Mount Auburn Cemetery’s Consecration Hymn to the tune of ‘Old Hundred’ (also the “Doxology”) lyrics written in 1831 by the Rev. John Pierpont

To thee, O God, in humble trust,
Our hearts their cheerful incense burn,
For this thy word, “Thou art of dust,
And unto dust shalt thou return.”

For, what were life, life’s work all done,
The hopes, joys, loves, that cling to clay,
All, all, departed, one by one,
And yet life’s load borne on for aye!

Decay! Decay! ’tis stamped on all!
All bloom, in flower and flesh, shall fade;
Ye whispering trees, when we shall fall,
Be our long sleep beneath your shade!

Here to thy bosom, mother Earth,
Take back, in peace, what thou hast given;
And all that is of heavenly birth,
O God in peace, recall to heaven!

Changing American Grounds & Practices

The creation of Mount Auburn Cemetery started the rural cemetery movement in the United States. What is a green or natural burial - in 1831 and today? A look at how this burial landscape is also an urban oasis.

Candace Currie | Director of Planning & Cemetery at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge & Watertown, MA
Boston burying grounds
Copp’s Hill and King’s Chapel

In the North End.
Dating from 1659

First burial ground in Boston on Tremont
near School Street.
Dating from 1630.
1825

Dr. Jacob Bigelow assembles a group of distinguished citizens at his Boston home to discuss the need for a rural cemetery outside of Boston.

Stourhead
1740s

Picturesque
George Brimmer bought land in 1825 “to prevent the destruction of the trees, and to preserve so beautiful a spot for some public or appropriate use.”

1831 Plan by Alexander Wadsworth
The Rural Cemetery Movement Led to Public Gardens and Parks

- Mount Auburn Cemetery – Boston (1831)
- Laurel Hill Cemetery – Philadelphia (1836)
- Boston Public Garden (1837)
- Green-Wood Cemetery – Brooklyn (1838)
- Central Park – Manhattan (1859)
- Prospect Park (1867)
- Arnold Arboretum – Boston (1872)
- New York Botanical Garden (1891)
MOUNT AUBURN CEMETERY
HAS BEEN DESIGNATED A
NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK

THIS SITE POSSESSES NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE
IN COMMEMORATING THE HISTORY OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

ESTABLISHED IN 1831 AS THE NATION’S FIRST LARGE SCALE
DESIGNED LANDSCAPE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC, MOUNT AUBURN
WAS THE FIRST AMERICAN RURAL CEMETERY. IT INITIATED THE
GREAT AGE OF AMERICAN CEMETERY BUILDING AND INFLUENCED
THE DESIGN OF PUBLIC PARKS, MONUMENTS AND SUBURBIA.

2003
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
Most cemeteries in Massachusetts require concrete grave liners or vaults

The answer to “sunken graves”
In 1993, we’re running out of Space! **NOT!**

“Balance between the natural landscape and built elements can fluctuate only to a certain degree before the dominance of structures, loss of open space, or a layout of uniform monuments that imposes on rather than responds to the site will undermine the contemplative and healing influence of the landscape”. Master Plan, 1993
Shared Memorials

Azalea Wall
Birch Gardens

Natural Burials

- Natural burial graves do not allow any type of stone marker
- Graves are placed between family lots
- There are six graves in the grassy area between these upright markers at the top of a hill
Mount Auburn Cemetery
Hybrid Burial Ground Certification
From the Green Burial Council

- Green Burial Council (GBC) certifies:
  - Funeral Homes,
  - Cemeteries &
  - Products such as caskets and shrouds

- Cemeteries
  - Hybrid
  - Natural
  - Conservation
Essential elements of natural burial

• No embalming
• Everything going into the grave is biodegradable
• Marker: flat, local stone or natural marker
• Provenance of materials: indigenous, sustainably harvested, locally produced
• Depth: 3-5 feet to bottom
• Low density: <100/acre
• Order of burials: non-sequential
Inspiration

“The elements which have once moved and circulated in living frames do not become extinct nor useless after death: they offer themselves as the materials from which other living frames are to be constructed. ...”

Dr. Jacob Bigelow, co-founder Mount Auburn Cemetery

Land used today for *new* burial grounds . . . will prevent the destruction of the trees, and preserve so beautiful a spot for public or appropriate use.

1831 Plan by Alexander Wadsworth