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Urbanization and the Changing Role of the Nashville City Cemetery

When the Nashville City Cemetery was first established in 1822, it served the city's immediate needs of proper burial and sanitation. Today, the cemetery brings the community together through community service and camaraderie. Moreover, the site serves as a historical landmark that gives one a glimpse into Nashville's past. Through comparing the cemetery's past and present physical function and communal properties, one can make observations concerning Nashville's growth as an urban center and note how the urbanization of Nashville correlates with a change in the role of the City Cemetery.

The immediate function of the cemetery in the nineteenth century was strikingly different from the function it serves today. The original physical function involved the realization that proper burial of the deceased was essential to help prevent disease transmission, and the concept known as germ theory fueled this realization. The germ theory became well established between 1850 and 1920. It took a long time to convince people that the disease found in a corpse was the cause of the death and not the result of the death. To counter the germ theory, the idea of spontaneous generation of organisms confused the disease hypothesis even further and made the germ theory more difficult for citizens to accept. During the nineteenth century, many people still believed that living organisms arose from nonliving material spontaneously, encouraging the idea that the germs did not cause the death of people.¹

As the germ theory grew support, in 1870 Louis Pasteur demonstrated that decomposition was caused by microorganisms. Around the same time, Robert Koch identified the specific

¹ "Germ Theory." <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/contagion/germtheory.html>.

germs that caused anthrax and tuberculosis. Cholera and tuberculosis at this time caused a significant percentage of deaths in Nashville. Koch became known for Koch's postulates, which proved that specific germs caused specific diseases and that these diseases can be transmitted between bodies. By the end of the nineteenth century, people began to finally understand that cholera was caused by a specific microorganism and that it could be transmitted between people and contaminated water supplies.² However, acceptance of this idea was slow because Koch was not able to identify the cholera bacillus microorganism until 1883.³

The realization of disease transmission played an important role in burial practices. If graves were constructed to be too shallow, cholera could be quickly spread to water sources during a heavy rain. This would have been a significant problem in Nashville particularly because most people received their drinking water from the Cumberland River. The Oxfam International Organization notes in its cholera guidelines pamphlet that “graves must be at least 30 meters from any water point, [and] the bottom of a grave should be at least 1.5 meters above the water table.”⁴ Burial specifications such as these were valuable in preventing disease transmission.

The Nashville City Cemetery website provides unlimited information that allows one to study information concerning the prominent diseases of this period. By using filters on the interment book records online, one can see how many people died of various diseases such as cholera, scarlet fever, cancer, consumption, and even teething.⁵ From analyzing the Historic Nashville City Cemetery Interments, one can see that 140 of the burials from between 1850 to

² Ibid.

³ “Cholera Epidemics in the 19th Century.” <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/contagion/cholera.html>.

⁴ "Cholera Outbreak Guidelines." http://www.unicef.org/cholera/Annexes/SupportingResources/Annex_6B/OXFAM_Cholera_guidelines.pdf.

⁵ “Historic Nashville City Cemetery Interments (1846-1979)- Official.”

1860 were victims of cholera, whereas only three cholera victims were recorded in the record between 1900 and 1910.⁶ Undoubtedly, proper burial practices played a role in eradicating cholera from the population. The interment books are an excellent source for interpreting life and death beginning with the first interment book in 1846. A glossary of ancient disease names is also included online, as many illnesses in the nineteenth century were named much differently from the medical terms used today. This information can be used to analyze epidemics within the city and patterns of illnesses that correlate with the urbanization of Nashville. The filter available also allows one to conduct searches based on age, burial year, sex, and race.

The present function of the Nashville City Cemetery is quite different from what it was in the nineteenth century. While some people can choose to be buried at this cemetery today, the site serves mostly as an outdoor museum. The historical information provided by the cemetery today is priceless. Family historians and scholars now have easy online access to an alphabetical list of the interments from 1846-2010. While the cemetery started functioning in 1822, the first 24 years of interment records are lost.⁷ However, the obituaries for burials beginning in 1822 still exist and they are available online. One can take interest in the unique diction of the obituary entries. For example, one can read about Mr. Jacob B. Martin, who “displayed, during his sickness, the same mild resignation and gentleness of conduct which was his peculiar character in life,” and his “moral and correct deportment [was] applauded by all who thought correctly; and he was a favorite son of his parents. Long will they feel and mourn his loss - for few have

⁶ “Historic Nashville City Cemetery Interments (1846-1979)- Official.”

⁷ *The Nashville City Cemetery*, p. 2.

such a son.”⁸ Entries such as this can be read by the year, and a filter search is available to search the obituaries by key words or individual names.

In addition to the list of interments and obituaries, resource maps of all lots and sections that were compiled in 1908 and updated in 2005 allow one to locate and visit any specific grave they wish.⁹ Newspaper articles are catalogued on the Nashville City Cemetery website that account the lives of some people buried in the cemetery, and an occupation list of individuals is included, with links to their tombstones. One can view individuals who were teachers, lawyers, carriage drivers, firemen, grand-masters of the Masons, pioneer settlers, preachers, and poets. This information can be used to examine cultural trends within Nashville as the city developed. The possibilities for sociological studies of this information are boundless.

In addition to comparing the cemetery’s changes in physical function, comparing how the cemetery functioned in a social sense in the past and present allows one to study how the cemetery brought the city population together and formed community relationships. In the nineteenth century, the cemetery served as a community gathering space in the sense that all citizens rested in one place. The Nashville City Cemetery website notes that “by 1850, the cemetery was the final resting place for over 11,000 people of every race, religion and economic status.”¹⁰ While the cemetery includes Nashville founders, American Revolutionary War soldiers, and governors, it also includes slaves and free colored persons. Most of the people buried in the cemetery are actually not famous.¹¹

⁸ “The Nashville City Cemetery: Obituaries- 1822.” <http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1822.htm>.

⁹ *The Nashville City Cemetery*, p. 73.

¹⁰ “The Nashville City Cemetery: History.” <http://www.thenashvillecitycemetery.org/history.htm>.

¹¹ *The Nashville City Cemetery*, p. 27.

One reason why people from all walks of life were laid to rest in this particular cemetery is that because in 1822, this was the only cemetery owned by the corporation of the City of Nashville. Thus, everyone who lived in the city, without consideration of the color of their skin or their economic status, was buried in this cemetery.¹² Despite this fact, it is important to realize that patterns of racial segregation within in the cemetery continued to exist.

In 1840, “Nashville was the home to the largest free African-American population in the state.”¹³ The City Cemetery allows us to see how African-Americans interacted with the white population in the nineteenth century. “The community lived in two worlds, separately in a black world and also within a larger white one. This is reflected at City, where many black people are buried in the Negro ground and others lie throughout the cemetery.”¹⁴ Through touring the cemetery and comparing the monuments placed on white and African-American graves, one can draw conclusions about how the two separate communities interacted.

In stark contrast to gathering people together in death, today the City Cemetery gathers citizens of Nashville together in life. Volunteers known as Master Gardeners busy themselves with cemetery beautification and annual Spring Garden tours. Other volunteer work includes the involvement of local Boy Scout troops planting trees and the Hands On Nashville program assisting in trash cleanups and garden additions. More than eighty volunteers visit the cemetery each year, accumulating over 500 hours of community service annually.¹⁵ An annual “Memorial Day Dash” involving the Nashville Striders has been arranged for the past sixteen years. All of the proceeds raised during the event are used to fund the continuing preservation and restoration of the cemetery.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

One specific social product of the cemetery is “The Nashville City Cemetery Association” that was formed in 1998, which includes citizens who are historic preservationists, academic representatives, and descendants of the deceased. The non-profit organization strives to “protect, preserve, restore, and raise public awareness of the Nashville City Cemetery.”¹⁶ An even more engaging activity held at the cemetery today is the living history tour. Complete with re-enactors and biographical narratives, the living history tour gives visitors a chance to experience history visually and verbally. The tour is also recorded and accessible on the Nashville City Cemetery app, which individuals can use on their own time if no tour is scheduled.

Renovations of the cemetery in recent years have also made the cemetery more accessible and convenient for Nashville’s population and tourists. A water line was installed to provide water for flowers, bathroom facilities, and drinking fountains. Gravesites have been made more aesthetically pleasing and respectful by replacing old columns, cleaning limestone, and treating deteriorating stone with consolidant. On the City Cemetery website, there are pictures documenting every tombstone and mausoleum that was renovated. In 1946, the Keeble Building was built to provide office space for the cemetery sexton.¹⁷

Richard Meyer notes that having a beautifully landscaped cemetery is important for the community because it allows access to nature within in the city. This concept became more important for Nashville as it progressed through urbanization. Meyer states that a cemetery “preserves of nature in the immediate vicinity of the burgeoning metropolis, easy access for urban dwellers, which is becoming increasingly hard to find [in Massachusetts].”¹⁸ The need to

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁸ Meyer, Richard. *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture*, p. 312.

preserve nature within the metropolis of Nashville has without a doubt contributed to the change in function of the Nashville City Cemetery.

In 2008, The University of Tennessee Archaeological Research Lab used ground-penetrating radar equipment to identify unmarked graves. Because of this work, “the dignity of a clearly-marked grave was restored to thirty-six individuals, adding to the rich, historic tapestry of the Cemetery.”¹⁹ Also available in digital data files online are the original cemetery lot cards for those buried. Historians or descendants of the deceased can look up an individual by name and view the original lot card of the individual buried. The name of the lot owner, the date sold, and the dimension information of the burial plot is included. Consider, for example, the original cemetery lot card for Henry Albertson. In the digital copy of the cemetery lot card, one can see the specifications made for a 4 year-old's burial within the 10 feet by 20 feet family plot. The location of Magnolia and Mulberry is also noted on the card.²⁰

With the comparison of the past cemetery to the present, one must ask: does Nashville's growth as an urban center affect the role that the cemetery plays in our lives? Urbanism can have an impact on funeral practices and the rituals surrounding death, and Rebecca Marrall's research focuses on this topic. Within the state of Oregon, Marrall compared rural centers to urban centers in order to understand how urbanization impacts funeral practices. This research can be compared to the growth of Nashville through the nineteenth century to the present, as the Nashville population developed from rural to urban and to this today continues to include both rural and urban areas.

According to Marrall, urban dwellers today are more culturally exposed to funeral alternatives. Marrall researched urban patterns of funeral uses and found that "regional

¹⁹ *The Nashville City Cemetery*, p. 60.

²⁰ The Original Cemetery Lot Card for Henry Albertson.

differences influence what choices are available to urban and rural residents, [and] alternative funeral options are more accessible in the urban settlement." Through interviews with funeral directors and citizens of Oregon, Marrall observed that more urban residents choose alternative funeral options than do rural residents.²¹

New funeral trends also exist today, and the new technologies allowing these trends tend to originate in urban areas. These new trends include green burials, the LifeGem, and eternal reefs. One trend that is prominent today but was not as popular in the nineteenth century is cremation with the subsequent spreading of ashes in a wilderness area.²² The LifeGem is a diamond made using the carbon in the deceased individual's ashes. Green burials involve burying the dead with a minimal impact on the environment, using biodegradable pine boxes and no embalming chemicals. The eternal reef process involves mixing concrete with the deceased individual's ashes and molding it into the shape of a marine reef.²³ Marrall's suggestions may explain why the function of the Nashville City Cemetery has changed, as many burial alternatives are available today.

Through the process of urbanization, Nashville has certainly changed as a community since the nineteenth century. This change is displayed in how the function of the Nashville City Cemetery has deviated from being a burial ground to serving as a museum and database. Rather than bringing the community together for the purpose of funerals, the City Cemetery is now more commonly associated with historical information and outdoor leisure. While Rebecca Marrall suggests reasons why the function of an urban cemetery might change, Richard Meyer gives insight into why having an aesthetically pleasing cemetery is necessary within the city.

²¹ Marrall, Rebecca. "Urbanism and North American Funerary Practices," p. 9-10.

²² Ibid., p.16.

²³ Ibid.

Although Marrall studied funeral practices in Oregon and Meyer observed cemeteries in Massachusetts, a reader could believe that either one of the authors was discussing Nashville. This comparison exposes the patterns of urbanization and cemetery trends that are applicable across the United States. These ideas combine to provide a holistic explanation for why the function of the City Cemetery has changed and how this change was shaped by the urbanization of Nashville.

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