

NEW LIFE FOR OLD Cemeteries

*Refuge and Recreation
Among the Headstones*

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Paul and Orysia Bezpalko Hernandez walking among the headstones at The Woodlands cemetery on their wedding day in May 2022. Photo by Nina Lily Photography.

When friends learned that Erin Downing and Steph Cabezas wanted to be married last May at The Woodlands cemetery in Philadelphia, the couple had some explaining to do.

“We definitely had a few raised eyebrows,” said Cabezas. “A lot of people were curious and wanted to know why we chose the venue, and when we explained our reasons, they agreed it was very ‘us.’ The idea of honoring those who we love and miss seemed to really resonate with people as well.”

These types of events at cemeteries are becoming more common, with funerary grounds hosting everything from weddings and craft fairs to 5K races and antique car shows all year long. But cemeteries and historic burial grounds are playing bigger roles now in topics such as climate change and even cultural relations.

PRESERVING SPACE

Last fall, Morris Arboretum hosted a two-day online conference, “New Life for Old Cemeteries: Connecting Communities and Open Space,” that was geared toward preserving and caring for cemeteries and highlighting their importance to the ecological, economic, and social sustainability of communities today. Conference co-sponsors included The Woodlands,

Historic Eden Cemetery, Laurel Hill, and Arch Street Meeting House Preservation Trust.

Bill Cullina, F. Otto Haas executive director of Morris Arboretum, opened the conference by saying historic cemeteries represent a large portion of open space in many cities, including Philadelphia and surrounding regions.

“Cemeteries have increasingly become places of refuge, recreation, peace and connection,” said Cullina. “Caring for these living collections of canopy trees and shrubs, as well as the resting places of our departed, has never been more important.”

Conference participant Jessica Baumert, executive director of The Woodlands, a 54-acre cemetery in West Philadelphia, said the pandemic highlighted the need for green space.

“We saw an enormous uptick in our daily visitors and many were folks who hadn’t stepped foot in our gates before,” she said. “These new visitors have now become regular visitors to our space. This seems to be a trend across the country. Cemeteries are definitely having a moment.”



Steph Cabezas (left) and Erin Downing at The Woodlands on their wedding day in May 2022. Photo by Paloma Alicea (@palomaalicea).

HISTORY, CULTURE, ECONOMY

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cemeteries were considered places to gather and socialize before the development of public parks, botanic gardens and arboreta. As the country became more industrialized, the verdant space of cemeteries became even more valuable as places of respite. Laurel Hill was designed as a park when it opened in 1836, becoming one of the first rural cemeteries in the nation.

“We usually don’t think about cemeteries in the same breath as we do public parks or urban plazas,” said Nancy Goldenberg, president and CEO of Laurel Hill, said during the conference. “Yet when you really think about it, cemeteries occupy a lot of space.” There are 824 cemeteries in our region, totaling almost 9,000 acres. “Specifically, since COVID, cemeteries



Left to right: Laurel Hill's Market of the Macabre (photo courtesy of Laurel Hill); Paul and Orysia Bezpalko Hernandez at The Woodlands (photo by Nina Lily Photography); Laurel Hill's RIP 5K (photo courtesy of Laurel Hill).

are simultaneously filling the role of museum, library, arboretum, nature sanctuary, and venue for active and passive recreation.”

As historic cemeteries run out of space, they need to raise money in other ways. Laurel Hill brands itself as a cultural and educational attraction, featuring walking tours of trees as well as an annual antique car and hearse show that features funeral service vehicles.

In addition to the historical significance of Philadelphia's cemeteries where prominent members of the city's past are buried, advocates say they are culturally important, too. Presenter Monica Rhodes, former director of resource management at the National Park Foundation and 2022 Harvard Loeb Fellow, studied preservation efforts at Historic Eden Cemetery, a historic African-American cemetery located in Collingdale, PA, founded in 1902.

“These commemorative spaces like Eden are extremely important to understanding what these sites and places mean in the 21st century,” she

said. “These cultural landscapes serve as a direct connection and a direct linkage to how we can help answer some of the questions that we are facing today around histories that are, honestly, left out of many textbooks and conversations. So these landscapes oftentimes are what we have left over and what Eden Cemetery is prominently preserving.”

Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, NY, partners with the International Masonry Institute to train young people to restore, repair and maintain the headstones and monuments in a program called the Bridge to Crafts Career Program. The interns, ages 18 to 24, work with preservation professionals and skilled craftspeople, and they also learn resume development, interviewing skills, financial management, and get job placement assistance.

TREES AND OPEN SPACES

Trees and gardens are prime attractions in cemeteries. Some contain champion trees, which are the largest specimens of their species, as well as rare types of trees.

“Cemeteries have big, old amazing trees and great open space resources,” said Bryan Thompson-Nowak, director of education at Morris Arboretum. “Old cemeteries have fallen into disrepair. If we don't preserve them, we could lose those trees. We need to advocate for cemeteries to get better funding, and for foundations to see cemeteries as open space worthy of preservation.”

For Orysia Bezpalko Hernandez and Paul Hernandez, there was no other space for their wedding than The Woodlands. They had their first unofficial date at the cemetery, Paul proposed there, and their engagement party was held there.

“The Woodlands is so much more than a cemetery—it's such a blessing to have this incredible historic green space in our community, and we feel so honored to have part of our story intertwined so deeply with its enduring legacy,” said Orysia.

Learn much more fascinating information about Philadelphia's cemeteries by watching [part one](#) and [part two](#) of the conference.