

Graceland Cemetery: A Design History

By Christopher Vernon

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For some time—especially since the 1989 publication of Blanche Linden-Ward's *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery*—historians, architects, landscape architects, and lovers of peaceful oases in the city have become increasingly interested in the American rural cemetery movement. Its first exemplar, Mount Auburn Cemetery, was founded in 1831; two other important examples were established before the decade ended—Laurel Hill in Philadelphia (1836) and Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn (1838)—and Spring Grove in Cincinnati was chartered in 1845. Chicago's Graceland, founded in 1860, was one of the last. During the Civil War years, the rural cemetery would be gradually supplanted by other types of burial grounds.

Although cities in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states were quick to follow Boston's lead in establishing rural cemeteries, a phenomenon that Arthur J. Krim examined in his article "Diffusion of Garden Cemeteries in New England" (1983), modern monographs on these cemeteries have been slow to appear. Fortunately, early guidebooks were published to most of the first rural cemeteries—Mount Auburn, Laurel Hill, and Green-Wood—and they have become important sources of information and images. The two for Green-Wood and Mount Auburn, published in 1847, are often bound together, the text for the first written by Nehemiah Cleaveland and for the second by Cornelia W. Walter. Both are illustrated with line engravings by James Smillie. Some of the mourners portrayed in these engravings are solitary and sunk in melancholy; others are accompanied by children, subdued in manner but attentive, whom the adults appear to be lecturing on the virtues of the deceased. In 1852, *Smith's Illustrated Guide to and Through Laurel Hill Cemetery* appeared, written by R. A. Smith and illustrated with wood engravings. (It is now available online.)

Another major rural cemetery was Spring Grove in Cincinnati, chartered in 1845. Its trustees chose a site and then approached John Notman, a Scots-born architect who had designed Laurel Hill Cemetery. Notman's plan for Spring Grove was overly formal, however, and did not address the difficulties of the land. Next, the trustees approached a local architect, Howard Daniels, asking him to design a picturesque scheme that better dealt with the realities of the terrain. Daniels' plan was adopted, but the landscape became cluttered when individual owners began to embellish and plant their lots. In 1854, Robert Buchanan, a member of Spring Grove's board, met Adolph Strauch, a young Prussian landscape gardener and adherent of the famous garden designer Prince Pückler-Muskau. Strauch convinced Buchanan that he could achieve greater landscape unity in the cemetery by making the plan more scientific, and he was appointed Spring Grove's landscape gardener and then its superintendent. (He remained in Cincinnati for the rest of his life and is buried on an island in the lake at Spring Grove.) Strauch's revisions of the Spring Grove landscape were so successful that in 1875 Frederick Law Olmsted described it as "the best [cemetery in the United States] from a landscape gardening point of view."

These, then, are four of the most significant pre-1860 rural cemeteries in the United States—Mount Auburn, Laurel Hill, Green-Wood, and Spring Grove—and some important publications about them, both early guide books and modern monographs. Among modern studies, an essential reference is *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History* by David C. Sloane (1991), which covers the entire chronological sweep of the American cemetery in its every form and stylistic manifestation. Also of value is *Silent Cities* by Kenneth T. Jackson, with photographs by MacArthur Fellow Camilo Jose Vergara (1989), which is not limited to "elite" rural cemeteries but also discusses and illustrates the burial grounds of ethnic and religious minorities.

Before this year, however, Chicago's famous cemetery Graceland had never been the subject of a book-length study. Robin Karson, executive director of the Library of American Landscape History, and the trustees of the Graceland Cemetery Improvement Fund agreed that one was urgently needed. Karson invited Christopher Vernon, an American living in Australia, to write the book. Previously Vernon had written an introduction to a reprint of Wilhelm Miller's *Prairie Spirit in Landscape Gardening* and had contributed to a 1992 report on Graceland. He had also been a student of Walter L. Creese, who included a chapter on Graceland Cemetery in his book *The Crowning of the American Landscape: Eight Great Spaces and Their Buildings*. Now an associate professor in the School of Architecture, Landscape, and Visual Arts at the University of Western Australia, Vernon accepted the offer, even though it required him to make frequent long flights to his home hemisphere.

Like nearly all rural cemeteries, Graceland, founded just before the Civil War by Thomas Barbour Bryan, is a private entity. In 1856, Bryan a lawyer and land developer, formed a committee and purchased land to the north of Chicago,

Review of *Graceland Cemetery: A Design History* by Cynthia Zaitzevsky in *Site/Lines* Spring 2013

which had undulating terrain and a grove of old trees. He had studied A. J. Downing's writings as well as G. M. Kern's *Practical Landscape Gardening* (1855), which includes a section on layouts for cemeteries.

Most of these well-known rural cemeteries were designed sequentially by one person or at most two, as in the case of Daniels and Strauch at Spring Grove. By contrast, Graceland was the subject of plans by at least five landscape professionals, generally little known. The first was a Swedish landscape gardener, Swain Nelson, who had settled in Chicago. Next on the scene was William Saunders, a Scots landscape gardener with an established reputation in Philadelphia. Nelson and Saunders appear to have worked in tandem for a time, with Saunders the principal designer and Nelson executing his plans. An undated lithograph of Graceland attributes the design to both men. Although water-stained and marred by a large tear, it is a key document, showing a regular layout but with an area reserved for parkland—one feature of which was a grotto.

Horace W. S. Cleveland would also provide an early design for the cemetery. Cleveland had gained a reputation primarily for New England work, including four cemeteries, and also for implementing Olmsted and Vaux's plans for Prospect Park in Brooklyn. He then moved to Chicago from Boston and did the same for their designs of the south parks of Chicago and the nearby community of Riverside. When *The American Builder and Journal of Art*, which published articles on landscape matters, was founded in Chicago in 1869, Cleveland became a contributor with "A Few Hints on the Arrangement of Cemeteries." A few years later, he wrote a booklet entitled *The Public Grounds of Chicago: How to Give Them Character and Expression*. It was almost inevitable that Cleveland would be asked to do further work at Graceland. (Although the cemetery itself was well outside the range of the Great Fire of 1871, Cleveland's 1870 plan was destroyed, but it was also described in an official pamphlet, which Vernon has made use of here.)

In 1877, Graceland's founder left Chicago to take a post in the Rutherford Hayes administration. Before leaving, however, Bryan hired William Le Baron Jenney to carry out the last major improvements at Graceland. Today best known as the architect of the structurally innovative Home Insurance Building (1885) in Chicago, Jenney had studied engineering in Paris. However, his tenure was short. By 1881, Thomas Bryan's nephew Bryan Lathrop, Vice-President of Graceland's Board of Managers, had named Ossian Cole Simonds landscape gardener at Graceland, bestowing upon him the titles of "Superintendent, Landscape Gardener, Engineer, and Surveyor." Traditionally the design of Graceland is attributed to this last contributor to its planning.

Simonds had just completed his architectural studies at the University of Michigan. Aside from a rural upbringing, he had no special knowledge of plants when he arrived at Graceland, but during the course of his tenure there he became an expert plantsman. He and Lathrop immediately began planting the site, then barren and practically treeless. While few planting plans for Graceland have survived, Simonds left an account of his first planting activities there, writing that he went out into the country to select "native growth" from farms, including elms and other trees "fourteen, sixteen and eighteen inches in diameter." He also purchased wagonloads of shrubs. Like Olmsted in his design of the Boston parks, under way at the same time, Simonds was not a purist about native plants. He emphasized but did not use them exclusively to create what Wilhelm Miller called "long views"—a fine example of which is the grass path depicted in Vernon's book. Carefully graded and sensitively planted, this path has an intriguing but almost certainly accidental resemblance to the walk past Ray Wood at Castel Howard in North Yorkshire, England, which terminates first at Vanbrugh's Temple of the Four Winds and then in a distant view of the Howard family mausoleum designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor (1731).

Simonds resigned as Graceland's superintendent in 1898 but remained as landscape gardener for a few more years, a total of two-and-a-half decades of intense involvement at the site. Vernon gently suggests that posterity has been perhaps too kind to Simonds, giving him credit for concepts developed by his predecessors, who had done considerable groundwork before his arrival. Nevertheless, when Simonds retired, Graceland's evolution as a landscape was essentially complete, and two of its most famous monuments were in place: the Martin Ryerson tomb (1889) and the Carrie Eliza Getty Mausoleum (1890), both by Louis H. Sullivan. Later memorials in Graceland included the Marshall Field monument (1906), a collaboration between sculptor Daniel Chester French and architect Henry Bacon in a garden setting, and the mini-Parthenon designed by McKim, Mead & White in 1921 for Mr. and Mrs. Potter Palmer, which overlooks Lake Willowmere.

Vernon's research on this book was exemplary. Where documents were lacking or lost in the 1871 fire, he diligently sought sources elsewhere. He located the *American Builder*, in print for a scant four years, which contains valuable

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information about Cleveland's Chicago years. He also obtained a transcript of Simonds's account of Graceland's plantings from the University of Michigan. His bibliography is exhaustive. The book is illustrated with fine black and white historic photographs chiefly from two sources: eloquent turn-of-the-century views by Arthur G. Eldredge, some from the collection of the Chicago History Museum and others from a 1904 book on Graceland published by the Photographic Print Company. It also contains contemporary photographs in both color and black-and-white by Carol Betsch. Both trained landscape historians and other readers of *Site/Lines* will be happy to have this book in their libraries.

—Cynthia Zaitzevsky