

MOUNT HOPE CEMETERY CONTEXT IN THE RURAL CEMETERY MOVEMENT

Mount Hope Cemetery is a product of the evolution of traditions and functionalities in the burial of the dead. Prior to the 19th century, early Americans implemented four types of burial places. The first type was generally unorganized, isolated burials laid out by pioneer populations. As these populations began to settle into small communities, they established family burial plots on their rural properties. In growing towns, churchyards emerged as the dominant burial ground for urban settlements. Often a burial area was designated as a “Potters Field” for the burial of the indigent, transient or non-religious dead. These burial traditions of colonial America were followed, in time, by an idea of rural burial in a beautiful place.

In the early 19th century, problems arose with the continued use of established burial grounds. Overcrowding was widespread, and in Europe, it became common practice for bodies to be moved to make room for newly deceased. Disinterment was accompanied by a concern about public health, particularly if the burial ground had been used to accommodate burials resulting from cholera, yellow fever, or other epidemics. Additionally, city graveyards were moved, vandalized, or abandoned. This was particularly prevalent in New England. By 1831, burial grounds were observed as unkempt and unattractive; a New England writer noted “the burying place continues to be the most neglected spot in all the region, distinguished from other fields only by its leaning stones and the meanness of its enclosures, without a tree or a shrub to take from it the air of utter desolation.”

As health and overcrowding concerns persisted, Americans developed new attitudes toward death and nature. Since early settlement, Americans transformed nature into pastoral, agricultural landscapes. However, in the first few decades of the 19th century, Americans began to create naturalistic landscapes in the informal style. The desire for picturesque settings combined with practical burial concerns was instrumental in the emergence of the rural cemetery movement in America.

In response to shifting attitudes and the need to address issues of health and overcrowding, Americans looked to new European cemeteries, in particular, Pere Lachaise Cemetery. This Parisian cemetery was laid out in 1804, transforming an existing garden into the first rural, garden cemetery in the world. Influenced by

French and English landscape gardening and naturalistic landscape theory, rural cemeteries began in New England and spread throughout the northeast and the nation.

In addition to the naturalistic character of the landscape, rural cemeteries had many commonalities, notably features that were constructed to enhance the picturesque landscape character. Fountains became widely used ornamental features, complementing the natural ponds found in the many rural cemeteries. Support buildings often reflected Egyptian-style architecture, and a range of plant materials were used to augment pre-existing site vegetation. Evergreens were often selected as they symbolized everlasting life. Winding carriage drives provided scenic paths through the undulating cemetery grounds. As residents purchased burial plots, many erected monuments and enclosures, providing spatial definition of the landscape. The prolific inclusion of sculpted stone monuments and iron enclosures in rural cemeteries stimulated the production of these arts. The setting of crafted arts within picturesque cemetery grounds created a dichotomous relationship between the art and nature that paralleled other countervailing themes in rural cemeteries. Although the new cemeteries were laid out outside dense urban cores, scenic vistas provided views of the burgeoning cities, thus creating an intriguing counterbalance of civilization and wilderness.

The new rural cemetery highlighted the contrasting characters of art and nature and civilization and wilderness, providing city residents with a highly sought after accessibility to nature without having to abandon city life. Theorists believed that these naturalistic landscapes of art and nature had calming effects on visitors. Therefore, the rural cemetery movement was not only a solution to growing burial problems; it was also a means to “foster social stability and civility” and to “shape moral taste and general sentiments of all classes.” The new cemetery grounds were meant to be places of contemplation and meditation, allowing one to reflect on issues of death and mortality. The ability to inwardly explore and question one’s own feelings of death within a picturesque setting fostered feelings of hope, rendering death less oppressive.

Given the naturalistic character of the new cemetery landscapes and the physical relationship to dense urban centers, rural cemeteries attracted a range of people. Use of the new cemeteries was not limited to funerals and mourning; rather,

peopled used the cemeteries as parklands, ideal for leisurely strolls under sloping, wooded canopies. In this sense, rural cemeteries were a precursor and impetus to public parks, predating the establishment of citywide park systems, which occurred toward the end of the 19th century. The recreational use of the emerging cemetery type created an awareness of the need for public parks. In 1848, prominent landscape gardener, theorist, and essayist Andrew Jackson Downing noted, "Judging from the crowds of people in carriages, and on foot, which (are found) constantly thronging....Mount Auburn...it is plain enough how much our citizens, of all classes, would enjoy public parks on a similar scale.

This excerpt also highlights the importance of the fact that the rural cemeteries were not exclusionary, accepting all classes of people to use the grounds and purchase burial plots. The character and use of rural cemeteries served as a model for the future parklands.

The character and placement of rural cemeteries not only created models for public parks, but also influenced the development of the surrounding community. Because the outlying cemeteries attracted large numbers of visitors, convenient public transportation routes led to the cemetery grounds outside the city. When horse-drawn streetcars were laid out, the first routes commonly led to the sprawling cemeteries. Toward the end of the 19th century, as cities began to establish park systems, public parklands were often created near the rural cemeteries which had previously served as passive recreation grounds.

The first rural cemetery in the United States was Mount Auburn, established in 1831 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The carefully laid out plan for Mount Auburn Cemetery utilized a naturally picturesque landscape of dramatically sloping, wooded terrain to create a scenic composition. Drives and paths traversed the hilly ground plane and several ponds added to the landscape character. The hills and valleys and the layout of the curving drives and paths defined a sequence of panoramic views into the surrounding landscape and the city of Boston.

Mount Auburn Cemetery served as a model for other rural cemeteries established in subsequent years. New England and the broader northeast region of the United States was the first area where rural cemeteries proliferated. In particular, New York State established several early examples of this new cemetery landscape. The first rural cemeteries created in New York were Green-Wood Cemetery and

Mount Hope Cemetery, which opened within weeks of each other in 1838. In the 19th century, Rochester was experiencing the same issues that spurred the creation of rural cemeteries elsewhere: existing burials grounds were filled to capacity; city residents were concerned about contamination from burying victims of the 1832 cholera epidemic; and the demand for land within the city core increased. Using Mount Auburn as inspiration, the City of Rochester established the country's first municipally owned rural cemetery.

The rural cemetery movement resulted in the creation of picturesque, naturalistic landscapes that afforded city residents a scenic respite from bustling urban life. The emergence of this new landscape type resolved numerous issues that plagued cities in the early 19th century. In addition, the rural cemetery movement impacted cities and communities and ultimately addressed issues beyond the need to accommodate burials. In summary, the creation of rural cemeteries resulted in four broad changes:

- Improvement to urban living conditions
- Lessening of oppressive feelings of death
- Stimulation of the arts of sculpture and iron work
- Impetus to municipal parks

Mount Hope Cemetery impacted the City of Rochester within each of the four, broad level changes. By creating an expansive cemetery south of the city, more land was available within Rochester to expand the city core. It also allowed the City to discontinue burials near the rapidly expanding population. Shortly after its opening in 1838, the Mount Hope Cemetery landscape attracted visitors from throughout the city, many of whom were drawn to the cemetery for its dramatic scenery and view of the city. The leisure use of the cemetery grounds and the scenic character afforded visitors a sense of hope, allowing them to celebrate life and redefine perceptions of death. Many visitors also traversed the Mount Hope Cemetery landscape to admire the impressive stone monuments placed through the grounds. In this sense, the cemetery served as an early example of an outdoor museum grounds as well as the first public parkland in Rochester. As was the case in many cities with rural cemeteries, Mount Hope Cemetery served as the terminus of the first horse-drawn streetcar line, bringing large crowds to the cemetery. Overall, the conditions that led to the creation of Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester reflected the broader issues that influenced the

emergence of the rural cemetery movement both in the United States and abroad.

*Taken from the Mount Hope Cemetery Cultural Landscape Report – 2009.
Heritage Landscapes LLC and Wendel Duchscherer Architects & Engineers, PC*