

175th Anniversary Feature: Cave Hill Cemetery- a Rural, Garden-style Cemetery



Aerial of Cave Hill Cemetery. Louisville Chamber of Commerce.

By Eva Stimson & Gayle Collins, Special to Cave Hill Heritage Foundation

From its beginning, 175 years ago, Cave Hill Cemetery has been much more than a traditional burial ground. A person entering the gates of Cave Hill Cemetery for the first time might wonder: Is this a park? An outdoor art gallery? Or a well-tended garden with walking trails? As one of the nation's earliest rural, garden-style cemeteries, Cave Hill represented, a new approach to burying and memorializing the dead. A precursor to public parks, the rural, garden-style cemetery offered a tranquil green space, open to everyone, where visitors could stroll the grounds, enjoy nature, and be inspired by the artwork on monuments and mausoleums.

John Claudius Loudon, a Scottish landscape gardener and architect, was the originator of the rural garden-style cemetery movement. His writings in the early 1800s helped shape Victorian taste in gardens. He envisioned gardens that were both picturesque and educational, where trees and shrubs were carefully selected and studied, as in today's arboretums. Cemeteries in this style feature a well-defined plan and manicured landscapes.



John Claudius Loudon. Wikipedia, 2023.

By the early 19th century, urban burial grounds had become over-crowded, as the Industrial Revolution brought more and more workers to the cities. Graves were stacked on top of each other, and graveyards were criticized as breeding grounds for disease. In response, followers of Loudon brought his style to the United States, where Mount Auburn Cemetery was established near Boston in 1831, becoming the first rural, garden-style cemetery in the country. Mount Auburn's founders created a spacious burial place outside the city, with trees and monuments that fostered contemplation while refreshing body and soul. Skilled horticulturists, designers, and sculptors created tapestries of nature embracing monumental art that together told the community's stories.



Loudon-designed cemetery in North Surrey, England. Wikipedia, 2023.

From the time of its commissioning in 1848, Cave Hill Cemetery has been designed and managed by trained arborists, horticulturists, designers, and restoration staff. Louisville's mayor appointed a committee and hired an engineer to manage the cemetery. The engineer adopted the rural cemetery management style that was highly popular at the time in Europe and gaining strong acceptance in the eastern United States. This required a superintendent with professional horticultural training to maintain the cemetery's peaceful and orderly environment. The cemetery has thrived, and its 296 acres now host the largest tree canopy outside the city's park system.

Cave Hill Cemetery occupies a dynamic place in the Greater Louisville community. It is recognized as an outdoor art gallery and museum of horticultural specimens and historic monuments. As the final resting place for more than 140,000 people, Cave Hill's grounds convey a sense of dignity and respect. The cemetery's setting in Louisville's only arboretum ensures a place of peace and natural splendor. Its monuments and mausoleums enable the cemetery to tell the story of Louisville and its remarkable citizenry. More than 300,000 people visit the 296-acre cemetery each year.

Cave Hill is living history, a place of perpetuity and solace that requires careful nurturing. Like other garden-style cemeteries, it represents the evolution from collections of graves in churchyards to pastoral cemeteries that propelled and paralleled the movement for national parks in the United States. Cave Hill Cemetery predates the Olmsted Park system—18 parks and 6 parkways—which began taking shape in Louisville in 1891. Both the park system and cemetery were envisioned as providing a respite from the stresses of urban life while adding to the city's distinctiveness. Ultimately, these green spaces also contributed to the quality of life and health of the city's residents. Before art museums became widely available features of urban living, rural garden cemeteries offered city-dwellers the opportunity to experience beautiful artwork. For example, before the Metropolitan Art Museum opened in 1872, cemeteries were among the best places to see art in New York City. At Woodlawn Cemetery (established in the Bronx in 1863) and Green-Wood (established in Brooklyn in 1838), visitors could see soaring marble angels and mausoleums designed to imitate

French chapels, Egyptian temples, and the Greek Parthenon. Similarly, Cave Hill Cemetery offers the community a repository of monumental art, much of which is historically significant, which can be viewed at no cost.

Many rural garden-style cemeteries were originally built outside cities, in rural landscapes. As the cities expanded to surround these cemeteries, the name “rural” remained and came to signify a peaceful, pastoral oasis amid noisy, fast-paced urban life. Edmund Francis Lee and Benjamin Grove, the principal architects of Cave Hill Cemetery, hoped that the grounds of the cemetery would remind people of the eternal nature of life and death. Lee wrote:

“A place of burial may be made a delightful place of resort, and an embellishment to a town of no ordinary character, by being located in the midst of rural scenery, and by affording susceptibilities for the tasteful display of works of art and offerings dedicated to the memory of the dead. Such a place would become, by these means, an object gratifying to the pride of citizens and attractive to strangers; but what is of vastly greater importance, it would become in due time a school of virtue, teaching by the examples of the dead, and a nursery of all the pious and tender emotions of the heart, on the due cultivation of which, the preservation of social order of religion, and of our dearest privileges depend.”



Cave Hill Aerial and Louisville cityscape. Jeff Hurt, 2023.

Rural cemeteries emerged just as transcendentalism was taking off as a literary and philosophical movement in the United States. The rural aesthetic of Cave Hill Cemetery reflects the themes of writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who sought to connect humans with nature and the divine. Emerson, in fact, helped design Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, Mass., following a transcendentalist aesthetic. He also gave the dedicatory address for the cemetery, which is preserved as his essay, “Immortality.” In a consecration address for Mount Auburn Cemetery, Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story made this statement, which is equally applicable to Cave Hill: “There is not in all the untrodden valleys of the West, a more secluded, more natural or appropriate spot for the religious exercises of the living.”

Sources: “Grave Landscapes: The Nineteenth Century Rural Cemetery Movement,” James R. Cothran and Erica Danylchak Private Manuscript held by Cave Hill Cemetery

“Why Old American Cemeteries Are Showcasing New Art,” by Allison C. Meier (www.bloomberg.com, April 18, 2019)