

SPOTLIGHT

Cemeteries: Cities of the dead, havens for the living

This article, which appears as part of a series, attempts to acquaint readers with the ongoing efforts to replace the Soldiers Monument and Statue of Fame, which commemorate the Civil War and recall the earliest days of Sewickley Cemetery.

This effort is borne by the non-profit organization, Citizens for Soldiers, a group of dedicated residents of Sewickley Valley. The support of the people in the valley is invaluable to the endeavors of this group.

From the day of its inception, May 19, 1859, Sewickley Cemetery has been a source of pleasure and pride, not only for the immediate community, but for many of our neighbors as well.

The task to preserve, in some fashion, the Civil War Monument has brought about an increased awareness of the cemetery as part of the active community. This shift, which incorporates the cemetery more fully into the public consciousness, affords an opportunity to ponder the evolution of this graveyard, its stunning collection of artwork and the rich history contained herein.

Why is this City of the Dead the perfect place for the restored Soldiers Monument? And why should we participate in the restoration process as individuals?

Despite the fact that death has always been part of the human experience, we have struggled, as history illustrates, to come to terms with it. Historians note a number of phases in the American view of death and the physical care of the dead. That care has usually involved burial in some form with the purpose, it seems, of protecting the body from further insult.

One of many customs arriving with the first settlers was the common practice of burying dead parishioners beneath the church floorboards, close to God.

As early community living developed here in America, utilizing that piece of ground below the church again became the norm; however, due to the limited space there, the practice of burial was forced out of doors.

It was during this phase that burial began to evolve into a more formal practice: The recording of one's name, date of birth and death on a wood or stone marker became a common practice.

As villages continued to grow, officials were now forced to deal with churchyards no longer able to accommodate



A TREETOP canopy shelters visitors to Sewickley Cemetery as they make their way up the winding road.

the number of dead. The strict use of consecrated ground, coupled with urban growth occurring around the church, prevented expansion of the graveyards. These burgeoning cemeteries, with their unsanitary conditions, also presented a growing "social" problem, which compelled managers to begin planning their first city cemeteries.

Grove Street Cemetery, established in 1796 in New Haven, Conn., was the first planned cemetery in America. It quickly became a model for others by taking into consideration proximity, traffic flow, use of resources and issues of sanitation.

Its location outside the immediate city had a psychological impact as well. Death, which had been in the public eye daily, was now removed. Away from the physical world of the living these cemeteries became somewhat separate and sadly, forgotten.

An important change associated with the development of the city cemetery was the contrast of church communal property and the private property of the city. Burial ground now had to be purchased and affiliation with a church was no longer required for admission.

In France, in 1804, a cemetery designed by Nicolas Frochet, a landscape artist, came into being, further revolutionizing the concept of death and burial.

Pedestrian walks, wooded areas, open meadows and streams were all found

within its walls.

Academy-trained architects and sculptors further transformed the landscape. Bronze, granite, ceramic tiling and stained glass were woven into the natural beauty creating a veritable Garden of Eden, a permanent resting place whose tranquility held the darkness and terror of death at bay.

The impact these changes had on society and their views concerning death was significant. Here in Sewickley, in 1859, the cemetery envisioned was based, in part, on some of the sweeping changes taking place here and in France.

Originally comprised of 22 acres, one of the first issues addressed was establishing a nursery on the property. From the beginning, lot ornamentation and general grounds landscaping was important to the board.

One must visit the cemetery to rediscover the treasures here, and to rekindle an appreciation for the history and art that reside with nature.

Being situated on the hill overlooking the river and valley is, in and of itself, beautiful. Imagining this space free of the houses and industry, without air traffic or automobiles, evokes images of the pristine beauty mentioned time and time again by D. N. White, cemetery superintendent from 1860 to 1888.

Consider this entry in the board's book of minutes dated June 1862:

"The Sewickley Cemetery is no longer problematical. It is a living institution on a permanent basis and promises to exist and flourish after every inhabitant in this beautiful valley has passed away and for future generations afterward.

"There is now not a doubt that it will be sought as a burial place by all the population within five miles in any direction and that it will become, in process of time, one of the most charming cities of the dead in this or any other county.

"In its beauty of natural scenery it is unsurpassed and when the adornments of art and nature are combined to beautify it, no more lovely and sacred resting place can be desired."

Spread over nearly 80 acres, Sewickley Cemetery looks much as it has from its beginning. The road, so difficult to establish initially, invites the spirit as it winds up through trees, moving beyond the noise of traffic. Old sections of stonewall and steep hillsides pocked with fern and Jacob's Ladder line the roadway.

At times, sunlight dances between the leaves' shadows on the pavement while at others the brilliant yellow leaves themselves become the sun, chasing grey days away.

Each section of the cemetery has unique characteristics. Some drop off into deeply shaded and heavily mossed places, dotted with lichen-coated tomb-

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Beauty, quiet ease aching spirits

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stones. A few are on top of the hill, in the sun, overlooking the valleys or the river.

There are enchanted places here. The smell of pine rising from the ground beneath the trees, drifting in the air with the songs of birds has the power to soothe the most disconcerted soul. Squirrels and chipmunks, forever on the move, are visible everywhere.

Huge shadows of turkey vultures skim across the grass while hawks float ever higher on the thermals coming up from the valley below.

Each season brings to the landscape continual revision. From heavy snows crusting pine boughs, bringing them low to the ground; to the deep lush grass spotted with yellow dandelions and the many flowering trees planted throughout, this city of the dead has an ethereal quality.

White and the board of 1862 were men who understood the need, not only for a cemetery in the valley but for a place of beauty in the midst of tumult. It is with a mixture of despair and hope that we reluctantly cope with the loss of those who have had the greatest impact on us.

Death is often perceived as the ultimate wedge and "the great equalizer"; it is an aspect of life we cannot escape. The cemetery is a place where people can come to re-establish and retain those connections that grounded them in their lives. It is a place for the living as well as the dead: A place to celebrate the lives of family, friends, veterans and the many who have had an impact on our world.

As one considers these attributes, it's easy to understand why so many beautiful pieces of art adorn this space. Given the quiet and serene surroundings, they are easy to reflect on. Whether simple markers or ornate headstones, every one of them represent the tangible history of an individual, a family or a group.

Memorials, like that of the Soldiers Monument, with the figure of Fame, belong in this setting. Here they can be appreciated in an atmos-



phere conducive to quiet contemplation. It is in settings such as this that art, history and the physical care of the dead blend, becoming part of the social infrastructure, enriching and nourishing community life.

Tax-deductible donations may be sent to: Citizens for Soldiers, Fame Fund, and P. O. Box 293, Sewickley, PA 15143. No donation is too small or too large.

Citizens for Soldiers is a Pennsylvania not-for-profit organization. It has a 501(c) (3) designation from the IRS.

The committee meets the third Wednesday of each month and welcomes your interest and support. Call 412-980-6013 or visit www.CitizensForSoldiers.org.