague’s Instagram post from Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York (one of America’s greatest “rural cemeteries”) revealed that crowded parks had forced her to find alternative sanctuary. Might cemeteries be enjoying a new appreciation among the COVID-weary public? Could these resting places—especially “rural cemeteries” or “garden cemeteries” that were popular bucolic havens for enjoying nature, art, and architecture nearly two centuries ago—be newly fulfilling their original design intent?

The Rise of “Rural” or “Garden” Cemeteries

Rural Cemeteries were the result of sweeping changes in how early 19th-century Americans viewed death and the repose of the dead. There were three driving factors. One was the state of traditional graveyards and burial grounds in late-18th, early-19th century American cities, which were expanding in size and density. These burial places were usually connected with churches at the center of cities. By the turn of the 19th century, they were crowded and in poor condition. Burials were often shallow, causing graves to become uncovered. Decomposing bodies were feared as contagion sources, emitting harmful miasma, and could contaminate city water supplies. Cholera and typhoid epidemics became more frequent.² Civic leaders proposed that burials be moved outside the city core, away from human habitation. Increasingly all across the nation, city limits were extended and burials relocated (many graves were actually moved) farther and farther away from city centers.³

¹Cedar Hill Cemetery, “Guide for Visitors.” Cedar Hill Cemetery & Foundation.
https://www.cedarhillcemetery.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/visitorguide_cedarhill.pdf (accessed January 9, 2023).

²Smith, Jeffrey. *The Rural Cemetery Movement: Places of Paradox in Nineteenth-Century America*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017, p. 9.

³Yalom, Marilyn. *The American Resting Place: Four Hundred Years of History Through Our Cemeteries and Burial Grounds*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008, p. 44.

A second factor were changing views of death and afterlife. Seventeenth- and 18th-century graveyards reflect a certain equality of the dead, interred with little distinction between memorial markers that revealed few personal details about the deceased—usually just birth and death dates. (Fig. 1) All were equal in the eyes of a supreme being and would rise in the Second Coming (according to Christian doctrine). In the first decades of the 19th century, however, death came to be seen as more a passage from one state of being to another. In his 1817 poem “Thanatopsis,” William Cullen Bryant communicated the idea that man is a creature of the earth, more attuned to nature’s teachings. In death he mixes with all the elements, and all those who have died before him, for an untroubled rest.⁴ Bryant rendered nature as the “...the great tomb of man”; the dead would rest together, “All in one mighty sepulcher”.⁵

The comforting presence of transcendent nature became more prominent, and rural cemeteries reflected this in their great displays of natural beauty—ravines, lakes, vistas, knolls, groves, and winding roads—“managed” through the newly evolving field of landscape architecture. (Fig. 2) Nature and the divine became more closely tied. We see this reflected in how some of the earliest rural cemeteries were lauded at the time of their creation. In his dedication speech for America’s first rural cemetery, Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1831, Associate Justice Joseph Story noted: “...the natural features of Mount Auburn are incomparable for the purposes to which it is now sacred”.⁶ (Fig. 3) He added: “Our cemeteries, rightly selected, and properly arranged, may be made subservient to some of the highest purposes of religion and human duty”.⁷ The rural cemetery’s design equated nature to godliness. According to the visitor’s guide to Hartford’s Cedar Hill Cemetery (1864), the American rural cemetery was “a vast temple to the transcendent being where the visitor senses the eminence of God in nature”.⁸

A third factor was the growing interest in creating public parks as refuges from crowded, dirty cities. Public parks later followed the model of the rural cemetery, intended as places for the living to commune with nature and partake of the shared memory of those who had gone before. According to rural cemetery historian Jeffrey Smith, those who founded and developed rural cemeteries “...understood that these were not just graveyards. They were green spaces that people would use on a regular basis...” Fees for rural cemetery burial plots (churchyards and town burying grounds did not charge for burial) financed landscape design, planting, and maintenance, “a green space as relief from crowded and polluted cities.” Not until the late 19th century did public parks replace cemeteries in these same functions (save for burials, or course).⁹ Landscape architect and park champion Andrew Jackson Downing observed in an 1849 issue of the *Horticulturist*: “. . . the idea [of a rural cemetery] took the public mind by storm . . . does not this general interest prove that public gardens, near our large cities, would be equally successful?”.¹⁰

⁴Yalom, Marilyn. *The American Resting Place: Four Hundred Years of History Through Our Cemeteries and Burial Grounds*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008, p. 44.

⁵Bryant, William Cullen. “Thanatopsis.” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50465/thanatopsis> (accessed January 13, 2023).

⁶Smith, Jeffrey. *The Rural Cemetery Movement: Places of Paradox in Nineteenth-Century America*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017, p. 23.

⁷Smith, Jeffrey. *The Rural Cemetery Movement: Places of Paradox in Nineteenth-Century America*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017, pp. 23-24.

⁸Cedar Hill Cemetery, “Guide for Visitors.” Cedar Hill Cemetery & Foundation. https://www.cedarhillcemetery.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/visitinguide_cedarhill.pdf (accessed January 9, 2023).

⁹Smith, Jeffrey. *The Rural Cemetery Movement: Places of Paradox in Nineteenth-Century America*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017, p. xii.

¹⁰Mount Auburn Cemetery, <https://www.mountauburn.org/a-new-american-landscape/> (accessed January 11, 2023).

Rural cemeteries fulfilled their founders' dreams. Many, especially those on new trolley lines, became popular leisure spots as work hours decreased during the latter 19th and early 20th centuries. Victorians in their finery crowded cemeteries on Sundays, some picnicking among their interred relatives and friends. (Fig. 4) It wasn't until the second half of the 20th century, with increased mobility and the rise of regional metro areas, that visiting cemeteries on a regular basis became less common for most Americans.¹¹

Cemeteries as COVID Refuges

COVID changed this. Many of the cemeteries consulted in this paper's research, all of them rural cemeteries, verify significant increases in visitors during the pandemic's early weeks. Visitation rates abated a bit as the pandemic eased, but some cemeteries report visitors still exceed pre-pandemic levels. Many cemeteries kept their gates open while other places of refuge closed. Some responded with new visitor education programs and activities (Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta started "contactless scavenger hunts" and "free picnic maps for folks to get takeout from local restaurants and explore the cemetery to find a place to eat").¹² Green-Wood Cemetery extended its hours and opened all four of its gates (usually only two were open).¹³ "Our numbers have really skyrocketed," reported Nancy Goldenberg, President and CEO of Philadelphia's Laurel Hill Cemetery, adding that 43 percent of the year's visitors came in the last two weeks of March 2020.¹⁴ A stay-at-home mom in Detroit visited five cemeteries in the pandemic's first few weeks, as she didn't feel comfortable taking her children to "overcrowded" city parks.¹⁵ Spring Grove in Cincinnati made the difficult decision to close its grounds to "thousands" of new visitors as staffs were stretched thin dealing with COVID-related funerals and cremations. COVID visitors flocked to cemeteries to seek open space, but they also found solace in the presence of those who passed before them, setting the pandemic in existential perspective.

¹¹Yalom, Marilyn. *The American Resting Place: Four Hundred Years of History Through Our Cemeteries and Burial Grounds*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008, p. 284.

¹²Harker, Richard. Email to author regarding COVID visitors and programs at Oakland Cemetery, Atlanta, GA, January 10, 2023.

¹³Martin, Kristyn. "Cemeteries see surge in visitors as people maintain social distancing amid coronavirus pandemic: 'We need to get outside.'" <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/cemetery-visits-increase-coronavirus-social-distancing-215853581.html> (accessed January 11, 2023).

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

Illustrations



Fig. 1: Early graveyards had rows of nearly identical headstones, such as Boston's Granary Burying Ground (1660).



Fig. 2: Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, NY, 1839



Fig. 3: Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, MA, 1831



Fig. 4: Sunday outings in cemeteries, such as Woodland in Dayton, OH, were community events.