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The Willimantic Cemetery (Part Two of Four)

The largest single monument in the Willimantic Cemetery is Hugh Clark Murray's miniature Greek Temple. Murray (1849-1919) was born in Scotland and built the Boston store, now Hurleys, on the corner of Main and Church Streets in 1892.



Adolph Strauch was responsible for much of the professionalization of America's cemeteries. He helped to limit sizes to plots, thinned trees and introduced landscaped lawn plans, and the development of lakes and ponds. Cemetery designing became more professional, demanding a combination of engineering, horticulture and aesthetics from designers. Cemeteries began to serve as arboretums, museums and artistic ornaments. Those whom take the upcoming tour will witness all those themes in the Willimantic cemetery.

The rural cemeteries became known as "gardens of graves" and "cities of the dead." Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery was influenced by English and French gardens and landscaping. It

provided both a botanical tour and a history museum. Horticulture and agriculture became very popular in the early years of the Republic, and gardening clubs were one of the nation's earliest voluntary associations. Other influences were the Grove Street Cemetery in New Haven, and the Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris (1804). The French based the cemetery on English aesthetic theories of the late 18th century, where man's control over nature could be demonstrated in gardening and landscaping, where a balance could be made between art and nature. An example from England became the landscaped gardens in county homes of the elite, developed by gardeners such as Lancelot "Capability" Brown and Humphrey Repton. Art became an expression of civilization. This aesthetic movement became known as the Picturesque.

Britain was the first nation to industrialize, and rapid urbanization was seen to be isolating people from the forces of nature. The Picturesque Movement became a way of explaining social and political unrest. But in America, nature was seen to be a force which resisted civilization, and the Picturesque movement did not become popular until the 1820s, and when it did, it became a craze. European Romantic aesthetics were quickly adapted to American culture, and soon realized through the rural cemetery movement.

Swan Point Cemetery in Providence (1846), Cedar Grove Cemetery in New London (1850), and Cedar Hill Cemetery in Hartford (1863), are good local examples of the movement. The planned landscapes were opened to the public, and became highly popular. Visitors were drawn into the undulating landscape of dales and valleys, by winding roads and lanes, in an attempt to draw visitors away from the more familiar, monotonous urban grid. The cemeteries became an essential element of the developing American urban culture, softening the harder edges of urbanized, industrial, commercial life, and introducing aspects and virtues of country life in the cities.

As Willimantic developed after the Civil War, there was a constant struggle between land speculators, the mills and aesthetes to create a public park in the growing city. The Willimantic Linen Company opened Recreation Park, or the "Fairgrounds" in 1883. A later plan to develop a central park near Bank Street was crushed, and the owners of the Bridge Street mills did not deed Soldier's and Sailors' Field (Memorial Park) to the town until the 1920s. It was left to the Willimantic Cemetery to act as the city's lone "park." Its winding lanes, and landscaping were dotted with some outstanding monuments, celebrating the city's movers and shakers.

The monuments in Willimantic Cemetery, and in those across the nation, represented hope, immortality, life, and a faith in the afterlife. The development of the railroads made precut, mass-produced monuments widely available, consisting of natural, mythological and religious symbols. They consisted of American Eagles, to represent universal liberty, lambs for innocence, roses for the prime of life. The rich could afford monuments sculpted from soft, white marble to convey comfort, success and joy. Gothic vaults, classical urns and Egyptian obelisks became very popular. The cemeteries became the site of competitions between the rich for who could erect the most ostentatious monuments. Indeed, Frederick Law Olmstead, who designed New York City's Central Park, complained in 1861 that rural cemeteries were no longer places of seclusion and reflection, but places of gross ostentation, and a resort for pleasure seekers, travelers, promenaders and loungers.

Protestant, urban elites became the directors of the new cemeteries, the "museums of memories." The wealthy were hoping to ensure their place in Heaven, by their good works on earth. This religious liberalism, Arminianism, was a softening of the stricter Calvinistic-Protestant views of Puritans, which held that death often led to eternal damnation. Death took on a new meaning, becoming more romantic and melancholy. This made the death of children more acceptable at a time when child mortality was very high. The word cemetery comes from the Greek word for sleeping chamber, and death became defined as sleep.

The development of the Willimantic Cemetery, and those across America, owe a lot to the rapid growth of the city. Urban areas were chaotic and disordered, and throughout the 19th century the urban park movement introduced boulevards and parks in an attempt to introduce order. Central Park in New York is a clear expression of what was referred to as "Parkomania" in the city. The City Beautiful movement of the 1890s promoted classical art and architecture. And these movements were reflected in urban

cemeteries. Family mausoleums became very popular during the 1880s and 1890s. Box shaped marble houses and rough hewn stone gave way to Doric and ionic columns. The move to cremation was slow, because of the strong belief that cemeteries were resting places for the dead awaiting Judgement Day. The destruction of the body through cremation threatened this hope of resurrection.

Continued next week.