

Visiting ‘the Deserted Village’

ALEXANDER HUGHES

My grandmother lives just down the road from the cemetery where my grandfather is buried. Growing up, when my sister and I would visit her, she would often take the two of us on our bicycles down the street to visit his grave. I remember these visits fondly; they allowed me to pay my respects to my departed relatives and to draw closer to my living family. Somewhere along the way, I grew old enough to also appreciate these cemetery visits for their own sake. I began to reflect on the fact that I, too, will one day be buried—God willing, somewhere on those same grounds—and I in turn began to think about what I might do to justify myself before I get there.

Despite my affinity for graveyards, it was with a twinge of embarrassment that I reacted to the suggestion that I should lead a tour of Mount Auburn Cemetery for a group of the Abigail Adams Institute’s student fellows. It was a welcome idea—but despite the fact that the cemetery is only about a mile from campus and (probably) inspired the cemetery I loved so much as a kid, I somehow never had been there. This oversight would have been unthinkable had I attended Harvard just a few generations earlier, when, I’m told, its spacious grounds were a favored spot to take a date for a stroll or a picnic. Earlier still, in the cemetery’s early days, it was considered one of the focal points of Boston society: the poet James Russell Lowell once said that Bostonians had only two ways of entertaining important guests: a public dinner or a trip to Mount Auburn.



To appreciate why Mount Auburn once meant so much to the city, it is necessary to understand the circumstances of its creation. Anyone who has walked the Freedom Trail can describe the condition of Boston's older graveyards. They were typically cramped, with rows of small, homogenous, gray headstones—and little else. Even in communities where more space was available, early American cemeteries were relatively unornamented and unvarying. They were meant to provide for the dignity of the dead, but they were not meant for the active enjoyment of the living. In some cases, according to John Stilgoe's *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845*, the Puritans intentionally built disheveled graveyards as "carefully articulated emblem[s] of the wildness of personified death."¹

That changed for a very simple reason—in the 1820s, Boston was running out of space to bury the dead. Afraid of the public health problems that would result from improper burials, Mayor Josiah Quincy III tasked Jacob Bigelow with finding a solution to the problem.² Bigelow was both a physician and one of New England's most prominent botanists; as a member of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, he saw an opportunity to solve two problems at once.

Drawing on examples like Paris' Père Lachaise, the city's new cemetery would also be a carefully landscaped botanical garden. There wasn't enough empty land in Boston proper to fulfill this vision, so the state legislature bought a farm in Cambridge and set the Society to work transforming it.

When the cemetery was finally consecrated in 1831, several thousand people came to mark the occasion. Gathered together in a convenient spot near the center of the property, they listened as Justice Joseph Story, the first president of the cemetery, invested it with a third role to go alongside that of burial ground and garden. The monuments within were for the purpose of instructing the feelings of the living:

It should not be for the poor purpose of gratifying our vanity or pride that we should erect columns, and obelisks, and monuments, to the dead; but that we may read thereon much of our own destiny and duty. We know that man is the creature of associations and excitements. Experience may instruct, but habit, and appetite, and passion, and imagination, will exercise a strong dominion over him. These are the Fates, which weave the thread of his character, and unravel the mysteries of his conduct. The truth, which strikes home, must not only have the approbation of his reason, but it must be embodied in a visible, tangible, practical form. It must be felt, as well as seen. It must warm, as well as convince.³

Mount Auburn was the one of the first cemeteries of its kind in the United States, but many others quickly followed its example, creating new spacious, landscaped grounds for the dead. No doubt this is in part because other cities faced similar problems of overcrowding in their oldest cemeteries. But the greater part of its appeal, I suspect, came from the fact that the form and functions of the cemetery were so well-matched. The mourner, of course, wishes to be comforted, and he might take some comfort in the idea that the dead are somewhere which is clean and beautiful and cared for. More than that, to paraphrase Dr. Johnson, the sure knowledge of death has a wonderfully concentrating effect on the mind. The beauty of a well-kept graveyard has the power to soothe that fear without erasing the desire to live better that it inspires.

Mount Auburn remains an active cemetery, but most of us do not go there to mourn, for example, Charles Sumner or Julia Ward Howe or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The sadness caused by their deaths has dissipated. Instead, we go hoping to be invigorated by the memory of their great deeds and beautiful ideas. Eventually, most visitors reach the largest of the monuments on the property, a tower dedicated to Washington (without honoring him, I suppose, no American Panthéon would be complete). Standing at its top, reviewing Cambridge and Boston laid out before him, one might just be inspired to breathe new life into the nation his ancestors carved out of the forest.

The fear of death cannot be bested by means other than the spiritual, but the fear of being forgotten can be. This is the balm a good cemetery offers us—a surety that our bones will not lay neglected. More than that—more than a commitment that we will be remembered—it promises us that our memories might still do some good after we are gone. It leaves open the possibility that a young man, decades hence, might likewise stumble upon our graves and walk away once more prepared to defend the Permanent Things.

¹ John Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580-1845*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 227.

² Meg Winslow, “A History of Mount Auburn Cemetery,” March 26, 2024, Cary Memorial Library, Lexington, Massachusetts, YouTube, 1:17:26, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_m7HndvvQQ.

³ Joseph Story, *Consecration Address: An Address Delivered on the Dedication of the Cemetery at Mount Auburn, September 24, 1831*. Mount Auburn Cemetery. <https://mountauburn.org/joseph-storys-consecration-address/>

