

Our Eastside Hill Heritage | Part 2: Forest Hill Cemetery

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by Nancy Wesenberg

Forest Hill Cemetery is surely one of the most prominent features of our East Hill neighborhood, and if you spend any amount of time there, you will notice that locals use the cemetery almost like a park. Besides people who come to plant flowers and tend graves, you can see people just strolling through, alone or in pairs, sometimes pushing baby strollers or stopping to read the inscriptions on the gravestones. You can also see joggers, and children riding their bikes, and of course in the winter there is the sledding hill at the south end. It is a well-used, well-tended place, peaceful but not gloomy in any way, and the living and the dead seem to mingle there quite comfortably and naturally.

What you may not know is that the use of cemeteries as parks started almost 170 years ago, that rural cemeteries were actually the forerunners of city parks in this country, and that Forest Hill Cemetery, one of the first in Eau Claire, was established several decades after a major breakthrough in cemetery reform occurred.

When the Puritans first brought their austere simplicity to this country, they did not bring with them the old English tradition of decorating graves and adorning graveyards with vegetation. They looked upon graveyards as unpleasant necessities and avoided them as much as possible. The symbols on their grave markers were often grim, with death's heads or skulls, and epitaphs that warned the living that they would soon be joining the dead.

But in the first decades of the 19th century this attitude began to change. The rapid growth of cities in the east caused serious overcrowding in urban cemeteries, many of which were adjacent to churches, and people began to view these burial places as repulsive and unhealthy. They were also usually unprotected and unsupervised, and therefore subject to vandalism, grave robbery, and other forms of desecration. In some cities officials began to argue over possible alternatives, but they often ended up doing nothing when they were unable to agree on solutions. New York City was one of the few to begin trying to plan cemeteries in more out-of-the-way locations, but many people found it difficult to get to these places and objected to the change.

In the rural south, the situation was somewhat different. Family burial plots were a long-standing tradition for families who owned land, but people found it distressing that an eventual change of land ownership could mean the loss of access to graves, or even their obliteration if the land became desirable for some other purpose. All over the country, people began to feel the need for more attractive, safe, and permanent places to bury their dead.

A breakthrough came in 1831 with the establishment of Mount Auburn Cemetery, just outside of Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was an unprecedented 72 acres, large enough to serve the Boston area as well, and was conceived by private citizens frustrated by the city's cemetery crisis. Although Pere Lachaise, a formal garden cemetery established in Paris in 1804 may have served as a model, Mount Auburn's creators strove for a more natural design, with winding roads which accommodated

themselves to the small hills, valleys, ponds, and forested areas of the property, which was fenced, and supervised and protected by a paid staff. In this setting eternity must have seemed far more attractive and hopeful, among the green tranquility of living things, than the one suggested by the rank and putrid conditions of the old-fashioned graveyards. People almost immediately accepted Mount Auburn as a new model of the ideal burial place. This new vision of eternity was more in keeping with the forward-looking optimism of a prosperous new nation, and one which prompted the widespread use of the word “cemetery” from the Greek word for “sleeping chamber,” as a euphemistic replacement for older terms like “graveyard” or “burial ground.”

In the Boston area, Mount Auburn quickly became a popular destination, with people coming regularly for Sunday strolls, carriage rides, and picnics, and some observers began to realize that people came to Mount Auburn not only to visit the dead, but to escape the bustle of the city and experience the pleasant and calming effects of nature. So Mount Auburn not only revolutionized this country’s approach to cemetery design, it also helped demonstrate the people’s desire for parks — oases of green and calm — in towns and cities.

By the time Eau Claire was being settled, in the 1840’s and 50’s, this view of the cemetery was being embraced by people across the country. However, it took some time before the residents of the new community (still several villages at that time) dealt with the issue. In the March 25th, 1859 issue of the Free Press, published in Eau Claire by a Mr. Gilbert Porter, a fairly lengthy editorial appeared complaining about the lack of provisions for a proper cemetery in Eau Claire. The editorial mentioned “the long sleep that knows no earthly waking” and proposed that the town fathers should set aside some “pleasant place . . . where the thoughtless hum of the busy world does not disturb, but the sunshine rests lovingly, and the sounding pines ever sigh their mournful requiem.”

But several years later, in the October 24th, 1861 issue of the Free Press, Mr. Porter was still trying to get residents of Eau Claire worked up about this issue:

Alas! that no interest is manifested by the proper authorities in a place of burial. It is somebody’s sacred duty to provide a suitable one at once. Whose is it?

Finally, in 1862, the Free Press announced that land had finally been purchased for a town cemetery, but the sketchy records seem to indicate that arguments over the suitability of the spot went on for several more years before anything was done. A short statement that originally appeared in the LaCrosse Republican, and was reprinted in the June 19th, 1862 issue of the Free Press, seemed to poke a little fun at the people of Eau Claire for neglecting this issue so long:

Eau Claire had been a right smart place for the last six or eight years, and its inhabitants are just beginning to think of a burial ground. Probably some feeble settlers have recently arrived, as such a necessity would not occur for fifty years among the people of the Chippewa Valley.

It is clear, however, that Forest Hill was among the first municipal cemeteries established in Eau Claire — possibly the first. Later editorials called for improvements, bemoaning the cemetery’s condition and stating that fencing was needed to keep wandering cattle from “befouling” the spot. Still later articles show that gradually the town got organized, plotted and sold lots at Forest Hill (working around the

bodies already casually buried there), constructed fences, and even planned for a set of steps to make the cemetery more accessible to the downtown area.

If you walk in the north end of Forest Hill you can see some of this history for yourself. Although many of the earliest tombstones were made of soft marble, which eroded easily and makes it difficult now to make out some names and dates, many are still readable. Many also display examples of symbols and sentiments once popular on grave markers, (sheaves of wheat, willow trees, a finger pointing to heaven). Small mausoleums commemorate some of Eau Claire's earliest prominent citizens and there is also the chapel, built by Henry C. Putnam in 1908 in memory of his wife, Jane. Seven members of the Putnam family, including Henry and Jane, are buried there. As you move southward, towards the newer parts of the cemetery, you can see how the markers have changed in style, and why granite, much harder and more durable than marble, became the preferred material for gravestones.

Yes, history is all around us here on the East Hill, but it is perhaps most evident at Forest Hill Cemetery. Maybe that's why so many of us like to go there, and why we use it like a beloved neighborhood park.