Tulips, Graceland Cemetery.

Photography by Arthur G. Eldridge. Courtesy Chicago History Museum.

Introduction

Graceland Cemetery, laid out over several decades on a sandy ridge in northern Chicago, eventually became one of the best known landscapes in the world. In 1915, more than fifty years after its dedication, the parklike setting was identified by the horticulturist Wilhelm Miller as "perhaps the most famous example of landscape gardening designed by a western man." Miller rhapsodically continued: "It is more than a mere cemetery, for it is full of spiritual suggestion, and its wonderful effects produced by trees and shrubs native to Illinois have profoundly influenced the planting of home grounds."[1] Graceland's naturelike planting compositions also influenced the design of parks, campuses, and institutional grounds throughout the Midwest and beyond, bolstering an indigenous "Prairie School" of landscape design whose most famous practitioner was the Danish-born landscape architect Jens Jensen.

The planting compositions that transformed Graceland were the work of Ossian Cole Simonds, the cemetery's superintendent for more than three decades. Simonds used Graceland as his private design laboratory, experimenting with lyrical combinations of common trees and shrubs—such as oak, maple, ash, hornbeam, hawthorn, witch hazel, dogwood, and elder—many of which he transplanted from the wild. Carefully cultivated in the cemetery setting, these plants eventually achieved great stature and beauty, stirring not only aesthetic admiration but pride over the burgeoning American movement in landscape design. Photographs of Graceland were featured in many period publications, conveying

an appreciation for the quiet beauties of native vegetation, preferred by "cultured" persons over the "showiest plants from all foreign lands."[2] In the years leading up to the First World War, nativist language laced increasingly polemical writings by Miller and others. Graceland's beauty was breathtaking, but more important to some, it had become a symbol of American purity.

To most visitors Graceland was also a source of solace and peace, a welcoming haven in an urban setting. The beauty of this place owed much to Simonds, but it also owed much to the layers of design that shaped the framework on which Simonds worked. This work was accomplished by a sequence of practitioners that included two looming figures in the history of American landscape, H. W. S. Cleveland and William Le Baron Jenney. These men, and those that came before, firmly believed in the salutary force of nature. And, in fact, legions of admiring visitors regularly made the trip to Graceland to lose themselves in the mirrorlike perfection of Lake Willowmere, to watch spring-blooming bulbs emerge under the wide-spreading branches of native oaks, and to observe native haws and maples take on the russet tones of autumn. They continue to do so today.

There is little question that Graceland's status as one of America's most important cemeteries is attributable to its conception as a work of landscape art. This book aims to recover the multilayered history of this iconic landscape. Design does not occur in a vacuum; along with the aesthetic vision of designer and client, the designs of gardens, parks, and cemeteries also encapsulate broader social concerns. Consequently, our study of Graceland Cemetery must begin with a consideration of its wider context.

Chicago's origins can be traced back to the late 1700s, with the founding of a trading post at the mouth of the Chicago River. In 1803 the U.S. Army built Fort Dearborn on a small hill overlooking the river. The site of the future city, as the architectural historian Robert Bruegmann describes it, was "an inhospitable stretch of marshy terrain that smelled of [wild] onions" on the southwestern shores of Lake Michigan.[3] The area was first used as a portage between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River, which would enable the city's growth as a continental transportation hub. From its original lakeshore environs, Chicago—and soon the nation—would expand westward into one of

Potter Palmer Monument, Lake Willowmere. *Graceland Cemetery* (Chicago: Photographic Print Co., 1904), courtesy Trustees of the Graceland Cemetery Improvement Fund.

America's most distinctive natural landscapes, the prairies; although greatly altered by agriculture today, the gently undulating prairies once covered much of the midwestern and western United States and Canada. Chicago had just over four thousand residents when it was incorporated as a city in 1837—officially adopting the motto *Urbs in Horto,* or "City in a Garden."

Urbs in Horto registered more an aspiration than it did the fledgling city's reality. City boosters such as William B. Ogden (Chicago's first mayor and later a member of Graceland's founding board) saw the cultivation of gardens as a means to "demonstrate the city's cultural refinement," hoping that it would be seen as more than a business center.[4] By 1840 the city's population had swelled to almost 4,500; only a decade later nearly 30,000 people would call Chicago home.

In 1848 water transport routes expanded, and with them the city's role as a trading center. In that year the Illinois and Michigan Canal, linking Lake Michigan to the Mississippi, was completed; via river and canal, it was now possible to ship goods from

the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. The same year saw the opening of Chicago's first railway, another conduit for manufactured goods and farm produce. Only the year before, as the historian Donald L. Miller notes, Chicago had not a single mile of track, but a decade later it was "the rail center of America."[5] As Bruegmann writes, "The city's development as one of the world's great railroad centers led to its dominance in the lumber, coal, and steel industries and the manufacture of farm implements, railroad cars, machinery, and household goods of all kinds."[6] Cattle operations followed the railroads' western expansion, and Chicago's vital role as a rail hub would soon lead to its becoming an epicenter for the meatpacking industry—Carl Sandburg's "hog butcher for the world." As its street gridiron quickly spread across the virtually flat terrain, the city also attracted people seeking lucrative business opportunities, especially in real estate.

View to Burnham Island.
Photograph by Arthur G. Eldridge. Courtesy Chicago History Museum

One of those was a Virginia attorney, Thomas Barbour Bryan. Arriving in 1852 by way of Cincinnati, Bryan established a legal practice, but he soon came to specialize in land speculation and the buying and selling of real estate, often acting as an agent for other investors. One of his enterprises would be the founding of Graceland Cemetery.

Nearly four thousand Chicagoans died in the Civil War; some casualties would come home to their final rest at Graceland. But the war also became a catalyst for industrialization, facilitated by Chicago's maturing transportation links and commercial economy. As the historian Theodore Karamanski notes, Chicago's chief rivals, Cincinnati and St. Louis, were too near the front lines in the early stages of the war, and Chicago was able to eclipse them as a center for grain distribution, meatpacking, and the heavy industries that supported the Union Army.[7]

In 1871, with the Civil War and a martyred president still a recent memory, the now legendary Great Fire destroyed roughly a third of the city's center (including the office of Graceland Cemetery and the records held there). But Chicago would rise from the ashes like a phoenix; the disaster became a catalyst for rebirth and further growth, and Chicago boosters now set out to rebuild the city under the banner "I Will." Of this period Bruegmann writes: "Chicago was experiencing changes of all kinds faster than the more established cities in the East or in Europe. It was a tumultuous place, building and rebuilding itself so fast that at times it must have seemed the entire city was under construction. It was the 'Shock City' of the 1870s and 1880s, where travelers went to view the future."[8] Mark Twain, in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), called Chicago "astonishing"; he described it as "a city where they are always rubbing the lamp, and fetching up the genii, and contriving and achieving new impossibilities." "It is hopeless," Twain observed, "for the occasional visitor to try to keep up with Chicago—she outgrows his prophecies faster than he can make them." The city's population had jumped to over half a million by the time Twain penned his description, and when Graceland's landscape development was completed around 1900, the figure had more than tripled.

"In Chicago," as the cemetery historian Helen Sclair astutely observes, "the living and the dead have always sought the same space, high and dry land with good transportation." In the early

Lake Willowmere.
Photograph by Arthur G. Eldridge. Courtesy Chicago History Museum

days, she notes, "both populations shared settlements at Fort Dearborn and along rivers." In 1835 the fledgling town established two burial grounds at its eastern edge. Soon enough, however, "the dead were standing in the way of the living," and both graveyards were closed. By 1843 Chicago had established the new City Cemetery on the lakeshore in what was then its northern hinterland (now Lincoln Park).[9] Cholera epidemics in the 1850s increased the cemetery's population and also fueled concern that ongoing burials there would contaminate the city's water source, Lake Michigan. It was against—and perhaps in entrepreneurial response to—this backdrop that Chicago's first rural cemeteries began to appear, further north of the city. Rosehill Cemetery saw its first burial in July of 1859, and the Roman Catholic cemetery Calvary was consecrated the same year. The dedication of Grace-

land would follow in 1860. By 1866 Chicago had abandoned City Cemetery, and bodies were exhumed for reinterment in rural cemeteries, including Graceland.

Unlike their urban predecessors, Chicago's new rural cemeteries were no mean burying grounds. By the nineteenth century, as the art historian Sally A. Kitt Chappell notes, most Americans had "changed their ideas about death since the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards spoke of 'sinners in the hands of an angry God.'" By contrast, "sermons—and paintings and poems—spoke of victory over death and the continuity of family life in a land of celestial bliss, but the belief had no expression in landscape art until the advent of the rural cemetery movement."[10] By the time it appeared on the Chicago scene, the rural cemetery idea was already decades old and had covered considerable distance in finding its way from its European birthplace to the American prairies. Chappell writes: "Early American rural cemeteries were inspired by Père-Lachaise, the immensely popular rural cemetery in Paris, created in 1804 in the English picturesque landscape style. In the newly industrialized nation, rural cemeteries like Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1831), Green[-]Wood in Brooklyn, New York (1838), and Spring Grove in Cincinnati, Ohio (1845), provided some of the few accessible parklike spaces for people who lived in crowded cities. Weekend revelers flocked to their lawns for picnics, family get-togethers, and other summer activities."[11]

Graceland and Chicago's other rural cemeteries would soon prove no less popular. Indeed, as Donald Miller observes in his history of the city, these cemeteries had become so popular by the 1860s that "one of them began charging admission to families failing to produce a burial-lot certificate." Paradoxically, as Miller points out, "to get some peace and quiet, to breathe pure and wholesome air, the citizens of the city of the living had to visit the gardens of the dead."[12]

But the city was not as welcoming of art as some. As a character in a novel by the Chicago writer Henry Blake Fuller (1857–1929) put it: "This town of ours labors under one peculiar disadvantage: it is the only great city in the world to which all its citizens have come for the one common, avowed object of making money. There you have its genesis, its growth, its end and object. In this Garden City of ours, every man cultivates his own little bed and his neighbor

his; but who looks after the paths between? Chicago, then, is not the sort of city in which artists are encouraged."[13] Indeed, whereas its Cambridge and Cincinnati predecessors had been founded by horticultural societies, Graceland would be established by private investors. Graceland and Chicago's other rural cemeteries did, however, provide an early civic amenity as quasi-parklands; it was nearly a decade after Graceland's founding before the city's park districts were established. In the end Graceland would become Thomas Bryan's object lesson that "making money" and the production of beauty were not mutually exclusive pursuits.

Graceland also displays, as Chappell writes, "a panorama of historic attitudes toward interment."[14] These attitudes, too, changed through time. Older portions of the cemetery, for instance, register the mid-nineteenth-century practice of delineating individual plots with iron railings or stone coping. This approach would later be supplanted by concern for creating an overall, harmonious composition of tree-framed lawns—"a soft green blanket over gently contoured land"—free from railings and coping, with low, inconspicuous gravestones.[15] Nonetheless, even this newer phenomenon did not remain static. Beginning around the turn of the century, a series of grandiose monuments were constructed to famous people by famous people, some of them seemingly oblivious of the cemetery's wider landscape setting.

The cemetery's landscape layout is best understood as a palimpsest. Perhaps even more so than its counterparts elsewhere, Graceland in its first half-century was a highly contingent, evolving creation involving no fewer than six primary designers—Swain Nelson, William Saunders, H. W. S. Cleveland, John A. Cole, William Le Baron Jenney, and O. C. Simonds—each man working over the work of his predecessors. Saunders made the first layout and Nelson implemented it; Cleveland and later Cole orchestrated expansions; Jenny laid out the cemetery's final expansion, draining and sculpting the terrain and providing Simonds with a foundation upon which to plant. Also important were the ideas and guidance of a pair of talented amateur landscape gardeners, Graceland's progenitor, Thomas Barbour Bryan, and his nephew—and successor as cemetery president—Bryan Lathrop. In fact, when Simonds began work at Graceland under Jenney's tutelage in 1878, he had no experience in landscape gardening. The canvas on which these designers worked was dynamic, as new land was acquired from time to time.

Lake Hazelmere. Photograph by Arthur G. Eldridge. Courtesy Chicago History Museum

Graceland's midwestern location is in itself significant. Initially the prairie grasslands were dismissed aesthetically because of their flatness and visual monotony. Landscape gardeners, professional and amateur alike, who came to Chicago from Europe or the eastern United States usually recreated scenic vignettes more typical of Old World gardens or New England. Such was the case with Graceland's early layouts. Indeed, all but one of the cemetery's designers were "transplants" to the Midwest. And yet one must remember that in the mid-nineteenth century landscape gardening—or landscape architecture, as it is known today—was a fledgling profession with only a handful of practitioners. By the century's end, however, local architects such as Louis Sullivan had cultivated an aesthetic appreciation of the prairies. In his *Autobiography of an Idea* (1924), Sullivan (writing in the third person) recalled his first encounter with the prairies, which "utterly

amazed and bewildered him" as he viewed them on a rail journey from Philadelphia to Chicago in the 1870s: "Stretching like a floor to the far horizon, —not a tree except by watercourse or on a solitary 'island.' It was amazing. Here was power—power greater than the mountains. Soon Louis caught glimpses of [Lake Michigan], . . . superbly beautiful in color, under a lucent sky. And overall spanned the dome of the sky, resting on the rim of the horizon far away on all sides, eternally calm overhead, holding an atmosphere pellucid and serene."[16]

Sullivan's appreciation of the prairie landscape would eventually spawn—driven by his protégé Frank Lloyd Wright—a regional school of design with Chicago as its epicenter. Landscape architects would follow. Paradoxically, one of the most eloquent articulations of this new regional landscape appreciation was written by a pair of Harvard academics. In their seminal textbook, *An Introduction to the Study of Landscape Design* (1917), Henry Vincent Hubbard and Theodora Kimball wrote:

> The sea alone, or a great lake, can vie with the prairie in the overwhelming simplicity of its effect. Extent, vastness, are alike in prairie and sea, but while the sea is always alive, even if at times asleep, the prairie is dead. It is immovable, ponderous, monotonous, stupefying. Each slight undulation which bounds the view gives promise of something different beyond, a promise always unfulfilled as one swell of ground succeeds another through days of travel. But nowhere better than on a prairie are to be seen the glories of the powers of the air. The squadrons of towering white cumulus clouds, giving in their diminishing perspective even a vaster sweep of view than the land, the daily miracles of sunset and sunrise, the clean and exhilarating summer breeze, or the deadly fury of a prairie blizzard, give to a man in an unusual degree a sense of standing directly in the presence of the great forces of the natural world.[17]

Within this shift in notions of landscape beauty or taste, Graceland would prove to be a harbinger of change. Graceland was at its landscape pinnacle by the second decade of the twentieth century, when Arthur G. Eldredge recorded it in a series of luminous photographs. Even if only unintentionally,

the cemetery's undulating landscape of sinuous drives and water bodies, velvety greenswards, and groves of predominantly native trees and shrubs would soon become a touchstone for a new generation of landscape architects. In its final form, Graceland's design linked the nineteenth-century work of landscape gardening pioneers to a second generation of designers. With restoration efforts ongoing and a burgeoning interest in native plants and sustainable design, Graceland Cemetery has no less potential to inspire twenty-first-century landscape architects.