



# Cortland Rural Cemetery

110 TOMPKINS STREET • CORTLAND, NEW YORK 13045

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## Cemeteries in a Changing American Society

By ANDREW PALM

The first cemeteries in America consisted of church or community cemeteries, patterned after the cemeteries our early European settlers were familiar with. Row after row of simple markers described by one writer as "unattractive necessities ... overgrown with weeds." In urban settings these cemeteries were many times filled, abandoned and built over.

In Europe, cemetery space was usually recycled, with the deceased occupying a burial space for a number of decades, and then that same space was re-used for another burial. But in America with its vast unused land, we developed a new tradition of giving each deceased a permanent burial space of their own.

The growing affluence in America in the 1800's, combined with a new romantic view of nature and other societal changes, created an environment in which a new physical layout of cemeteries would be developed. It was called the Rural Cemetery Movement, and the first cemetery to be designed in this new landscape architecture style was Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1831. The Rural Cemetery style spread rapidly through America and was adopted by many communities in Cortland County, including Cortland, Homer, McGraw, Marathon and Truxton. These Rural Cemeteries were characterized by larger family-owned lots, roads that wound through the cemetery, large shade trees, and walkways that allowed each family access to their own lot in a park-like setting. Tombstones became artistic endeavors and cemeteries became a place for a peaceful stroll as well as a place of mourning.

By the time of the development of the Cortland Rural Cemetery in 1853, the Rural Cemetery movement was peaking.

The latter half of the 19th century saw the development and widespread adoption of the Lawn



*Rural Cemetery style landscape architecture.*

Cemetery landscape architecture style. The Lawn Cemetery is characterized by block-like sections, straight roads and a lack of walkways that was intentional. With the development and maintenance of grass lawns, it was expected that you would simply cross the lawn to get to your family lot. Cortland Rural Cemetery adopted the Lawn Cemetery landscape architectural style in most of the sections laid out after the original core land acquisition and design.

The third major change in cemetery layout in America was the introduction of the Memorial Park. Characterized by markers that were only installed flush with the ground and with no monuments above ground, this early 20th century style was widely adopted for new cemetery design. We have a few areas which utilized this style in Cortland Rural, including our two Veterans' sections as well as parts of three other sections which were limited to flush markers only starting in the late 1950's. In many upstate cities, whole new cemeteries were built using this style.

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## Cemeteries in a Changing American Society *(continued from front)*



*Lawn Cemetery style landscape architecture.*

Land was formerly often sold in larger lots designed for an extended family, a process that has now primarily shifted to smaller lots of one, two or three graves for just a limited family.

But greater utilization of space occurs when you build taller above-ground mausoleums, which typically are six crypts high and can be built in multiple floor layouts. Popularized first in larger American cities where space was at a premium, they extended to medium size cities like Syracuse, Binghamton and Rochester in the 1960's and '70's. Public Mausoleums have become widely accepted particularly in those areas with immigrant populations who have a tradition of above-ground mausoleum interment, like the relatively recent Italian immigrants to America. Considerably less expensive than private mausoleums and often featuring indoor settings which can be comfortably visited year-round, they also appeal to the large percentage of the American population who still have a fear of underground burial — surveys reporting that up to 80% of the American public has that fear.

Cortland Rural Cemetery has the only public mausoleum in Cortland County, and it was constructed inside our chapel just a couple years ago.

But the bigger change has been in the rise of cremation. Crematories have been in existence since the late 1800's in America, but cremation was not a common practice until the 1980's. Religious

practices have changed, the Catholic Church accepting cremation in 1963 for example. In addition, the mobility of retirees has made cremation's practical aspect of separating the time of death from the time of interment a significant factor in deaths occurring in areas with large retiree populations such as Florida, Arizona and Hawaii. Finally, economic pressures have become a larger and larger factor in making funeral arrangements, and the choice of cremation can have a significant impact on the cost of funeral and cemetery services.

All of this has led to a rapidly growing acceptance of cremation as a practice with the confirmed 2003 national cremation rate exceeding 28%. Roughly 45 percent of deaths in America are expected to result in cremation by 2025, not that far away now, and the rate seems to be growing faster than previously expected. In those retiree-heavy states of Florida, Arizona and Hawaii, the rates for 2025 are projected to exceed 65%.

And unfortunately, there is our dilemma. For many older cemeteries, and that includes virtually all of those in New York, there is a growing cost of maintenance for those older sections sold years ago for little money in today's dollars. While the goal for cemeteries is a trusted permanent maintenance or perpetual care fund that will generate enough revenue to maintain the full cemetery in perpetuity, the reality is most cemeteries today need a large portion of their maintenance expenses to be covered by current operational revenue.

Coupled with that is the lack of established



*Memorial Park style landscape architecture.*

tradition of burial or inurnment of cremations, as many cremated remains end up on the mantle, shelf, or worse, the closet or attic. For instance, the use of cremation means that survivors can end up burying the remains in backyard gardens or scattering them in places where they end up with no access in the future as properties are sold or developed for other uses. The cemetery has traditionally solved this problem by being neutral ground that anyone can visit when they want, night times excepted of course, without the need for the permission or forbearance of anyone else. The act of scattering also means you have limited your use of memorialization. The cemetery can still be used for a monument or marker if the person's remains aren't placed there. To better fill that gap between the number of cremations performed and the number actually put to final rest, and to provide the traditional value of a neutral, universal and permanent place for cremated remains, cemeteries have developed choices called niches. In walls in mausoleums, in stand-alone outside structures, in garden walls and benches, cemeteries now offer affordable, permanent places of rest and memorialization for cremations in small cubicles. Accompanying this has been the development of a wide range of urns, including very elaborate ones, to hold the remains and the development of glass-fronted niches to be able to view those urns.

But changing demographics in upstate New York also means fewer people and fewer burials. So even though cemeteries offer new choices in products and services, they simply have fewer available customers than in years past. As a result, cemeteries have become increasingly dependent on donations and fundraising activities, as well as marketing themselves in new ways to generate friends and eventual customers. Some of these can be quite beneficial to the community, for instance White Haven Memorial Park near Rochester was the first cemetery in the country to become an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary.

The modern cemetery is really for the living, a legacy of the Rural Cemetery Movement. It's a place you go with your memories, a green place to experience some quiet, a place to contemplate the significance of our past and appreciate today. I love to visit cemeteries and do just those things, and I hope I've given you a better appreciation of the challenges of maintaining both the traditions and the physical structure of our cemeteries in today's changing world. ♣

—Excerpted from a talk to the Cortland Rotary Club, June 2007

## Shrub Maintenance

While the Cemetery has traditionally pruned shrubbery on individual lots in the Cemetery, this is actually the responsibility of the lot owners. Shrubby is considered a living memorial, similar to monuments and markers, and is not part of Perpetual Care or Permanent Maintenance. The Cemetery's obligation is to mow the lawns to the extent money is available to do it. Due to rising costs of labor, fuel and equipment and the demands of a longer mowing season, the Cemetery is no longer in a position to offer shrub pruning as a free service.

The Trustees of the Cemetery are in the process of developing a new policy on Shrubbery Maintenance that will require some degree of annual shrubbery maintenance by owners of lots with shrubbery on them. In order not to be a practical burden on lot owners who can't do the work themselves, the pruning of shrubbery and the removal of shrubbery will be offered as paid services provided by the Cemetery to lot owners.

New plantings of shrubbery need to be approved by the Superintendent for location so they don't overgrow the lots or markers of neighboring lots.

If you have overgrown shrubs you'd like removed, or if your shrubbery needs pruning and you'd like the Cemetery to do it for you, please contact them directly at 607-756-6022 for a quote on the cost. ♣

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## Tree Planting

The Cemetery Foundation continues to offer the ability to make a donation of \$250 or \$300 and have a tree planted in memory of a loved one. A \$250 donation will allow for a smaller tree such as a Pear or Crabapple, while the \$300 donation enables the planting of a larger tree such as Maple or Oak. The trees are planted in locations which fit the general plan of the Cemetery but we can try to make those near to your family lot so you more easily find and appreciate them.

Trees are maintained by the Cemetery and using mostly "free" labor, the Cemetery Superintendent and staff have been diligently working at pruning existing trees to enhance their appearance and health while making them easier to mow under and around. ♣

# New Glass Front Cremation Niches

The Cemetery has installed two units of glass-fronted niches to hold cremation urns. Each unit has 16 single niches for one urn and 10 double niches designed to hold two urns. These glass-fronted niches are designed to view the more elaborate cremation urns now available from funeral directors and other sources. Each niche will have a plaque on it with the name of the deceased with birth and death dates along with room for a small framed photo of your loved one.

Beautifully crafted of bronze, stainless steel and glass, these niches are indoors and naturally illuminated by the adjacent west-facing stained glass window.

These glass-fronted niches join the existing offerings of Tudor styled wood cremation niches of oak along with crypts faced with Italian marble designed to hold casketed remains, all within the Historic Chapel building.

Priced from \$1,000 for singles and \$2,500 to \$3,000 for doubles, these niches are affordable, attractive and convenient. For more information or to make an appointment to view them, please call the Cemetery at 607-756-6022.



*Photo by James Clark*



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