



A New Chapter for Historic Cemeteries

Green Burial as a Tool for Revitalization

by Ed Bixby





Nearly 20 years ago, a small historic burial ground nestled within the forest gave little hint of what it would one day become.

Steelmantown Cemetery, located in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, operated for years as an illegal dumping ground. Discarded furniture, construction waste, and household debris piled high, standing in stark contrast to the surrounding pitch pine-oak forest. To many, the cemetery was beyond saving; in 2007, a new beginning emerged beneath the trees.

Rather than adopting the image of a traditional cemetery, nature penned a new identity for the space. The new caretakers did not impose a cemetery upon the land—the land became the cemetery.

This transformation was more than debris removal; it challenged conventional cemetery design. The natural landscape was the canvas itself—walking paths followed the terrain instead of reshaping it, and the trees became the burial space itself, not obstacles to development.

Today, Steelmantown Cemetery has served hundreds of families and invites visitors to enjoy its three miles of eco-trails. As it approaches its twentieth year of operation, it has become one of North America's longest-operating green burial preserves. Embalming and traditional hardwood coffins, grave liners, and polished upright monuments are prohibited; burials occur among the trees, along whimsical moss-covered trails. Steelmantown stands as a testament to green burial's ability to restore not only the grounds of historic cemeteries, but their purpose: to serve the departed with dignity and the living with compassion in perpetuity.

Every community has a Steelmantown. Across the United States, cemeteries large and small tell a similar story of disrepair and abandonment. These sites are of extraordinary cultural and historic value, yet many were designed for a model of cemetery management that no longer reflects contemporary realities. Deferred maintenance accumulates. Historic features deteriorate. Grounds fall from regular use. Changing consumer preferences prompt cemetery operators to reconsider how these spaces might continue serving future generations. The question is no longer how cemeteries should be maintained—but how they should evolve.

Green burial offers a compelling answer—not because it is inherently simpler or less expensive, but because it is founded on a different philosophy. It begins not with a blueprint, but with an observation. Rather than asking how the land can be adjusted to fit a predetermined mold, green burial asks the natural landscape what it is already capable of becoming. There is no uniformity or conformity; instead, there is an acknowledgment and response to the qualities already present within the land. This shift in perspective changes everything.

An overgrown section ceases to be a maintenance issue and presents an opportunity for renewal. An unused plot or forgotten corner can once again become an active, meaningful space—existing ecology, topography, and hydrology unite to cultivate a site that is neither static nor tame, nurturing a dynamic living landscape.

In practical terms, this means handing the reins to the land: befriending native vegetation, reducing unnecessary disturbance, and letting Mother Nature do as she may. Not

only does this minimize maintenance inputs, but it also allows the cemetery to function in closer harmony with the place it occupies.

The benefits extend well outside the sphere of sustainability and environmental stewardship. Green burial enables cemeteries to diversify the services they provide without relinquishing their historic mission and identity. This translates to a tangible plan for preservation, breathing new life into the space as it adapts to a changing consumer landscape. Green burial is a farewell both ancient and modern, honoring time both past and present to invite the living to rediscover and protect historic cemeteries.

If Steeltowntown highlights the power of green burial on a modest scale, Mount Vernon Cemetery in Philadelphia is set to demonstrate its potential in one of America's grandest historic cemeteries.

Incorporated in 1856, Mount Vernon Cemetery was established as one of the nation's first rural cemeteries, designed as what Victorian writer Fanny Kemble would describe as "a pleasure garden instead of a place for graves." Before decades of neglect, it stood as a space of reflection and recreation, intertwining history, nature, art, and memory.

What once was the epitome of a Victorian garden cemetery had fallen into neglect. Invasive overgrowth consumed monumentation. Grave sites became inaccessible. Behind closed gates, its remarkable character lay in wait.

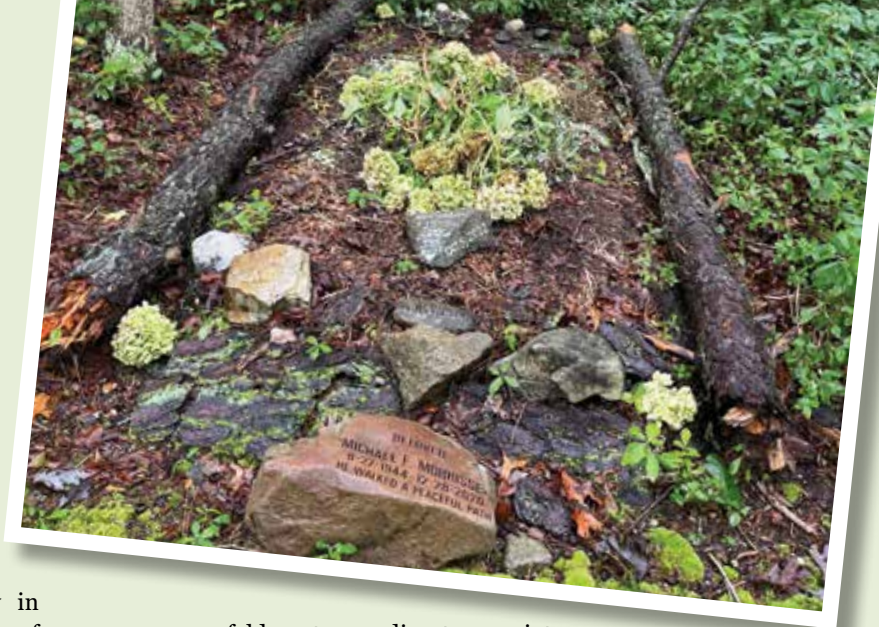
Today, green burial is rewriting Mount Vernon's story. The site is not merely being uncovered, but reimaged by the very force that overtook it: nature.

In 2025, the stewards of Steeltowntown Cemetery again turned to the land for answers. Woven in the landscape were patches of wild—foxes roamed silently through the undergrowth, white-tailed deer wandered beneath towering trees, and birdsong drifted through the canopy above. Where many saw disaster, green burial saw possibility.

Meandering footpaths will reconnect long-forgotten sections of the cemetery, guiding visitors through a mosaic of natural and historic settings. Interpretive markers will illuminate the stories of those interred and the cemetery's role in shaping Philadelphia, while Victorian benches will invite visitors to pause, reflect, and linger within the landscape. All the while, green burial will act as the quiet thread that binds history, remembrance, and the natural world into a single experience.

The result is a cemetery that matures rather than merely ages. As native vegetation thrives, seasonal rhythms become part of the visitor experience. Spring wildflowers give way to summer grasses, autumn color, and winter silhouettes. Each visit offers something subtly different, reinforcing the idea that remembrance is not frozen in time, but continues to evolve alongside the land itself. That, right there, is the power of green burial.

Perhaps this is best exemplified by the experience itself. No two services are identical, because no two landscapes are the same. Green burial returns the final act of care to the family—whether that be carrying a loved one to their resting place, lowering their casket, or backfilling their grave. The



ceremony unfolds not according to a script, but in quiet conversation with the place itself. In doing so, families establish an ongoing relationship with the surrounding nature; the breeze through the trees, the changing light, and the chorus of birds become as much a part of the farewell as the words spoken. This is what brings families back and keeps historic cemeteries alive.

Steeltowntown demonstrated what could happen when a neglected cemetery was viewed not as a liability, but as a place of possibility. Mount Vernon is poised to demonstrate that the same philosophy can guide the renewal of one of America's most significant historic cemeteries. One began as a small family burial ground hidden among the pines. The other occupies twenty-seven acres within one of the nation's oldest cities. Their histories differ, yet each echoes the same principle: when memory is etched into the living landscape, preservation ceases to be a barrier and becomes a natural consequence.

For this reason, green burial is not simply another form of interment. It is a renewed approach to stewardship—one that allows historic cemeteries to adapt without abandoning their identity, to welcome new generations without forgetting those who came before, and to preserve the character of a place by allowing it to become more fully itself.

Perhaps that is the greatest lesson offered by Steeltowntown and Mount Vernon alike.

Sometimes the most meaningful transformation begins not by asking what we can build upon the land, but by asking what the land has been waiting to become all along. Green burial simply gives the land permission to become exactly that.



Ed Bixby is the Founder of the Global Green Burial Alliance, an international social networking and educational organization for eco-friendly funeral providers and consumers. He is the Owner of Destination Destiny Memorials, a family of fifteen green burial cemeteries across the United States, including Steeltowntown Cemetery in New Jersey and Mount Vernon Cemetery in Philadelphia. Ed is also the Owner of

Eternally Green Funeral Solutions, a company specializing in eco-friendly caskets and carriers. He previously served as the President of the Green Burial Council for 10 years.