THE RURAL CEMETERY MOVEMENT:
THE ORIGINS OF CEMETERIES LIKE YOURS

BY JEFFREY SMITH

The "rural cemetery movement" started in 1831 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when Mount Auburn Cemetery opened. Others followed in other cities, responding to many of the same needs and cultural priorities. Paradoxically, these "rural" cemeteries were anything but rural in our context; they were a uniquely urban phenomenon, albeit located outside cities in the adjacent countryside. Within a decade or so, the rest of the ten largest cities in the United States (and a number of the smaller ones as well) had similar burial sites—Laurel Hill in Philadelphia, Green-Wood in Brooklyn, Green Mount in Baltimore, and Mount Hope in Rochester opened such cemeteries by decade's end, all with similar ends in mind that responded to similar emerging urban needs.

TABLE ONE:

GROWTH OF SAMPLE CITIES WITH RURAL CEMETERIES						
City	*Cemetery*	*Population*				
		1830	1840		1850	
		Pop.	Pop.	Pct Chg	Pop.	Pct Chg
Albany	Albany Rural	24,209	33,721	39.29	50,763	50.54
Baltimore	Green Mount	80,800	102,313	26.63	169,054	65.23
Brooklyn	Green-Wood	12,406	36,233	192.06	96,838	167.26
Buffalo	Forest Lawn	8,668	18,213	110.12	42,261	132.04
Charleston	Magnolia	30,289	29,261	-3.39	42,985	46.90
Cincinnati	Spring Grove	24,831	46,338	86.61	115,435	149.12
Philadelphia	Laurel Hill	80,462	93,665	16.41	121,376	29.59
Richmond	Hollywood	16,060	20,153	25.49	27,570	36.80
Rochester	Mount Hope	9,207	20,191	119.30	36,403	80.29
St. Louis	Bellefontaine	4,977	16,469	230.90	77,860	373.77
Wilmington	Oakdale	3,791	5,335	40.73	7,264	36.16

Population pressures were part of the story. Rapid growth in American cities in the decades after the War of 1812 (New York became the first city with more than 100,000 souls in 1820) created new needs for graveyards—all those people die, after all, and unlike population as we usually tabulate it, cemetery population constantly accumulates. Not only were graveyards filling up but cities were growing geographically as well, engulfing them and transforming mere "land" into "real estate" with a monetary value.

Cities needed burial grounds farther outside the city to accommodate both the growing need for burial sites and to inter the remains of those being exhumed from those older graveyards now swallowed up by the city. They were generally located between one and five miles outside the city, well out of the way of development. In fact, a number of them intentionally used land that had little other commercial use. For example, Mount Auburn took over a wooded area of glens and deep ravines called "Sweet Auburn," the land Simon Perkins sold the proprietors of the Akron Rural Cemetery (renamed Glendale) in 1839 was scenic with its deep glens but commercially useless, and the board at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond even included its commercial uselessness when making its case for a state charter in 1847, noting that the land was "wholly unsuited to the general improvement of the city," so its being used as a permanent burial site would not inhibit the city's growth, as some were claiming.[1]

But these new rural cemeteries were more than burial grounds. They departed from traditional cemeteries that were really little more than graveyards with rows of graves crowded into a space with occasional markers, usually with limited and sparse landscaping—a tree or two here and there—at best. Founders of these new cemeteries wanted them to be places that people visited on a regular basis.

The rhetoric about their grounds spoke of an emerging view about landscaping that departed from the formal "pleasure grounds" and parks, featuring a more natural landscape, albeit one that was heavily mediated by the hand of designers who laid out roads and paths, cleared the land and planted trees, and ensured views of great vistas and plant specimens.

Within the first decade after Mount Auburn opened and others had followed, cemeteries in major cities actively marketed themselves through publications, pamphlets, newspaper advertisements, and tours via street railways. In part, they provided a respite from crowded, polluted, smoky cities by opening green spaces. And while founding documents and dedication speeches spoke of the sacred function of the cemetery, their emphasis on visitation and sales suggested a concern beyond it. Unlike earlier graveyards that were supported by religious organizations or city governments, these cemeteries were private companies with charters from state legislatures that had to generate their own income to support themselves. They did so by selling graves and burials, of course, but made even more by selling large family lots that were priced by the square foot and featured massive monuments or mausoleums that people might visit. In this way, the cemetery came to be a way for people to craft both personal and community narratives about whom was important, whom deserved to be part of the community's collective memory, and whom was notable.

Most cemeteries had a set tour route that people could and did follow that passed such places. Within just a few years of opening, Mount Auburn offered an annotated tour of notable graves. Similarly, Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn offered "a circuitous but imperfect carriageway, leading through the more important portions of the ground" in 1840 that private carriage operators used to take people around—although, as its early guidebook suggested, while "it is a charming view which we get from this gentle height [of the carriage]. If, however your time and strength allow, leave the carriage for a few minutes, and climb to the more elevated ground called 'The Plateau.'"[2] The guidebooks must have worked; by the early 1850s, Green-Wood attracted more than 100,000 visitors a year, and a half a million annually by the start of the Civil War.[3] Green-Wood inspired at least two more to name their route The Tour. David Bates Douglass, who designed Green-Wood, used the name when he laid out Albany Rural Cemetery.[4]

When Bellefontaine hired Green-Wood's superintendent Almerin Hotchkiss in 1849, he brought this idea to St. Louis with him; the first published map of Bellefontaine shows a route called The Tour.[5] Tours were so popular at Hollywood Cemetery that the board boasted of them in 1855, noting that "in evidence that this beautiful abode of the dead has become attractive . . . the Board take pleasure in mentioning the fact that a line of omnibuses has been established to run regularly to and from the Cemetery every afternoon."[6]

People were more likely to visit these cemeteries if there were graves of notable people for them to see. A central component of promoting visitation and burial centered on the added respectability and prestige of the cemetery that came from having notable people buried there—making it a tonier "neighborhood" of sorts. The rhetoric of burial of the famous centered on the edifying nature of collective.

Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Joseph Story noted the strength of association in his dedication speech at Mount Auburn, asking "Who, that has stood by the tomb of Washington on the quiet Potomac, has not felt his heart more pure, his wishes more aspiring, his gratitude more warm, and his love of country touched by a holier flame?" [7]

Cemeteries like yours are designed with these same ideas in mind. Be sure to notice the way the roads are laid out, the different sizes of markers, and their proximity to the road.