

August 30, 1997

The Rural Cemetery Movement in Willimantic (Part One of Four)

In the foreground is the original 1830s Willimantic Cemetery and beyond the more ostentatious late 19th century monuments put in place after the 1877 cemetery extension.



Last Christmas, Tony Clark and I conducted a couple of tours of the Willimantic Cemetery in aid of the Soup Kitchen. They were very well attended despite the cold weather, so we will repeat the tour on Saturday, September 27, at 10:00 am and 2 :00 pm. For those who will not be able to attend, the upcoming articles will hopefully be interesting. For those attending, they will provide some fascinating background into America's 19th century rural cemeteries. Every day, thousand of people drive past one of the most attractive sites in Willimantic. They don't realize what they are missing. The original Willimantic Cemetery was laid out in the 1830s, but before we examine it in detail, it is necessary to put its history in context with wider developments across the United States

during the 19th century.

The contemporary isolation of the cemetery in American culture is a post WWII phenomenon. Youth and vitality is celebrated today, so cemeteries are out of touch with a "relentlessly cheerful" modern culture. So burial places are a necessary nuisance, not a central institution. In the 19th century, many city guides denoted several pages of text, maps and pictures to their well-designed cemeteries. Death was not an unusual subject in those days. Medicine was relatively primitive, and the most innocent of infections often proved fatal. Child mortality was high, and a grave was considered to be a place to rekindle memories, a place for solace.

Graveyards, or cemeteries have played an important role in American culture. This is reflected in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* (1938) and William Kennedy's novel, *Ironweed* (1983), where the grave represents an ongoing mystical lifea way to deal with death. Family plots were very popular in the first half of the 19th century, and were often surrounded with iron fences, but these were removed when the rural park cemeteries became popular. It was thought indecent to bring concepts of private space, born in the city, to the sleeping places of the deceased. Designers of the urban park, rural cemeteries banned fences, because they destroyed the unity of the landscape. The

rural cemeteries became the home of ostentatious monuments, built in classical and Greek Revival styles.

The first graveyard in the United States to be laid out and planned was the Grove Street Cemetery in New Haven, Connecticut in 1796. This introduced the concept of purchasing land for burial. It was built out-of-town in the wake of an outbreak of yellow fever in 1794/95, as it was thought gases from corpses caused the fever. This was the first case of the separation of burial and the church. The rural cemetery movement dominated the first half of the 19th century. The Mount Auburn Cemetery in Boston became the model for these resting places for the living and the dead. The new rural cemeteries developed alongside a new middle class community based on families, volunteer associations, history and recent artistic styles, in an attempt to establish some virtues of a cultural life in the expanding cities. Landscaping of these urban parks and rural cemeteries became feasible with the invention of the mechanical lawn mower in England in 1830. The Picturesque movement, an aesthetic development from England, influenced the landscaping styles of American cemeteries. The popularity led to a period of cemetery commercialization and professionalization. Boards were formed, and fees charged for plots to make profits for investors and to pay for secretaries, treasurers, superintendents and cemetery security forces. There is no documentation of security forces in the Willimantic Cemetery, but it was administered by a board of local worthies, and proved to be a popular lunchtime and weekend escape for the cotton workers in the Bridge Street mills.

Continued next week.