

Springfield Cemetery, Queens. Zinc.

## Introduction

Cemeteries are outdoor museums which reflect changes in culture just as vividly as they reveal genealogical records. Cemetery gravestones mirror trends in social history, art, and architecture, and cemetery grounds are often important examples of landscape design. They therefore merit the same public attention and preservation given to historic houses and other landmarks of America's heritage.

This brochure resulted from a survey and evaluation of New York City's historic cemeteries carried out by the archaeology program of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. The project included historical research and documentation of forty cemeteries throughout the five boroughs and an educational outreach program consisting of a series of lectures and walking tours. It was made possible by a grant from the New York Council for the Humanities to the New York Landmarks Preservation Foundation.

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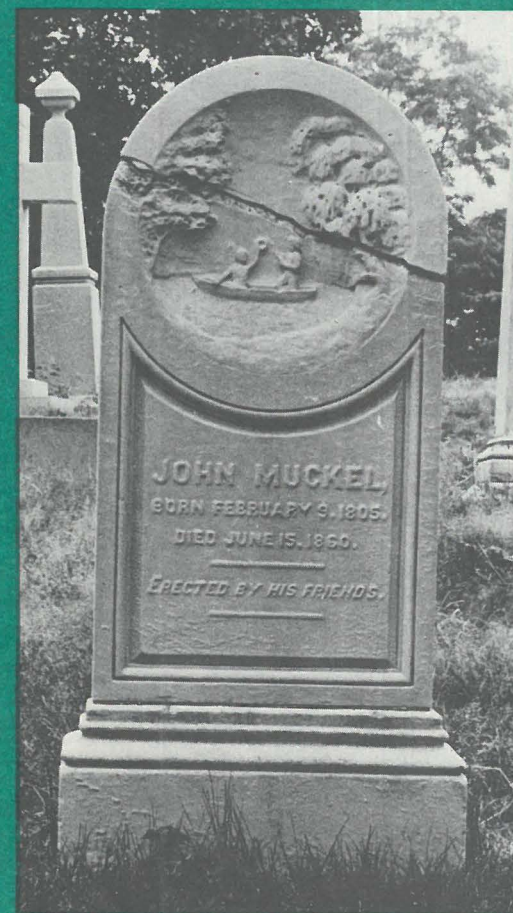
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# Preserving Historic Cemeteries

New York City  
Landmarks Preservation Commission  
Gravestone Project



Trinity Cemetery Uptown, Manhattan. Marble.



## Why Study Historic Gravestones?

*Gravestones are documents in stone.* They may be the only surviving records providing information on life spans, infant mortality, sex roles, occupations, ethnic status, and social class. When other sources have survived, gravestones can often fill in the gaps left in the written historical record.

*Gravestones are works of art.* Early American stones are the work of our nation's Colonial artisans, and the carved designs are a folk art. Later, in the Victorian era, cemeteries reflect significant trends in art, architecture, and urban planning. The more elaborate Victorian nineteenth century cemeteries often include sculptures and mausoleums which rival museum pieces in esthetic and technique.

*Gravestones reflect America's attitude towards death.* Colonial cemeteries were pious reminders of the brevity of life and the stark surety of death, mitigated by the promise of eternity. The designs on Colonial stones were simple because colonists believed that protracted mourning and ostentatious displays of grief were an affront to God and a chal-



St. Andrews Cemetery, Staten Island. Brownstone.

lenge to the Divine plan. Death was a humbling reminder of an individual's mortality and God's omnipotence. In contrast, the more elaborate nineteenth century Victorian motifs reveal how values had evolved or changed since the Colonial period. The Romantic cemeteries of Victorian America celebrated death as the step into immortality from a life on earth, which, if fortunately lived with success, hinted at the richness to come in the eternal life. The Victorians believed that worldly success affirmed God's plan. Therefore, it was no longer considered impious to display one's material wealth and social status in the erection of splendid monuments or mausoleums. Thus the success of the deceased could be proudly memorialized rather than recalled with humility as in the Colonial period.



Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn. Sandstone and Granite.



Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn. Marble.

## Materials

The earliest surviving New York City gravestone dates from 1681. Colonial stones were carved from schist from Manhattan and Connecticut, sandstones from Connecticut and New Jersey, and slates from Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Occasionally, stones were imported from Europe. Between 1800 and 1820, marble was increasingly preferred for monuments and sculptures. However, by the last decade of the nineteenth century it was apparent that marble deteriorated quickly in the urban environment. The predominant use of granite has continued ever since. Throughout the nineteenth century, mausoleums and elaborate monuments utilized a wide variety of stones including brownstones and colored granites. Cast iron fencing, monument trim crafted from a variety of metals, and semi-precious stones complemented the ornate markers and mausoleums of Victorian cemeteries.





Trinity Cemetery Downtown, Manhattan. Brownstone.



## Motifs

The symbols most frequently found on Colonial stones are:

- 1) death's heads with wings or crossbones
- 2) cherub or angel heads with wings
- 3) ornate and prominently carved initials of the deceased
- 4) flowers
- 5) Masonic designs

Infrequently, Colonial stones include a unique symbol such as a cannon or portrait. The majority of the Colonial stones in New York City include nothing more than inscriptions and dates. Stones showing surnames of Dutch, English, Irish, Scottish, German, French, Flemish, Scandinavian, and Jewish ancestry were found throughout the city in Colonial cemetery grounds affiliated with their respective congregations and sometimes within the same burial grounds, but the texts or phrases inscribed on the majority of the stones were inscribed in English whatever their ancestry. The surnames reveal the continuous tolerance extended to diverse ethnic groups by the Colonial Dutch and English.

After 1840, as Victorian cemetery art evolved, sculptures increasingly adorned monuments. Mausoleums as well as monuments reflected popular nineteenth century architectural styles such as Egyptian and Gothic Revivals. On individual stones, Colonial motifs such as cherubs and angels continued to be used but the number of motifs increased profusely.

Among the more popular motifs during the Victorian period were the following:

## Motifs and their Meanings

ANCHORS *Hope*

ANGELS AND CHERUBS *Heavenly messengers, guides*

BOUQUETS *Condolences, mourning*

DOVES *The soul; purity; Holy Ghost*

FLOWER WITH BROKEN STEM *Life cut off in bloom (especially regarding youth)*

HANDSHAKES *Spiritual union; farewell*

LAMBS *Innocence; Christ; sacrifice*

SHEAF OF WHEAT *Bounty of the earth; a full life*

TORCHES INVERTED *Death*

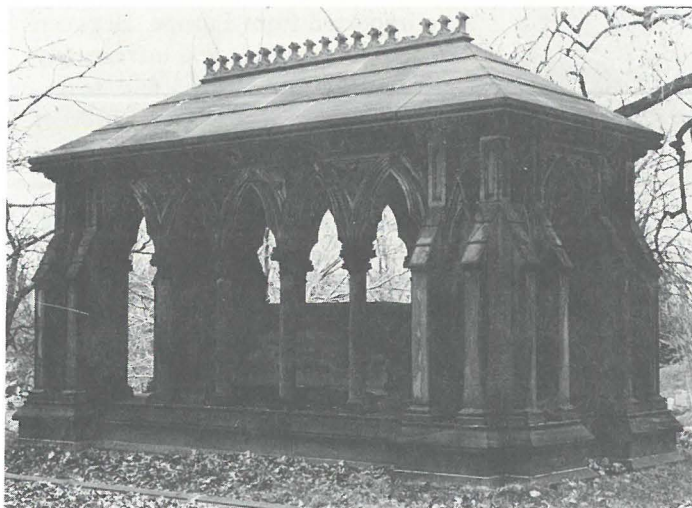
URNS *Mortality; the container of the soul*

WILLOWS *Gospel of Christ; mourning*

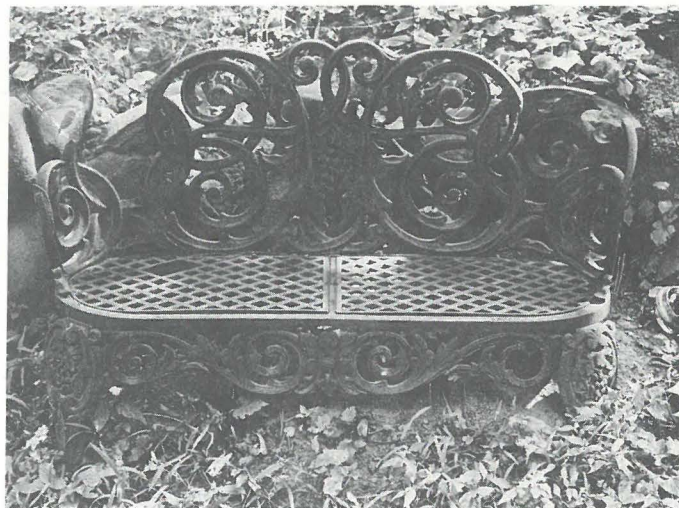
WREATHS *Victory over sin and death*

## Landscape

Colonial cemeteries were usually situated next to the church with a minimum of landscaping. Victorian cemeteries were built in response to the pressures of expanding urban populations at a time when urban land values were increasing. The cemeteries were built in areas that at that time were less expensive rural suburbs but are now part of the city proper. The landscape design of Victorian cemeteries is reflected in the terms frequently applied to these cemeteries: "Romantic," "rural," and "garden." Victorian cemeteries were based on precepts established in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by such visionaries as Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton. These concepts were popularized and further developed in America by landscape architects such as A.J. Downing, Calvert Vaux, and Frederick Law Olmsted. Their plans emphasized the picturesque planning of man-made pools, curving paths, and idyllic vistas set amidst plantings of both native and exotic trees. The overall effect was that of nature preserved—and rearranged—by the hand of man and protected from the corrupt city. The park-like effect was

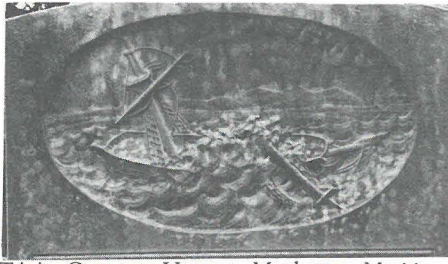


Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn..Brownstone..



Trinity Cemetery Uptown, Manhattan. Cast Iron..



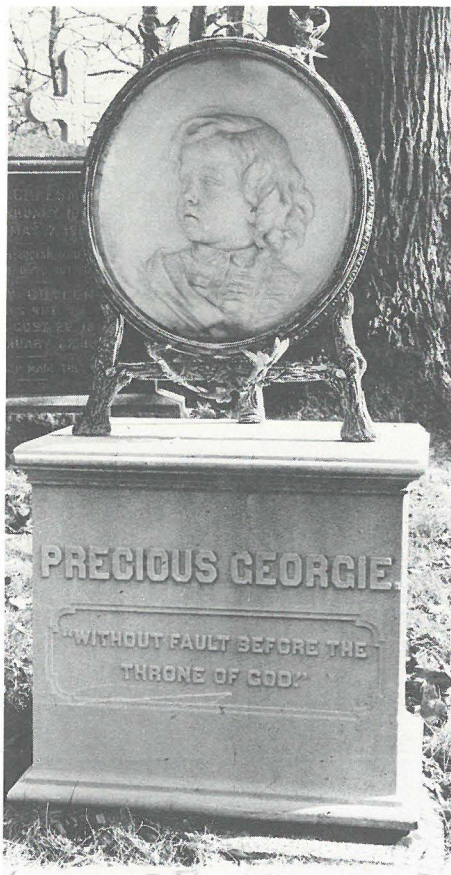


Trinity Cemetery Uptown, Manhattan. Marble.

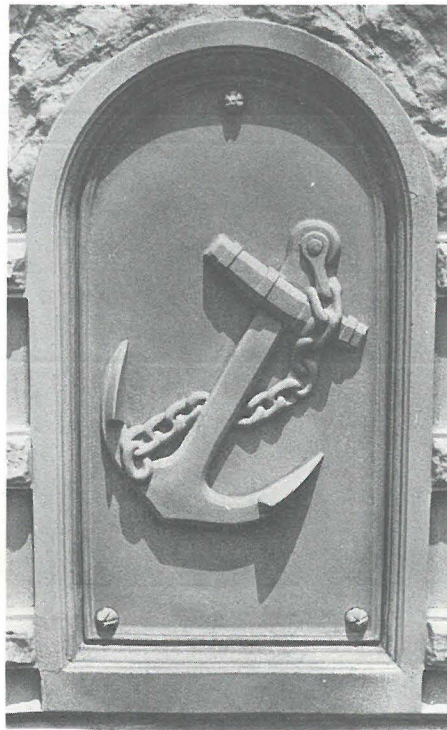
designed to achieve two goals of the Romantic ideal: both to delight the beholder and to lift the individual's thoughts to a more spiritual plane. They were also designed to act as public parks, outdoor museums of sculptures, and arboretums. A Sunday afternoon horse-drawn carriage ride through the cemetery, a stroll around the grounds, and even a picnic lunch amidst the monuments became popular forms of recreation in the Victorian era.

### *Preservation*

In the twentieth century, attitudes towards death are as culturally complex as they have ever been. As in the past, they are different from beliefs held by



Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn. Marble and Bronze.



Springfield Cemetery, Queens. Zinc.

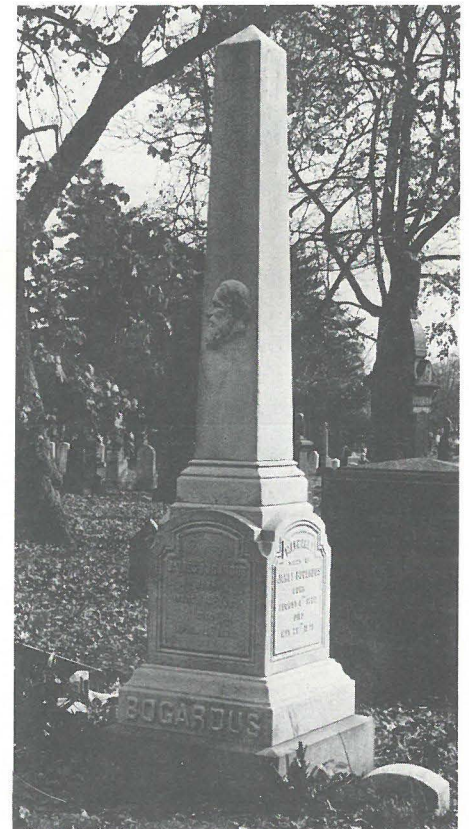
preceding generations. Today's views of immortality, whether optimistic or skeptical, place less emphasis on the importance of memorials than Victorian Americans did. Although for admittedly different reasons, today's stones are reminiscent of Colonial America's minimal emphasis on markers. The twentieth century's increasing reluctance to bear the full cost of cemetery upkeep threatens to destroy the heritage of America's earlier cemeteries. Maintenance costs for monuments, cast iron fencing and landscaping are increasingly difficult to fund. Even more striking are the effects upon cemeteries of age and environmental pollution. In addition to simple preservation, creative reuse is an alternative. Some congregations, civic organizations, and local governments have advocated a return to the Victorians' use of cemeteries as public parks. One such example is the welcome extended by Trinity Parish in lower Manhattan to people on their lunch hour who may bring sandwiches and eat on benches placed throughout Trinity's two graveyards, utilizing the cemeteries in ways not unlike the Victorians who picnicked in and enjoyed the park-like setting of their cemeteries. Some municipalities have converted cemetery chapels and gatehouses into local history museums or community

centers. Tours focusing on both the historical and esthetic aspects of old cemeteries can serve to increase community awareness and interest so that adequate funds can be raised to preserve deteriorating monuments. Because so many of the old cemeteries contain a variety of trees, bushes, and flowers, historic cemeteries are obvious attractions for horticultural groups and garden clubs. You may wish to write for further information by contacting the following organizations:

The Association for  
Gravestone Studies  
% American Antiquarian Society  
Worcester, MA 01609

Friends of Mt. Hope Cemetery  
(Victorian)  
791 Mt. Hope Avenue  
Rochester, NY 14620

New York City  
Landmarks Preservation Commission  
20 Vesey Street  
New York, New York 10007



Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn. Marble.