

Oak Leaves

Oak Hill Cemetery Association

1705 Mt. Vernon Rd. S. E. • Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52403

Oak Hill Cemetery is non-profit lot owner association dedicated to preserving the heritage of Linn County, Iowa.

The Evolution of a Cemetery – Customs and Burial Patterns

Burial customs have varied widely over time, not only geographically, but because of the influence of differing social structure, and spiritual beliefs.

Within the landscape of Oak Hill Cemetery there are three very distinct burial styles and more variations over time. So how did we get to the customs and burial patterns we see today?

Let's start at the beginning, explore the patterns and determine what influenced the different arrangements.

Native American Burial Customs

Traditions involving the care for the dead among the Native Americans varied between the nomadic groups and the settled communities in fixed locations. But we do know, custom usually dictated some type of purification ritual at the time of burial.

The burial practices involved in returning your remains to the earth, and included various forms of encasement, sub-surface interment, cremation, and exposure. Depending on geography and the influence of European customs, there is an interesting blend of burial traditions in the United States.

- The Plains Indians – Utilizing trees, scaffolds, canoes, and boxes on stilts, they commonly practiced above ground burials, which decayed over time.
- The Indians of the Mississippi River – Used more permanent earthen constructions, such as the chambered mounds and crematory mounds. *Northeast Iowa has great examples of mound building at Effigy Mounds.*
- The Indians of the Southwest – As the first group to experience Hispanic contact in the 16th century, they established burials within defined graveyards at the pueblos, stone and adobe villages.
- The Indians of the Pacific Northwest – The influence of the Russian fur trade brought the use of gable-roofed shelters over graves to house the spirit of the dead. The size of the shelters was an indication of social status, while clan affiliations were identified by color and by the styling. In many ways, this tradition carries over into the selection of a monument or mausoleum.

*Did you know the word **Cemetery** is derived from the Greek for dormitory, a place where one sleeps?*

Colonial and Early American Burial Customs

Most of the earliest burials at Oak Hill Cemetery were families of English (or later Dutch) decent, influenced by the earliest settlements on the eastern shore of North America following voyages of exploration in the 16th century. This Colonial period in the English colonies brought a mix of the secular graveyards and the ideal of burial of the dead in churchyards located close to churches.

Early Puritans did not advocate using any religious symbols attributing human form to spiritual beings such as God, angels, or spirits. These Puritans rejected churchyard burials and they rebelled against these practices, believing such images were false idols. Instead, many 17th century New England towns set aside land as common community burial grounds.

Headstone images from this period also reflect the rejection of formal Christian iconography in favor of more secular figures, such as skulls representing fate common to all men, broken columns, trees and other symbols of nature.



The death's head, a non-religious symbol was the first imagery employed in gravestone carving. A death's head, often with wings and/or crossed bones was a stylized skull. Some have speculated that winged skulls were intended to symbolize a combination of physical death and spiritual regeneration.

Slowly the fervor of the message, you are all mortal, and any day now you could die faded off. The change can be seen in the design of the death's head. Wings became feathery and almost delicate, and other small touches are added such as hair, more lifelike eyes and pupils, and developed into today's cherub image.

This death's head image does not appear in Oak Hill Cemetery, but does appear in an Iowa Cemetery.

Burial in churchyards would soon be impractical to all except those living closest to the church. Landowners soon expanded their properties to produce large scale cash crops, meaning towns were located far apart and transportation was difficult. Many chose alternative locations for cemeteries, which took the form of family cemeteries on their own

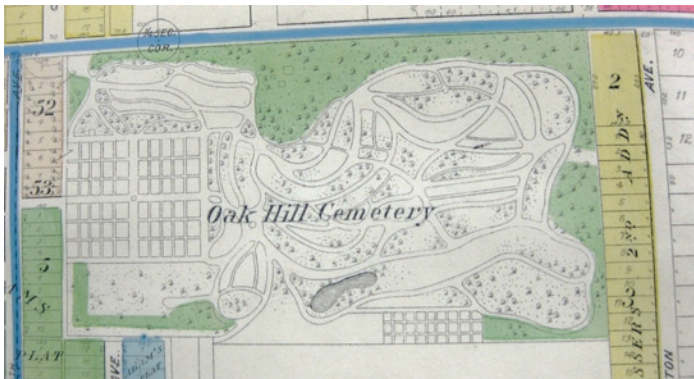
property. Whatever the circumstance, they were usually established on a high, well-drained point of land, and often were enclosed by a fence or wall. They followed a pattern of regular, compact spacing and east-facing orientation. (In many cemeteries, the vast majority of the graves are oriented in such a manner that the bodies lie with their heads to the West and their feet to the East. This very old custom appears to originate with the Pagan sun worshippers, but is primarily attributed to Christians who believe that the final summons to Judgment will come from the East.)



The “Rural” Cemetery Movement

As early as the 1830’s on the east coast and during the 1868 expansion of Oak Hill Cemetery, there was a shift in design, influenced by European trends in gardening and landscape design. With the rapid growth of urban centers, efforts were made to give cemeteries a more natural, more park like feel. To achieve this, gracefully curving pathways and watercourses were adapted to rolling land forms with open meadows, irregular outlines, uneven stands of trees, naturalistic lakes. Planned as serene and spacious grounds where the combination of nature and monuments would be spiritually uplifting, they came to be looked on as public parks, places of respite and recreation acclaimed for their beauty and usefulness to society.

At Oak Hill Cemetery, John Weare Jr. and the Board of Directors employed a landscape engineer from Chicago, Horace W.S. Cleveland, and this is believed to be the first cemetery designed by him in Iowa. The map indicates his full vision for the cemetery, and we now know he was involved in the 1868-1869 expansion and again in 1880.



The cemetery gateway established separation from the workaday world, and a winding drive of gradual ascent slowed progress to a stately pace. Such settings stirred an appreciation of nature and a sense of the continuity of life.



Ossian C. Simonds was hired in the early 1910’s to redesign portions of the cemetery. Both Cleveland and Simonds brought their own vision to the overall design of Oak Hill Cemetery. O. C. Simonds believed “there should be as few roads in the cemetery as possible” and it is believed his plan involved grading driveway elevations to lessen curves and profiles in some areas.

The Memorial Park Plan

By the 1930s, cemeteries and memorial parks showed the influence of modernism in a general preference for buildings and monuments that were stripped of excessive decoration. Typically, classical formality was again introduced to early 20th century cemetery landscapes. The lawn or park plan system, de-emphasized monuments in favor of unbroken lawn scenery, or common open space and formal flower gardens. Several areas at Oak Hill Cemetery were adapted to this style, (although we never reached the level of formal flower gardens as some cemeteries did), and monuments in these designated areas are restricted to grass level markers. The use of more mechanized equipment of the time period, to maintain grounds efficiently on a broad scale prompted standardization of markers flush with the ground level and the elimination of plot-defining barriers.



Cremation

The idea of cremation is not new, and was practiced by some Native American tribes. The Early American religious influence of rising up on judgment day, made the practice less desirable. After the Civil War, reformers concerned about land conservation and public health brought on a revival of the practice of incineration and urn burial. Mausoleums and columbium structures were erected in cemeteries to expand the number of burials which could be accommodated with the least sacrifice of ground space.

Information compiled from a variety of sources including the National Register Bulletin titled Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Cemeteries and Burial Places and from From The Association for Gravestone Studies.