

When Mount Auburn Cemetery opened in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1831, it introduced the “rural cemetery movement” that included a new way of thinking about not only cemeteries but the ways people used them. Two decades later, Bellefontaine Cemetery opened in St. Louis, inspired by the same model and dedicated in May 1850. (Image: Shutterstock)

Death, Civic Pride, and Collective Memory:

THE DEDICATION OF BELLEFONTAINE CEMETERY IN ST. LOUIS

by JEFFREY SMITH

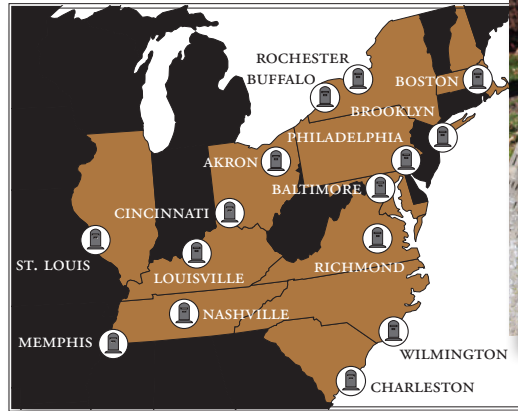


When the Rev. Truman Marcellus Post delivered his sermon at the dedication of Bellefontaine Cemetery in St. Louis, he assured the crowd that they embarked on “no ordinary errand. No civic festivity, or literary reunion, no achievement of Commerce, or joy of Victory.” Post’s sermon was part of the festivities on May 15, 1850, to dedicate a new burial ground that would be different than any St. Louis had seen. This was the first and best example of the “rural cemetery movement” in the region, capitalizing on new thinking of cemeteries as community assets that people used as parks.

James Yeatman (1818-1901) was among the original board members of Bellefontaine Cemetery in 1849, and the one the board sent to the east coast to hire a superintendent. In August, he managed to lure Almerin Hotchkiss away from the prestigious Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. Hotchkiss brought his design and organizational ideas with him.

(Image: Missouri Historical Society)

Many major cities had rural cemeteries by the time Bellefontaine was dedicated in May 1850, as this map suggests. These were, not coincidentally, also some of the fastest-growing cities in the United States. (Map: Michael Thede)



Part of the original 138 acres Bellefontaine acquired from Luther Kennett included the Hempstead family graveyard; Kennett had agreed to allow the Hempstead family access to the burial ground and a turnaround when he purchased it in 1831, and Bellefontaine created a family lot consisting of the former graveyard. It includes graves from as early as the 1810s, including that of fur trader Manuel Lisa. (Images: Jeffrey Smith)

Bellefontaine was part of something of a revolution in cemeteries that started when Mount Auburn Cemetery opened in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in September 1831.¹ Their founders and community leaders saw them as a city amenity not unlike parks, libraries, opera houses, athenaeums, or museums. 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 almost exclusively an urban phenomenon, albeit located outside cities in the adjacent countryside. Within a decade or so, the remaining 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. When St. Louisans received a charter from the State of Missouri for a Rural Cemetery Association in early 1841, they were at the forefront of thinking about these burial sites.

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, and

grew by five-fold over the next three decades) created new needs for graveyards—all those people die, after all, and unlike population as we usually tabulate it, cemetery population accumulates. Not only were graveyards filling up, but cities like St. Louis were growing geographically as well, engulfing them and thus monetizing that land with more profitable uses than burying the dead. 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 (Ohio) Rural Cemetery (renamed Glendale) in 1839 was scenic with its deep glens but commercially almost worthless, and the board at Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond even included the land’s economic inadequacy when making its case for a state charter in 1847, noting that the land was “wholly unsuited to the general

improvement of the city.” Being used as a permanent burial site would not only not inhibit the city’s growth, as some were claiming, but would generate revenue and encourage growth in surrounding areas, thus transforming a geographic lemon into civic lemonade.²

More importantly for our purposes here, these cemeteries were also a central piece of preserving and articulating a community’s collective or cultural memory. Unlike their precursors, the new type of burial ground introduced by Mount Auburn in 1831 targeted more than the bereaved burying loved ones; rather, their founders designed both the landscape and the functions for the living to visit. They were not “pleasure grounds” as such, but they were places where people could escape urban crowding and pollution and be part of a more natural setting (albeit a highly mediated and designed nature).

These cemeteries retained their sacred function of burial and consecration, but they also served the more secular function for visitors. Since the new cemeteries encouraged (and even relied upon) visitors who may or may not have had any relation to the cemetery or those buried there, the monumentation took on a



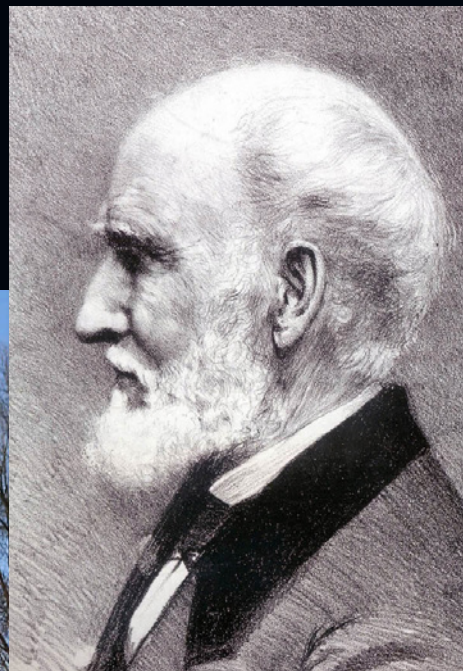
Curvilinear roads that meshed with the terrain, handsome vistas, and planned landscaping were all parts of the rural cemetery movement, as is evident from these early maps of Mount Auburn in Cambridge and Laurel Hill in Philadelphia, both of which informed Hotchkiss' design of Bellefontaine. (Images: Library of Congress)

At the dedication ceremony, Bellefontaine distributed copies of this map, drawn by noted St. Louis cartographer Julius Hutawa from the design by Superintendent Almerin Hotchkiss. Like a number of other cemeteries, Bellefontaine held an auction that afternoon in which people paid an extra premium to be the first to select the locations of their family lots. Among the road names was "The Tour," so purchasers could be confident their family lots were in view of the main route visitors would take—and it worked; every person who bought a lot that day is either on or within view of The Tour. Hotchkiss knew the value of such a tour route from his experience at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. (Image: Missouri Historical Society)

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When former Senator Thomas Hart Benton (1782-1858) died, his grave was marked with an obelisk seen here in the distance on a family lot he shared with Henry Brandt. As the Louisiana Purchase Exposition approached, the State of Missouri established a Benton Monument Commission in 1902 to create and fund a more lavish granite marker for Missouri's first senator, seen in here in the foreground. (Image: Jeffrey Smith)



Wayman Crow (1803-1885) was among the founding members of the board of Bellefontaine.

While attorney James MacPherson agreed to host the first meeting of the organizers in March 1849, Crow—a prominent Whig politician and dry goods merchant—was one of the two who signed the invitation along with iron manufacturer James Harrison. Crow purchased a lot at the dedication, but a quarter-century later acquired a new one and vacated the old one for this site overlooking the Mississippi River. (Images:

Missouri Historical Society, Jeffrey Smith)



“We know, that man is the creature of associations and excitements. . . . 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?”

Joseph Story, Dedication of Mount Auburn Cemetery, 1831

new kind and level of importance. Before, in burying grounds operated by churches or towns or even families, the markers provided a way to mark a grave and suggest familial relations and ideas about salvation. After all, the people walking through those graveyards were, by and large, mourners at burials or descendants of those interred. The demographics of visitors altered the thinking about monuments, gravestones, and even the spatial arrangements of burials. Those markers evolved into ways to communicate ideas about more earthly concerns such as social position, economic status, and real or perceived importance. Grave markers and family monuments became larger and more highly decorated, offering more information about the deceased, and located in places that suggested status and convenience to be viewed. Despite a rhetoric of these monuments' role of preserving history (and to an extent they do preserve a version of history) it is a highly mediated history that reflects a kind of invention.³ That is to say, collective memory and history are not necessarily two sides of the same coin, despite the fact that the makers of them believe “that they embody *history*, defined as objective reality, not an interpretation of a memory.”⁴ Once we see them as a product of a creative process rather than recording information or contributing to the mourning process alone, cemeteries and their markers, monuments, mausoleums, and structures take on new importance as a prism

through which we can understand the values and attitudes of the people and communities that erected, visited, and supported them. Collective memory and monuments reflect the values of both the creators of the monuments and those who interact with them, both at the time of creation and at every subsequent moment. Their responses may not be the same, but they are based on their own values and pasts.

People consciously understood this role cemeteries played in reflecting cultural ideas and values from their beginning. Speaking at the dedication of Mount Auburn in September of 1831, Associate Justice Joseph Story noted the role of cemeteries in the entertainment and edification of all who wander their paths. “It should not be for the poor purpose of gratifying our vanity or pride, that we should erect columns, and obelisks, and monuments to the dead,” Story noted, “but that we may read thereon much of our own destiny and duty. We know that man is the creature of associations and excitements.”⁵ Others followed suit with similar sentiments almost immediately. Just four years later, Samuel Walker sought a place to collect the stone commemorations of notable figures in his booklet calling for a rural cemetery that became Green Mount in Baltimore, thundering that “Maryland has not been without her great men, names that would have adorned a Roman age, in her proudest era; but under our present system, where are they? Who can point to the narrow houses, where rest their lowly heads? They are scattered to the four winds of heaven,

resting here and there in obscure isolated tombs, undistinguished and almost forgotten?”⁶ William Wyatt echoed Walker's view in his speech at the dedication of Green Mount in July 1839 with his hopes that “here may be recorded the public gratitude to a public benefactor, and in some conspicuous division of these grounds, the stranger may read the history of the statesman, the divine, the philanthropist, the soldier or the scholar whose deeds have improved or whose fame adorned the city.”⁷ That same year, Laurel Hill Cemetery founder John Jay Smith sent an article to the daily newspapers in Philadelphia about his having recently received the new visitor's guide to Mount Auburn—some 250 pages long with sixty engravings—observing that “thus does a rural cemetery insure a double chance for good or great names being remembered first on a stone tablet, and next on the ever more enduring page.”⁸

That was the backdrop for the oration of the Rev. Truman Marcellus Post. The following is an excerpted version of Post's speech, published by both Bellefontaine Cemetery, St. Louis newspapers, and even the later biography of Post. This was not particularly unusual; cemeteries commonly published the dedication speeches in early versions of their published rules and regulations or as marketing documents; Mount Auburn published the proceedings of its dedication, complete with the dedication speech of Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Joseph Story.

Connecticut-born Truman Marcellus Post (1810-1886) was trained in both the law and theology, and became more strident in his antislavery views after the murder of Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois, in late 1837. He became pastor of Third Presbyterian Church in St. Louis in 1847, the post he held when he delivered this oration. (Image: Missouri Historical Society)



“Address of Professor Post”⁹

Fellow Citizens:

We are come hither to-day on no ordinary errand. No civic festivity, or literary reunion, no achievement of Commerce, or joy of Victory, gathers us this day amid these scenes of nature, this green and wooded seclusion.

We are come, 'tis true, to found a City—of your own emporium the shadow, the counterpart, the home; to grow with its growth, and become populous with its people—yet a city for no living men, a City of the Dead, we found this day.¹⁰

Not in pride come we. In no vain ambition to wrestle with our mortal state, or rescue these bodies from corruption, or our names from oblivion. Too well, alas! we know,

“Nor storied urn,
nor animated bust,
Back to its mansion
calls the fleeting breath;
Nor Honor’s voice
provokes the silent dust,

Nor Flattery soothes
the dull cold ear of death.”

In no such dream of the children of pride, but as under a common doom, we come on an errand of love and sorrow. We come to consecrate a place to the sad proprieties of grief, and the last offices of earthly affection, the holy memories of the dead, and the repose of the grave—to hallow a sanctuary for remembrance and love and tears—to thoughts that walk again life’s pilgrimage with the departed, or see the faces faded and lost from earth, brightening in the smile of God. We come to select the last home for families, and friends, and forms we love most dearly. Yea, to choose the place of our own final rest, where memory, perchance, may drop over our dust the “tribute of a tear.”

In doing this, and in exhibiting a care for the seemingly bestowment of our dead, we obey a universal feeling of humanity—a feeling that regards the very form, consecrated by the residence of the soul and the memories of love, as more than common earth. We ask no more leave of Philosophy for this sentiment than we do for our tears over the dead—content to follow the irrepressible impulse of nature, an instinct of immortality clinging around our very clay. But we do know it is the highest philosophy to follow the universal and immortal voice of Nature. Her indications, truer than all logic, always point to beneficent, though it may be hidden uses.

Moreover, observation teaches us, here, as everywhere, that violated Nature vindicates herself—a natural retribution attends

on our treatment of the dead. A neglect of the decencies and pious proprieties of sepulture ever reacts disastrously on the manners and tastes, sentiments and morality, and, finally, on the entire genius of civilization.

But, apart from all philosophy, we love to linger around the place of our dead, where we looked on the forms we loved for the last time. Thither fondly we oft return, and sorrow soothes itself with its offering of tears, over their lone and lowly rest. We love to beautify their last repose, as though the departed spirit were more quickly conscious and cognizant around the spot where the companion of its mortal pilgrimage awaits the resurrection, as though there it were still sensible to the soothing charm of natural beauty, or the gentle offices of memory and love. True, we cannot wake their sleep; they answer us never with voice or sigh; still we delight to make their rest beautiful—beautiful with all that nature, and all that art can give; we would strew it with flowers, to be tended with gentle fingers, and bedewed ever with fresh tears; we would that affection and honor should speak of them in commemorative marble, and nature around should wear her benignant and loveliest aspect.

In spite of philosophy, Nature still exclaims: “Ah! Who to dumb forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being
e’er resigned, Left the war
precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor left one longing, lingering
look behind? On some fond
breast the parting soul
relies, Some pious drops the
closing eye requires, Even
from the tomb the voice of
Nature cries, Even in our ashes
live their wonted fires.”¹¹

Posts and steps like these in Bellefontaine were intentionally designed to mirror the entrances to homes. They appear to not be present in other major urban cemeteries, suggesting that they were a product offered and created by a local stone works. (Image: Jeffrey Smith)



Natural taste and sensibility again, plead for the rural cemetery. A seemly and beautiful sepulture amid the jostle, and din, and offenses of sight and sound, in the tumult of the city! It is impossible! In the city churchyard, on the borders of our crowded and reeking thoroughfares, 'mid the clang, and clamor, and dust, and the tramping of feet, and the rattling of wheels, it seems as if the buried could not rest.¹² We can hardly disabuse the mind of the painful illusion, that the turmoil of mortal life may still perturb even the sleepers of the grave. The sensibilities of the mourner are shocked by the mingling of the vulgar and profane life with the awe and silence of the house

of death. Meditation flees such scenes — the sanctity of private grief is outraged.¹³ The faces of the departed will not come to greet you, and the sensitive spirit hastes to hide its wound away from the stare and curiosity of the passing crowd. No, not there — but in seclusion, silence and solitude, grief loves to seek the face of the dead, and commune with its memories and hopes: where earth, with its stilly life, where green in its time, and Spring comes forth with its flowers beautiful and voiceless; and Summer passes into a solemn Sabbath glory; and pensive Autumn throws its seemly shroud of fading loveliness over the dying year; and the desolate Winter keeps religiously at least the

fitting loneliness and stillness of the tomb.

Grief for the dead, also asks seclusion and isolation. It shuns the public walk. The stare of the curious crowd oppresses, profanes, tortures it. It treads its path of sorrow with no idle gazer. It asks to love and weep alone. It asks a burial place where the landscape, with its natural variety of surface, and the screen of hill, and dale, and copse, and thicket, may furnish separate sanctuaries for sorrow. Our nature, too, asks a place of final rest beside the forms loved in life. . . . These sentiments have, in every age, established burial places amid the high and tranquil and beautiful places of nature.

Health unquestionably requires the rural cemetery.

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Health unquestionably requires the rural cemetery. The burial place in the midst of the city soon becomes a nuisance, exalting [*sic*] from its crowded graves the pestilence. From this consideration, as well as that of taste, either by custom or express legislation, burials in the city were universally prohibited by the States of antiquity . . . Maladies the most dreadful to which man is liable have come forth from the shallow and crowded graves to avenge the unseemly bestowment of the dead.¹⁴

. . . But, far beyond the hygienic or aesthetic, the moral uses of the rural cemetery claim our regard.

To make the place of the dead beautiful and attractive, is wise for man. The amenity that lures life often with the shadow of the tomb, purifies, ennobles, and hallows it. The tomb, the great refiner and chastener of life, as a beneficent remembrancer and educator—the perpetuator of the discipline of sorrow, without its pang—the admonisher of the true and enduring in our being—it is well to give it permanent voice, often to invoke its influence to sober life's passion and hope, and to impart true wisdom to its reason and aim.

Place, then, and preserve the city of Death beside that of Life, as its sorrowful but blessed remembrancer. Let Life look oft on the features of its pale brother. Make that face not foul and revolting, but charming with the spell of beauty and of holy repose; that the loving may often come to gaze thereon, and may turn away with chastened hopes and

passions, and quicken end sympathies, and higher and holier thoughts.

Again, the rural cemetery, as a permanent conservatory of memories of the past, and the attractor of the living within the sphere of their influence, is a great interest of civilization; a perpetuator of social life and order.¹⁵ It binds the present to the past by the ties of reverent love and sorrow. It gives the virtue and reason of the departed perpetual utterance on the ear of life. A cemetery is a great picture gallery of the loved and honored dead. You walk in it as in a Pantheon of historic virtues and fames. The wise, the gifted, the eloquent, the good, the heroic, and the loved, look forth upon you from their rest, and the power of their thought is upon your soul. That thought, in such scenes, preserves, not chains and enslaves order.

The rural cemetery, then, demanded by natural taste and for its moral uses, we may regard as almost a necessity of civilization; and we feel it worthy of ourselves and our city to provide such a place for the burial of our dead, and to consecrate it for all coming time as a sanctuary for grief, and memory, and funeral silence and repose.

We count it a matter of gratulation that the work has been entered on in such a spirit and with such beginnings. The enterprise was long contemplated, and at length entered upon as almost a necessity of seemly and permanent sepulture.

“Soon the mourner shall follow the mourned, till we, and all hearts that beat for us beneath these heavens, shall at last keep the long and silent rendezvous of the grave. Yea, I see the endless succession of the future hastening on, as the many waters of yonder mighty river, till the seasons weary in their round, and the sun grows weary in the sky, and time itself is sere and deathlike old. I see the world of Life itself passing, and Death's shadow falls over all. But Death himself shall perish in that hour. The great Victor of Death shall summon the pale prisoners of the grave, and they shall come forth; and then, though voice of earth's memory may have perished for ages, though the rock-hewn monument may have crumbled long cycles ago, still a record, written on no earthly marble, waits us in the great doom, and our mortal works follow us there.”

**Epitaph, Truman Marcellus
Post's gravestone,
Bellefontaine Cemetery¹⁶**

ENDNOTES

¹ Recent scholarship has built on Blanche Linden-Ward's seminal history of Mount Auburn Cemetery by expanding the interpretive perspective beyond her focus on Mount Auburn in terms of landscape history; see Blanche Linden-Ward, *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1989). Recent works have focused on these cemeteries as cultural phenomena as well. For examples, see Joy Marie Giguere, *Characteristically American: Memorial Architecture, National Identity, and the Egyptian Revival* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2014); James R. Cothran and Erica Danylchak, *Grave Landscapes: The Nineteenth-Century Rural Cemetery Movement* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018); Jeffrey Smith, *The Rural Cemetery Movement: Places of Paradox in Nineteenth-Century America* (Latham: Lexington Books, 2017). There are a number of histories of individual rural cemeteries as well; see, for example, Jeffrey Richman, *Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery: New York's Buried Treasure* (Brooklyn: Green-Wood Cemetery, 1988); and Christopher Vernon, *Graceland Cemetery: A Design History* (Amherst, Massachusetts: Library of American Landscape History, 2011).

² "Statement to the General Assembly of Virginia," January 10, 1850, Hollywood Cemetery Minutes, Hollywood Cemetery Collection, Virginia Historical Society.

³ Elizabethada Wright. "Reading the Cemetery," *Lieu de Memoire par Excellence*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 33:2 (Spring, 2003), 28.

⁴ Dell Upton, *What Can and Can't Be Said: Race, Uplift, and Monument Building in the Contemporary South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 21.

⁵ Joseph Story, *An Address Delivered on the Dedication of the Cemetery at Mount Auburn, September 24, 1831, To Which is Added an Appendix, Containing a Historical Notice and Description of the Place, with a List of the Present Subscribers* (Boston: Joseph T. and Edwin Buckingham, 1831), 14.

⁶ Samuel D. Walker, *Rural Cemetery and Public Walk* (Baltimore: Sands and Nelson, 1835), 19.

⁷ William E. Wyatt, *Services at the Dedication of Green Mount Cemetery, Montpelier, Vt., Sept. 15, 1855, with the Rules and Regulations* (Montpelier: E. P. Walton, Jr., Printer, 1855), 32.

⁸ John Jay Smith, Jr., "Memoranda Respecting the Foundation of Laurel Hill Cemetery," Laurel Hill Cemetery Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; the undated article he sent to dailies in Philadelphia, pasted into this document, "Rural Cemeteries—Mount Auburn."

⁹ The following offers excerpts from Post's address, which was reprinted by both Bellefontaine Cemetery and in local newspapers.

¹⁰ This idea of cemetery as home emerged as part of the rural cemetery movement. Family lots contributed to this, with their arrangement and design reflective of Victorian houses—steps in front and entry into public spaces with "private" spaces (that is, individual gravestones) smaller. Unusual to Bellefontaine (and perhaps unique) is the number of newel posts entering family lots with the terms "Our Home" on them.

¹¹ From Thomas Gray (1718-1773), "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," first published in 1751.

¹² Post's reference to the rural cemetery as an escape from urban life was not unusual in dedication speeches. It also speaks to the changed attitude about cemeteries as places for the living to visit and commune with nature rather than merely a site to warehouse the dead.

¹³ Here, Post is referring to a common problem in cities like St. Louis. As cities grew in population, they also grew geographically so that land on the outskirts of town used for burials became surrounded by the city itself, making that land too valuable to be used as a graveyard. As cities grew, therefore, some of those graveyards remained, others were moved. The idea of a bustling city immediately adjacent to the burial ground was a common one, though, and seen as problematic.

¹⁴ Issues of health were commonly cited as reasons to establish cemeteries, and Post was building on a long history of placing burial sites outside town. He makes references to gravesites of the ancient world, but he surely knew of more recent thoughts on the subject. In 1838, Laurel Hill Cemetery founder John Jay Smith (writing under the pen name "Atticus") noted that rural cemeteries were essential to keep miasmas and such away from the population. See Atticus [John Jay Smith], *Hints on the Subject of Interments*, Smith "Memoranda Respecting the Foundation of Laurel Hill Cemetery," 11. In 1839, the founders of Glendale Cemetery in Akron, Ohio, used Smith's exact words—right down to the italics—in its petition to the state legislature requesting a charter for the Akron Rural Cemetery, arguing that: "It is at this day well known, and has been satisfactorily demonstrated, *that burials in cities greatly endanger the public health*; that the miasmata disengaged from burying places, may, and often have, caused frightful catastrophes, and that they not only give more virulence to prevailing maladies, but also originate contagious diseases, whose ravages have been terrible." See Petition to Ohio Legislature, January 10, 1839, Glendale Cemetery Minutes. The charter passed in March 1839. Glendale Cemetery Minutes, Petition to Ohio Legislature, January 10, 1839.

¹⁵ Again, Post's comments are consistent with other writers and speakers at the time, seeing the cemetery as a place to preserve and articulate the community's collective memory. At the dedication of Mount Auburn Cemetery in 1831, Associate Justice Joseph Story noted its power in his dedication. Others followed suit with similar sentiments almost immediately, quickly normalizing the idea that proximity to the great was uplifting and edifying. See Joseph Story, *An Address Delivered on the Dedication of the Cemetery at Mount Auburn, September 24, 1831, To Which is Added an Appendix, Containing a Historical Notice and Description of the Place, with a List of the Present Subscribers* (Boston: Joseph T. and Edwin Buckingham, 1831), 14; Samuel D. Walker, *Rural Cemetery and Public Walk* (Baltimore: Sands and Nelson, 1835), 19.

¹⁶ Gravestone, Truman Marcellus Post, Bellefontaine Cemetery, St. Louis, Missouri.