

GRAVE CONCERNS: DECAY, DEATH, AND NATURE
IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of History
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2018

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Degree awarded June 2018

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Department of History

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While multiple questions drive this project, one fundamental query lays at its center. How did American approaches to mortality, their own and others, during the early national period (roughly 1770 to 1850) shape both their understanding of themselves and their environment? The answer to that question exposes a distinct set of values revolving around preparation for death, and acknowledgment and respect for their own (and others mortality), which Americans imbibed from various and disparate sources. More specifically, the first half of the project examines how the letters they wrote and read, the sermons they listened to, the mourning rituals they practiced, the burial grounds they utilized, and the novels and poetry they consumed all combined to create a shared knowledge base and approach to death during the early republic. Uniquely, these principles found strength through a conscious linking of mortality to the natural world. Americans understood their own death as part of a larger, both positive and negative, perfected natural system created and perpetuated by God.

The American approach towards mortality, however, was not static and the nineteenth century bore witness to the emergence of a sentimentalized, sanitized, and less human inclusive vision of mortality during 1830s and beyond. Ironically, nature remained central to the way Americans experienced death, however, in a consciously

aesthetic, romantic, controlled manner. It is written into the present where rolling and manicured lawns combine together with still ponds to create bucolic scenes of peaceful rest among scenes of beauty. The old, grim, but no less natural lessons of worms, dirt, decay, and dissolution no longer hold sway, ignoring the vital and humbling connection between human bodies and the natural world that was understood in the early republic. This shift (and the focus of the second half of the dissertation), was spurred on by numerous interrelated but distinct factors ranging from urban growth, disease, foreign immigration, and changing cultural sentiments. Americans during the 1830s, 40s, and 50s redefined their relationship to death and in doing so consciously turned away from a vibrant, dynamic, and humbling vision of mortality grounded in the natural world.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It will come as no surprise that this project, while only bearing my name under the title, was inherently collaborative and dependent on numerous people. I would like to take a few moments to thank those institutions and people so integral to the work you are about to consider. No amount of gratitude will ever be enough concerning my mentor, adviser, and friend, Matthew Dennis, who over the past years has shepherded, encouraged, critiqued, and supported me and this project at every instance and in every permutation I presented to him. Thank you Matt. I would also like to recognize the individual members of my committee: Marsha Weisiger, Gordon Sayre, and Daniel Pope. Without your words of encouragement, boundless patience, and unique insights (as updates dwindled and progress slowed) this entire project would have remained as distant and hazy as it was so many years ago during those halting and initial first steps. All of you have and will continue to leave an indelible mark on my approach to the historian's craft. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Neil Maher whose contagious energy, enthusiasm, and friendship during this project's earliest days gave me the confidence to believe in myself and continue pushing my (then) thesis down avenues that are essential to its DNA today.

Without the support of the University of Oregon, the College of Arts and Sciences, the Graduate School, and the Department of History this project would not exist. The financial and academic support provided by these different facets of the University of Oregon were not just important, but critical to my ability to research and write the dissertation. I benefitted from a generous research grant from the Department of History in 2014 and was honored to receive a yearlong Dissertation Fellowship from the

College of Arts and Sciences in 2016. I would also like to thank the American Society for 18th Century Studies and the Boston Athenaeum who generously provided me a research fellowship in 2015. More specifically, I would like to express my appreciation for the entire staff of the Boston Athenaeum and, particularly, Mary Warnement and Carolle R. Morini who were so gracious and helpful during my summer there. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the archivists and staff at the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond, Virginia, and at the New York Historical Society in New York, New York, whose professionalism and knowledge were crucial to my research.

While there are countless others that warrant thanks, I would like to finish by acknowledging the contributions of my friends and family. Without you all, getting through those early morning writing sessions and late night paper grading moments would have been impossible. To that end, I would like to particularly thank Tara Keegan, Ernest Anastasio III, Miles Redding, Jerome Garcia, Christopher Smith, Kenneth Surles, and John Bedan you will never know just how much I needed all of you. I also want to recognize my family: Linda, Michael, Karl, Lindsey, Maureen, Melissa, Delores, Kordelia, Trey, Grant, and Lennox. All of you cheered me when I failed and celebrated for me when I succeeded. Lastly, and unsurprisingly, I would like to thank my mother and father, Barbara and Dominick, it is understatement to say I could not have done this without the both of you. Your love and unswerving confidence in me will never be forgotten. Truly and deeply, thank you.

For Barbara and Dominick, you never wavered.

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CHAPTER I
GRAVE CONCERNS

Unless we are cremated or mummified, our bodies will decompose after we die. Being embalmed and placed in a casket and a concrete grave liner will delay the process, but only for a few weeks or months. We like the idea of facilitating the decomposition, so that our bodies can be part of the earth as soon as possible. We also like the idea that we can be productive and help solve our environmental crisis—even after we die.

Katrina Spade¹

Man feeds on other organized beings; at death he returns to the airs, waters and earth, which are absorbed by the roots and leaves of vegetables; the inferior animals are supported by these, and man again maintains his existence by preying on those. Pride and caprice may retard these changes, and frustrate nature for a while, but happily for the succeeding inhabitants of this earth, they cannot eventually prevent them.

Y²

In autumn of 1794, a curious article titled “Observations on Burying the Dead” occupied the pages of *The New York Magazine*. This might seem a strange essay to include in an American magazine dedicated to literature. Americans of the early national period, however, lived in a world suffused and engaged with mortality, so much so that one wonders what they might have thought about death today. The essayist, identified as “Y,” would likely express puzzlement and confusion that today we largely ignore the realities of mortality and, instead, actively try to “frustrate nature for a while.”³ The aversion to contemplating our own mortality and the halting of decay that Y decried in 1794 is now the norm for Americans, and while the sadness we feel when a loved one

¹ “FAQ,” the website of The Urban Death Project, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://urbandeathproject.org/#faq> (site discontinued).

² Y, “Observations on Burying the Dead,” *The New York Magazine, or Literary Repository* 5, no. 10, October 1794, 619-620.

³ Y, “Observations on Burying the Dead,” 620.

dies transcends both space and time, the way we approach death could not be more different. Unlike Y, the bereaved American of the twenty-first century turns to a highly industrialized, sanitized, and, outsourced version of mortality. From the employment of a funeral director, to widespread use of embalming agents, airtight caskets, and leak-proof concrete vaults, the American way of death seems entirely focused on denying decomposition and mortality.⁴ American culture largely rejects that our bodies are frail, permeable, and *natural*, or, as Y so eloquently observed, that “Matter is doomed to go its round.”⁵

Our approach to death is not monolithic, however, and Y might take heart that a small, but vocal, group of modern-day Americans has turned to “green” or natural burials. The emerging green burial movement shares some surprising values with Y’s approach from over two hundred years ago. On the front page of the Science Section in April 2015, *The New York Times* ran an article with the provocative headline, “A Project to Turn Corpses into Compost.”⁶ Only ten years earlier, in 2005, Juliette and Joe Seehee created the Green Burial Council to certify—by a three leaf rating system of course—the most “green” burial products, places, and services. American perceptions of death may be evolving.⁷ Echoing Y’s musings nearly two centuries later, Katrina Spade, founder of the

⁴ Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963). For more on the modern funeral industry and all of its concerns and problems there is no better—and engagingly written—account.

⁵ Y, “Observations on Burying the Dead,” 619.

⁶ Catrin Einhorn, “A Project to Turn Corpse into Compost,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 2015.

⁷ “What is the Green Burial Council,” the website of the Green Burial Council, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://greenburialcouncil.org/>.

Urban Death Project, has declared: “We like the idea of facilitating decomposition, so that our bodies can be a part of the earth as soon as possible.”⁸

Katrina Spade and Y’s words mirror each other, both in their goals and in their understanding of the human body and death. Both advocate simplicity, and the allowance of decomposition, and each imagines our mortality as part of a natural cycle in which human bodies return to the soil to become, in essence, food for other organisms. A return to 1794 emphasizes this historical resonance. “All animated nature is supported by the successive decomposition and renovation of its parts.” Y then continued, “Stupendous system! Where beings originate, progress, and die to prepare the world for others.”⁹ Juxtapose Y’s early republic mindset with reflections from the modern Green Burial Council: “Through green burial we can utilize our end-of-life rituals for the betterment of the planet and help ensure a brighter future for the younger generations. We can come to appreciate death as an integral part of a natural process that continues long after we perish.”¹⁰ Green burial is less a giant leap forward into a new and natural mode of death practices in the United States, then; instead, it is a rediscovery or reencounter with a centuries-old practice that marked a crucial and underexplored part of the American story. For early Americans had always practiced, with few exceptions, a form of “green burial” and knew of no other way to understand their own decay and death.

A rediscovery, however, implies change, which raises a host of interrelated questions. When did the American relationship with death shift away from its more

⁸ “FAQ,” the website of the Urban Death Project.

⁹ Y, “Observations on Burying the Dead.” 620.

¹⁰ Joe Seehee, “A Word from Our Founder,” the website of the Green Burial Council, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://greenburialcouncil.org/a-word-from-our-founder/>

natural form into the distant and sanitized system we employ today, and in that transition what was lost? In what ways was American burial “green” before the shift? What did this process of “natural death” actually look like, physically and spiritually, and what lessons can it provide for us and for “green burial” advocates such as Katrina Spade or the Green Burial Council?

The answers to these questions reveal fascinating insights into the early national period and the American relationship with death because mortality, unlike countless other experiences, touched all Americans, literate or illiterate, rich or poor, black or white, man or woman. Examining the way they understood death through their religious values, their writings, the mourning rituals they practiced, and their burying grounds exposes the existence of an important American “worldview” of death that embraced and readied Americans for the end of life, whether their own or the deaths of others.¹¹ Suffusing and supporting every facet of this death ideology was a dynamic connection between Americans and the natural world. For early national Americans, death represented one of the most powerful, humbling, and omnipresent examples of nature’s power. Through mortality, additionally, Americans directly accessed the nature of their own bodies in an organic, visceral, and singular way that asserted their place within the environment, not

¹¹ The use of the term “Worldview” is deliberate here, I am borrowing it largely from anthropology and philosophy and through it I am attempting to argue that the early republic (its people, its culture, etc.) fostered a specific type of understanding of death and its processes. Through cultural avenues both formal and informal, for example the difference between a Congregationalist religious ceremony or a written letter, Americans in the early republic were better prepared to deal with death through both their own personal actions and the larger received wisdom circulating within the American cultural milieu. I am not attempting, however, to problematize or challenge the larger theory of worldview, which has spawned significant debate among the academic communities most disposed to using it. For more information on this debate and/or the current status of the concept of “worldview” see: Leo Apostel, et al., “Worldviews: from fragmentation to integration” (Brussels: VUB Press, 1994), David Beine, “The End of Worldview in Anthropology?” (SIL Electronic Working Papers, 2010), and Ken Funk, “What is Worldview?”, Oregon State University, last modified March 21, 2001, <https://web.engr.oregonstate.edu/~funkk/Personal/worldview.html>.

outside of it. Critically this worldview of death relied upon and supported among Americans a broad understanding of the natural world that embraced its most positive and negative elements.¹² Americans, from dairy farmers in New England to tobacco planters in Virginia, understood that a spring shower that nourished their crops was no different from the worms wriggling through the remains of their decomposing loved ones. They were both equal and important manifestations of nature. The holistic approach to the environment, which included mortality and its attendant rituals, represents a distinct feature of the early republic. Its “nature of death,” or the American worldview of death, however, was not static. Vigorous changes throughout the nation including rapid urbanization, evolving ideas about human health, sanitation, and soaring immigration, all combined to reorient the American view of both death and nature by the mid-nineteenth century. Americans’ prior relationship to mortality, and the nature that undergirded it, became too stark, harsh, and grim, and Americans in the 1830s and thereafter no longer valued the cruel truths that death and nature evinced and buttressed. Ironically, nature would not disappear from the evolving American relationship with mortality; however, its contours would dramatically change, conceptually and physically, as embodied by the beautiful landscapes of America’s dramatic and romantic “rural cemeteries.”

The shift from the experiential, everyday nature of death into the sentimentalized, beautiful, but distant relationship with mortality that dominates to this day has its origin in the early republic. The period spanning the waning years of the American Revolution to the moments just before the American Civil War were pivotal for both the nation and the American worldview of death. This was not merely a time of rapid change but one of

¹² Catherine L Albanese, *Nature Religion in America from the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 44.

cultural and national definition, of what it meant to live and die as an “American.” The landscape of the nation also evolved during these pivotal years. The increasing size and importance of urban enclaves, from New York to Richmond, directly influenced the way Americans experienced death and nature. Rural communities also witnessed and influenced the evolving American relationship to mortality, as they refashioned themselves from isolated towns and villages into suburban satellites of American cities. Telling this national story necessitates a broad geographic focus that shifts from region to region and place-to-place.

This study builds upon a significant amount of scholarship regarding death in both America and Europe. Philippe Ariès’s landmark study from 1981, *The Hour of Our Death*, represents the most widely read work to date upon the subject of mortality in the western world. Ariès’s work exhaustively studies the evolution of mortality practices in continental Europe—with brief asides into America and Great Britain—and powerfully concludes that a familiarity with death that existed for centuries was replaced in the last two hundred years with something altogether more distant.¹³ This dissertation builds upon those conclusions by isolating and exploring that tipping moment within the American context and connecting it to an evolving relationship between Anglo-American conceptions of nature and mortality. Both Gary Laderman’s *Sacred Remains* and David Charles Sloane’s *The Last Great Necessity* take many of Ariès’s ideas and apply them to death and mortuary practices in America.¹⁴ Laderman and Sloane’s analyses highlight the

¹³ Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), see “Conclusion: Five Variations on Four Themes.” Thomas Walter Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), presents a useful coda to *The Hour of Our Death*.

¹⁴ David Charles Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

importance of the professionalization and commercialization of death in defining our modern relationship to mortality. By placing so much importance on commercialization, they mostly ignore the significant connection between nature and death that marked early republic burial and deemphasize the importance of the entire period before professional undertakers. More recent scholarship, including Erik Seeman's *Death in the New World*, examines mortality within both indigenous and colonial communities directly preceding American independence. Seeman usefully demonstrates the linkages between different groups of people in the Atlantic world through death practices and the evolving integration of what he calls "deathways" into a diplomatic language.¹⁵ Both the concept of deathways and the importance of transnational death practices form part of the intellectual bedrock of "Grave Concerns."

Some historians have uncovered the ways that the natural world has suffused American death. David Schuyler's classic *New Urban Landscape* and Aaron Sachs' *Arcadian America* are two examples.¹⁶ Sachs begins with a simple premise: modern-day Americans have lost an environmental tradition—arcadianism—that harmonized natural limits with urbanity, nature with culture, and replaced it with a simplistic and rigid understanding of the environment. He contends that Americans replaced arcadianism with hard boundaries between purity and wilderness, on the one hand, and despoliation and civilization on the other.¹⁷ Sachs' analysis focuses especially on the birth and

¹⁵ Erik R. Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), see "Introduction: Ways of Dying, Ways of Living."

¹⁶ Aaron Sachs, *Arcadian America: The Death and Life of an Environmental Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), chap. 3, "The Didactic Landscape: Rural Cemeteries."

¹⁷ Sachs, *Arcadian America*, 3.

adoption of the rural cemetery style. American rural cemeteries were a new aesthetic environmental design that emerged in the 1830s and suburbanized burial, presaging the town and city parks of the post-Civil War period. Sachs positions these dramatic spaces as the embodiment of the arcadian ethos. Sachs additionally argues that rural cemeteries such as Mt. Auburn, located just outside of Boston, Massachusetts, provided vital green spaces in an industrializing American landscape that championed both the beauty of nature and, as a cemetery, the humble position of humans. To demonstrate the form of this ideology, Sachs moves from cemeteries to Walden Pond and even modern day Ithaca, New York, considering advocates of arcadianism from Thoreau and Emerson to lesser-known landscape designers such as H.W.S. Cleveland.

The strain of arcadianism that Sachs analyzes is important, but in assessing it he underestimates the importance of death rituals and burial spaces in the years predating it.¹⁸ Deemphasized are the churchyards, graveyards, and private plots of the early republic, as Americans headed into a “better” relationship with their dead and their environment through rural cemetery spaces. Americans prior to the emergence of rural cemeteries also understood the natural world and connected to their environments. Unique to early national Americans, however, was their embrace of the processes of death and decay, their sense of a holistic nature that connected them in a primal and basic way to the world of trees, plants, rivers, animals, birds, and insects. That singular holism relied upon *all* the connections Americans made between death and the natural world—

¹⁸ See Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*; Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape*; Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*. All of these works also place a large emphasis on the movement towards the rural cemetery as a watershed moment in the history of death in America, and while their focus is less on the natural environment (excluding David Shuyler’s work) they all still put forth a similar argument to that being advanced within Sachs’ *Arcadian America*.

whether that was a grinning skull, flowering rose bush, or half-sunken grave—and not solely on aesthetics, beauty, and tranquility.

The everyday relationship to the environment that marked the early republic does not represent an earlier form of arcadianism, but a hybrid of multiple strains of both thought and action. Americans living within the early republic understood themselves as intrinsic and permeable members of an environmental network. They understood the natural world as a holistic and dynamic system that, crucially, shaped them while simultaneously being altered by them. They viewed nature through natural philosophy, lived experience, and folk learning. As historians such as Conevery Bolton Valencius and Linda Nash have argued, Americans in the early republic and in isolated pockets in the West respected, utilized, and feared the natural world because they understood their physical bodies as an inherent part of it.¹⁹ Swamps, for example, frightened white Americans in the era not only because of the actual dangerous creatures within them but because they were “dark,” “uncivilized,” and debilitating places that seemed inimical to human life. What they did not know scientifically about the connection between wetland ecosystems, mosquitos, and disease vectors they still “learned” and understood through direct contact and belief in the environment’s power to change them physically and mentally, positively and negatively. Americans understood their bodies not as distinct,

¹⁹ For examples, see; Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country : How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Linda Lorraine Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies : A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Gregg Mitman, *Breathing Space : How Allergies Shape Our Lives and Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Nancy Langston, *Toxic Bodies* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2011). All of these works put forward extremely compelling and important arguments that attempt to demonstrate that Americans of the past, dissimilar to the present, saw themselves as permeable units existing within the environment as opposed to the seeming impenetrable and closed off bodies that medical science has put forward for the past 130 years.

closed off individual units imperiled by invasive outside forces, but instead as organic and permeable entities shaped by all of the factors within their environment. While much was faulty in their understanding of nature, disease, and health, it held one clear advantage over the present.

Death within the early republic represented an important facet of this natural holism that permeated American culture. People from New York City to Charleston understood themselves and their bodies as functioning parts of a larger environment. Mortality then stood as the ultimate example of this natural permeability. Death and decay reinforced for Americans, regardless of station, their place within a larger, inescapable, self-regulating, and Divine environmental order. Death, as the writer Y so adroitly observed, was part of a “stupendous system!”²⁰

The embrace of this nature-based order represents a significant component of the American mortality worldview. It transcends the modern—and problematic—boundaries erected between nature and culture where that dichotomy colors much of our present struggle to live in accord with the planet. Likewise, it has led many historians, environmental or otherwise, to place undue importance on the exclusive preservation of “wild spaces,” the tragic eradication of iconic species, or the evolution of American attitudes towards the value of recreation in the outdoors. Places like Yosemite National Park and species like the American Bison are worthy of study and celebration, but doing so can reinforce the idea that nature is exclusively “out there.” Moreover, much of the present-day popular ideology concerning the natural environment embraces the premise

²⁰ Y, “Observations on Burying the Dead.” 620.

that nature tends towards balance and is only in danger when humans meddle with it, or that nature is at its best and most “natural” when isolated from people.²¹

The simplistic conception of people as simply disturbers and destroyers of our environment presents a pessimistic view of the possibilities of a healthy and sustaining relationship with the natural world. Pushing our histories away from binary views of nature and culture and towards a broader vision that sees nature and culture embedded within each other is paramount. Environmental historian William Cronon best captures this position. As Cronon observes, “The tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or a saw.”²² By elevating the commonplace nature that humans interact with each day, Cronon breaks down the imagined barriers between the environment and ourselves; boundaries between humans and nature that modern day impulses elevating of sublime natural scenes and/or isolated “wilderness” reaffirms. Within these smaller and easily accessible moments with the natural world, however, we can grasp a more grounded and personal vision of the connection between environmental forces and ourselves and better orient ourselves to live alongside them.

Death during the early republic was a central experience of accessible (indeed unavoidable) nature, which placed Americans within the natural world as opposed to outside of it. By dying and witnessing the death of friends and loved ones, Americans directly experienced naturally mandated processes similar to eating, sleeping, or

²¹ For a just few best-selling examples see; Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989); Alan Weisman, *The World without Us* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin’s Press, 2007); Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015).

²² William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground : Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996).

practicing bodily functions. Unlike those instances, however, mortality was powerful, personal, and unforgettable. All encountered death when walking within and by churchyard burial grounds, or waiting solemnly as funeral processions passed or coffins disappeared into the earth, and all Americans over time witnessed grass and other plant life emerge from the ground nourished by decaying remains below. Wealth, religion, ethnicity, and even race did not bar one from experiencing the processes of death and decay. By contrast, our modern experience of nature and our access to the environment is often more artificial and determined by wealth and geography. If experiencing nature requires, say, a trip to Yosemite, where one can encounter natural purity and the sublime, then access is possible only through considerable time, trouble, and money. But nature in the early republic was holistic and enveloping, no more so than at death. And such was the case not only for white urban Americans of means, but also for, say, enslaved African Americans in early nineteenth-century rural Georgia, who saw their master's family burial ground and their own graveyard each day as they moved about the plantation. From the potter's field to the prestigious burial grounds of the Old North Church in Boston, early republic Americans interacted with, confronted, and placed themselves within nature through death.

The organization of this dissertation is both chronological and thematic. The opening three chapters seek to establish the existence of an American death worldview and practice and will revisit similar themes but within three distinct areas. Each of these three chapters show in a linked fashion, physically and spiritually, how Americans embraced mortality suffused with nature. Chapter II, "Dust to Dust," examines the ways that religion and personal spirituality expressed and spread the death worldview among

Americans, from church pulpits and via personal writing and correspondence. Chapter III, “Food for the Worms,” assesses the physical contours of the early republic American death worldview by exploring mourning and burial practices, burial spaces, and tombstone epigraphy. Through rituals and the graveyard environment itself, Americans regularly and physically experienced a strong environmental ethos that reinforced their sense of their permeable and finite lives as natural entities. Chapter IV, “The Green Turf Swells Above Thy Moldering Clay,” examines the importance of mortality, decay, mortuary rituals, and the graveyard setting within popular literary culture. As American writers fashioned a creative culture for the fledgling republic, they explored and disseminated the connections they saw between nature and mortality that were at the heart of the American worldview of death.

Yet, for all the reminders of nature that anchored conceptions of mortality in American minds during the early republic, challenges arose that eventually pushed Americans from the everyday nature of death into the system that we see today. Three distinct but interconnected challenges drive the final chapters. Chapter V, “Noisome Exhalations,” examines the way that evolving medical knowledge of epidemic disease—and the theory of miasma—directly undermined the intimacy and public style of mourning rituals, which in turn weakened the American connection to the nature of death. Outbreaks of diseases, including the infamous yellow fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia in 1793, alongside its less-chronicled visitation to New York City in 1822, exposed fault lines within the culture of death, locally and increasingly nationally. New modes of public health and sanitation associated mortal remains with disease and sought to isolate them in burial spaces more physically and socially remote. Chapter VI, “People

of Low Character,” analyzes how the increasing fears of contagion and disease emanating from the dead, and changing demographics through immigration, altered native-born American desires to be directly involved and closely connected to their deceased, physically and emotionally. The swelling tide of immigrants in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, predominately Irish, pushed native-born Americans to seek ways to isolate themselves both from the bodies of living immigrants and the remains of their dead. To create this separation, middle and upper class Americans increasingly found ways to stigmatize the corpses of immigrant dead, which resulted in the dramatic relocation of public burial grounds—that served the poor primarily—to the margins of both community and cultural life. All of this weakened the direct and easily accessed experience with mortality that anchored the older American worldview of death embedded in natural processes. The final chapter, “Hidden From Mortal Eyes,” chronicles the emergence of a much different vision of mortality in America. The everyday and experiential understanding of death as an environmental force underwent a dramatic realignment associated with America’s rural cemetery movement. From embalming to caskets, Americans increasingly turned towards preserving bodies and beautifying death, which deemphasized nature’s harshest characteristics. Death was increasingly sentimentalized, sanitized, and stripped of the organicism that had previously marked it, ironically, in part by the celebrated nature of the landscaped and aestheticized park like rural cemeteries that arose from Philadelphia to Charleston.

Looking around a cemetery in the twenty-first century, surrounded by marble headstones situated among precisely manicured, undulating, and seemingly endless turf, most Americans believe they are viewing nature. They are not wrong, exactly, but a

closer look around and underneath the soil yields a much more complex picture. The deceased are typically filled with chemicals, their caskets are crafted to be nearly indestructible, and the corpses and caskets themselves are usually placed within concrete, “leak proof” vaults. For most that seems perfectly reasonable. Why should our loved ones’ bodies be ravaged and destroyed by bacteria, insects, and even plants as they lie at rest?

As we have seen, more recently some have begun to assert that, in dying, humans experience their closest connection to the natural environment. In the words of one modern day green burial proponent, “Our idea is to allow physical bodies to degrade naturally and be incorporated into other living things, trees and flowers. We want them to be caught up in life’s continuing cycles of growth and death, decomposition and rebirth.”²³ Green burial seeks to challenge modern American mortuary practices and to redefine our bodies in death, less as isolated corpses sealed away for all eternity, but instead as organic vessels that can continue to give back and create new generations of diverse life.

This noble sentiment is neither original nor unique. Americans of the early republic understood death as a natural process in ways that presaged today’s green burial advocates. They conceptualized themselves as functioning, permeable entities that were inseparable from their environments, with death and decay serving as powerful reminders. Through death rituals (religious and physical), burial spaces, and literature, Americans during the early republic experienced nature in its most raw and powerful manifestations and connected themselves to their environments in a uniquely holistic

²³ Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: A Journey through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York: Scribner, 2007).

way. Loved ones today decline and die in hospitals and nursing homes, and efficient professionals then whisk their remains away. While this might make the process of death emotionally easier, has it undermined our own ability to cope with mortality and bodily decline? And such practices seem to wall off our bodies from the natural world that surrounds us. It is ironic, then, that we increasingly rely on temporary escapes to “pristine nature” and manicured parks to alleviate our feelings of alienation from the environment while at the same time ignoring the nature of our own bodies. Death has always been saddening, challenging, and awful, and this exploration into early republic deathways is not an attempt to turn back the clock. It is, however, a challenge, both to my readers and to myself. By grappling with death and decay, by examining our own frailty, by participating in death rituals (no matter how unpleasant), and by physically encountering our burial grounds, perhaps we can better understand both our own mortality and our place within our natural world. Grave concerns indeed.

CHAPTER II
DUST TO DUST

...the seeds of dissolution are sown thick in our bodies, and are constantly, tho' often imperceptible, working, in us, decay.
Reverend Levi Collins²⁴

We delay preparation for death; but death cannot be deferred.
Reverend Joseph Hilliard²⁵

In early 1802, twenty-three year old American William Tudor must have felt both blessed and elated to be embarking on a months long journey to some of the oldest and most storied cities on the Italian peninsula. We can imagine the young man excitedly thinking about visiting the sumptuous Teatro San Carlo of Naples or taking in the grandeur of Rome's Coliseum. His many letters home chronicled his exuberance at being a young man, alone, experiencing Italian and European culture firsthand. In modern parlance, William Tudor was having the time of his life.

Tudor's letters, however jubilant, contained within them a melancholy and contemplative tone. Before even arriving in Italy his plans for the journey had already shifted dramatically. His brother, John Henry Tudor, was supposed to be his traveling companion but had been forced to remain behind bothered by a lingering and debilitating illness. William's correspondence reflected this change, and his letters not only recorded his trip, but allowed him to inquire regularly after the health of his ailing brother. From

²⁴ Levi Collins, *A Sermon, Preached in Somers, April 29, 1806, at the Funeral of Mrs. Mary Sexton, (Relict of Mr. Daniel Sexton,) Who Died April 27, 1806, in the 91st Year of Her Age* (Hartford: Hudson & Goodwin, 1807), 10.

²⁵ Joseph Hilliard, *A Sermon, Delivered in Somersworth, May 14, 1817, at the Funeral of Mrs. Elizabeth Wentworth* (Cambridge: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1817), 3.

the very first letter home, William referred to his growing anxiety regarding the condition of John Henry. Still, he remained hopeful that John Henry could join him in Italy, suggesting even that “if he were in this climate he would soon be well.”²⁶ John Henry, however, had only one last journey to make.

Family and friends attempted to allay William’s mounting concern over the state of his brother’s health, but for William this slow drip of information was maddening. A letter dated March 14, 1802, captured the mercurial mood of the younger Tudor. He recorded the arrival of a ship ferrying within it a letter from his mother containing news of his brother. Waiting anxiously—and lobbying doggedly—he convinced the ship’s navigator to pass on the letter without the required scrutiny of the health office. From here, it is easy to imagine William veritably running back to his room and in privacy, shakily, opening the awaited letter. “I do not know what to say has been the results of its contents on me, her letters like a day in April alternate showers and beams of sunshine, it has however relieved me of a load of oppression,” he reflected. William, intriguingly, captured his mood through a simile grounded in the natural world. His own feelings, he purported, mirrored a spring day, equal parts cloudy and radiant, and wholly dependent on factors outside of his control, like weather. While his words might appear fanciful today, they illuminate an important way that Americans understood themselves, their own emotions, and their mortality. For despite his relief at John Henry’s continued life, William was not blind to the reality of his brother’s dangerous position. “When I think of home, when I think of my Brothers in Philadelphia, when I picture to myself one at eighteen watching over the pallid couch of a beloved brother, and trying through his tears

²⁶ William Tudor to Family, 2 February 1802, William Tudor Papers, Boston Athenaeum.

to console him with pleasantries, that are foreign to his heart, when I see this one in the bloom of youth forgetting the pains that torment him...it unmans me.” Tudor then forcefully concludes, “Though I only shed a tear... they are drawn from the heart and afford me a note of painful relief.”²⁷ Although his brother was alive, William Tudor was not naïve; death still loomed large in his mind.

As spring turned to summer in the port city of Livorno, William Tudor confronted mortality through the final dissolution of his brother. He actually learned of John Henry’s death from a fellow American tourist (his family had agreed to withhold the news of the death from William in light of his trip). Tudor’s response captures a moment of grim expectation and honest anguish at the loss. Significantly, his words expose a part of the dynamic worldview that surrounded death during the early republic.²⁸ His letter opened with sentiments designed to reassure his mother that he was not in a dangerous state of mind, which—importantly—he credited to his expectation of John Henry’s death. Death did not catch William by surprise as the experiences of his entire life prepared him for it. Americans of the early republic lived in a world where death always loomed, and preparation and engagement with mortality actually represented one of the most important lessons of life.

American experiences with death came from numerous places in the early national period and his grief-stricken letter alights on two important examples. First, condolence letters and spirituality helped Americans express their own feelings about death while additionally facilitating the spread of shared wisdom and experiences

²⁷ William Tudor to Family, 14 March 1802, William Tudor Papers.

²⁸ For more on this term and my usage of it throughout, please see the Chapter I and in particular citation no. 9.

between family, friends, and religious leaders. Second, was his anguished regret at being physically absent from his brother's side during his final moments. He writes, "What is your distress what your sufferings [sic] I see you bathed in tears, each trying to solace the other of the distress... why I am not present to weep in concert to my heart to yours and receive consolation from their mutual beatings."²⁹ While he outwardly appealed to a communal desire to grieve among his family, his letter also betrayed the great guilt he felt over being absent from the physical space of his brother's deathbed. He continues lamenting his own absence, "What did he think at my absence, who ought to have held his hand in mine, who ought to have been his solace, who ought to have received his last sigh."³⁰ William Tudor's letter returned to that refrain numerous times, as it was not just the death that fueled his grief but his inability to share in the actual processes of his brother's mortality. Tudor concluded his long letter by stating that he had hastened his journey home to be better able to share in his family's grief and reflect upon the passing of his beloved brother among and with his family, or as he poetically notes, "the little circle incloses [sic] all that I have dear in life."³¹

Death entered the life of William Tudor while he toured Italy, and his letters encapsulated an all-encompassing grief. It was a sadness, however, tempered by expectation and understanding, an undercurrent that weaved throughout the personal writings and condolence letters of the early republic. While William Tudor desperately hoped for his brother to return to bodily health, he was not blind to the stark realities; if

²⁹ William Tudor to Family, 15 June 1802, William Tudor Papers.

³⁰ William Tudor to Family, 15 June 1802.

³¹ William Tudor to Family, 15 June 1802.

anything, he was more aware of his brother's fragility because of his constant reflection upon it. William Tudor's words bring into clear focus the broad worldview that suffused the American relationship with mortality; it was life that was uncertain not death, and as such Americans, whether rich or poor, embraced the finite boundaries of life throughout their myriad personal and spiritual expressions of grief. As Tudor wrote discussing his own sadness, "I suffered one or two hours of anguish, relieved by tears, which I shed... I have expected the event."³²

William Tudor was no exception or outlier, as early republic Americans shared a dynamic worldview that revolved around the omnipresence of death and that engendered a readiness to confront mortality. This worldview depended upon and was reinforced through their personal writings and condolence letters to bereaved friends and family, and the sermons that guided their responses to mortality. The American embrace of death fashioned it into a common subject of import that reminded them constantly of their own mortality, and additionally—though less present in Tudor's writing—grounded them within a nature-based cycle of life and death. The American worldview of death was a system that engendered preparedness and respect for decay and dissolution.

George Evelyn Harrison, a wealthy Virginia planter, illustrated through his correspondence the ways that death, life, and nature comingled during the early nineteenth century. Death visited Harrison in both his own home and his friends' and he keenly documented and reflected on these events in his correspondence. Personally, grief came into Harrison's own life in September of 1831. He and his wife had been enduring a tumultuous and trying pregnancy in 1831, which he chronicled in a series of letters to his

³² William Tudor to Family, 15 June 1802, William Tudor Papers.

sister, Anne Byrd. Harrison's letter to his sister from the 30th of September contained the awaited birth announcement; however, the tidings were not joyous. After being born prematurely, his young daughter passed after seven hours. Harrison recounts to his sister, "We hoped at our time to have saved it, but nature forbade."³³ Harrison's allusion to nature is purposeful, placing the death of his child not outside of natural processes but completely within and governed by them. His daughter's death was not a chiding reprimand from God, nor was it the fault of any doctor or midwife. Instead, as he simply and grimly recounts of his daughter's life, "nature forbade."³⁴ The sentiment itself mirrors that of William Tudor; it was one of expectation, resignation, and acceptance of death as an unavoidable process of life. Harrison's seemingly simple acknowledgment of his daughter's passing prioritizes the power of nature and gestures towards a set of learned values that living creatures—humans included—were governed by and part of the natural environment. It was a grim and fatalistic lesson, but these discussions of death fostered a constant preparedness and readiness for dying that had its roots in a subtle but complex environmental ideology among early republic Americans.

Harrison's decades long correspondence to his sister chronicled multiple deaths, and while some were afforded more reflection than others, he always maintained singular view of mortality undergirded by nature. In an 1831 letter to his sister, concerning the death of their brother Walter, he lamented the sudden hole his absence would leave in Richmond society. The brother's death shocked George, but did not render him unable to reflect on the greater lessons at work. "The universal destroyer is as indiscriminate as he

³³ George Evelyn Harrison to Anne H. Byrd, 30 September 1831, Byrd Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

³⁴ George Evelyn Harrison to Anne H. Byrd, 30 September 1831, Byrd Family Papers.

is powerful,” he concludes.³⁵ George positioned death as an uncontrollable force, similar to a hurricane or earthquake, which kills without regard for prestige or wealth. Parallels to this idea emerged from an 1834 letter to his sister. In the letter he discussed his attempt to visit his grievously ill friend, Robert Walker, at his home in Petersburg, Virginia. Or, in Harrison’s words, he wished to see Robert Walker, “to render the last sad affairs.”³⁶ Unfortunately, he arrived too late. He relates his frustration at missing this opportunity noting that he “had not the melancholy satisfaction to find him alive.”³⁷ Here Harrison lamented his missed opportunity to physically visit with his dying friend. A meeting that represented more than just curiosity. Harrison—similar to so many Americans—viewed this bedside visitation as both an important duty and a powerful moment in his own personal growth. Americans sought out the deathbeds of their loved ones to directly access the process of dying and when this was impossible they voraciously looked for and/or described the details in their correspondences. In a world where death appeared everywhere and at all times, Americans gleaned a “melancholy satisfaction”—a better understanding—from meditating on death and decay as captured so vividly in the bedchamber of a friend like Walker.

Importantly, in the very same letter, Harrison reflected not only on Walker’s death but also on two others, illuminating the centrality of the worldview surrounding mortality that pushed Americans to embrace death through discussion. Walker himself deftly observes, “Death has been busy with his dismal doings of late.”³⁸ His understanding of

³⁵ George Evelyn Harrison to Anne H. Byrd, 11 April 1831, Byrd Family Papers.

³⁶ George Evelyn Harrison to Anne H. Byrd, 3 April 1834.

³⁷ George Evelyn Harrison to Anne H. Byrd, 3 April 1834.

³⁸ George Evelyn Harrison to Anne H. Byrd, 3 April 1834.

death as destructive, dismal, tireless, and universal is significant. In a clear allusion to changing seasons or weather, death was not simply a distant idea that only occurred at the end of long and healthy lives; instead, it was an uncontrollable force that suffused their existence.

This joining or likening of death to natural seasonal changes or weather recurs throughout many different letters and was not confined to any particular American region or group. Bostonian Margaret Lamb took this idea from the realm of metaphor to reality when she learned of the death of her grandson in February, 1838. She writes to her son, Thomas, ostensibly lamenting her inability to travel to be with him. She notes, “It is bitter to feel we are five hundred miles away from you, in this deep season of grief.”³⁹ Margaret Lamb’s phrasing was both metaphorical and grounded in reality. In the first case, the lengthy mourning period that her own son faced after the death of his son was a “season.” Lamb, however, was also subtly but directly linking the actual seasonal weather, the cold and snow of winter, with increased mortality. Instead of seeing death as completely unrelated to the actual realities of the climate, Margaret connected the two together, fashioning both a metaphorical and physical “season of grief” that aptly illustrated the human connection to the natural world through death. This reading of mortality as both a characteristic of certain seasons and as lasting the duration of a season further entrenched the idea of death as a natural force of destruction outside of human control.

Death and dying appeared frequently in correspondence during this period, and served as the centerpiece of many letters, whether communicating odd circumstances around a death or opining about a person’s chance of survival. Robert Byrd Pollard, the

³⁹ Margaret Lamb to Thomas Lamb, 2 February 1838, Lamb Family Papers, Boston Athenaeum.

son of a wealthy Virginia family, chronicled decay and death throughout his letters home from White Sulphur Springs where he himself sought treatment for a chronic digestive illness. As Pollard made his way across the state of Virginia in 1834, he chronicled the precipitously declining health of his traveling companion Captain Duncan. While observing and documenting the declining condition of a friend feels macabre, for a man like Pollard battling his own chronic illness, the topic could not have been more important. Pollard's account of his friend's decline helped him confront the fragile state of his own health and mortality. What ailed the Captain is unclear, but the disease itself was less of interest to Pollard than watching his companion's slow decay. "His voice is completely changed, and he has the most ghastly appearance you ever saw in your life—he is so low that he takes no exercise and for the purpose of excitement has resorted to the pernicious and frequent use of opium." He somberly concludes, "if he ever reaches home again it will be a miracle."⁴⁰ For the young Pollard, his companion served as a forceful lesson on the ravages of decay. As Duncan withered in front of Pollard, he was faced with and forced to reflect on human mortality, especially his own. Captain Duncan's declining health served as an important central theme in his letters home, reminding all of the impermanence of human life and bracing both himself and his friends for death.

The death worldview that threaded throughout American correspondence even crossed racial boundaries, particularly in the South, where slave deaths were discussed and deployed as stark reminders of the power of nature over life. Among the correspondence of New Englander William Tudor is a letter from a Mrs. Leogewick of

⁴⁰ Robert Byrd Pollard to Robert Pollard, 2 September 1834, Byrd Family Papers.

Pearl River, Mississippi, dated August 2, 1822, which offers an extended look into the mortality of nine slaves her household had recently purchased. While Mrs. Leogewick was optimistic about their prospects, nature had other plans for these poor slaves. One enslaved woman—pregnant when purchased—delivered a child, but it died soon after birth. She then died some five weeks later. Two other children also died shortly after their purchase. Finally, one of the slaves, a young man, suffered from various ailments that ultimately claimed his life. “A young man evidently consumptive, who from the moment he was purchased was found inadequate for labor of any kind, he went through a course of physicians & medicines,” she continues, “the poor young man paid the debt of nature some few weeks since on the banks of this delightful river.”⁴¹ Again we see nature being positioned in such a way as to make it synonymous with death. Or, in the lyrical phrasing of Mrs. Leogewick, all Americans—slave or otherwise—must pay back their “debt of nature.”⁴² She also, intriguingly, juxtaposes the slave’s death with the “delightful river” flowing by her home, illuminating two different manifestations of the power of the natural world. Mrs. Leogewick envisioned death as a natural force that connected human beings with the environment as organic entities who existed within a natural web. Evidenced in her letter was a powerful system that claimed four of the nine slaves she purchased soon after they arrived at her plantation.⁴³

Letters allowed for Americans to struggle communally with death, but death’s inherently individual experience additionally exposed the depth of nature’s importance to

⁴¹ Mrs. Leogewick to William Tudor. 2 August 1822, William Tudor Papers.

⁴² Mrs. Leogewick to William Tudor. 2 August 1822.

⁴³ Mrs. Leogewick to William Tudor. 2 August 1822.

the American worldview of death as men and women interrogated their own internal relationship with mortality. New England based grocer Almon D. Hodges Sr.'s daybook is illustrative. The pages of Hodges's journal abound with observations ranging from the purchasing of dry goods to trips to New York City. What recurs with equal and perhaps more frequency is Hodges's record of deaths in and around New England. Each day recounts a death; from the first page of his journal to the last, Hodges journal serves as a chronicle of death and decay.⁴⁴ Hodges often recorded without any editorializing, indicating a keen awareness and fascination with death that went beyond simple curiosity. Understanding and reflecting upon death were central to the way Hodges documented the passage of time, and through that connection Hodges constantly reminded himself of the brevity of human existence. While he remained terse about his reasoning, the significant amounts of space he spent writing about death indicates the power of the worldview that oriented the American relationship with mortality. Early republic Americans not only understood the ubiquity of death; they embraced it and used it to guide their lives and in doing so grounded themselves in nature in a unique and powerful way. No wonder then that the pages of Hodges's diary from the years 1819 to around 1850 document hundreds of deaths because for him and many other Americans this natural limit pushed them onwards every day.⁴⁵

For Hodges, recording deaths was a key aspect of his daily introspection, but equally important were the ways that he documented the deceased that so preoccupied him. Hodges records deaths in a similar matter to his observations of weather and

⁴⁴ Almon D. Hodges Sr., *Diary of Almon D. Hodges, Sr., 1819-1878*, Hodges Family Papers, Boston Athenaeum.

⁴⁵ Hodges, *Diary of Almon D. Hodges, Sr., 1819-1878*, Hodges Family Papers.

temperature, many times placing them directly next to each other, thereby indicating that, in his mind, death was no less natural or uncommon. His observations from March of 1820, for example, chronicles terrible rain and wind alongside the deaths of two girls, “one a virgin and one a prostitute.”⁴⁶ At the end of the month he also notes that on the 27th two inches of snow had fallen and that it was “7 years this day since the death of John W. Hodges.”⁴⁷ Two ideas emerge from this example: first, keeping a record of the deceased, no matter who they were, was important to Hodges. Why else record the random deaths of two very different women? Second, his meticulous records reinforced the natural rhythms of death through their juxtaposition with larger environmental processes such as the falling of snow or the rumble of thunder. The uninterrupted record of various deaths in a way no different from natural weather events linked Almon Hodges Sr. to the environment in a fundamental, even primal way. His entry that it was seven years to the day since John W. Hodges died is likewise rife with meaning. The most obvious point being that Hodges remembered key deaths and their anniversaries, which kept alive in his own memory his long passed loved ones. Additionally, and more uniquely, Hodges and other Americans reckoned the passage of time in terms of those lost to the inevitable processes of human decay in a similar way to how people—both then and now—refer to certain years by disastrous weather events like Hurricane Irene and 2011 or, more recently, 2017 and the three hurricanes that wreaked havoc through the southeastern United States.

⁴⁶ Hodges, *Diary of Almon D. Hodges, Sr., 1819-1878, Journal 1, March 1, 1820 to June 15, 1820, Hodges Family Papers.*

⁴⁷ Hodges, *Diary of Almon D. Hodges, Sr., 1819-1878, Journal 1, March 1, 1820 to June 15, 1820.*

Hodges diary abounds in these simple recollections of the deceased, but it also draws attention to another significant aspect of early American lives, funeral attendance. Hodges was only a young man in his twenties, when he started attending funerals and from then on his journal chronicles the unceasing regularity of these events. On the 5th of June, 1826 he observes, “Death of Geo Gilbert,” and his entry continues on the 6th, “Funeral at 7 ock [sic] went only as far as Pawtucket.”⁴⁸ While Hodges maintained the terse composition style that marked his daybooks, his record of funeral attendance is still significant. Not every mention of the deceased within Hodges’s diary coincides with funeral attendance. Therefore, when he does record his attendance, Hodges suggests their importance. The personal significance of funerals is not necessarily surprising, but the frequency that he attends them challenge our present day—more distant—notions of death. Funeral attendance for Hodges and other Americans, however, was crucial and helped inculcate them into a worldview that kept the notion of death, sudden or distant, close at hand and helped forge a distinctly death accepting culture.

The way that Hodges actually writes about funerals and deaths also sheds light on the way that early Americans envisioned the deceased among them as commonplace and natural. Hodges’s spartan writing could appear to indicate detachment and a lack of thought or emotion about death. Yet his tone is consistent throughout and is equally present in discussing glad tidings, such as the birth of his first son in 1831. Almon Hodges writes of his son’s birth, “Thursday afternoon, half past two – boy born – Danforth Comstock Hodges.”⁴⁹ Death or birth for Hodges represented familiar moments

⁴⁸ Hodges, *Diary of Almon D. Hodges, Sr., 1819-1878, Journal 4, May 1, 1825 to December 28, 1833, Hodges Family Papers.*

⁴⁹ Hodges, *Diary of Almon D. Hodges, Sr., 1819-1878, Journal 4, May 1, 1825 to December 28, 1833.*

that whether joyous or sorrowful were a natural part of the fabric of his life. Compare the entry regarding the birth of his son with his record of the death of his mother only a few months later. The entries for his mother begin on November 5, 1831. Hodges records, “Saturday at 11 o’clock died this evening at the above hour, my mother, Sarah Hodges, aged 63.” He continues on the 9th, “Funeral of my mother at 10 o’clock, started at eleven for Norton, funeral processed around their ¼ before two. Started from the burying ground at 2 for Providence where we arrived at 10 past 4 o’clock. Prayer by Rev. Peter Clarke of Norton.”⁵⁰ Hodges does not pen a mournful panegyric, but instead recounts his thoughts simply and clearly, similar to the birth of his child, Comstock, only two months previous. Additionally, all of these entries recall his dispassionate tone about temperatures and snowfalls analyzed earlier. While death might have been a sorrowful interruption of his life, it was not something that surprised him, nor did it upend the natural order. Conversely, it actually reinforced and confirmed the very real nature that governed human life.

The apparent centrality, regularity, and inevitability of death that funerals reinforced within Americans during this period led at times to unique situations. One fascinating example emerges from an 1826 letter from Helen MacLeod of Washington DC to her brother Donald MacLeod. In it, she describes the death and funeral of a former African American servant named Ferdinand. “It is with much regret I inform you of the death of an old servant Ferdinand, he died in March last of a pulmonary complaint brought on by severe bilious fever.” She continues, “he came to the city [Washington

⁵⁰ Hodges, *Diary of Almon D. Hodges, Sr., 1819-1878*, Journal 4, May 1, 1825 to December 28, 1833, Hodges Family Papers.

DC] last Christmas to visit some of his relations and never left it again.”⁵¹ Helen so valued the life of Ferdinand that despite the racial categories in place at the time she felt compelled to reflect upon his death. Furthermore, not only was the entire family shaken by his passage but they actually paid for his funeral and attended it.⁵² For Helen MacLeod, and all others, death mattered and in such a way as to actually be able to cross entrenched racial lines.

As central and natural parts of American life during the early part of the nineteenth century, it is particularly interesting to speculate as to the mindset of those like Almon D. Hodges and Helen MacLeod, both in their mid to late twenties, as more and more deaths and funerals came to occupy their social lives and personal introspections. Both display that funerals and deaths served as important moments of social gathering, which, though melancholic, brought together early Americans just as often as trips to the theatre or other social activities. In Hodges’s case, he even combined both! His entry from September 7, 1827, is demonstrative. Hodges writes, “Sunday went to the Holles St. church where heard the Rev M. Pierpoint preach the funeral sermon of Rev Doct [sic] Holley an elegant discourse went down town in the eve with Madam Duchesne.”⁵³ Hodges’s embrace of mortality was a useful exercise and one that fit within normal fabric of American lives. Perhaps his musings on what he had heard that morning even weaved into his evening’s conversation with Madam Duchesne. Funerals, in fact, were built around public participation often involving long processions and worship services

⁵¹ Helen MacLeod to Donald MacLeod. 10 September 1826, MacLeod Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

⁵² Helen MacLeod to Donald MacLeod. 10 September 1826, MacLeod Family Papers.

⁵³ Hodges, Diary of Almon D. Hodges, Sr., 1819-1878, Journal 4, May 1, 1825 to December 28, 1833, Hodges Family Papers.

grounded in decay, dissolution, and the natural process that was—and remains—death, as will be investigated in a following chapter. Here, however, it is enough to recognize that both Helen MacLeod and Almon Hodges illustrate that death and funerals were not things to avoid or dread but instead were an important part of early American cultural expression.

The early republic was a landscape of death, and citizens from North to South positioned human mortality as an inescapable occasion and topic of concern. Letters flowed all over the country filled with discussions of those who had recently passed and those whom might soon join them. At times, a cool detachment dominates, and other times heated passion punctuated with rich language and emotional outpourings. While the language might be different, as well as the reaction, what did not change was the frequency and necessity of being prepared for and reckoning with human mortality. Another layer of knowledge and experience, however, also guided them, the community clergy. These men served as the spiritual font of knowledge that placed death within the context of faith and prayer. Common ideas such as sin, forgiveness, piety, and discipline recur throughout, but more interesting is ministerial discussion of nature. Early republic clergy emerged as fundamental guides in the creation of the culture of death that placed American bodies within a larger God-governed web of nature that suffused American society during the early republic.

As dawn rose on a November morning in 1818 in the small Massachusetts community of Worcester, the Reverend Aaron Bancroft of the 2nd Congregational Church was preoccupied. Later that day he would deliver the final words regarding the life of the recently deceased Mary Thomas, the wife of a personal friend and a committed member

of the congregation. His words would comfort, educate, and bring closure for the family of Mary Thomas, as well as her friends and fellow parishioners. To prepare for the sermon Reverend Bancroft appears to have drawn inspiration from both a divine and natural source. Perhaps he peered out of his window, or stood outside in the cool morning air watching as the sun's rays penetrated the leafy canopy of the oaks and maples so common to New England. As he surveyed this scene (and as his funeral sermon would reflect), he could not help but notice and take inspiration from the riot of color that unfurled in front of him. Reds, oranges, yellows, abounded as if the countryside was aflame. Of course, there was no such fire occurring; instead, he was witnessing the rhythmic change of seasons, embodied by the colorful death and decay of the region's deciduous trees. For the reverend, as he meditated upon the life of Mary Thomas, surrounded by one of fall's most beautiful phenomenon, he was struck by the words of the prophet Isaiah, "And we all do fade as a leaf."⁵⁴

The Reverend Bancroft's connection of the Bible and the natural world represented a powerful linkage that helped push forward a worldview that saw human beings as part of the natural world as opposed to outside of it. According to environmental historian Donald Worster and others this ideology represented an "arcadian view," which he argues emerged in its most concentrated form out of the mind of the Reverend Gilbert White of Selborne, England in the late eighteenth century.⁵⁵ Key to Worster's arcadian view was simplicity in all aspects of life. Selborne represented, and

⁵⁴ Isaiah, 64:6 (King James Version)

⁵⁵ Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2.

Worster argues, that a modest life allowed for humans to reconnect and peacefully coexist with all of the organisms that surrounded them.⁵⁶ Worster applies this useful terminology mostly to the avenues that science embarked upon during the eighteenth century, but this arcadian ethos was at its most accessible to the largest portion of Americans through the regularity of the Sunday worship service or the funeral gathering.⁵⁷ Reverend Bancroft, who most certainly was familiar with Gilbert White's writings, saw the power of putting this ideology in front of his parishioners, and Mary Thomas's funeral service presented a perfect opportunity. Death exemplified the very real nature at work within both a dying parishioner and a falling leaf. Americans were undeniably natural entities within a divine environmental system, and the deaths of their loved ones proved that.

Later that November day as the Reverend Bancroft rose to the pulpit he expounded to the assembled congregation a sermon entitled, "The Leaf an Emblem of Human Life," and powerfully reinforced to his parishioners the power of death as an environmental and divine force.⁵⁸ Bancroft advanced a vision for his parishioners that linked humans and nature together as part of larger whole, authored and controlled by God. "In the Sacred Scriptures frequent allusions are made to natural objects, as emblems of human life; and they are emphatical and impressive." He continued forcefully, "We

⁵⁶ Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, 2.

⁵⁷ Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, pt. 1. Within part 1, "Two Roads Diverged: Ecology in the Eighteenth Century", Worster examines the tension between the two systems, which he labels "the arcadian view" (detailed above) and "the imperial tradition;" the imperial school of thought at its most basic sought to control nature, in opposition to arcadianism.

⁵⁸ Aaron Bancroft, *The Leaf an Emblem of Human Life: A Sermon, Delivered November 22, 1818, the Sunday Following the Interment of Mrs. Mary Thomas* (Worcester: William Manning, 1818).

are bound to acknowledge the agency of God as well in the natural as the moral world.”⁵⁹

This is a powerful beginning. Bancroft directly stated to his congregation that God controls the processes of nature, and that while Christian spirituality often pondered the moral, the power of God within the natural world should not be overlooked either. In the mind of Bancroft and the parishioners he addressed, God governed all, and humans, while rational and different from the animals and plants, were still within the confines of the natural environment.

The inclusivity of nature that the Reverend Bancroft proposed was neither arbitrary nor capricious. Bancroft believed and preached that through death and decay Americans could better grasp their own place within God’s perfect plan for the earth. Nothing demonstrated this more ably for Bancroft than the changing of the seasons. He intoned, “If the extreme of cold and heat, experienced in our climate, should instantly succeed each other, animal life could not be sustained, and the whole economy of vegetation must be disturbed. But the severity of our winter is gradually diminished [with spring’s arrival].”⁶⁰ Bancroft, however, was not content only to acknowledge this truism, he also desired to edify his parishioners and explain why this system worked so flawlessly. “The sun, in his progress to the equator, slowly regains the power over us, which he had lost in his journey to the southern latitude; the vernal winds become more and more serene and soft,” he continued, “and by this genial influence the earth is prepared to renew its productions, and all classes of its inhabitants are recalled to active

⁵⁹ Bancroft, *The Leaf an Emblem of Human Life*, 7.

⁶⁰ Bancroft, 8-9.

labours, in accomplishing the design of their existence.”⁶¹ Bancroft positioned the arrangement of the seasons as indicative of God’s plan to facilitate the life of all organisms on the earth. While his explanation was simplistic, its lack of complexity lent it ever more strength as the diverse members of the congregation, from tradesmen to farmers, could all understand the primal lessons being imparted to them. Education and understanding arose from many sources in the early national period, not the least being the church pulpit, and Bancroft here served as both preacher and naturalist educator for his flock as they learned about the critical cycles of the natural environment.

The cyclical and sequential patterns of nature recounted by Reverend Bancroft also extended to humanity. Bancroft deftly shifted this natural framework to include humans and even attempted to place the progression of their lives within this divinely controlled environmental system. Bancroft observed that the seasons “In like manner succeed the stages of human life.”⁶² Bancroft’s presented a direct connection and comparison between the seasonal changes, so aptly displayed by the oranges and reds of the surrounding fall foliage, and humanity. From birth until death, humans equally followed a cyclical and natural system that brought them from infancy to old age. “We are wonderfully made, and our heavenly father has adapted all the circumstances of our state of being to the capacity given us.” He concluded, “In the progress of human life, we acquire that acquaintance with the things with which we are conversant, that enables [us] to act to useful purpose, and to accomplish the design of our existence.”⁶³ The natural

⁶¹ Bancroft, *The Leaf an Emblem of Human Life*, 9.

⁶² Bancroft, 9.

⁶³ Bancroft, 10.

progression of age, similar to the seasons, prepared Americans and allowed them to flourish, like the spring rains watering dormant flowers and providing them the sustenance to push through the soil and into the sunlight of the summer.

The centrality of death and decay to this natural system is central to Bancroft's message. He muses upon death's prominent place in the lives of all things on the earth. He notes, "Death and destruction appear on every spot of the earth. Innumerable seeds annually, without vegetating, perish; the winds of heaven often prostrate the lofty forests; and insects and animals daily prey on each other."⁶⁴ These observations evince something that historian Catharine Albanese observed more generally in the writings of Puritan divines including both Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. Protestant ministers, while quick to differentiate between the God of Nature and nature personified, nonetheless believed Americans could read the perfection of God through experience in and with nature, whether in the form of a life creating seed or the clouds in the sky, something she argues presages the transcendentalist turn of the middle nineteenth century.⁶⁵ Similarly, Reverend Bancroft, while certainly not downplaying the presence of God, nonetheless was putting forward an observable and naturalistic vision of life on earth for his parishioners.

Bancroft did not solely read God into the natural world, but also sought to place humanity within the environment as opposed to outside or above it. "Humans being also decay and die. We all do fade as the leaf," he powerfully proclaimed.⁶⁶ Here humans are

⁶⁴ Bancroft, *The Leaf an Emblem of Human Life*, 16.

⁶⁵ Albanese, *Nature Religion in America from the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*, 41–43.

⁶⁶ Bancroft, *The Leaf an Emblem of Human Life*, 16.

inextricably connected to the natural forces that governed all living organisms. Disruption of the seasons or something as fantastical as eternal life would *both* upset the entirety of the earthly system, which according to Bancroft and other religious thinkers, was infallible and perfect, as it followed God’s will. Bancroft stated without reservation, “Nature is uniform in her operations; the seasons, as they revolve, produce their appropriate effects, and are fraught with the appropriate blessings.”⁶⁷ Bancroft envisioned the natural order as arranged towards the greatest good. The revolution of the seasons—where revolve suggests its repeated, circular, and expected traits—brings about the necessary gifts of nature from the humble apple to a newborn colt.

As seasons change they foster both life and death, and humans too are part of God’s plan for the nature of the earth. Bancroft recited, “Like the natural decay of leaves, too, weakness and death and old age take place with men at different periods of human life.”⁶⁸ Here again the minister is placing his parishioners and all humans squarely within the confines of nature, not outside of it, nor superior to it—at least in this capacity—but a functioning and bounded part of it. Or as the Reverend Bancroft importantly observed, “Though the infirmities and pains attendant on a failing constitution are experienced by men at different seasons of human existence, yet they will certainly happen to all.”⁶⁹ His lesson to the congregation was a perfect encapsulation of multiple components of the American worldview of death; first, everyone and everything will decay and die. Second, human life was not simply a reflection of seasonal changes but was part of those very

⁶⁷ Bancroft, *The Leaf an Emblem of Human Life*, 12.

⁶⁸ Bancroft, 18.

⁶⁹ Bancroft, 18.

environmental processes. Human beings were natural creatures, and they functioned in the way that the seasons themselves did, through a process of birth, growth, decay, and death.

As the Reverend Bancroft ended his sermon, he returned to his opening metaphor that juxtaposed human beings with the beautiful, orange wreathed trees surrounding him and his fellow New Englanders that November. “The tree, having for its appointed number of years produced its foliage, and yielded its fruit, itself, root and branch, decays and perishes.” He concludes, “It is renewed only by its former seeds, which in turn vegetate and grow, decay and die.”⁷⁰ The Reverend, through the natural environment, was painting a perfect picture of the simplicity and necessity of the cycles of life that all living organisms face. He and his fellow parishioners stood firmly within this system as evidenced by the funeral they all gathered for that day. It may appear strange that so few words remembering Mary Thomas—the deceased—occurred within Bancroft’s sermon, but for the minister and his congregants, Mrs. Thomas no longer benefitted from platitudes or lessons. Instead, Bancroft used death to serve the living, by presenting them a perfect case study of the frailty and regularity of human life as dictated by God and nature.

Numerous funeral sermons from this period overflow with allusions to death as a central and fundamental manifestation of the power of the environment and its reassertion of control over the lives of humans, despite their attempts to distance themselves from nature. We might examine Albemarle County, Virginia, and the parish of St. Anne’s in the waning decades of the eighteenth century, for example, where parishioners looked

⁷⁰ Bancroft, *The Leaf an Emblem of Human Life*, 19.

towards the words of their spiritual leader, the Reverend Charles Clay, during times of both joy and sadness. The Reverend Clay, similar to his Congregationalist equivalent Bancroft, spent much of his time devoted to and expounding upon death and the processes of decay that claimed all. Likewise, for Clay, death was no novelty or isolated event but instead one of fundamental importance to all Virginians and worthy of lengthy meditation.

Many of Clay's surviving sermons are devoted solely to funerals—an indication of the prime importance of mortality in American culture—and a fundamental feature of all of Clay's sermons and descriptions of death were environmental motifs. Clay elected to refer to the dead, not as remains or the deceased, for example, but simply as “bones” or “carcasses” with other various descriptors from “dry” to “putrefying.”⁷¹ While not particularly elegant or beautiful, Clay's understanding of death is no less environmentally oriented than falling leaves or changing seasons. Clay saw death for what it was and in its most primal form: bones and carcasses. Human beings in the end all find themselves as bones and dust mingled with soil, insects, and bacteria that return them to earth. While certainly macabre, it demonstrates his own broad understanding of the biological impermanence of human bodies and drives home that no matter who his parishioner's may have been in life, they were all the same in death, organic beings that decay and die.

Clay, like many of his contemporaries, drew attention to the natural but physically repellent side of death that held such terror for Americans during the early republic. Decay and death were not necessarily beautiful; they were not processes that only inspired flowery poetry or wistful meditation. Returning to Catharine Albanese, she

⁷¹ Clay, Untitled Sermons (#1) 1769-1776, Clay Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

usefully explores this strain of thought, albeit without discussing human mortality. She contends that Puritan thinkers understood that the truths of nature were not always “positive” but that even “negative truths”—filth or human waste—were revelatory.⁷² Death and decay perfectly capture this dynamic, as destroyers of the physical, whether it was the bodies of human beings or the branches and trunks of oaks. Clay argues, “It must be owned that death is the great King of Terrors, of ye dissolution of ye Soul and Body, and that thoughts of becoming prey to the devouring Worms; Carry with it something very shocking to human nature.”⁷³ For Clay and many early republic ministers this repellent message best prepared their parishioners for death in an unpredictable and changing American landscape. As a contemporary New England minister similarly intoned to his flock, “The feelings of our nature recoil at the thought, worms shall destroy these our mortal bodies, and that they shall turn moldering into dust.”⁷⁴ Dying often inspired fear, but that remained an unavoidable consequence of nature and meditating upon it as a part of human life both prepared Americans for death and grounded them in an experiential understanding of their organic bodies.

While death was unpredictable and struck down the young, old, sick, and hale, it was not pointless. Dying was a natural law. Clay thundered from the pulpit, “Let the grave open upon me and let the laws of destruction receive her prey!”⁷⁵ Death

⁷² Albanese, *Nature Religion in America from the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*, 44.

⁷³ Clay, Untitled Sermons (#45) 1769-1776, Clay Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

⁷⁴ Andrew Yates, *The Blessedness of Dying in the Lord: A Sermon, Delivered at Hartford, January 23, 1810, at the Funeral of Mrs. Amelia Flint, Consort of the Rev. Abel Flint, Who Died of a Consumption, January 19* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1810), 3.

⁷⁵ Clay, Untitled Sermons (#18) 1769-1776, Clay Family Papers.

represented the culmination of natural laws within a human life that included destruction and dissolution. The words of the Reverend Samuel Austin regarding the death of Hannah Blair from smallpox are useful. “Death, in unnumbered forms, walks every where. He has a kind of omnipresence in this very garden. There is no tree, nor shrub, nor flower, where death doth not lurk. So sure as we are in the garden, so sure we are close by the sepulcher.”⁷⁶ Austin believed that death resided everywhere and affected all things and that the “garden” despite its outward beauty was also a tomb. The garden ideology contained within this quotation additionally suggests a larger way that Americans understood their environment. God served as the master gardener, and if humans obeyed both the moral precepts and the natural systems God put in place they could live in perfect harmony, no different than a well-tended garden plot. Yet despite this Edenic vision, the garden only thrived when it included death alongside life.

The Reverend Clay’s conception of death and the natural world did not fill the minds of his parishioners with romantic visions of the power of nature. Instead, nature and death represented awe-inspiring forces that humbled human beings and forced them to reckon with their own spiritual shortcomings. His flock would not leave St. Anne’s feeling enamored with nature, but they would leave fearful and respectful of its power over them. An undated sermon from Clay concerning the connection between death and disease illustrates this primal vision of nature’s power and role within American life. “Death is the natural consequence of diseases,” Clay uttered, “We are all tending toward dust and disorder what we feel in our bodies may put us frequently in mind of our

⁷⁶ Samuel Austin, *The Most Promising Life, and Death, Closely Connected: A Sermon, Delivered at Worcester, November 4th, MDCCXCII, the Sabbath Subsequent to the Death and Interment of Miss Hannah Blair, Who Died of the Small Pox* (Worcester: Leonard Worcester, 1794), 9.

approaching dissolution, and the gloomy horrors the grave.”⁷⁷ Clay expressly drew attention to the organic inevitability of death, the idea that humans, like all living things, were “tending towards decay and death.” Nature and death was emblematic of the world, one where nature was not always pliant to American governance. For Clay and his parishioners, nature was to be feared and respected, and death served as a constant and accessible reminder of this uncontrollable power.

Clay’s funeral sermons abounded with grim and destructive portrayals of the power of nature and death crucial to the American mortality worldview. From children to the elderly, Clay constantly returned to the subject of the inescapable power of death. In discussing the premature death of teenage member of the church, he took the time to remind the parents that they too should ready themselves to join her. As he stated, starkly, “according to the course of nature you are nigh unto death.”⁷⁸ Clay and his parishioners realized that death was a fundamental part of the “course of nature.” Clay continued within this grim yet nature-based mode when attempting to encapsulate the grief felt by the family, constructing a metaphor that depicted humans as bounded by the realities of earth. “A sore breach hath indeed been made in your family, a hopeful branch lopped off,” he concluded.⁷⁹ His allusion to the deceased as a branch references the idea of a family tree but also envisions the daughter as a distinctly natural object, a tree branch, ripped from the trunk of her family. This was a powerful and easily understood metaphor

⁷⁷ Clay, Untitled Sermons (#4) 1769-1776. Clay Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

⁷⁸ Clay, Untitled Sermons (#45) 1769-1776. Clay Family Papers.

⁷⁹ Clay, Untitled Sermons (#45) 1769-1776. Clay Family Papers.

for the parishioners of St. Anne's who resided in the shadow of the great forests of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

While ministers from all corners of the emerging republic preached from their pulpits to their congregations, they could not reach everyone. The printed word, however, allowed them to transcend geographic boundaries. In an era that witnessed the passion of the Second Great Awakening and its power to inspire thousands of Americans from Massachusetts to Georgia, the print culture of the new republic was rife with printed sermons. Americans read these sermons for their spiritual content and imbibed their imagery, ranging from cover illustrations to decorative page borders. Through these skulls, bones, verdant leaves, and poignant willows religious ideology was also conveyed.

Environmental motifs were common and reinforced the connection between death and nature. The earliest depictions were often grim and foreboding, reflecting the idea that death was destructive, terrifying, and altogether inevitable. This macabre image of human life and death represented for many historians of funerary art an older American mindset, which they convincingly argue disappeared by the middle of the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ Yet missing from those analyses of artistic change were the environmental messages such images portrayed and disseminated among the living before they were displaced. Consider the following of a cover page (figure 1) from a 1771 pamphlet out of Boston.⁸¹ At the very top of the page, superseding all subsequent script, is a facsimile of

⁸⁰ James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life*, chap. 4 "Remember Me As You Pass By"; Richard E Meyer, *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1995), pt. I "Icon and Epitaph".

⁸¹ John Searl, *A Funeral Sermon Delivered at Newbury-Port, Dec. 30, 1770: Occasioned by the Death of Mrs. Phebe Parsons, Consort of the Rev. Jonathan Parsons, Minister of the Presbyterian Congregation*

a headstone, a key emblem of death. And the headstone's iconography conveyed an unavoidable message via its simple depiction of a human skull with crossed bones surrounded by spreading foliage.

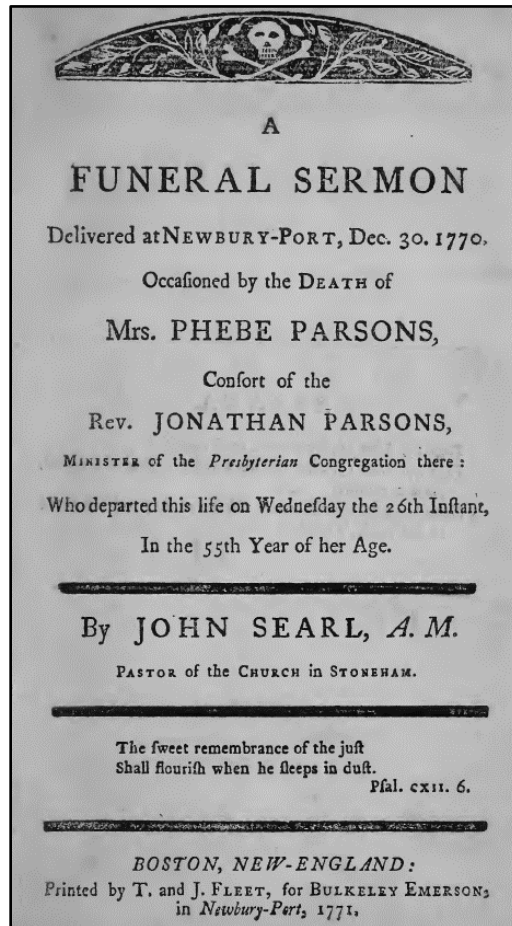


Figure 1. Title page from *A Funeral Sermon Delivered at Newbury-Port, Dec. 30, 1770* (Newburyport: T. and J. Fleet, 1771), showing the distinct skull and crossed bones.

Here two environmental motifs come together in one image. First is the stark depiction of death encapsulated in the grinning human skull. The image represents the human body laid bare, stripped of all defining personal characteristics, and rendered into

There, Who Departed This Life on Wednesday the 26th Instant, in the 55th Year of Her Age (Newburyport: T. and J. Fleet, 1771).

its most basic element, the skeleton. Like the words of their ministers such images remind viewers that death breaks down the living and fashions them into nothing more than remains, in no way different from any other living creature. The second environmental characteristic of this image are the leaves that appear to be springing forth from underneath and around the bones. At its simplest level the leaves and the skull represents nature and death as partners. More specifically, the pairing of these two images, the human skull and the creeping foliage, expressed the artist's belief that Americans in death return to the earth to create new life.⁸² No matter the content of the sermon itself, anyone viewing this pamphlet could not help but be struck by this arresting image that so perfectly married death and nature.

Similar imagery that melds death and the environment abounds and demonstrates the significance of this connection to Christians in the early republic. Looking to the opening years of the nineteenth century yields other exemplary representation of this powerful connection. While death is depicted in less frightening terms it remains immersed in a larger flow of environmental change. The following image (figure 2) from 1806 is illustrative.⁸³ It displays, at the bottom of the title page, a solitary weeping willow and unkempt and wild grasses. The image additionally introduces an urn and pedestal motif. Anchoring the image for the viewer is the graceful, drooping form of the weeping willow—a symbol of death from antiquity. For Americans viewing and reading these sermons, the association between death and natural objects, be they trees or wild grasses,

⁸² Searl, *A Funeral Sermon Delivered at Newbury-Port, Dec. 30, 1770*.

⁸³ Abel Flint, *Death the Lot of All! A Sermon, Delivered in East-Hartford, November 3, 1806, at the Funeral of Mrs. Mary Yates, Consort of the Rev. Andrew Yates, Who Died of a Consumption, October 31* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1806).

is clear even if they were not acquainted with the historical significance of the willow or the urn. In these cases the end of life becomes subsumed in a natural scene indicating the fleeting existence of humankind and its inescapable connection to the environment. Alternatively, it also indicates that upon dying the greatest memorial to the deceased might be the material reality that nature and life continue, growing, flourishing, and dying in turn.

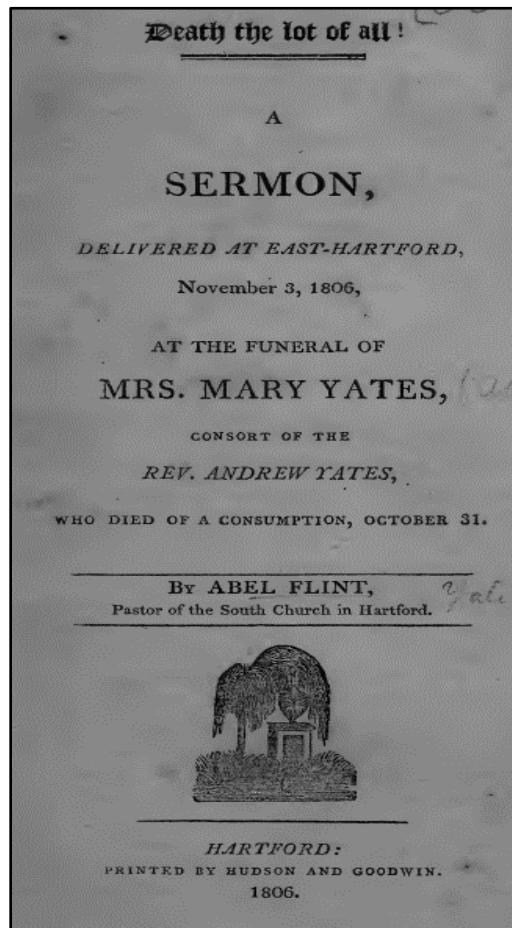


Figure 2. Title page from *Death the Lot of All!* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1806), depicting a weeping willow, grasses, and urn.

Death and nature were inseparable for Americans during the early Republic. Americans from all walks of life and Christian faiths witnessed and understood death and decay to be facets of environmental processes grounded in the physical and natural world

in a fundamental organic way, but one that also evinced the supernatural or spiritual power of God, who created the system. They saw death as an inevitable change that could be extremely frightening, grim, and abhorrent, but also one that afflicted all people and all things equally. Ministers took time to remind their flock constantly of the omnipresence of death, or as one New England minister explained, “men are surrounded with a multiplicity of natural causes, which have a tendency to *destroy* life.”⁸⁴ Condolence letters were rife with wistful meditations upon the ways that death manifested itself and the reality that all human beings, despite the qualities that distinguish them from the animals and plants, were still environmental entities. Americans and their deaths were the ultimate manifestation of their being in nature as opposed to lording over the natural world with impunity—as they understood that the only entity with that power was God.

All of the meditation upon the power of nature as manifested through death and decay enforced a worldview that better prepared Americans for life’s end. Words, while powerful, supplemented and intensified the physical confrontations between death and nature that they witnessed with an almost daily regularity. For Americans living in the early republic came face to face with the primal forces of nature in a most unassuming of places, the humble graveyard.

⁸⁴ Nathanael Emmons, *A Discourse, Delivered at the Funeral of Mrs. Bathsheba Sanford, the Late Consort of Rev. David Sanford, Pastor of the Second Church in Medway, November 17, 1800* (Wrentham, MA: Nathaniel Heaton, 1801), 5.

CHAPTER III

FOOD FOR THE WORMS

There is something peculiarly pleasing even in the burial ground at Bethlehem...
Judith Sargent Murray⁸⁵

On the left was a wild cherry tree, grotesque and unsymmetrical, but always looked upon with a sort of awe; for here we soon learned was the spot chosen by our grandfather for his last resting place.

Jane Blair Cary Smith⁸⁶

In the summer of 1790, the pathbreaking American writer Judith Sargent Murray took up her famous alias, Constantia, set about recording what appears at first as a simple American travelogue. Traveling through Pennsylvania in late June, she chose to pen a letter to a friend and confidante, which would ultimately be published for the readers of *The New York Magazine* in August of that same year. For Murray her purpose and subject appear clear. “I have this morning been endeavouring to summons before me several events of our journey, in order to select for you something which may be calculated for your amusement.” She concludes, “I think I can do no better than to present to you a little sketch of our *Bethlehem* tour.”⁸⁷ Why she chose tiny Bethlehem over the bustling and growing city of Philadelphia remains unclear, but the town sited on the picturesque Lehigh River certainly had its charms. She claims of Bethlehem, “it is beautiful village,

⁸⁵ Judith Sargent Murray [Constantia, pseud.] “Description of a Journey to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.,” *The New York Magazine, or Literary Repository* 1, no. 8, August 1790, 463.

⁸⁶ Jane Blair Cary Smith, *The Carysbrooke Memoir*, Virginia Historical Society.

⁸⁷ Murray [Constantia, pseud.], “Description of a Journey to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.,” 458.

and without the smallest degree of enthusiasm it may be pronounced a terrestrial Paradise.”⁸⁸ For Murray, it is the perfect summer sojourn.

Murray’s letter paints an enticing picture of the little community of German Moravians that called Bethlehem home, and she takes the reader through a myriad of locations within the town. Among them, she pays particular attention to the parallel rivers that wend their way around the village and provide water to the various chestnut, locust, and cedar trees that line the riverbanks. From these scenes, she takes the reader among the cultivated fields and stone houses of the citizenry, while also chronicling the hilltop location of the Moravian Brethren, the Sisterhood, the Asylum for Widows, and the Seminary for Young Women. As she proclaims of Bethlehem and its citizens, “Upon an eminence in Bethlehem, the cultivated scene is displayed before us—a chain of verdant hills encircle it, and this little Eden is embosomed in its midst.”⁸⁹ Murray’s Bethlehem represents an almost perfect location, endowed by nature with a bounteous and pleasant climate and tended by a hard-working and God-fearing people.

But a trace of melancholy flows below the surface. Despite the praise she heaped upon Bethlehem, Murray was grieving. She writes to an anonymous friend, “Having ever since the melancholy period which deprived us of our maternal friend, been distinguished by you, my dear Mrs. S, with an obliging and sisterly regard, you very naturally supply, in some sense the void which her demise had left in my heart.”⁹⁰ Unfortunately, the identity of this “maternal friend” does not appear in the letter, nor is the relationship

⁸⁸ Murray [Constantia, pseud.], “Description of a Journey to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.,” 458.

⁸⁹ Murray [Constantia, pseud.], 458.

⁹⁰ Murray [Constantia, pseud.], 458.

between Mrs. S, Murray, and the deceased indicated. The larger record of Murray's life, however, indicates that she was no stranger to grief. In 1789 she endured the stillbirth of her child, which she memorialized forever in her poem, "Lines Occasioned by the Death of an Infant."⁹¹ The loss felt by Murray comes through clearly in her impassioned words concerning the dead. Even amidst the joy, excitement, and adventure of Murray's summer recreation, the influence of the American worldview of death is clear. Her embrace of death among so much beauty and life takes a unique form in her letter.

Emerging out of the picturesque descriptions of rolling rivers and aromatic cedars that occupy so much of Murray's writings is a long and extended reflection upon both a funeral procession and the burial ground of Bethlehem. From this a question emerges: why among so many painterly vistas and lively people does she spend the second half of her letter ruminating upon the burial processes of Moravian Germans and meditating among the headstones of their deceased? While she herself provides no definitive answer, her writing was informed by the worldview guiding Americans in the early republic, which drove Americans to engage with and discuss death to better prepare themselves for their own end. The central components of this death ideology that highlighted both the beauty of nature and its unpleasantness undergirded the American relationship with mortality in letters and sermons—as discussed in the previous chapter—and was represented physically through their own lives, their funerary customs, and the places they buried their dead.

Murray's travelogue demonstrates a clear fascination with death and burial characteristic of the early republic. The beginning of her discussion of Moravian

⁹¹ "Poem on the Death of an Infant by Judith Sargent Murray," Judith Sargent Murray Society, accessed January 26, 2018, http://jsmsociety.com/Death_of_an_Infant.html.

mourning practices is simple enough. In inquiring of a local if the Moravian's wear black to mourn their dead—a mainstream American Christian practice during this period—she is surprised by their answer that they do not.⁹² From here, Murray then edifies herself and her reader by embarking upon a detailed and lengthy exposition that celebrates the Moravian approach to death. Her first words upon the subject are illuminating. “In the Moravian manner of interring their dead...there is something *to me* strikingly pleasing.”⁹³ Instead of finding the concept of death and burial repellent, Murray refers to them as something particularly beneficial.

Murray also found the physical burial ground of the Moravians fascinating. She observes, “There is something particularly pleasing even in the burial grounds at Bethlehem.”⁹⁴ Her use of the word “even” denotes a certain surprise and acknowledges the inherent melancholy of burial grounds, but Murray, nonetheless, demonstrates a clear interest in this space as a site for tourists and other literate Americans not drawn there by a funeral. She reflects on its singular style of beauty. Murray notes, “It is a spacious oval plain, decently walled in [U]pon a straight line the graves are laid out, and you can walk between every one with as much care as you could pursue your way along the gravel walks of a parterre.”⁹⁵

⁹² While this is a generalization, and more discussion will come later of the particular mourning practices of American religious groups, it is a nonetheless a common practice during this period to wear black to designate mourning, see the works of David E Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*.

⁹³ Murray [Constantia, pseud.], “Description of a Journey to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania,,” 463.

⁹⁴ Murray [Constantia, pseud.], 463.

⁹⁵ Murray [Constantia, pseud.], 463.

This passage is striking, from Murray's description of the graveyard's oval shape to her conscious use of the word *parterre*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *parterre* came to the English language from French, with its earliest usage in England around the late seventeenth century. It was not a common word, and its meaning was primarily horticultural; specifically, "A level space in a garden occupied by an ornamental arrangement of flower beds."⁹⁶ Murray chose to liken the Moravian graveyard to a patterned flower garden, which suggests a clear connection between the quiet and reflective beauty of a garden and a place for the interment of the dead. Her words illustrates the clear conjoining of nature—in this case a garden—with that of burial and death, reflecting how a graveyard might serve just as well as any garden in evoking the power of the natural world.

Murray additionally comments upon the Moravians' grave markers. Headstones remain a ubiquitous part of graveyards then and now, and for Murray are a preeminent symbol of human mortality. Of the Moravian grave markers she notes, "the gravestone is not raised as with us, but form[s] a modest tablet, which is generally shaded by verdant grass, and which bearing a concise inscription we receive the necessary information."⁹⁷ Here again she singles out a natural element. She acknowledges that surrounding the gravestones is a "verdant" lawn with grass healthy and high enough to shade to these gravestones from the summer sun. Murray was gratified that the Moravian's lawn style cemetery contained very little embellishment within it, relying instead on the simplicity

⁹⁶ *OED Online*, s.v. "Parterre," accessed September 6, 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138205>.

⁹⁷ Murray [Constantia, pseud.], "Description of a Journey to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.," 463.

of green grass and humble grave markers.⁹⁸ Her admiration of Moravian humility in the face of dissolution captured an important truth for Murray. Death, despite its singular importance, was commonplace and burial grounds in the early republic physically manifested this. From the tranquil sway of windblown grasses to the macabre grin of skull adorned tombstones, American graveyards reinforced the worldview that life and death were twin faces—both positive and negative—of the larger environmental system of God’s nature, which in turn helped Americans embrace their own ends.

Death and burial, significantly, represented a unifying feature in all American lives despite the multiplicity of faiths that populated the American religious landscape in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁹⁹ While some ministers argued that Baptists presented a serious threat to the soul of American Christianity, and while others feared that Episcopalians had embraced far too many “Popish” traditions, they nonetheless all still desired to bury their dead with a certain level of reverence and feeling. As one Presbyterian minister noted in 1818, “To entomb the bodies of our deceased friends, and to desire that they may rest in their graves undisturbed, is a dictate of natural affection, sanctioned by the word of God.”¹⁰⁰ Despite doctrinal differences between the various Christian sects of the early national period, they all absorbed and

⁹⁸ Murray [Constantia, pseud.], “Description of a Journey to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.,” 463.

⁹⁹ For a comprehensive look at often contentious history of Christian American religious groups among others please see, Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

¹⁰⁰ Robert Crowell, *Interment of the Dead, a Dictate of Natural Affection, Sanctioned by the Word of God, and the Examples of the Good in Every Age: A Sermon Delivered in Ipswich, Second Parish, July 23, 1818, on the Occasion of Reinterring the Coffins Which Had Been Robbed of Their Contents* (Andover, MA: Flagg and Gould, 1818), 8.

reproduced the mourning and burial traditions of their English or continental forebears.¹⁰¹ Central to this trans-Atlantic cultural exchange—particularly during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—was a stark dislike and distrust of any and all traditions that seemed to conjure up the specter of Roman Catholicism. Therefore, American Protestants buried their dead within a traditional framework that shared many similarities—with slight variations—that connected them to each other from northernmost regions of New England to the deep backwoods of the American South and beyond into the expanding American frontier.

The process of mourning the dead actually began even before death itself. Family and friends often gathered around the bedside of the sick or aged to spend some final fleeting moments with them before their passing. Yet unlike the modern gathering around a hospital or funeral home bed, these visitations were almost always exclusively in the home. Further differentiating these early republic deathbed scenes was a unique central motif of a “good death.”¹⁰² Christians on the brink of dying attempted to display quiet resignation and unshakeable faith in the power of the God. Displays of anger, fear, and frustration while dying were seen as signs of sinfulness and even damnation. As historian Erik Seeman argues, while such idealized deathbed scenes often represented more fiction than fact, they nonetheless pointed to an accepted cultural convention that championed acceptance in the face of inevitable mortality.¹⁰³ The ubiquitous nature of these deathbed scenes within the written records of many early Americans—whether published or

¹⁰¹ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 101–2.

¹⁰² Erik R. Seeman, *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England*, (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). In particular, see Chapter 2, “‘She Died Like Good Old Jacob’: Deathbed Scenes and Attitudes Towards Dead”.

¹⁰³ Erik R. Seeman, *Pious Persuasions: Laity and Clergy in Eighteenth-Century New England*.

private—demonstrates the pervasiveness of this attitude and helps illuminate the different contours of “how” Americans died in the early republic.

Early national American broadsheets and magazines chronicled the thoughts and feelings of the dying, which were marked by a keen awareness of mortality based in nature. An 1806 obituary for a Philadelphia merchant named Joseph Magoffin noted, “He felt the pangs of separation from those he loved on earth; his feelings were not those of a stoick [*sic*]; yet he met his death with the fortitude of a Christian.” The writer then concludes, “He always spoke with calmness of his approaching dissolution: and to one of his friends he gave directions respecting his funeral, and the place he wished his flesh to rest in hope.”¹⁰⁴ A key part of this last quotation is the use of the word “dissolution” to denote death and decay. Dissolution’s most basic and universal meaning revolves around the decomposition or breaking down of organic substances—in this case the human body—into their constituent parts or elements. It was a perfect synonym for bodily decay. Americans during this period acknowledged that decay was natural, and, according to the testimonial, attempted to embrace it with tranquil resignation. Christian spirituality served as a key anchor point to many of these deathbed scenes, but what also threaded throughout them was a necessary understanding that human life ended and returned to the earth no differently from any other living creature.

American Christians trumpeted their faith in the power of God in the moments before death, but of course no amount of proclamations would forestall the end. After death, those still living began a process that brought them into close, physical, and intimate contact with corpses, and forced them to confront mortality. Death before the

¹⁰⁴ “Obituary,” *General Assembly’s Missionary Magazine* 2, no. 8, August, 1806, 398.

advent of professional undertakers was extremely personal and close.¹⁰⁵ Families and friends were responsible for preparing the body for burial in a visceral confrontation with death. This sobering process began simply enough with the cleaning and dressing of the body in a simple white shift or gown. In this practice, the Moravian's were not unique. Historian David Stannard, for example, notes the exact same behavior among seventeenth-century New England Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.¹⁰⁶ While the record is scant regarding the feelings of those performing these ritualized tasks, it was likely an emotional experience for most, which reinforced their sense of mortality, the course of nature, and the processes of death and bodily decay.

The corpse—after being cleaned and dressed—then began the second phase of the burial process: public display. This second phase had two purposes: first, communal grieving and, second, an intimate physical demonstration to the living of their own mortality. The body was usually displayed within the home of the surviving relatives or, on some occasions, was relocated—on foot or via carriage for those wealthy enough—to the local church for viewing. This period of public viewing reproduced itself throughout America, even among free African Americans. Returning to Helen McLeod's 1826 letter to her brother—discussed in the previous chapter—she recalled the funeral of their favored “old servant” Ferdinand. “Father saw him decently interred—Agnes and Elizabeth and the three boys went to the house he stayed at,” Helen continues, “and after

¹⁰⁵ Multiple works have chronicled the rise of the funerary industry within the United States with differing levels of approval or disapprobation, I will also engage with this topic in later chapters as it certainly has clear impact on the ‘nature of death’, however, for the time being please see these works: Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*; Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*; Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death*.

¹⁰⁶ Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death*, 103.

hearing an address and prayer by a respectable old black preacher waited till the remains of poor Ferdinand were conveyed to the vehicle that was to take him to his long home.”¹⁰⁷ For the McLeods, viewing the remains of Ferdinand was a family affair involving Helen, her two sisters, and their three sons.

The death and subsequent viewing of Ferdinand—in spite of prevailing racial attitudes—reinforced for Helen McLeod the natural limits evinced through mortality. She writes of Ferdinand’s passing, “He used often to visit us and was only a short time before he was taken ill that we were admiring him being such a fine stout man, but ‘man cometh forth as flower and is cut-down.’”¹⁰⁸ Helen invokes a familiar allusion that places humans in the natural world; human life is a blossoming flower, beautiful but all too brief. The presence and preaching of an African American minister also demonstrates the diffusion of American Christianity among the African American community—both free and slave—during the early republic. Helen McLeod’s musings concerning the funeral of Ferdinand show that death was not a singular event restricted to one family, but rather it physically touched numerous lives through these public viewings and pushed Americans to understand their own bodies as natural organisms. The friends that filled the household of the still living—in Ferdinand’s case—or the church services that occurred around the corpse, all connected death to the larger community of people and nature. These mortuary practices reinforced for all who viewed the corpse the organic limits that ended all lives.

Public display, however, was never more than one or two days and wholly depended on the corpse’s state of decay, the season, and its accompanying weather. The

¹⁰⁷ Helen McLeod to Donald McLeod, Sept. 10, 1826. McLeod Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

¹⁰⁸ Helen McLeod to Donald McLeod, Sept. 10, 1826. McLeod Family Papers.

haste of early republic burials reflected the grim reality that human bodies decomposed after death and, in the heat of a summer day, rot accelerated at an alarming pace. While beginning to feel the pull of English and continental European sentimentalizing of death, Americans generally still understood the human body as an environmental entity and that decay, therefore, was messy and repulsive but entirely natural.¹⁰⁹ As one 1794 observer noted of human decay, “The once beautiful and elegant form will soon present itself as a source of disgust, horror and pestilence.”¹¹⁰ Many American ministers followed English traditions as prescribed in the 1645 *Directory for the Publique Worship of God*, which required speedy burial. It reads, “When any person departteth this life, let the dead body, upon the day of buriall, be decently attended from the house to the place appointed for publique burial, and there immediately interred, without any ceremony.”¹¹¹ American Protestants understood that speedy burials, which recognized both the quickness that rot and decay set in and the impact of weather and climate, were natural and necessary. Lengthy laying out periods negated not only traditional burial practices but also the nature within death as evinced through decay.

Americans maintained a healthy respect for the process of bodily decomposition, and they mostly turned away from procedures that preserved the corpse. In the early republic—unlike modern America—embalming, or chemically arresting decay, was at best a curiosity and at worst an unnecessary evil. American Christians favored the

¹⁰⁹ Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*. See in particular Ariès chapter entitled “The Age of the Beautiful Death” for his argument concerning the romanticizing and sentimentalizing of death as it occurred within the European cultural community.

¹¹⁰ Y, “Observations on Burying the Dead.,” 620.

¹¹¹ *A Directory for the Publique Worship of God. Together with an Ordinance of Parliament for the Taking Away of the Book of Common Prayer* (London: T.W., 1645) 73.

uniform, normal, and speedy burial that occurred before decay visibly commenced, because they respected the role of decomposition in breaking down their remains. Embalming prevented the necessary and natural processes of that returned the body to the earth, something that Americans understood intimately because of their close contact with the dead. Americans turned away from embalming in the early republic because it repudiated the simple doctrine that from dust the human body arose and to dust it returned.¹¹²

With the period of public display over, the corporeal remains then began their final and solemn journey from the home or church to the familiar confines of the local churchyard or graveyard. This final procession was an essential ritual that connected Americans to the natural world through mortality. It conveyed the body physically, in the actual hands of loved ones, to its final resting place. Whether consisting of dozens of people or only the closest intimates of the deceased, these processions were conspicuously public. Both the people involved and those in the surrounding community witnessed the loss and understood the hard boundary that was human mortality.

Funeral processions during the early republic evinced a uniformity that stretched throughout the newly created American nation. While displays of wealth or prestige could mark the American burial process, funeral processions—particularly during the early republic—displayed substantial consistency whether they carried a deceased general or bishop, on the one hand, or a humble farmer or artisan on the other. Two examples from early nineteenth-century Connecticut and Virginia are indicative of this American landscape of death. The February 1808 funeral procession for Jonathan

¹¹² P, "Religious and Moral Essays.: Mode of Embalming the Dead.," *The Evangelical Intelligencer* 2, no. 12, December 1808, 561–62.

Woodbridge, who died in in the city of Richmond, Virginia, is demonstrative.

Woodbridge carried the rank of brigadier general and his funeral took on a decidedly military aspect. Yet for all the drums and fifes the basic, familiar, and intimate contours appear. The obituary notice begins, “The corpse was received in front of [the] late dwelling house of the deceased, by the troops on duty.” It continues, “[T]he troops then wheeled and formed in front of the corpse—the pall supported by six field officers in uniform.”¹¹³ Notice within the passage that while the dress and pomp of the military cortege receives recognition the coffin bearing the general is nonetheless carried by hand. The 1804 obituary notice for Bishop Samuel Parker of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, illuminates many similarities. The obituary reads, “The funeral procession moved in the following order—The Corpse was preceded by the wardens and vestry—The pall was supported by the Rev. Dr. Stillman, Rev. Dr. Lathrop, Rev. Dr. Eliot, Rev. Dr. Eckley, Rev. Dr. Morse, and the Rev. Mr. Emerson.”¹¹⁴ Here again, despite a separation of four years and countless miles, the coffin is carried by hand to both the funeral service and the burial ground. The obituary of Bishop Parker notes the presence of personal carriages among those who joined the procession, yet the mortal remains of the Bishop still made their final journey by hand.¹¹⁵

The passing of a funeral processions created intimate moments of connection with the dead that powerfully reinforced the mortality that underpinned the American worldview of death. The previous two obituaries describe the public style of the chosen

¹¹³ Woodbridge Obituary Notice, Feb. 9, 1808. Virginia Historical Society.

¹¹⁴ “Article 1 -- No Title,” *The Boston Weekly Magazine, Devoted to Morality, Literature, Biography, History, the Fine Arts, Agriculture, &c. &c.*, no. 8, December 15, 1804, 31.

¹¹⁵ “Article 1 -- No Title,” *The Boston Weekly Magazine...*, 31.

routes as the corpse threaded its way among the homes of the living and was joined by large groups of people that watched the procession, whether familiar with the deceased or not. The obituary recounts the various Boston streets that the funeral cortege twisted through as it made its way to Trinity Church where the body came to rest.¹¹⁶ While the account for General Woodbridge's procession contains less detail, it too captures the public nature of early republic funeral processions. The obituary reads, "The procession was now formed and being joined by a vast concourse of citizens, moved to the meeting house... After the divine service was concluded the procession was again formed and moved to the burying ground."¹¹⁷ Another theme illustrated here was the close proximity that existed between Americans and their places of burial, which facilitated the transportation of human remains without the need for carriages and buttressed the close contact between the living and their dead. Each of these accounts demonstrate the powerful—and public—reminder of death that funeral processions represented; a deliberate public style that forced Americans to embrace their own mortality and the nature of their own bodies via the remains of the dead.

The graveyard itself represented an important place where Americans encountered and reflected on death and decay and their own connection to the environment that surrounded them. Churches during the early republic were focal points of community life and served as spiritual refuges as well as civic centers that brimmed with debates concerning all aspects of city and town life. Many early national period churches also carried the appellation of "meeting house," affirming their dual role within

¹¹⁶ "Article 1 -- No Title," *The Boston Weekly Magazine*..., 31.

¹¹⁷ "Article 1 -- No Title," 31.

American communities.¹¹⁸ The importance of churches was mapped onto the landscape, and they often occupied central and accessible locations that facilitated their easy use and visitation. Even today, most modern maps of communities on the eastern seaboard reveals the presence of the various churches that Americans did and still do call upon in times of need.

Period maps reflect this reality as well. An 1887 facsimile of a 1780 map of Charleston, South Carolina captures an American city at a moment of crisis during the American Revolution (figure 3). The map prominently features entrenchments and fortifications but also two different churches, the so-called “Old Church” and “New Church.” The location of the “New Church” at the heart of the small—37 total blocks—city of Charleston is indicative. The only other buildings recorded similarly on this 1780 map are the state house, market, and arsenal—each also receiving a small drawing of the building.¹¹⁹ Even during times of conflict, churches represented important and central places essential to American communities. And attached to those cultural centers were, almost invariably, graveyards. Graveyard spaces in the early republic often were directly joined to American churches to facilitate funerary rituals, particularly the funeral procession and burial of the various members of the parish, and they allowed townspeople to keep their dead nearby.

¹¹⁸ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*. See in particular chapters including, “The Holy Commonwealth of New England”, “The Shaping of Colonial Presbyterianism”, “The Extension of Anglicanism”, “The Revolutionary Era”, and “New England Theology in Democratic America”.

¹¹⁹ “George Waring Jr., "A Plan of Charles Town with Its Entrenchments and Those Made during the Siege by the English 1780," *Report on the Social Statistics of Cities* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887).

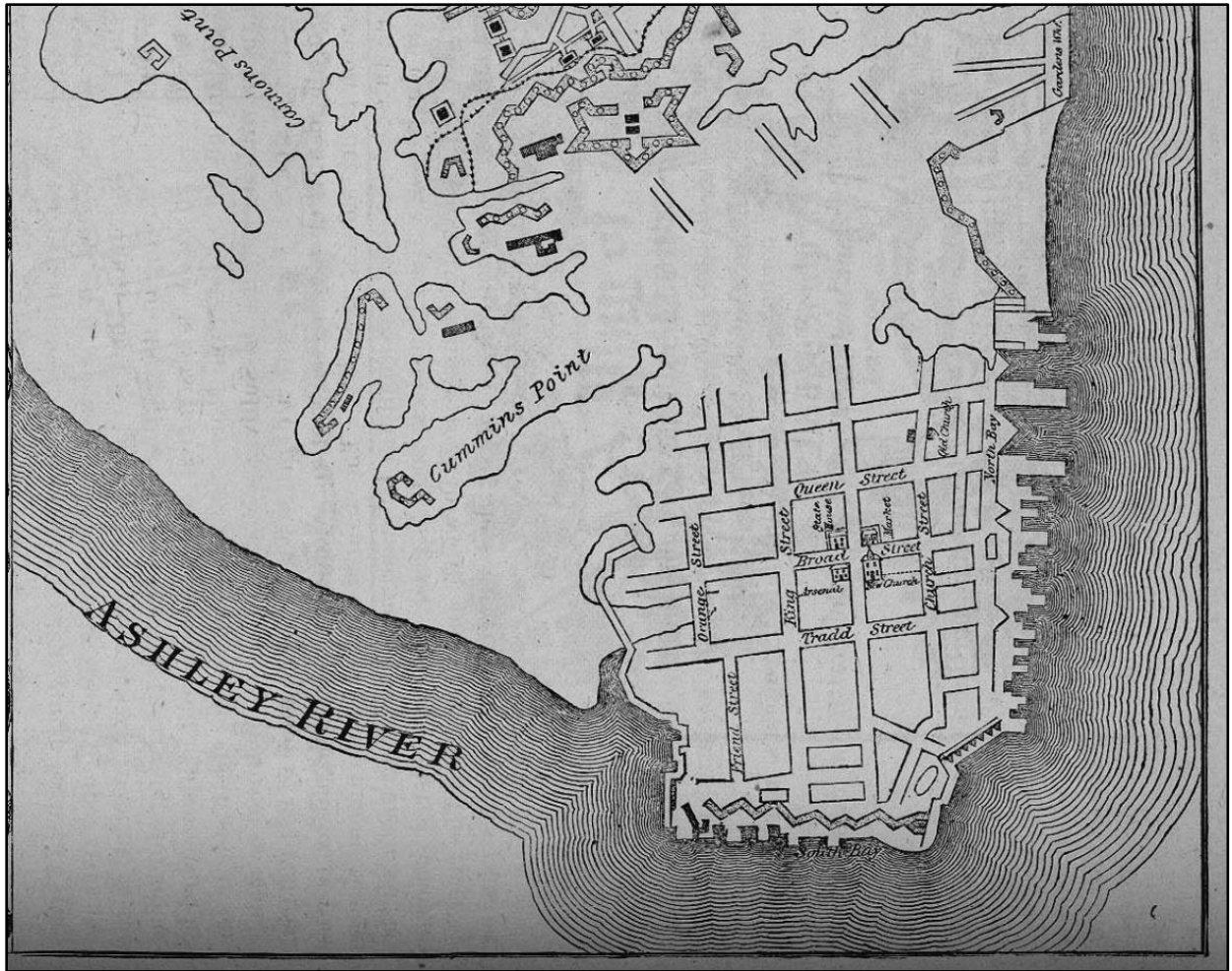


Figure 3. “A Plan of Charles Town with its Entrenchments and those made during the Siege by the English 1780” (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), note the New Church in the center of Charleston while the Old Church resides in the upper right of the city.

Even in cases where the burying ground was detached from the church, it still occupied central and easy to access locations within American communities. As the city of Boston grew in size, it opened three different unattached or municipal burial grounds before 1860, which moved from north to south as surging populations began to strain against the original settlement boundaries. These specific graveyards, known today as Copp’s Hill, the Granary, and the Commons, all resided in prominent and key locations

within Boston.¹²⁰ The centrality of burial spaces among the living served as a daily and conspicuous reminder of the mortality that bounded their lives, the nature at the heart of death. Burying grounds also functioned as uniquely natural spaces among cities and towns that were increasing in population and size as the eighteenth century rolled into the nineteenth century—a topic that will be taken up later in the chapter.

American graveyards represented vernacular and organic spaces created without conscious planning but through communal need and necessity, alongside traditions inherited from abroad and created anew as Americans fashioned their identity. This vernacular design often led to the creation of chaotic and wild looking grounds that showed little regard for aesthetic concerns such as symmetry or even rudimentary landscaping. Instead, they were working natural spaces built for the sole purpose of inhuming, breaking down, and returning human corpses to their environmental components. Within this practical concern, however, was a desire for memorial and reflection that evinced their embrace of death and the spirituality of American Protestant Christianity. Burial grounds were dual-purpose spaces that contained both the rotting remains of the dead but also the stones upon which their lives would be recalled. At the heart of all these designs was nature, reflected in the headstone iconography, the various and at times random trees and shrubs, the overcrowded family plots, and even the very headstones themselves, whether opulent marble or venerable sandstone.

The core of American burial spaces, both figuratively and literally, were the dead. One of the primary principles behind graveyards was facilitating decay and decomposition so that the corpse did not become an unhealthy burden upon those still

¹²⁰ Boston Cemetery Department, *Historical Sketch and Matters Appertaining to the Granary Burial-Ground* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1902), 4, 11.

living. Despite the lack of medical understanding concerning pathogens and vectors of disease—a topic that will be taken up in a later chapter—most Americans still believed that putrefying matter, whether human, animal, or vegetable, presented a danger to health. One minister acknowledged that despite the spiritual necessity of burial it was also “the easiest way of preventing the dead from being noxious to the living.”¹²¹

Enhancing decomposition emerged as the paramount concern within the churchyard, and all aspects of the burial ritual and the graveyard intensified this.

One of the chief items that boosted the natural processes of decay was the coffin. Wood served as the primary material for American coffins during the period from 1760 to 1850. Wood had the dual advantage of being widely available in the American states and sturdy enough to hold a body without breaking during the burial process. The seeming inexhaustible forests of the Eastern Seaboard differentiated American burials from those of many lower income Europeans, for whom a full wooden coffin was an unaffordable luxury. In Europe, timber shortages often necessitated the use of simple sackcloth.¹²² The ubiquitous wooden coffin in America, however, possessed an additional advantage; it broke down easily and fostered decomposition. An American commentator from the late eighteenth century, for example, argues, “Coffins ought not to be made thick, nor of durable wood, that the earth may soon have access to the body,” aiding in its breakdown.¹²³ This commentator’s advice thus anticipates by nearly 50 years similar ideas espoused by famed Scottish horticulturalist, John Claudius Loudon: “With respect

¹²¹ Crowell, *Interment of the Dead, a Dictate of Natural Affection, Sanctioned by the Word of God, and the Examples of the Good in Every Age*, 8–9.

¹²² For European burial techniques particularly among the lower classes see, Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*.

¹²³ Y, “Observations on Burying the Dead.,” 623.

to the first and most important object, the decomposition of the dead, without the risk of injury to the living, there is, as we think, but one mode in which this can be effected, . . . and that is, interment in a wooden coffin in the free soil....”¹²⁴ What is central to both authors is the key connection between wooden coffins and decay. Dirt—that is, nature—reclaimed and absorbed bodily remains.

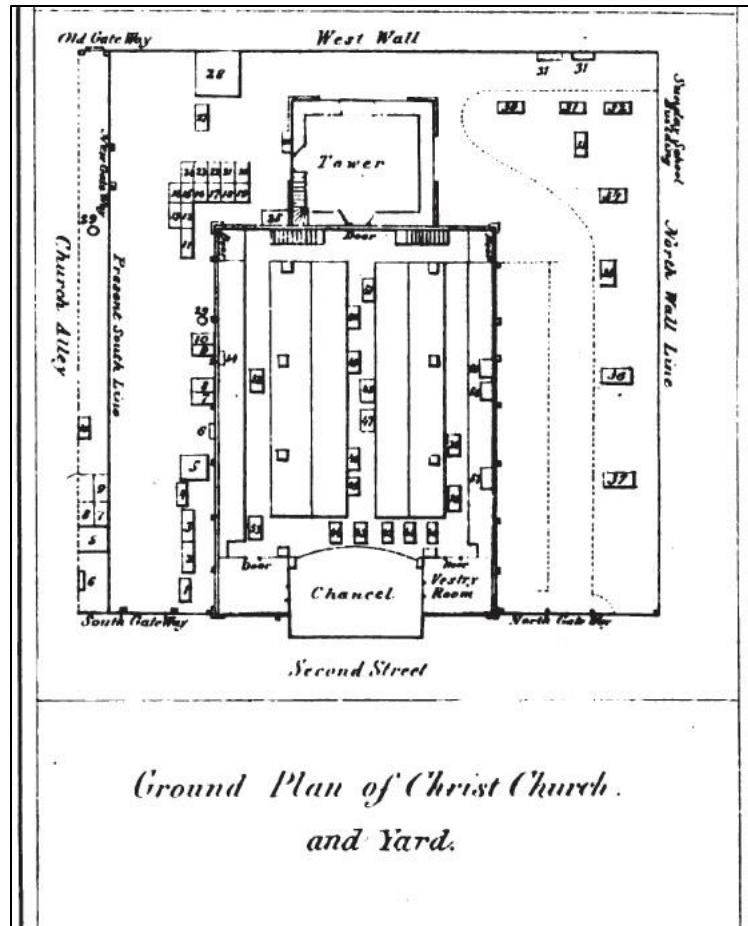


Figure 4. “Ground Plan of Christ Church and Yard” from *A Record of the Inscriptions on the Tablets and Gravestones in the Burial-Grounds of Christ Church, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Collins, 1864), note the positioning of the graves around the church.

¹²⁴ J. C. Loudon, “The Principles of Landscape--Gardening and of Landscape--Architecture Applied to the Laying out of Public Cemeteries and the Improvement of Churchyards; Including Observations on the Working and General Management of Cemeteries and Burial-Grounds ...: I. The Uses of Cemeteries,” *Journal of the Franklin Institute, of the State of Pennsylvania, for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts; Devoted to Mechanical and Physical Science, Civil Engineering, the Arts and Manufactures, and the Recording of American and Other Patent Inventions*, July 1, 1843, 47.

Graveyard spaces themselves also illustrated the nature of death. Early republic churchyards were not always beautiful to those viewing them, but they were undeniably natural spaces within the confines of towns and cities. Situated prominently within most communities, the graveyard was a uniquely universal environment sustained by the natural cycles of human mortality. Churchyards themselves did not follow any set patterns in their layout or construction, though; for the most part, they usually occupied higher ground—to facilitate drainage—and were demarcated clearly by fences and gates. Those maps that do exist largely illustrate square or rectangular spaces fit snugly within the confines of American towns and cities. The preceding 1864 map of Philadelphia’s Christ Church (figure 4), exemplifies the simplicity at the heart of American churchyards.¹²⁵

The map illustrates the practicality at the heart of American burial grounds. Bounding it and the church on all four sides are the various streets of Philadelphia’s grid. Of interest is the central location of the church within the plot and the presence of the headstones all around the building. For the parishioners of Christ Church, then, they shared their worship with the generations of their ancestors who came before them and occupied graves all around them.¹²⁶ Christ Church’s arrangement was purposeful. These headstones and their arrangement were visual representations of the natural truths Americans lived.

¹²⁵ Edward L. Clark, *A Record of the Inscriptions on the Tablets and Gravestones in the Burial-Grounds of Christ Church, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Collins, 1864), xii.

¹²⁶ Clark, *A Record of the Inscriptions on the Tablets and Gravestones in the Burial-Grounds of Christ Church, Philadelphia*, xii.

While Christ Church’s location within the bustling environs of Philadelphia certainly affected the way that graveyard was laid out, churches and burying grounds in America’s more rural locations adopted similar designs. The image below, “The Old Church,” (figure 5) from the defunct town of Good Luck, New York is emblematic.

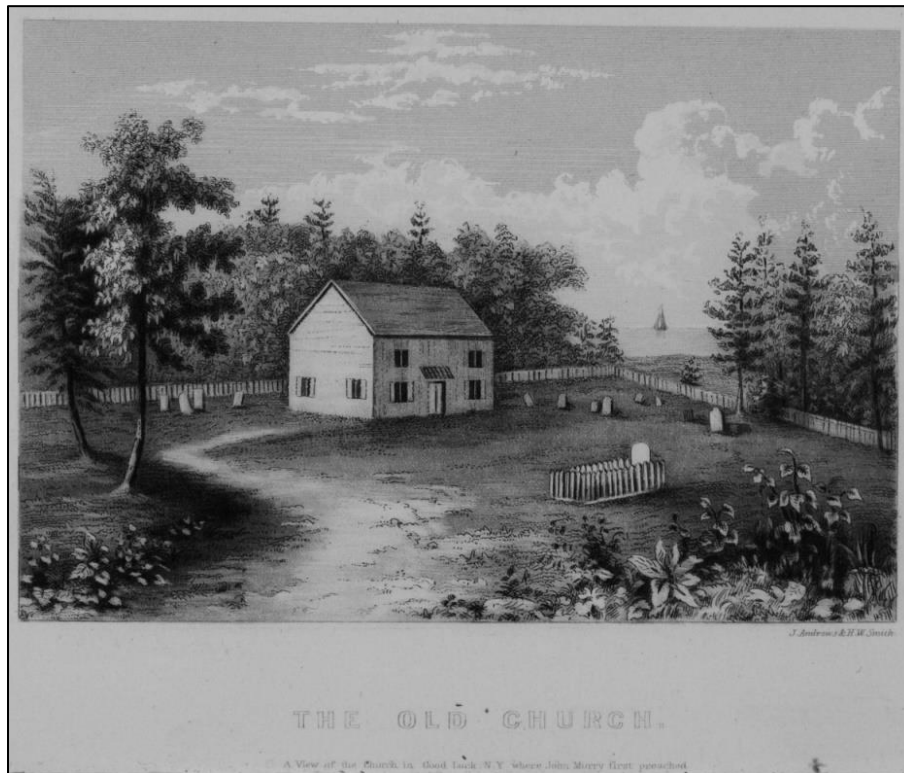


Figure 5. “The Old Church” from *Friendship’s Gift* (Lynn, MA: Thomas Herbert, 1850), observe the similar placement of headstones around the church.

Nestled towards the back is the quaint country church itself, here referred to fittingly as “The Old Church.”¹²⁷ The towers and chancels that dominated the map of Christ Church in Philadelphia disappear, replaced by a homey looking building that, if not for the headstones, would be indistinguishable from any other structure. Yet for all

¹²⁷ J. Andrews & H.W. Smith., “The Old Church.: A View of the Church in Good Luck, N.Y. Where John Murray First Preached.,” *Friendship’s Gift* (Lynn, MA: Thomas Herbert, 1850), 146.

the differences, similarities abound as well. The most striking commonality is found within the headstones themselves. The graves sprawl throughout the grounds of the Old Church and paralleling Christ Church surround the actual church building.¹²⁸ The headstones forcibly reminded the living that human remains dissolved beneath their feet and bodily destruction through decay was a powerful component of their worldview. An 1812 pamphlet helps situate this engagement with decay at the heart of American death. It reads, “They [the dead] lie down alike in the dust, and the worm shall cover them.”¹²⁹ The parishioners who traveled through the midst of the dead in order to worship among the living reinforced their own connection to the natural environment through these landscapes of death whether in city or country.

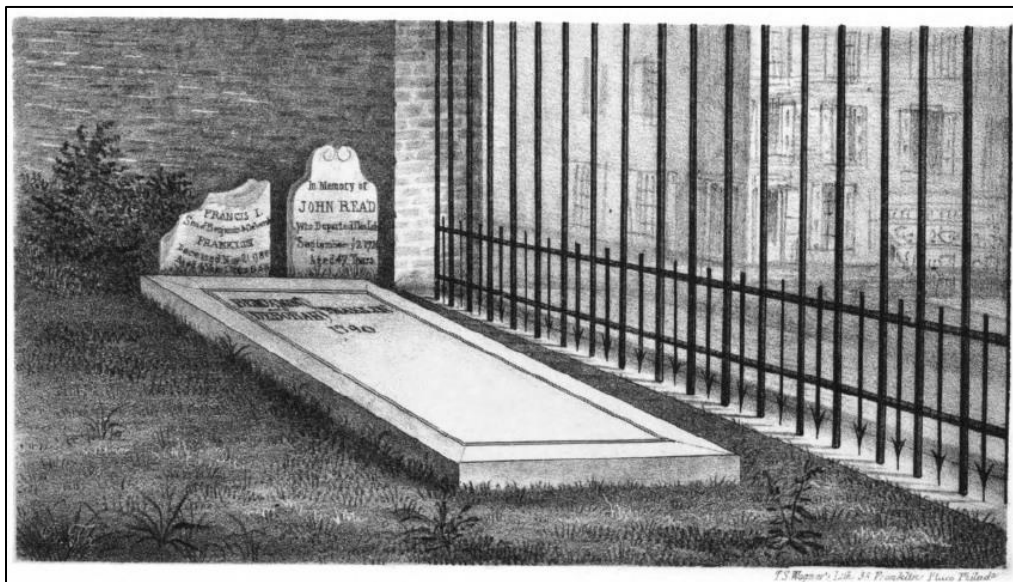


Figure 6. “Grave of Franklin” from *A Record of the Inscriptions on the Tablets and Gravestones in the Burial-Grounds of Christ Church, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Collins, 1864).

¹²⁸ J. Andrews & H.W. Smith, “The Old Church...,” 146.

¹²⁹ John Henry Livingston, *A Funeral Service, or Meditations Adapted to Funeral Addresses. Selected from the Sacred Scriptures* (New Brunswick: Abraham Blauvelt, 1812), 13.

Disparate American burial grounds also captured the wildness of the natural world through their apparent chaos. The image of the lonely church in Good Luck illustrates the natural and unplanned composition of early republic burial places. In viewing the image, the lack of any symmetry or attached adornments is readily apparent.¹³⁰ The grave markers have no particular arrangement, indicating both the hurried style of early republic inhumation alongside the recognition that the nature of death and decay were neither uniform nor predictable. Returning to Christ Church, a drawing of the grave maker of the American icon, Ben Franklin, (figure 6) helps provide context.¹³¹

The central headstone or plinth in this image is that of Benjamin Franklin and his wife Deborah Read Franklin. It is jarring perhaps to see that Franklin's headstone shares space with two other headstones that almost form a backdrop to this own.¹³² The cramped and confused state of early republic graveyards were the result of the growth of America's communities; once empty burial yards filled with the dead and rendered old arrangements untenable. Yet these graveyards offer striking portrayals of nature's power over life through death. The constant rearrangement, displacement, and overlap of human remains forced Americans to see themselves as only one small part of much larger natural system that only functioned properly with the passing of one generation before the next. This nature based organization did not submit to long term planning or control, and even

¹³⁰ J. Andrews & H.W. Smith, "The Old Church..." 146.

¹³¹ Clark, *A Record of the Inscriptions on the Tablets and Gravestones in the Burial-Grounds of Christ Church, Philadelphia*, 60.

¹³² Clark, 60.

if driven solely by necessity the grounds still evinced a chaotic wildness in the heart of America's increasingly artificial spaces.

The Franklins' tomb offers another, broader lesson about American mortality and nature. The presence of the other headstones in the same space indicates that their remains were mingling together below the soil. The marker on the left of the image is that of their deceased infant son, Francis, while the one on the right is that of Deborah's father, John Read, who had died much earlier in 1724.¹³³ Here the Franklins' tomb reflects the practice of comingling bodies in family or reused burial plots, which contained the bones of multiple generations.

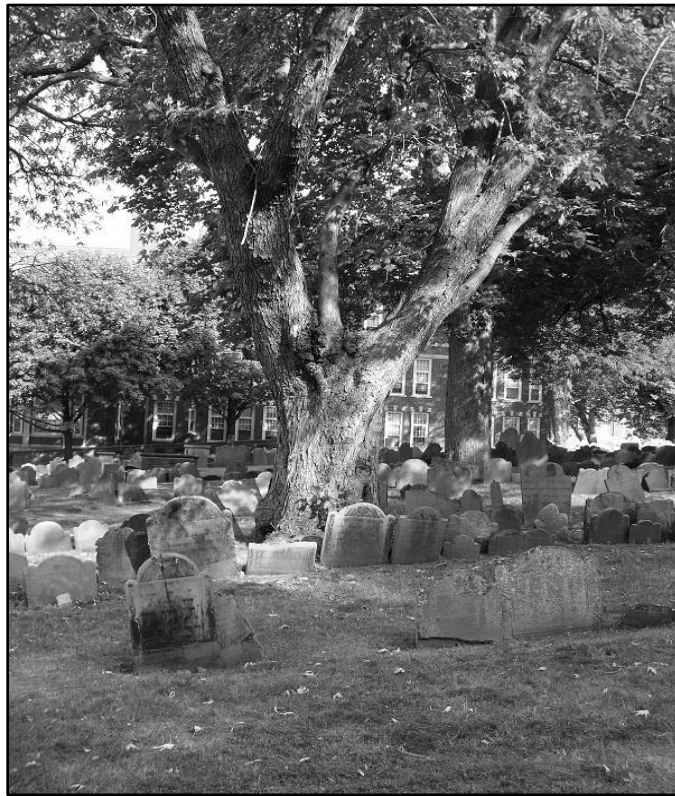


Figure 7. Photograph of Copp's Hill Burial Ground in Boston, Massachusetts (photo by author), note the cramped confines and multiplicity of headstones.

¹³³ Clark, *A Record of the Inscriptions on the Tablets and Gravestones in the Burial-Grounds of Christ Church, Philadelphia*, 60.

Traveling briefly to Boston, Massachusetts and the burial ground at Copp's Hill effectively transports the modern viewer to these times, spaces, and much different circumstances. This modern image (figure 7) displays numerous headstones arrayed in close-knit rows sinking and shifting with the very dirt itself.¹³⁴ The picture makes clear that the remains within the grounds of Copp's Hill were not buried with any notion that one particular part of the earth belonged to one body. The cramped necessity of early republic burial grounds dramatically deemphasized individuality and instead gave physical shape to the near anonymous position of people within the cosmically larger God-governed system of nature. This death and nature-based communalism both supported and was sustained by the graveyard's ultimate purpose: to speed along the destruction of dead matter. Americans buried their dead to facilitate their destruction in contrast to the later rural cemeteries that claimed and championed the recycling of remains into the beauty of nature, while at the same time seeing a dramatic increase in preservation and ever more ostentatious memorials as will be investigated later. In the early republic, however, multiple bodies in small plots made environmental sense and reflected the American worldview of death, as within the course of 10 or 20 years the only thing left within them would be bones and dust. The Baker family plot at St. Michael's Church in Charleston, South Carolina, exemplifies this. The plot contained four different Bakers, all of whom died between the years 1769 and 1787.¹³⁵ In a span of less than twenty years, the sexton of Saint Michael's overturned the very same ground to

¹³⁴ Photograph of Copp's Hill Burial Ground in Boston, Massachusetts taken by author on August 10, 2015.

¹³⁵ Clare Jervey, *Inscriptions on the Tablets and Gravestones in St. Michael's Church and Churchyard: Charleston, S.C., to Which Is Added from the Church Records a List of Interments of Persons to Whom There Are No Stones* (Charleston, SC: The State Company, 1906), 40, 42.

inhume four different bodies without any concern for their individuality. Instead, all four Bakers were joined together through their destruction and reclamation by the very soil itself. No matter the location, American burying grounds demonstrated the full power of nature through the disorderly sprouting of headstones and burial plots across the landscape.

While the arrangement of the graves imparted its own lessons, the headstones themselves also, in a sense spoke. American tombstones capture a myriad of stories about the beliefs of the deceased as well as the living. Returning to the image of Franklin's headstone captures one particular strain of American headstones: simplicity. As Franklin requested in his will, he desired a grave marker free from embellishment and adornment. "I wish to be buried by the side of my wife," he continues, "and that a marble stone to be made by Chambers, six feet long and four feet wide, plain with only a small moulding round the upper edge."¹³⁶ Unfortunately, the reason for his plain marker does not appear in the record, but for a man who argued so eloquently for thrift within the pages of *Poor Richard's Almanack* it is fitting that he would be economical to the end. Perhaps, though, he was also making a statement about the futility of grandiose monuments when faced with the power of nature. A force that possessed the power to render Americans into organic compounds that fed the very grasses which shrouded their headstones.

Tombstones imparted important lessons to the living and presented powerful resonances between the natural world and death. Prominently featured among headstone iconography during the late eighteenth century was the simple human skull or Death's

¹³⁶ Clark, *A Record of the Inscriptions on the Tablets and Gravestones in the Burial-Grounds of Christ Church, Philadelphia*, 60.

Head. The skull occupied a striking position at the top or tympanum of numerous American headstones. Variations on the skull also appeared from placing wings around it—towards the end of the eighteenth century—or crossed bones underneath it.¹³⁷ Take this headstone (figure 8) from the Granary Burial Ground in Boston, Massachusetts, for one Thomas Webb who died at the age of 33 in the year 1769.¹³⁸



Figure 8. Photograph of the headstone of Thomas Webb, died 1769, in the Granary Burial Ground in Boston, Massachusetts (photo by author), observe the skull motif adorning the top of the memorial.

¹³⁷ Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*, 69–74.

¹³⁸ Photograph of the headstone of Thomas Webb, died 1769, taken by author in the Granary Burial Ground in Boston, Massachusetts on August 10, 2015.

The most prominent feature of this headstone is the beautifully cut skull and crossed bones adorning the top. Another, more subtle, feature is the smaller image of the hourglass directly below the much larger skull. While the skull certainly was and remains a macabre symbol, it is also an important environmental emblem. The skull, stripped of human flesh, viscerally connects us to all other living vertebrates by reminding humans of the simple structure that lies just below our skin. Furthermore, the skull also speaks to the simple reality that all humans die, which was a fundamental shared message of mortuary art that historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists have identified.¹³⁹ By placing the human skull on so many grave markers during this period, Americans demonstrated a clear-eyed determination to grapple with their own nature based mortality whenever they found themselves in the graveyard. Additionally, the inscription on this and many other headstones of this period read, “Here Lies Deposited the Remains” or more simply, “Here Lies the Body of,” both of which focus squarely on the physical earthly body and force the reader to recognize the decomposing material memorialized below the stone.

American tombstone iconography evolved, however, and the rictus grin of the skull gave way to more sentimental motifs as the eighteenth century wore on and shifted into nineteenth century, which has formed a central theme of much of the work surrounding gravestone studies.¹⁴⁰ Yet even as Americans turned away from the potent image of the skull and crossed bones, their understanding that death represented an

¹³⁹ Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*, 69–71; Frederick J.E. Gorman and Michael DiBlasi, “Gravestone Iconography and Mortuary Ideology,” *Ethnohistory* 28, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 79.

¹⁴⁰ Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*, chap. 4 “Remember Me As You Pass By”; Leonard Huber, *Clasped Hands: Symbolism in New Orleans Cemeteries* (Lafayette, La.: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1982); Lynn Rainville, “Hanover Deathscapes: Mortuary Variability in New Hampshire, 1770-1920,” *Ethnohistory* 46, no. 3 (1999): 541–97.

unavoidable facet of their own connection to the natural world did not wane. Central to this artistic shift was the widespread adoption and depiction of the urn and the willow tree in place of the skull and crossed bones. Illustrating this perfectly is the tombstone found in Boston's Copp's Hill Burial Ground (figure 9) of not one but four different children of Jabez and Lydia Sweet, who died between the years 1800 and 1807.¹⁴¹

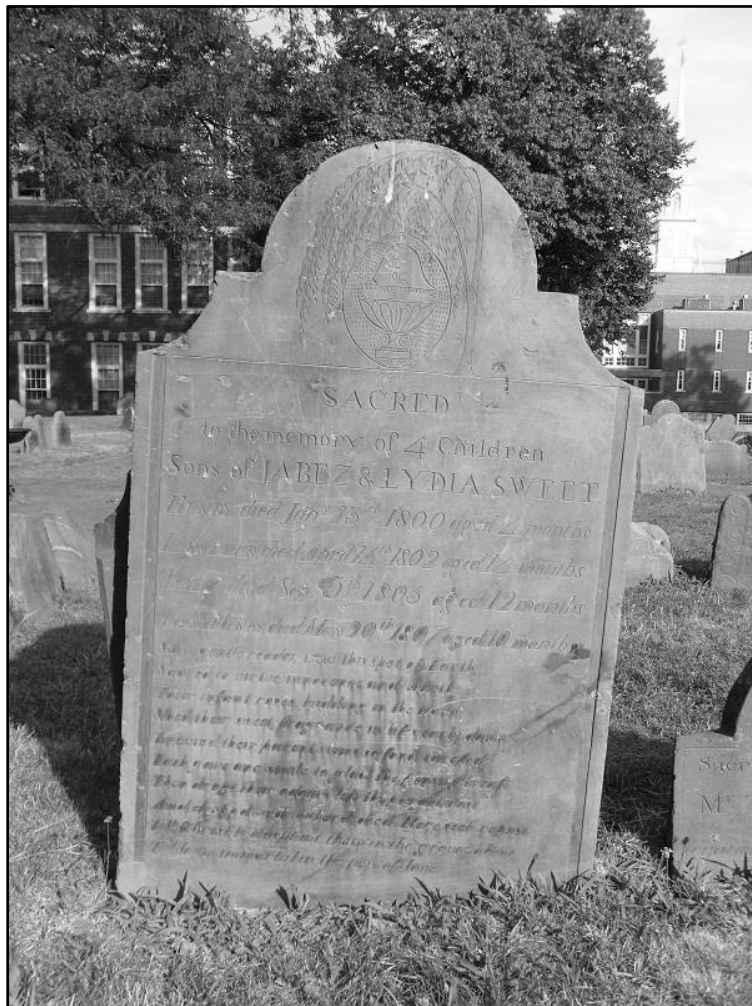


Figure 9. Photograph of the headstone of Henry, Ebenezer, Jabez, and Jabez Henry Sweet, died 1800, 1802, 1805, and 1807 respectively, in Copp's Hill Burial Ground in Boston, Massachusetts (photo by author), note the urn and willow motif gracing the top.

¹⁴¹ Photograph of the headstone of Henry, Ebenezer, Jabez, and Jabez Henry Sweet, died 1800, 1802, 1805, and 1807 respectively, taken by author in Copp's Hill Burial Ground in Boston, Massachusetts on August 10, 2015.

Moving past the sobering reminder of the elevated rates of infant mortality during the early republic as contrasted to today, the most striking feature is the artful depiction of the weeping willow and urn gracing the top of the marker. The weeping willow and urn as symbols referenced antiquity and represented the immortality of the soul. They were conscious shifts away from the more macabre symbols of the previous decades, but they still relied on nature to symbolize death.¹⁴² The weeping willow is a healthy and hale tree. It stretches to the top of headstone and then gently drapes itself over the central cutaway of the urn. In this particular case the urn is not actually “under” the tree as in other period depictions but is set apart in its own bordered circle. A single leaf graces the topmost portion of the urn in decoration. It’s impossible to tell the type of leaf this stonemason was attempting to depict, but the very presence of the leaf places a symbol of nature on the urn itself, signaling the connection between death and the natural world. The headstone iconography links human death and decay with rebirth through nature. The Sweet headstone captures this link so beautifully in the delicate boughs of the weeping willow and the single leaf.

Perhaps no more prominent an indication of the environmental processes at the heart of death existed than the actual graveyards themselves, with their verdant trees and fields of grasses sometimes grazed by local cattle. In the year 1762, Capt. Adino Paddock and John Ballard elected to plant the border of the Granary Burying Ground in Boston with sixteen elms. The elms were veritable floral celebrities to Bostonians as Capt. Paddock purchased them as saplings from England and then raised them in a nursery in Milton, Massachusetts, until they matured enough for transplanting to the Granary. Of the

¹⁴² Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*, 72; Rainville, “Hanover Deathscapes,” 557–60.

elms, the Cemetery Commission notes, “They grew to a noble size and retained their verdure five or six weeks longer than the native elms on the Common, [and they were] long the favorite resort of the birds and the gray squirrels.”¹⁴³ The message conveyed by the observers was that of the uncanny health and verdure of the trees in a space fertilized by the hundreds of bodies decaying within the grounds. Advocates for proper inhumation techniques during the latter part of the eighteenth century acknowledged this experiential connection between the health of trees and their location in graveyards. The writer observes, “They [graves] ought to be surrounded with trees, vegetables are found to flourish rapidly near where animal flesh or excreta are deposited.”¹⁴⁴ For Bostonians these elms served as a pocket of nature in the heart of the growing and urbanizing confines of Boston and were a perfect microcosm of environmental cycles of birth, growth, and death.

The healthful verdure of Capt. Paddock’s elms mirrored the health of the grasses that thrived among Boston’s dead and served as food for cattle. Without regular mowing, burial grounds often felt wildly chaotic and disorganized. Civic authorities, however, circumvented the need for caretakers by renting the grasses to Bostonians and allowing their local herds to graze among the dead.¹⁴⁵ A classically pastoral scene made real, this activity highlights that mortality was more concrete and less abstracted within the worldview of death that guided early national period Americans. It was not sacrilegious

¹⁴³ A chronicle of the Granary commissioned by the Boston Department of Cemeteries in 1902 contains useful references about the way that this historic burial space embodied nature within the heart of this growing city, see Boston Cemetery Department, *Historical Sketch and Matters Appertaining to the Granary Burial-Ground*, 9.

¹⁴⁴ Y, "Observations on Burying the Dead.," 623.

¹⁴⁵ Boston Cemetery Department, *Historical Sketch and Matters Appertaining to the Granary Burial-Ground*, 8.

to acknowledge that healthful grasses emerged from the soil where the dead decayed. Instead, the space both fostered and broke down the dead alongside serving as a food source for those still living; first in the form of the cattle that grazed upon the grasses and then as the cattle turned into the beef eaten by Bostonians. While Americans understood and appreciated the nature embodied in the elms planted by Capt. Paddock, they also saw it practically in the form of the grasses fit for eating by their livestock and subsequently themselves reflective of their broad understanding of the natural world.

The American worldview of death was not exclusive to urban burial grounds. Sometime during the 1850s the aging Jane Blair Cary Smith set about writing a memoir of her childhood among the quintessentially southern plantation environs of Carysbrooke in Fluvanna County, Virginia. Her memoir chronicles plantation life from the farming of tobacco to the deplorable selling of human slaves, yet it also meditates upon the numerous deaths that she experienced during her young life. These deaths serve among other events to spur on her Christianity, the communication of which emerges as the chief purpose of her memoir. The memoir also grants us a window into the family burial plot central to so many rural Americans homesteads within the early republic.

Smith's memoir begins by recounting the grounds of Carysbrooke, and while reminiscing about the various environs she notes the presence of a particular cherry tree within a favored grass plot. "On the left was a wild cherry tree, grotesque and unsymmetrical," she observes, "but always looked upon with a sort of awe; for here we soon learned was the spot chosen by our grandfather for his last resting place."¹⁴⁶ In the case of her grandfather, his remains came to rest underneath the boughs of a hoary and

¹⁴⁶ Jane Blair Cary Smith, *The Carysbrook Memoir*, Virginia Historical Society.

unkempt cherry tree amidst a wide green swathe where, as she recounts, “during pleasant weather we used to lie in the sun.”¹⁴⁷ For Jane Blair Cary Smith there was nothing unusual about lying so close to the decaying remains of her grandfather, because as Smith believed, this seemingly twisted and gnarled tree deserved reverence and was a natural symbol of her grandfather. Still, Cary Smith recalls that before her grandfather’s burial she was only too happy to have the body removed from her sight and interred within its resting place beneath the cherry tree. As she recalled, “We were too ignorant and uneducated to be really solemnised [*sic*]; and the dead being buried out of our sight was an unspeakable relief.”¹⁴⁸ For Cary Smith and many other Americans, death and decay, while necessary and natural, were not sentimentalized or romanticized but viewed clearly and prosaically. For young Jane, however, this trying experience would not be the last and death would be a frequent visitor at Carysbrooke.

In the winter of 1821, Jane Blair Cary Smith chronicled three deaths and burials within the family plot—one of her eight-year-old sister Anne, another of her infant sister Louisa, and still another of an unnamed newborn. Similar to the burial of her grandfather, Smith makes conscious note of the natural emblems that came to mark and memorialize her two young sisters. She recounts, “After two days we laid her [Anne] in the earth, by the side of our grandfather, and planted at her head and feet white rose bushes which bloomed in the spring, emblems of her sinless spirit.”¹⁴⁹ These rose bushes presented distinct natural markers, similar to her grandfather’s cherry tree, which showed the

¹⁴⁷ Jane Blair Cary Smith, *The Carysbrook Memoir*.

¹⁴⁸ Jane Blair Cary Smith.

¹⁴⁹ Jane Blair Cary Smith.

location of her sister's remains. Smith additionally noted their cyclical rebirth as they bloomed each spring. The infant Louisa's burial (alongside the unnamed infant) within the family plot similarly revolves around nature. "A day or two passed and we laid our darling by the side of the one who had gone before [Anne]," she wrote. "The white rose bushes had grown luxuriant and covered both graves. When spring came again another infant of a few days was laid there."¹⁵⁰ In such fashion, family burial connected rural Americans to death as they did in cities and towns. Marked with trees and plants, these family graveyards contained within them a nature that was primal and different from the cultivated spaces of their farmlands. For some, such as Jane Blair Cary Smith, plants and trees became more effective monuments to their loved ones than any granite or marble memorial. Nonetheless, these burial spaces, whether in Boston, Massachusetts, or Fluvanna County, Virginia, all illustrated the power of nature through the very trees and grasses that grew so "luxurious" or displayed such "verdure" off the reclaimed bodies of countless Americans whom came before.

Whether it was the musings of Judith Sargent Murray or that of Jane Blair Cary Smith, death loomed large in the early republic. Americans felt a keen awareness of their own mortality, seemingly daily, in both the practices they employed to place their dead within the earth or through the burial grounds that oriented their communities. American mortuary practices and burial spaces supported and reinforced the early republic worldview of death. Through their rituals and within their graveyards, the living were exposed to and embraced natural cycles, while additionally absorbing a grounded vision of the environment and their own place within it. This engagement with death, dying, and

¹⁵⁰ Jane Blair Cary Smith, *The Carysbrook Memoir*.

decay extended throughout various levels of American life and seemingly formed a central part of the fabric of American cultural institutions. And while family members and ministers reflected at the passing of life, so too did a nascent American literary culture, both producers and consumers. From poetry to graveside accounts to tombstone epitaphs, American writers and readers all contributed to and furthered the deep connection between death and the natural world.

CHAPTER IV

THE GREEN TURF SWELLS ABOVE THY MOLDERING CLAY

Death is a debt to nature due
Which I have paid and so must you
Epitaph of Deborah Osborn¹⁵¹

One corner of this field was somewhat above the level of the rest. The tallest tree of the group grew there, and there I had formerly placed a bench, and made it my retreat at periods of leisure. It had been recommended by its sequestered situation, its luxuriant verdure, and profound quiet... What revolutions had since occurred, and how gloomily contrasted was my present purpose with what had formerly led me hither. In this spot I had hastily determined to dig the grave of Susan.

Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn: Or the Memoirs of the Year 1793*¹⁵²

In the opening months of the year 1820 and at the age of nineteen, Massachusetts born Almon Danforth Hodges began to record—nearly daily—a diary primarily consisting of newsworthy items, expenditures, weather observations, and deaths. The pages cramped with Hodges' distinct script and populated with sentences and notations that swirl chaotically from top to bottom and left to right, documents a straightforward American life. Different from his son—also named Almon Danforth, who chronicled his time in the Union Army during the American Civil War—the elder Hodges fought no battles and did not distinguish himself in governmental or civic service. Instead, Almon Hodges Sr. worked within the grocery business and much of his time was spent traveling between Boston, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island. Despite the mundane

¹⁵¹ Kate E. Perry, *The Old Burying Ground of Fairfield, Conn: A Memorial of Many of the Early Settlers in Fairfield, and an Exhaustive and Faithful Transcript of the Inscriptions and Epitaphs on the 583 Tombstones Found in the Oldest Burying Ground Now Within the Limits of Fairfield* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1882), 15.

¹⁵² Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn: Or the Memoirs of the Year 1793*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1889), 65.

nature of Hodges experiences, his diary nonetheless offers an intriguing glimpse into the shape of a life within the early republic.

One central fragment of Almon D. Hodges life—as observed in chapter two—is death. His very first page of entries from August 1820, records on the eighth that “F. Arnold died.”¹⁵³ The diary entry’s few words shed very little light on F. Arnold, but they do signal the beginning of nearly sixty years of entries that record the numerous deaths that affected his life. One entry of note occurs on March 28, 1821, when the young Hodges observes pithily, “7 years this day since the death of Jonathan A. Hodges.”¹⁵⁴ The record concerning Jonathan A. Hodges is clearer and helps to explain the reason Almon elected to mark this particular anniversary. Jonathan Hodges was his late father. The number of Hodges’s entries gesture towards the important role that contemplating and writing about death assumed within the world of the early republic and reflected the worldview that prepared them for their own decay and demise.

Yet Almon Hodges was not the only American writing about death, and as he sat down to record the anniversary of his father’s death he might have chanced upon a recently published essay titled “Rural Funeral” from the pages of the amusingly named *Sketchbook of Jeffrey Crayon*—Jeffrey Crayon being the nom du plume of the American literary luminary, Washington Irving. If he had, Hodges may have been moved by Irving’s reflections gleaned directly from an English churchyard. Inspired by that burying ground Irving writes, “The natural effect of sorrow over the dead is to refine and elevate

¹⁵³ Hodges, *Diary of Almon D. Hodges, Sr., 1819-1878*, Journal 2, August 1, 1820 to April 18, 18, 1824. Hodges Family Papers, Boston Athenaeum.

¹⁵⁴ Hodges, *Diary of Almon D. Hodges, Sr., 1819-1878*, Journal 2, August 1, 1820 to April 18, 18, 1824.

the mind.”¹⁵⁵ Or maybe he had read William Cullen Bryant’s contemporaneously published poem, “Thanatopsis,” which reflected upon the organic frailty of our bodies glimpsed through death. As Bryant writes in the second stanza:

Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements,
To be a brother to the insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.¹⁵⁶

Perhaps it was these very words that drove a man such as Almon D. Hodges to seek out the graveyards, funerals, and emblems of mortality that are recorded all throughout his diary. No matter what inspired Hodges, early national period Americans did not need to look far to experience an American literary culture that embraced and explored human mortality.

The graveyard was a literary as well as physical place for Americans, made no less real via its mediation by early national writers, influenced by those of Britain and the European Continent. Their poems, stories, memoirs, novels, essays, and other accounts

¹⁵⁵ Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gentleman. [Pseud.]...: In Two Volumes*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Baudry, 1831), 1:238.

¹⁵⁶ William Cullen Bryant, *Thanatopsis ; And, A Forest Hymn* (Cambridge: John Wilson and Son, 1892), 12, 14.

fundamentally affected Americans' understanding and experience of death, burial grounds, and mortuary practices. Such literary works, ubiquitous in the early American republic, intertwined themselves with Americans' concrete, physical encounters with death and mortal remains, and together they shaped the landscape of death and nature in the early United States. Together they taught a shared cultural language of death, interment, and natural decay and regeneration—a discourse that captured an American experience that could be beautiful and comforting, but also harsh, frightening, and instructive about humans' place in an immutable world of God and nature.

Despite the lingering acrimony between the United States and Great Britain after American independence, the two nations found themselves remaining bound together by unbreakable cultural bonds. Among the cords that connected them was literature.¹⁵⁷ American writers and readers in the early national period imbibed the words of towering British figures from Wordsworth to Coleridge and cast them through their own minds and situations. Not every British writer, however, needed to carry the name recognition of a Pope or Fielding to reach American shores. One such example is the less well-known George Wright, author of *Pleasing Melancholy, or, A Walk Among the Tombs in a Country Church Yard*, published in London in 1793.

George Wright's work built upon other important voices that contributed to the tone, style, and content of *Pleasing Melancholy*. Wright's work contains the DNA of two other British writers, Thomas Gray and James Hervey. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Gray authored perhaps his most important and pioneering poem "An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," and it was almost instantly successful—both in

¹⁵⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch and Cyrus R. K. Patell, *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 591–92.

Britain and America—and saw multiple published editions within his lifetime and beyond. Gray’s elegy contains many elements within it, from its moral lessons concerning death to the path-breaking gothic stylings displayed within his churchyard setting.¹⁵⁸ James Hervey’s 1743 work, *A Meditation Among the Tombs in a Letter to Lady*, embodied a much different style while maintaining a similar message. Hervey’s *Meditations* eschews the poetry of Thomas Gray for scriptural quotations and lengthy reflections that emerge out of his time as an Anglican minister. Further differentiating Hervey’s work is its presentation as a self-help or guidebook with regards to death and mourning.¹⁵⁹ Both authors, however, shared a fascination with the look and feel of churchyards, making these works important building blocks within the growing realm of graveyard literature and affecting the form such literature took within nascent American culture.¹⁶⁰

From the power of God as expressed through death and decay, to the futility of vain and earthly glory, George Wright drew upon the emerging graveyard literature of his predecessors. In creating his own work, *Pleasing Melancholy, Or, A Walk Among the Tombs in a Country Church Yard*, George Wright synthesized these positions and provided Americans an important set of principles to consider. The thematic heart of his work reestablishes for his readers the benefit gained by confronting and reflecting upon mortality. Wright espouses this within the opening pages of *Pleasing Melancholy*. “How

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (Philadelphia: John W. Moore, 1845).

¹⁵⁹ James Hervey, *Meditations and Contemplations* (London: J. and J. Rivington, 1746).

¹⁶⁰ Bill Christophersen, *The Apparition in the Glass: Charles Brockden Brown’s American Gothic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), ix–xi; Peter Kafer, *Charles Brockden Brown’s Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); J. Gerald Kennedy, Leland S Person, and Oxford University Press, *The American Novel to 1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 100–104.

interesting and important are the lessons taught by a walk among the graves of deceased fellow mortals! How necessary the reflection for me--for all--I MUST SHORTLY DIE!” He continues, “How truly wise, to prepare for the solemn change, and be in constant readiness to appear before God, the Judge of quick and dead! Knowing the dictates of sacred inspiration proclaim this awful truth, it is appointed unto man once to die, and after this the judgment.”¹⁶¹ While powerfully written, Wright’s message that one must be ready for death was not novel and formed a central strain of funeral sermons from London, England to New London, Connecticut, as previously examined.

Wright is not content to admonish his readers to think passively about death; he urges them to physically seek out its most recognizable setting, the graveyard. Wright insists upon the “interesting and important” lessons “taught by a walk among the graves,” or, in other words, the importance of direct visitation and time spent among the real physical reminders of death and decay, headstones and tombs.¹⁶² The beautifully complex title of Wright’s manuscript additionally evokes this. The first part of Wright’s title, *Pleasing Melancholy*, asks the reader to embrace a contradiction—mirroring his apparently paradoxical belief that a place of death can be beneficial to the living. Wright believes that his time among the headstones, while mournful, is nonetheless “pleasing” to him. Wright sees within the melancholic attitudes and atmosphere that pervades scenes of human burial the immeasurable benefit of actually stopping and physically confronting human frailty.

¹⁶¹ George Wright, *Pleasing Melancholy, or, A Walk among the Tombs in a Country Church Yard: In the Stile & Manner of Hervey’s Meditations: To Which Are Added Epitaphs, Elegies, & Inscriptions, in Prose & Verse: Dedicated with Permission to Sir Richard Hill, Bart* (London: Chapman and Company, 1793), 2.

¹⁶² Wright, *Pleasing Melancholy, or, A Walk among the Tombs in a Country Church Yard...*, 2.

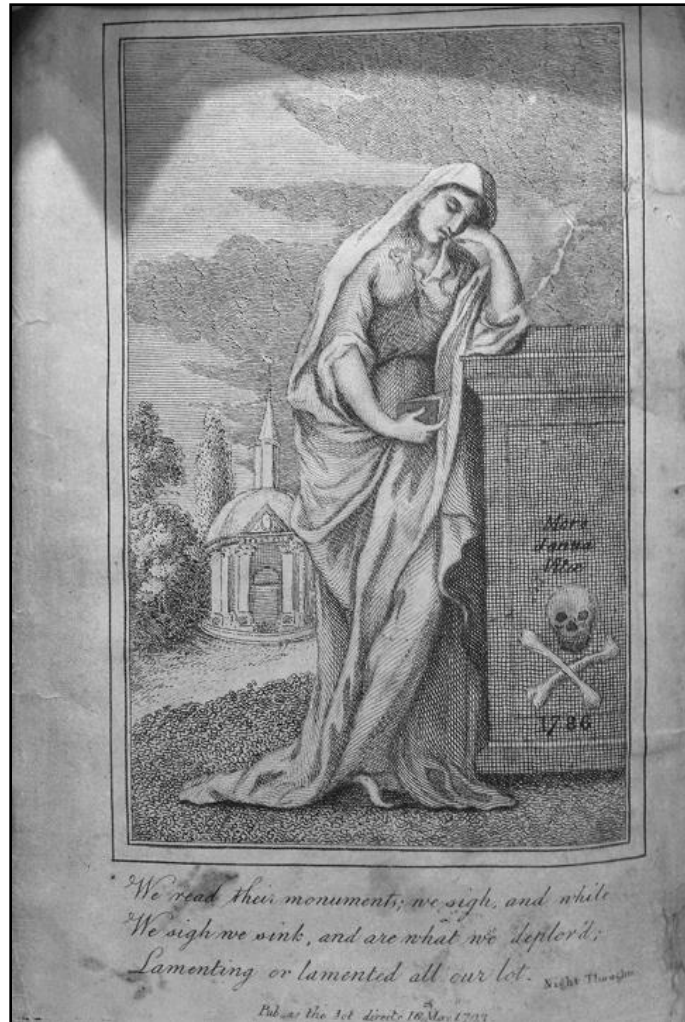


Figure 10. Frontispiece from *A Pleasing Melancholy* (London: Chapman and Company, 1793), observe the mausoleum in the background and Latin inscription *Mors Janua Vitae* on the foregrounded pedestal.

George Wright’s 1793 work, different from the works that predated it, leveraged a powerful tool in support of actual visitation and meditation within burial grounds. Aiding Wright’s written reflections, his publishers in London judiciously deployed full-page printed illustrations that depicted idealized burial grounds. Through these images alongside his prose, Wright emphasized that the very ubiquity of mortuary landscapes lent them their strength. Americans—or Britons in Wright’s case—all could easily visit and be exposed to a version of nature that did not elevate but, rather, humbled mankind

and illustrated clearly and realistically their position within the environmental world. The graveyard space, unique among the various landscapes of the eighteenth century, manifested the direct connection of humans to natural cycles. Through the decomposing bodies being absorbed back into the environment to feed trees and grasses, which in turn provided for worms and birds and other life, Wright articulated the human role within a web of interconnected ecological relationships. The artwork and prose employed in *Pleasing Melancholy* all pushed the living to embrace this inclusive vision of the natural world. The preceding image (figure 10) is demonstrative of this.

The angelic figure of a woman in deep contemplation stands as the perfect emblem of the type of meditation and reflection that Wright believed was uniquely found in churchyards. In the background, there is a singular mausoleum, elegant, and altogether more opulent than its surroundings, which gestures towards the preeminent importance of death for the living. Flanking the mausoleum are multiple trees, emblems of the life that emerges from death. The most arresting part of the image, however, is the standing monument that the solitary figure is leaning upon. It is not an accident that she is so deep in thought while leaning upon this memorial. Both the inscription and the classic imagery of the skull and crossed bones indicate to the reader that her deep contemplation revolves around mortality and the natural limits that govern the living. The Latin inscription gracing the marker, “*Mors Janua Vitae*,” carries the simple yet effective message that the tomb represents “The Door of Life and Death.”¹⁶³ This inscription reminds the reader that the barrier between the living and the dead is neither impregnable nor distant, but like a door to be passed through whenever the time comes. Graveyards, both real and literary,

¹⁶³ Wright, *Pleasing Melancholy, or, A Walk among the Tombs in a Country Church Yard*.

thus represented liminal spaces between life and death where the mind must confront and contemplate its own end.

Wright supplements this and other illustrations with his prose, which continually emphasizes the centrality of death within a larger and divine natural system. He employs numerous allusions and metaphors that attempt to convey this by highlighting the many ways that human life not only imitates nature but also is an integral part of it. In the latter section of *Pleasing Melancholy*, Wright crafts an extended death metaphor that contains multiple allusions to nature. “Exult not too much young man, in the bloom of thy youth, lest the hand of the destroyer pluck thee from thy garden of pleasure and delight . . . and leave thee to wither and decay, like the flower in yonder field, that has fallen beneath the scythe of the sturdy mower.”¹⁶⁴ Here the deity becomes a gardener or farmer, who has planted all life on earth, cared for it, and allowed it to thrive, but not without governance or control. Wright acknowledges this through his positioning of death—God’s power—as akin to that of a field hand harvesting his crop. Wright is not making the point that humans are no different from wheat, but he is arguing that, despite the soul, physical human life is still governed by natural forces. While fundamentally Wright is imploring his readers to get the state of their souls in order so that they might reach heaven, he emphasizes that life and death is a natural process. Wright’s metaphor clearly sees the physical self as an organism, whose death is part of environmental cycles.

Numerous passages within Wright’s *Pleasing Melancholy* also extend and explore the holistic or broad contours of the natural world that are so powerfully articulated through mortality. He investigates this through the Greek myth of Alcander. He writes,

¹⁶⁴ Wright, *Pleasing Melancholy, or, A Walk among the Tombs in a Country Church Yard...*, 206.

“Before the next evening he died in great agonies, insensible to everything but the pains of dissolving nature.”¹⁶⁵ Again, the central moral revolves around proper preparation of the spirit for death. Within that obvious lesson, he also subtly posits that Alcander’s physical self was inherently natural and organic, noting Alcander’s agonizing death was the “dissolving of nature.”¹⁶⁶ This more complete vision of nature—inclusive of humanity—was a hallmark of the worldview of death within the early republic.

Early national period writers built upon these themes and locations and, importantly, placed them within an American context. One particularly important mode of communication was poetry, and the work of Philip Morin Freneau is illustrative.¹⁶⁷ At differing times—and often all the same time—Freneau was a revolutionary polemicist, a privateer, and most famously “the poet of the American Revolution.”¹⁶⁸ Freneau’s writings often explored human mortality through poignant and nature-based metaphors. Freneau’s poetry rendered death into more common experiential emblems and images that accentuated the connection between human bodies and the natural world. “To an

¹⁶⁵ Wright, *Pleasing Melancholy, or, A Walk among the Tombs in a Country Church Yard...*, 9.

¹⁶⁶ Wright, 9.

¹⁶⁷ A complete survey of the various works that Freneau published concerning death, burial, and decay constitutes an entire work itself, yet highlighting and exploring a selection of such works is illustrative. While chronology matters the attribution and publication date of many of his poems vary, as different volumes printed from the late 18th century until now complicate when each work first entered into public circulation. Despite this, where possible chronological order will be maintained, with the desire to better illustrate recurring motifs and evolving ideologies within Freneau’s output. Some collected volumes of Philip Freneau’s prose emerged early within the newly independent American states with one being published in 1786. Freneau’s words gave voice to a generation of Americans who saw themselves as aggrieved adherents to the very best principles of English political life that they felt distorted under the rule of King George III and his Parliament. As Americans went through their forcible separation from their British heritage they looked for inspiration in forming and shaping their own nascent national identity. Freneau’s writings served as crucial first roots in this complex and ever-evolving process that continues into the present.

¹⁶⁸ Jacob Axelrad, *Philip Freneau, Champion of Democracy*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967). Surprisingly few biographical treatments of Freneau’s life have been published over the past 50 years.

Old Man,” published sometime between 1768 and 1794, captures his understanding of human bodies as organic objects. The central theme revolves around the ravages of time and the losses, both physical and mental, experienced by all people as their bodies age and decay. The sixth through ninth stanzas of “To an Old Man” are particularly illuminating:

Subjected to perpetual ills,
A thousand deaths around us grow:
The frost the tender blossom kills,
And roses wither as they blow.

Cold, nipping winds your fruits assail,
The blasted apple seeks the ground,
The peaches fall, the cherries fail,
The grape receives a mortal Wound.

The breeze, that gently ought to blow
Swells to a storm, and rends the main;
The sun that charm'd the grass to grow
Turns hostile and consumes the plain;

The mountains waste, the shores decay,
Once purling streams are dead and dry—
'Twas Nature's work—'tis Nature's play

And Nature says, that all must die.¹⁶⁹

Freneau's investigation of bodily decline consciously emphasizes that people age and decay no differently from any other natural entity. To demonstrate this holism, Freneau does not linger upon deathbed scenes or eulogies but instead focuses on the myriad of physical deaths occurring all around and in every moment. By taking his reader through the various ways that all earthly objects—even rivers and mountains—eventually cease to exist, he places himself and his readers within a much larger organic and divine system. Through this metaphor, he challenges his readers to think less of themselves as entirely separate and unique entities and more about their status as just another facet of the natural world, all of which is governed by death. Like apples, cherries, peaches, or grapes, humans are subject to natural limitations on their physical selves through aging, exposure, death, and decay.

Compare that message with a few select stanzas from another age-related poem, “To a Man of Ninety”, also composed between 1768 and 1794. This poem devotes itself entirely to exploring the musings of a fictitious elderly man as he directly measures the time allotted to his life with that apportioned to a solitary white oak—a tree native only to North America.¹⁷⁰ It is important that Freneau equates the life of a human with a native tree, seeing both as “Americans.” Freneau writes,

If to the shades, consuming flow,

The shadow of myself, I go,

¹⁶⁹ Philip Morin Freneau, *Poems Written between the Years 1768 and 1794 ... A New Edition Revised and Corrected ... Including a Considerable Number of Pieces Never before Published* (Mount Pleasant, NJ: Philip Morin Freneau, 1795), 194.

¹⁷⁰ Freneau, *Poems Written between the Years 1768 and 1794...*, 127–29.

When I am gone wilt thou remain!
From dust you rose, and grew like me;
I man became, and you a tree,
Both natives of one grassy plain.¹⁷¹

Within this stanza, Freneau emphasizes the similarities in origin between his aged American and the white oak, ascribing their mutual creation to God who fashions all life from the “dust.”¹⁷² Freneau situates his characters—the elderly man and the tree—as kindred inhabitants of the same God-authored world, despite their differences.

Could I, fair tree, like you, resign,
And banish all these fears of mine,
Grey hairs would be no cause of grief;
Your blossoms die, but you remain,
Your fruit lies scatter’d o’er the plain—
Learn wisdom from the falling leaf.¹⁷³

While the longevity and regrowth central to the life cycle of the white oak might help assuage human fears of death, Freneau argues poignantly that people should, “Learn wisdom from the falling leaf.”¹⁷⁴ But just what is the shape of this wisdom? The opening two lines from the succeeding stanza provide the answer: acceptance of one’s natural fate. “As you survive, by Heaven’s decree,” it continues, “Let wither’d flowers be thrown

¹⁷¹ Freneau, *Poems Written between the Years 1768 and 1794...*, 127.

¹⁷² Freneau, 127.

¹⁷³ Freneau, 128.

¹⁷⁴ Freneau, 128.

on me.”¹⁷⁵ God determines the span of life for all living things, from the towering oak to a wizened old woman, and no amount of pining can change natural history. Freneau instead encourages his readers to look to the natural world and resign themselves to their own position within it. Those who do will see a mirror that reflects God’s truth that all natural things—including themselves—must perish to be reborn again.

Returning to the poem, “To an Old Man”, Freneau takes all of the various currents of the death worldview and distills them into a powerful statement upon death and nature, its inviolable and universal rules. “’Twas Nature’s work—’tis Nature’s play and Nature says, that all must die,” Freneau concludes.¹⁷⁶ This sentiment serves as a refrain in many of Freneau’s mortality centered poems and gestures to the preeminent position of nature in explaining the physical realities of death. Consider this selection from a commissioned elegy for a Mrs. Burnet. Freneau somberly remarks,

Composed of Nature’s finest clay,
To Nature she her debt did pay,
Who sympathizing, mingles here,
The rising sigh, the melting tear.¹⁷⁷

This elegy espouses a worldview where humans are entirely natural entities emerging from and returning to the environment that created them. It also casts this as a law or a binding contract that is unalterable and always comes due. For Freneau death represented

¹⁷⁵ Freneau, *Poems Written between the Years 1768 and 1794...*, 128.

¹⁷⁶ Freneau, 194.

¹⁷⁷ Philip Morin Freneau, *Poems Written and Published During the American Revolutionary War, and Now Republished from the Original Manuscripts: Interspersed with Translations from the Ancients, and Other Pieces Not Heretofore in Print* (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1809), 222.

an absolute and divine law that placed humans in a subordinate position to those environmental forces they so often sought to tame, control, or extinguish. Death made clear that no matter the size of the herd, the span of the bridge, or the acreage of crops, people cannot escape their connection to the greater environmental community.

The idea that Americans understood themselves as dependent upon nature while a seemingly obvious connection was more nuanced. Consider the familiar Biblical passage from Genesis, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”¹⁷⁸ Similarly, note this wisdom imparted to Noah in preparation for the cataclysmic flood, “And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth *upon* the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered,” the passage continues, “Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things.”¹⁷⁹ The preeminent position of humans over plants and animals features prominently here and illustrates their dependence on nature. And that special favor God has marked them with does not render them any less natural than the beasts they eat. Human mortality, however, goes beyond dependence by directly evincing the frailty of people vis-à-vis God whose supernatural power has created nature and, deliberately, made humans subject to it. Humans might be God’s chosen creature, but that is precisely why God humbles them through their own decline and decay no different than the apple they consume.

¹⁷⁸ Gn. 1:26 (King James Version)

¹⁷⁹ Gn. 9:2-3 (King James Version)

Poetry was not the only form of literature driving and disseminating the American worldview of death; early national novels also played an important role in exploring mortality through the graveyard setting and mourning rituals. Charles Brockden Brown and his pioneering gothic novel, *Arthur Mervyn; or, Memoirs of the Year 1793*, captures this.¹⁸⁰ *Arthur Mervyn*, published in two volumes between 1799 and 1800, is set in and around Brown's native Philadelphia during the year 1793 and shifts between a larger historical moment—the community-rending yellow fever epidemic that devastated Philadelphia during that year—and the pure fiction of its central character, Arthur Mervyn. One significant and omnipresent companion throughout it all is death.¹⁸¹

The first mortality related moment occurs very early on in the novel and slowly acclimatizes its readers to multiple thematic elements, which subtly reflect and recapitulate numerous facets of the American death worldview. The first and most obvious is the stalking and inescapable presence of death as an almost daily constant in American lives. The second is Arthur's belief that his coming premature death was biologically pre-ordained. Lastly, Brown directly explores burial grounds and mortuary rituals through the language of nature, which made death “knowable” via common and

¹⁸⁰ Alan Axelrod, *Charles Brockden Brown, an American Tale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); Philip Barnard, Mark Kamrath, and Stephen Shapiro, *Revising Charles Brockden Brown: Culture, Politics, and Sexuality in the Early Republic* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004); Kafer, *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic*.

¹⁸¹ Brown published seven novels between 1798 and 1801, four of his novels in particular, *Wieland*, *Ormond*, *Edgar Huntly*, and *Arthur Mervyn*, have received the greater share of analysis and have emerged as his most emblematic works. Many different voices from historians to literary critics have evaluated and dissected the various methods and styles employed by Brown. A smaller and focused investigation of one of these four novels allows a window into larger trends that weave themselves throughout his most famous novels, in particular, Brown's depiction and treatment of decay, death, mourning, and burial in Charles Brockden Brown, *Arthur Mervyn: Or the Memoirs of the Year 1793*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1889).

shared experiences within the American environment and reinforced the position of humans within larger natural systems.

From the outset of the reader's encounter with Mervyn, his character evinces an acceptance of mortality that channels and concentrates the organic nature of human bodies. Mervyn imbibes a fatalistic belief that he is destined to die young because of a possible biological flaw—presaged by the deaths of his mother and siblings. Mervyn muses upon this assumed frailty when discovered destitute and defeated outside of a Philadelphia brownstone. He reminisces, "My father had a small farm, on which he has been able, by industry, to maintain himself and a numerous family. He has had many children, but some defect in the constitution of our mother has been fatal to all of them but me."¹⁸² He then ominously prophesizes, "They died successively as they attained the age of nineteen or twenty, and, since I have not yet reached that age, I may reasonably look for the same premature fate. In the spring of last year my mother followed her fifth child to the grave, and three months afterwards died herself."¹⁸³ Mervyn's resignation towards death, based on some perceived physical or "constitutional" trick of nature, makes his travel to Philadelphia at the height of deadly yellow fever all the more perilous.¹⁸⁴ "I may be condemned to share in the common destiny. What then? Life is

¹⁸² Brown, *Arthur Mervyn: Or the Memoirs of the Year 1793*, 1:17.

¹⁸³ Brown, 1:17.

¹⁸⁴ It is important to note here that Americans certainly were not so foolhardy as in Mervyn's case when confronted with outbreaks of deadly pathogens such as yellow fever. In fact, much of the time those who could afford to flee the confines of a city or community suffering under the ravages of disease did so and retreated to their own rural estates or those of friends while the disease burnt itself out among the poor and helpless. This, however, does not disprove the argument made here that Americans of all means and beliefs confronted death with a level of regularity that forced them to grapple with it. For examples of the aforementioned "fleeing" phenomenon please consult a work such as Valencius, *The Health of the Country*.

dependent on a thousand contingencies, not to be computed or foreseen.”¹⁸⁵ He continues to ponder, “The seeds of an early and lingering death are sown in my constitution. It is in vain to hope to escape the malady by which my mother and my brothers have died.”¹⁸⁶ Brown’s conscious framing of Mervyn’s mortality as “seeds sowed” within his body exemplifies the holism Americans understood existed between their physical selves and the environment. Mervyn was unsure why he and his family experienced this weakness, but he cast it in physical and natural terms. Such a horticultural metaphor speaks to the way Americans understood their bodies, subsumed within the natural world, where unknown maladies within and without suffused and shaped them.

Beyond Mervyn’s own biological fatalism, he confronted mortality first-hand through burial rituals and spaces. He dealt with a murder and a hasty burial, an attempted suicide by drowning, a city full of abandoned homes and overburdened, makeshift hearses, the death and burial of a young female friend, the passing of an infant while in her mother’s arms, the diseased madness and death of a murderer and forger, and the demise of a kindly benefactor, a family friend, and his own father in poverty and drunkenness.¹⁸⁷ As this simple list of casualties demonstrates, the death toll soars within the pages of *Arthur Mervyn*. Brown’s deployment of corpses and slap-dash burials fashioned death into a character that Mervyn interacts with nearly as much as any living actor within the novel.

¹⁸⁵ Brown, *Arthur Mervyn: Or the Memoirs of the Year 1793*, 1:136.

¹⁸⁶ Brown, 1:136.

¹⁸⁷ Brown. See entire novel.

Throughout these varied depictions of mortality, Brown reaffirmed death as an organic process. The scenes that unfold after Mervyn returns from the yellow fever-ravaged Philadelphia to the Hadwin family farm—where he had been previously living—are particularly illustrative. The warmth and familial tenderness he experienced formerly are gone, and he encounters a family much reduced, consisting now of one healthy daughter, one desperately ill daughter, and an old former family servant.

Mervyn quickly discovers that Mr. Hadwin contracted yellow fever while traveling to the city and upon returning home quickly succumbed to the disease.¹⁸⁸ As Mervyn morosely recounts, “The task of attending his sickbed was left to his daughters, and it was by their hands that his grave was dug and his body covered with earth.”¹⁸⁹ Their efforts exemplify the intimate ways of death in the early republic. They readied themselves and their father for death while he remained alive, and then after he finally passed they assumed the role of corpse preparers and undertakers. The responsibilities of the living to the dead did not discriminate by age or sex. Death was not burden but a duty performed by the living for the dead.

Mervyn also directly participates in the melancholy offices of death and burial. As she cared for her father during his rapid decline, one daughter, Susan, also contracted yellow fever. Her death seemed imminent as Arthur returned. The younger sister, Eliza, though exhausted from the rigors of burying her father and then caring for Susan, joyfully reunites with Arthur. The felicitous reunion, however, is spent at the side of his declining friend Susan. Her life fades away in front of them. Wishing to spare Eliza further anguish,

¹⁸⁸ Brown, *Arthur Mervyn: Or the Memoirs of the Year 1793*, 2:58–60.

¹⁸⁹ Brown, 2:60.

Arthur takes her from the room and offers to attend to all the necessities.¹⁹⁰ Mervyn observes, “Nothing remained but to watch her while expiring, and perform for her, when dead, the rites of interment.” He continues concisely, “I sat beside the bed of the dying till the mortal struggle was past.”¹⁹¹ Mervyn does not flee from the presence of the dying, or consign the burial to someone else’s hands, but instead resolutely remains an integral part of the entire proceeding.¹⁹²

Brown’s exploration of death further illustrates the central role of nature in early republic mortuary practices Mervyn’s internal debate over the most expedient, proper, and sensitive way to dispose of Susan Hadwin’s corpse. Brown presents the dilemma as a practical question. “The season was bleak and inclement. Much time, labour, and expense would be required to go through the customary rites.” Mervyn concludes matter-of-factly, “There was none but myself to perform these, and I had not the suitable means.”¹⁹³ Nonetheless, Mervyn chooses to prepare the corpse and bury Susan Hadwin himself.¹⁹⁴ Brown thus explored the concrete natural constraints, in this case weather, that early national American faced. Mervyn sets off spade in hand to find a suitable spot for the interment of Susan’s remains. He chooses a place under the tallest tree within the family orchard. Mervyn’s choice does not represent expedience or a lack of deep reflection; conversely, Brown allows the reader into Mervyn’s mind to see his purposefulness. “One corner of this field was somewhat above the level of the rest. The tallest tree of the group

¹⁹⁰ Brown, *Arthur Mervyn: Or the Memoirs of the Year 1793*, 2:58–60.

¹⁹¹ Brown, 2:59.

¹⁹² Brown, 2:63.

¹⁹³ Brown, 2:64.

¹⁹⁴ Brown, 2:63–64.

grew there, and there I had formerly placed a bench, and made it my retreat at periods of leisure.” He continues, “It had been recommended by its sequestered situation, its luxuriant verdure, and profound quiet. On one side was a potato-field, on the other a melon-patch; and before me, in rows, some hundreds of apple-trees.”¹⁹⁵ Mervyn’s selection reflects a deep desire for Susan’s remains to rest among and be memorialized by scenes of nature. While Susan’s bones would not be placed within a churchyard or beneath the artful carvings of a tombstone, Brown positions Susan’s final resting place as no less worthy. Brown’s prose reflects the belief that her remains—surrounded on all sides by nature, whether mundane or majestic—returned to the earth to break down and foster the next cycle of life. Susan Hadwin becomes a physical part of the farm, interred within its very soil, and providing for the life that will soon flourish all around her in the coming spring. The scene of Susan’s tranquil countryside burial presents a stark contrast with the “chaotic” and “dangerous” city of Philadelphia.

Brown concludes the chapter with an inner monologue from Arthur that sums up for both himself and his audience the grave significance of the event. It is important that the last words that Brown writes in this section attempt to explain and model the importance of embracing death, no matter the attendant physical or spiritual concerns. Mervyn begins stoically, “I neither trembled nor wavered in my purpose.” He then concludes eloquently, “I bore in my arms the being whom I had known and loved, through the whistling gale and intense darkness of a winter's night; I heaped earth upon her limbs, and covered them from human observation, without fluctuations or tremors,

¹⁹⁵ Brown, *Arthur Mervyn: Or the Memoirs of the Year 1793*, 2:65.

though not without feelings that were awful and sublime.”¹⁹⁶ Mervyn felt a terrible awe as he carried Susan’s still form.¹⁹⁷ Death here served as a powerful emblem of the power of God and nature.

Like early national novels and poetry, headstones and grave markers helped narrate for Americans their understanding of the natural world, their place within it, and the power that nature and God had over their lives. Gravestones offered necessary information—names and dates—as well as carved images, pithy epitaphs, and poetic musings, which articulated accessible messages understandable to all classes of people. Headstones and their epitaphs created an American library of death, conveying especially the valuable lesson that humans were inherently natural, frail, organic entities governed by the forces of nature and God.

Gravestones throughout the young republic encouraged the living to be prepared for their eventual demise and to be humble in the face of death. One in the small community of Milford, Connecticut in 1792 read:

Molly tho’ pleasant in her day
Was suddenly seized and sent away
How soon she's ripe, how soon she's rotten
Laid in the grave and soon forgotten.¹⁹⁸

The epitaph, with its wry simplicity, placed humans within the larger human and environmental community. Four short lines chronicle Molly’s life through an extended

¹⁹⁶ Brown, *Arthur Mervyn: Or the Memoirs of the Year 1793*, 2:65.

¹⁹⁷ Brown, 2:65.

¹⁹⁸ Charles Northend, *Churchyard Literature; Or, Light Reading on Grave Subjects: Being a Collection of Amusing, Quaint, and Curious Epitaphs* (New York: Hurst & Company, 1881), 105.

nature-based metaphor. Her maturity becomes “ripeness,” and her decline and death produce “rot.” The message applied to all organisms, humans included, who passed through the stages of growth, maturity, and death. The language is flip, if not cruel, and rejects sentimentality in favor of harsh natural truths. It was easy to comprehend the meaning of this passage, resonating as it did with the life experiences of farming families in late eighteenth-century rural Connecticut, embedded in the tenuous natural world.

These types of epitaphs recur throughout the states, dramatically illustrating the ubiquity of the death worldview operating within the early republic. A slight shift from rural Connecticut to the Carolinas and St. Michael’s churchyard in Charleston suggests that this cultural language, which conjoined death and nature on American tombstones, was broadly shared. As the family of thirteen-year-old Thomas Holland departed the graveyard in late January of 1795, they left behind this message for future generations.

Life's blooming spring just opens to our Eyes,
And strikes our senses with a sweet surprise
When Death's fierce arm uplifts the fatal blow
That hurls us breathless to the Earth below.¹⁹⁹

Prominently featured here are the twin messages of preparedness and humility, and they speak through language grounded in environmental motifs. The blooming of spring’s abundant life becomes the perfect phrase to capture the youth of Thomas Holland at his death; he is more than a child but not yet an adult. The end of the epitaph closes the cycle of life suddenly with the image of a violent return to earth. The ferocity of the phrasing reflects the unexpectedness of death, but the allusion to earth also serves as a pointed

¹⁹⁹ Jervey, *Inscriptions on the Tablets and Gravestones in St. Michael’s Church and Churchyard*, 142.

reminder that human bodies are earthly entities bound to the ground both in life and in death.²⁰⁰ Purposefully, Thomas Holland's epitaph invokes the cyclical composition of life. All creatures emerge out of nature, and then after the course of a lifetime return, all according to God's plan.

Other epitaphs even more directly proclaimed the inseparability of humans from the environment. Etched on Elizabeth Turney's rural Connecticut tombstone were these words:

Reader when you this monument survey,
Remember that your form is mouldering clay.
Thy soul, 'tis the immortal kind,
Nor form'd of fire, or earth, or wind;
Outlives the mouldering corpse
And leaves the globe behind.²⁰¹

The epitaph relayed here leaves no doubt as to the material basis of the human body while at the same time celebrating the ability of the soul to transgress its natural shell. It begins by positioning the corporeal body as no more than slowly decaying flesh. It then continues by contrasting the physical reality with the importance of the human soul and in doing this further recognizes the physical body as organic and part of nature. The spirit as opposed to the body is immortal and not created from anything found in nature such as fire, earth, or wind. The physical corpse will die, as dictated by the boundaries and constraints of God's earthly system, but the human soul allows transcendence beyond our

²⁰⁰ Jervey, *Inscriptions on the Tablets and Gravestones in St. Michael's Church and Churchyard...*, 142.

²⁰¹ Perry, *The Old Burying Ground of Fairfield, Conn...*, 211.

natural bodies upon death. While the uplifting message concerning the spirit's ability to ascend to heaven forms the central crux of the epitaph, the grave marker nonetheless emphasizes as well the physical body, connected so intimately with all of the nature that surrounds it.

Even simpler messages that stress the frailty of human bodies illustrate how important nature was to the worldview guiding Americans' relationship with mortality. Compare the previous epitaph with this concise proclamation from another tombstone.

Death is a debt to nature due

Which I have paid and so must you.²⁰²

Death follows life as a debt grounded in our inherently natural bodies. The repayment of this debt to nature takes the form of decay and death. Death drew Americans inextricably back to the physical world and served as a universal reminder of their own place within nature.

Whether nestled within the pages of a book, splayed across the front of a broadsheet, or carved into the face of the headstones that dotted America's burial spaces, people throughout the new republic read, wrote, and reflected upon the role of death in their lives. Almon D. Hodges Sr.'s diary, full of death, executions, obituary notices, and funerals only makes sense when placed within the American worldview of death. He and most Americans embraced mortality and the boundaries it placed upon them. Hodges's diligent recording of the deceased both within his community and without (he even

²⁰² Perry, *The Old Burying Ground of Fairfield, Conn...*, 15.

recorded the death of the Russian Tsar Alexander I in February of 1826) represent his personal attempts to explore his own relationship with mortality.²⁰³

While Hodges's chronicle of seemingly constant funerals represented private meditations into mortality, American literature explored death publicly within the pages of various manuscripts and publications. A brief look into the *Sketchbook of Jeffrey Crayon* by Washington Irving underscores this. Irving's writings about his time in England and on the continent—collected into the *Sketchbook*—ranged from apocryphal tales to social critiques. His essay, "Rural Funeral," embodies many common themes explored within this chapter. Irving believed in the power, both physical and spiritual, that death effected upon himself and placed this experience before his readers. The benefits, however, were not divorced from actual burial spaces and he, channeling George Wright's work, argued for the tangible benefits of spending time in graveyards and among the dead, but from an American perspective. Irving crystallizes for his readers an important component of the worldview of death that suffused American life; the constant physical presence of graveyards was essential to a healthy understanding of biological limits. "They pass it on their way to prayer; it meets their eyes when their hearts are softened by the exercises of devotion." He mused further, "[T]hey linger about it on the Sabbath, when the mind is disengaged from worldly cares, and most disposed to turn aside from present pleasures and present loves, and to sit down among the solemn mementoes of the past."²⁰⁴ The central message from Irving is clear and powerful: graveyards, mortuary rituals, and headstones all represented places, approaches, or

²⁰³ Hodges, *Diary of Almon D. Hodges, Sr., 1819-1878*, Hodges Family Papers, Boston Athenaeum.

²⁰⁴ Irving, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gentleman. [Pseud.]...: In Two Volumes.*, 1:288.

objects where the humbling organicism of human bodies was made explicit through death.

Washington Irving's admonition to spend time with the dead, however, was not fantastic or overly sentimental. Irving never shied from communicating to his reader the real and unpleasant processes that occurred below the soil. He notes, "There is a dismal process going on in the grave, ere dust can return to its kindred dust."²⁰⁵ Irving understood the primal and natural activities taking place beneath his feet and the value in recognizing them. Death dissolved the human form and reclaimed it so that "dust can return to its kindred dust."²⁰⁶ Despite this awareness, or perhaps because of it, Irving never wavers in arguing the necessity of the living to pass time among the remains of the dead. Even after dispensing with his essay "Rural Funeral" he returns to the idea upon his visit to Westminster Abbey. "The grave should be surrounded by every thing that might inspire tenderness and veneration for the dead; or that might win the living to virtue." He beautifully concludes, "It is the place, not of disgust and dismay, but of sorrow and meditation."²⁰⁷

Almon D. Hodges appeared to take Irving's words to heart during the course of his lifetime, and the litany of deaths and funerals that occupy his diary testify to this. Americans were steeped in a worldview that embraced death and made it a part of their lives. American writers helped propagate and shape the nature of death and the worldview regarding mortality that Americans followed. Undergirding much of their own

²⁰⁵ Irving, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gentleman. [Pseud.]...: In Two Volumes*, 1:284.

²⁰⁶ Irving, 1:284.

²⁰⁷ Irving, 1:348–49.

musings upon the subject was a careful attention to their own inherently frail and natural bodies and lives that tied them back to the earth and all of the creatures—including themselves—that made up God’s earthly kingdom. Death in America and its attendant processes, however, did not exist in a vacuum. As the young republic grew during the nineteenth century, the American relationship with mortality rested upon multiple fault lines whose cracking would have dramatic implications for death in America.

CHAPTER V

NOXIOUS EXHALATIONS

If a single corpse can sometimes embitter all our joys, and plunge our heart into the deepest morning [sic], what must be the effect of several thousand deceased, and among them some tenderly beloved friends.

Reverend Justus Henry Christian Helmuth²⁰⁸

The exclusive believers in home or local origin [of yellow fever], will ever find an old sink, a cist-pool, a rotten potato, or a putrid mouse, or some other nuisance of the kind, sufficient, if one could believe their stories, to poison a world. These gentlemen, however, do not seem to recollect, that the nuisances from which they fear so much, are the hourly productions of nature, and abound everywhere, at all times, over all the earth, rarely causing disease among its inhabitants.

The New York Board of Health²⁰⁹

Like many other Germans living in the eighteenth century, Justus Henry Christian Helmuth made the long journey across the Atlantic to begin a new life in America. For Justus, and many of his fellow Germans, his travels carried him to Pennsylvania. The widespread acceptance of differing faiths, from Moravian to Jewish, made Pennsylvania a religious haven of sorts with a distinctly international feel. Justus himself arrived in 1769, “called by God” to help tend and shepherd the growing German Christian population of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Only a few years later, however, Justus moved from Lancaster to the city of Philadelphia to lead St. Michael’s Church, the city’s first

²⁰⁸ Justus Henry Christian Helmuth and Charles Erdmann, *A Short Account of the Yellow Fever in Philadelphia, for the Reflecting Christian* (Philadelphia: Jones, Hoff & Derrick, 1794), 2.

²⁰⁹ New York Board of Health, *A History of the Proceedings of the Board of Health, of the City of New-York, in the Summer and Fall of 1822: Together with, an Account of the Rise and Progress of the Yellow Fever, Which Appeared during That Season, and the Several Documents in Relation to It, Which Were Laid before the Board* (New York: P.& H. van Pelt, 1823), 163.

Lutheran congregation.²¹⁰ Justus no doubt felt attracted to Philadelphia, which over the course of the eighteenth century had grown into a thriving, cosmopolitan community and entered the opening years of the American republic as the young nation's largest city. Justus's activities in Philadelphia primarily centered on his ministry at St. Michael's, alongside a dedication to furthering the education of young German and German-American men.²¹¹ Despite this, the day-to-day pace of the Reverend Helmuth's life remains less clear. A published work from 1794, however, sheds detailed light on his activities and thoughts during the latter half of 1793. While brief, this work by the Reverend Helmuth is freighted with powerful observations. As in that fateful year, Justus bore witness to a level of destruction that outstripped any that he had previously witnessed, including the occupation of Philadelphia during the Revolutionary War.²¹² Worse, the ruination that visited Philadelphia in 1793 was not attributable to any foreign army or riotous social upheaval, and the culprits—of which there were many—eluded all attempts at capture late that summer, because Philadelphia faced an outbreak of a virulent and contagious disease. The illness that swept through Philadelphia in those fateful months would challenge the very foundations of the American worldview of death by undermining the rich nature of the burial ground and recasting the human body itself as unclean, virulent, and dangerous.

Helmuth chronicled the confusion, fear, and overturning of all order that followed in the wake of this deadly and insidious visitor. At first, he detected nothing out of the

²¹⁰ James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, *Appletons' Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, vol. 3 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1888), 161.

²¹¹ Wilson and Fiske, 3:161.

²¹² Helmuth and Erdmann, *A Short Account of the Yellow Fever in Philadelphia, for the Reflecting Christian*, 1–2.

ordinary. He recalled, “On the nineteenth I was called to a man, whose breathing was very short, but who did not shew [*sic*] in his countenance the least symptoms of approaching death; nevertheless to my very surprise, he was a corpse on the 20th.”²¹³ Helmuth’s perception reflected the general unpreparedness within American communities when faced with especially contagious diseases. This lack of preparation was not borne out of willful neglect but of simple ignorance. “Nobody yet suspected that this man had died of a contagious fever,” he wrote. When “On the twenty-first a man out of the same family was buried... even this did not make any particular impression in those parts where these happened.”²¹⁴ Residents continued to live normally, knowing that even a common flu could become a mortal danger. The worldview of death that guided Philadelphians and Americans generally during this period continued to operate at the outset of the outbreak, and Americans maintained close contact with their dead as dictated by their usual customs and habits, including their intimate preparation of the corpse and its conveyance to the churchyard for burial.

Soon, however, everything began to change. “On the same evening terrifying accounts were reported from that of Water-Street,” Helmuth recalled, “Experienced physicians had been called to some sick persons, and these found the fever, that had broken out there, of the most dangerous complexion.”²¹⁵ He then concluded his record of the early hours and days of the fever: “From the above mentioned part of Water-street,

²¹³ Helmuth and Erdmann, *A Short Account of the Yellow Fever in Philadelphia, for the Reflecting Christian*, 4.

²¹⁴ Helmuth and Erdmann, 4.

²¹⁵ Helmuth and Erdmann, 4.

sixteen persons had been buried within a few days....”²¹⁶ Sixteen dead and buried in a matter of days shook Helmuth deeply, eliciting a panic unknown in modern America, yet these sixteen corpses only represented the first casualties in a long and deadly siege that would begin to shake the very core of American understandings, both scientific and vernacular, of disease, death, and memorial.

In the months and years preceding 1793, death had never been distant; it was a constant companion to Americans as they navigated the changing physical and cultural landscapes of the young United States. Americans built their lives, and their new country, surrounded by their dead. The American worldview of death emphasized the singular importance of grappling with death, which had proved to be a constant source of both anxiety and inspiration. For many the short span of their lives drove them doggedly onward to secure their happiness and that of their families. Some saw in their own deaths and those of others spiritual release from the pains and struggles of their lot in life, whether professing the staunchest New England Congregationalism or the syncretic Christian/African religions of the enslaved peoples of the South.

Most Americans, while instinctively wary of death, still understood it as necessary process within God’s plan for themselves, seeing within it the natural and divinely ordered system of birth, decay, death, and spiritual rebirth. Sermons commonly meditated on the necessity and goodness of preparing for death. Countless letters swirled throughout the nation drawing people together in grief—and, they hoped, comfort—as condolences created a shared private culture of mourning. On the other hand, the emerging American literary community, taking inspiration from their English and

²¹⁶ Helmuth and Erdmann, *A Short Account of the Yellow Fever in Philadelphia, for the Reflecting Christian*, 6.

continental cousins disseminated various poems, essays, and novels that helped to communicate and foster a shared American literary public culture, which had many facets, not the least among them an emphasis on death, mortal remains, and mortuary landscapes. Writers encouraged their readers to visit places of interment, meditate on the natural boundary of human mortality, and contemplate the nature of death. Such writings substantiated and amplified Americans' own firsthand and direct personal experiences with death and its lingering presence within the churchyards and graveyards all around them. The important relationship between living Americans and their deceased, between mortality and nature, however, would become more and more problematic as the United States grew and Americans sought isolation from both the dead and the primal nature they evinced. The grinning skull and the open grave that had served as emblems of ecological cycles and physically included Americans within the natural world evolved into terrifying symbols of disease and destruction. The first strike on this American worldview of death originated within the medical and scientific communities and their reliance on miasmatic theory, which exacerbated their inability to understand disease vectors and directly pushed them to probe and challenge those very emblems, spaces, and relationships that connected Americans to their dead.

Epidemic diseases and the staggering and rapid death tolls left in their wake taxed the organic relationship people maintained with their physical dead and their understanding of mortality. American communities, in particular urban communities, began to thrive during the nineteenth century and concentrated more and more people within them. The density of life created perfect zones for the communication of highly

infectious and extremely lethal diseases.²¹⁷ The history of city growth in America during this period is incomplete without acknowledging the multiple instances of tragic epidemics cutting down hundreds of people. These were no ordinary sicknesses. One devastating scourge of the early republic—afflicting Philadelphia and other American cities in 1793—came in the form of the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which carried yellow fever and killed thousands.²¹⁸ America, in a grim sign of its maturation, fell victim to numerous and devastating outbreaks in its greatest cities and most populous states. So large was the influence and power of yellow fever on the bodies, minds, and imaginations of Americans that—as noted in the prior chapter—it served as one of the central plot devices within Charles Brockden Brown’s novel *Arthur Mervyn*. Brown chronicled the ghastly conditions of fever-ridden Philadelphia in the fictional pages of *Arthur Mervyn*, channeling the real panic felt by people like the Reverend Helmuth, for whom all aspects of life seemed under violent assault. The reality of the epidemic needed no embellishment or literary license to frighten, with its massive death tolls and its ability to halt activity of any kind within the community.

One famous account of the 1793 epidemic, penned by journalist Mathew Carey, documented its effects: “When people summoned up the resolution to walk abroad, and take the air, the sick cart conveying patients to the hospital, or the hearse carrying the dead to the grave, which were traveling almost the whole of the day soon damped their

²¹⁷ For more information on disease and disease vectors among urban and/or American cities please see these two examples: Elizabeth A Fenn, *Pox Americana : The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); William H McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

²¹⁸ Please see, J. R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires : Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

spirits, and plunged them again into despondency.”²¹⁹ The yellow fever created a malaise that ate away at the very social fabric of Philadelphia. Carey noted, “We cannot be astonished at the frightful scenes that were acted, which seemed to indicate a total dissolution of the bonds of society in the nearest and dearest connexions [sic].”²²⁰ The broad devastation of the disease created a palpable fear, exacerbating the basest elements of human self-preservation and producing terrible scenes of human tragedy. As Carey himself confirmed, “Various instances have occurred, of dead bodies found lying in the streets, of persons who had no house or habitation, and could procure no shelter.”²²¹ For Mathew Carey and others observing the ravages of the disease it must have seemed as though civilization itself was collapsing all around them.

Carey had a flair for the melodramatic in his reporting—he hoped to sell copy—but his observations of the depression, panic, and gloom felt by healthy Philadelphians as they attempted to weather the disease nonetheless illuminate the power of yellow fever to upend day-to-day normality. Yellow fever challenged people’s ability to perform even the most basic daily functions. As Carey recalled of the city in late August, “About this time began the removals from the city, which were for some weeks so general, that almost every hour in the day, carts, waggons [sic], cochees [sic], and chairs were to be seen transporting families and furniture to the country in every direction.”²²² He

²¹⁹ Mathew Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1793), 30.

²²⁰ Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States*, 30.

²²¹ Carey, 32.

²²² Carey, 20–21.

concluded by observing simply, “Mechanics and artists were unemployed; and the streets wore the appearance of gloom and melancholy.”²²³ The fear of contagion and death that gripped Philadelphians—with good reason—upended all social activity, grinding business to a halt in America’s largest and most prosperous city.

The medical community attempted to respond by recommending certain practices while proscribing others. Many of the rules reflected the heightened fear and paranoia experienced by people who did not understand the cause of the contagion or the avenues through which it spread. One recommendation was to mark the homes of those infected, a logical practice that had the unfortunate repercussion of further stigmatizing the sick and condemning those abandoned inside to an agonizing and solitary death.²²⁴ Other recommendations included relocating the sick to a large, well-ventilated hospital, where their clothes and bed linens could be constantly changed and cleaned and their condition effectively monitored.²²⁵ The physicians even stumbled upon a semi-effective preventative by igniting gunpowder.²²⁶ The foul-smelling smoke did little to advance public health but it did repulse the mosquitos that spread yellow fever. Many of these rules emerged out of their bewilderment at the true nature of the disease. Yet Philadelphians were not alone in their confusion as the whole of the collected American

²²³ Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States*, 21.

²²⁴ Benjamin Rush, *An Account of the Biliious Remitting Yellow Fever ... of Philadelphia ... 1793* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1794), 22.

²²⁵ Rush, 22.

²²⁶ Rush, 23–24.

medical community, and even the best and brightest minds of Europe grappled with this complex and deadly mystery.

The confusion caused by yellow fever extended to forbidding traditional behaviors and customs that had little to do with public health, including practices traditional to the way Americans experienced death, mourning, and burial. As increasing numbers of people began to sicken and die, the relationship with death that Americans had previously maintained was slowly transformed into a driver of contagion. One rule promulgated by the College was the cessation of the tolling of church bells for funeral observances.²²⁷ They believed that the peal of the bells placed undue stress on the sick by serving as a constant and audible reminder of the mounting mortality. The College also found fault in public funeral processions and required the use of carriages—hearses—to move the dead to the churchyard; indeed, they concluded that graveside funeral services posed a danger and must be conducted “in as private a manner as possible.”²²⁸ While the idea of limiting possible exposure to yellow fever was noble, it had a significant side effect. It sowed the seeds of the idea that the dead presented an extreme danger and that remains were best disposed of quickly and with little interaction between the bereaved and their deceased. The corpse itself became an object of terror.

With the fear of contagion rising the basic performative functions of burial itself dramatically shifted. Also weakening the ability of Philadelphians to carry out fundamental and traditional funerary customs was the stark reality that there were too many corpses and too few people willing to bury them. “The dread of this disorder soon

²²⁷ Rush, *An Account of the Bilious Remitting Yellow Fever...*, 22.

²²⁸ Rush, 22.

became so great, that it was impossible to find carriers of the dead,” the Reverend Helmuth recalls, “as the numbers of those who had carried at first such as had died with this disorder, were infected thereby and fell sick; it therefore became necessary to make use of carriages.”²²⁹ Old and familiar practices, which had brought life and the death together and illustrated to the living their place in God’s natural system, became dangerous activities worthy of intense suspicion or prohibition during the height of the epidemic. These emergency responses presaged a permanent shift in mentality and practice within mere decades.

Justus Helmuth also reflected upon the disheartening decline in funeral observances. “The number of attendants at a funeral was greatly diminished, everybody retired at the approach of a herse [*sic*];” he then concluded sadly, “Windows and doors were shut as they passed. Frequently nobody but the driver of the herse [*sic*] or chair shafts and the inviter accompanied a coffin, which hundreds would have followed at other times.”²³⁰ Where there had once been crowds at funeral processions, now only the driver and the sexton—or inviter—attended. Helmuth experienced this shift keenly as a prominent and active Lutheran minister who had presided over hundreds if not thousands of funerals. Neglected were mortuary ceremonies that both consoled and educated Americans regarding the nature of their bodies and the limits placed upon them, and gone was the personal touch mourners, with the exception of St. Michael’s sexton, who continued to hand each corpse into its coffin no matter the cause of death. Few people

²²⁹ Helmuth and Erdmann, *A Short Account of the Yellow Fever in Philadelphia, for the Reflecting Christian*, 29.

²³⁰ Helmuth and Erdmann, 29.

were behaving similarly.²³¹ Instead, fearing contagion in any form, most shunned all physical contact with corpses, which they had in calmer times so intimately prepared for transportation and burial.

With Philadelphians avoiding the dead and their interment, the sheer number of people in need of burial turned the most basic mourning customs on their head. In less trying times, the funeral and burial—like today—took place almost exclusively during the day. The prodigious amount of deaths due to yellow fever, however, forced funerals and burials to slip into the gloom of night, a change not lost upon Reverend Helmuth. “It was impossible for usual gravediggers, to make from twenty to twenty six graves in a day.” Helmuth continued, “it became in several instances therefore necessary to take the night to it. Melancholy for all and dreadful for many, as these scenes were in the streets of the city.”²³² Despite his concern over night burials, Helmuth’s approach to mortality was still emblematic of the American worldview of death. He purported to feel a strange, though familiar kind of peace presiding over nighttime funerals. He remembered, “Yet, (to the praise of my gracious Redeemer I record it) this nightly silence among the tombs, when I was waiting for funerals, and wandering, quite alone, among the newly raised hills, was sometimes sweetly solemn.”²³³ Helmuth’s sweet solemnity had a simple source that he artfully explained later. “Ye, who were present at such nightly funerals, every hour of your life remember the grave.”²³⁴ While in the midst of chaos and death, Helmuth

²³¹ Helmuth and Erdmann, *A Short Account of the Yellow Fever in Philadelphia, for the Reflecting Christian*, 29.

²³² Helmuth and Erdmann, 30.

²³³ Helmuth and Erdmann, 30.

²³⁴ Helmuth and Erdmann, 30.

still articulated the importance of accepting the inevitability of death, a fundamental pillar of early national American death ideology. His parishioners' thoughts, while harder to discern, most likely did not take so magnanimous a view of the cascading corpses that surrounded them as the epidemic continued. Though a temporary measure necessitated by the epidemic, night funerals ate away at common traditions and practices and fashioned death and dying into an ever more terrible and trying occurrence, helping to inaugurate a new relationship with mortality that would emerge over the course of the nineteenth century.

Journalist Mathew Carey captured other strange and troubling shifts in long familiar mortuary practices, even among the well-to-do.²³⁵ Carey drew attention to the unusual conveyance of the body via carriage and the lack of relations or friends journeying alongside the corpse. During the crisis all corpses became objects worthy of fear better avoided than mourned. Such fear extended even to the living. He remembers, "A person with a crape, or any appearance of mourning, was shunned like a viper."²³⁶ Not only had the dead earned approbation as yellow fever stalked Philadelphia, but so too did those who mourned their passing in the traditional fashion.

As the summer pressed on Philadelphians continued to die, and finding able bodied people willing to administer to and bury the dead proved increasingly difficult. This dilemma led to a dramatic overturning of early republic social mores that saw African Americans thrust into a newfound position of importance.²³⁷ With dead bodies

²³⁵ Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States*, 29.

²³⁶ Carey, 29–30.

²³⁷ This type of phenomenon has been discussed previously, though, at a later date (1853) and in a very different geographic location (New Orleans) that presents marked differences to the case in Philadelphia.

mounting and in need of burial—and with church sextons overwhelmed and succumbing to disease themselves—a public plea went out to the African-American community to take over this important but presently dangerous custom. As Absalom Jones, a leading Philadelphia-based African-American clergyman observed in a pamphlet he published in 1794, “the mortality increasing, the difficulty of getting a corpse taken away, was such, that few were willing to do it, [even] when offered great rewards. The black people were looked to.”²³⁸ Suddenly, African Americans found themselves responsible for moving the bodies of deceased whites to their final resting places, completely overturning traditional social practices in which families handled these duties.

While necessity drove the employment of African Americans in duties formerly carried out by close intimates and their congregation, it was not the only reason for the change. Some believed that African Americans, through their genetic roots in the African continent, possessed an innate resistance to yellow fever.²³⁹ They speculated that the hotter and wetter climatic conditions of equatorial Africa shielded African Americans from the worst depredations of tropical diseases. Journalist Mathew Carey perpetuated this myth in his widely circulated chronicle of the disease. In it, he cited a report by a South Carolina doctor asserting the supposed resistance of African Americans to the

Furthermore, the argument put forward by Ari Kelman revolves around the challenging race relations present within the city of New Orleans. Please consult, Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), chap. 3 "The Necropolis of the South".

²³⁸ Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793: And a Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown upon Them in Some Late Publications* (Philadelphia: London: Printed for the authors. Reprinted, and sold by Darton and Harvey, 1794), 4.

²³⁹ For more on this argument please refer to: Valencius, *The Health of the Country*.

disease. Carey dismissed the claim in the end, but maintained that African Americans recovered from yellow fever more quickly than whites.²⁴⁰ The Reverend Absalom Jones argued to the contrary, convincingly pointing to the grievous mortality that also visited the African Americans of Philadelphia. “In 1792, there were 67 of our color buried, and in 1793 it amounted to 305.” Jones concluded, “thus the burials among us increased more than fourfold,” and asked, “was not this in a great degree the effects of the services of the unjustly vilified black people”?²⁴¹ The disease nonetheless reinforced a sense of African American otherness and foreshadowed the outsourcing of funerary responsibilities fast approaching in the nineteenth century.

No matter who bore the corpses for burial, the prevailing reality created by yellow fever in Philadelphia was fear, fear which was so strong that it bled past the borders of the city itself. The countryside surrounding the city watched with trepidation as the carriages and travelers streamed out of Philadelphia. The suspicion of these rural Pennsylvanians had merit, as the disease did strike their communities, killing with no less efficiency. The Reverend Helmuth commented on the situation. He recalls, “Nearly one third left the city; some of these carried the infection along with them; sickened in the country, and were brought back to us dead.”²⁴² Author Charles Brockden Brown brought—as cited in the previous chapter—this fearful scenario to life within the pages of his novel *Arthur Mervyn* when protagonist Arthur returns to the countryside after a time

²⁴⁰ Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States*, 78–79.

²⁴¹ Jones and Allen, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793*, 13.

²⁴² Helmuth and Erdmann, *A Short Account of the Yellow Fever in Philadelphia, for the Reflecting Christian*, 31.

in fever ridden Philadelphia and faces the burial of one friend while presiding over another.²⁴³

The panic felt in Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania countryside touched off a firestorm of concern among other states that struggled with the disease as well, though at nowhere near the level of the 1793 outbreak. The early republic was a nation of letter writers and emerging newspapers, and firsthand and secondhand accounts of the evolving situation in Philadelphia circulated widely. The paranoia spread even further along the channels of national and international trade, as boats plied up and down the coast and goods moved along emerging turnpikes and toll roads knitting the young nation together. The subject of these letters and communications tended to highlight the worst and most terrible moments of human sadness and agony created by yellow fever. Not-yet-afflicted localities sought to isolate themselves from anything coming out of Philadelphia.²⁴⁴ Throughout American communities, suspicion and recrimination—alongside church declared days of fasting—became the norm, as these places attempted to stave off the contagion, no matter the social customs it upended.

Mathew Carey’s reporting sheds light on the state-spanning actions taken in the aftermath of this disease outbreak. Coach travel was among the first things to come under scrutiny. Concerning coaches out of Philadelphia Carey recalled, “Specifying that the disorder had extended to Trenton, Princeton, Woodbridge, and Elizabethtown, on the post road to New York, directed, that notice should be sent to the owners of the stages not to

²⁴³ Brown, *Arthur Mervyn: Or the Memoirs of the Year 1793*, 1889, vol. 2, chap. 30.

²⁴⁴ Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States*, 37.

allow them to pass through the town.” Carey concluded, “In consequence of these resolves, the Eastern shore line of stages was stopt [sic] in the course of a few days.”²⁴⁵ As ground travel halted, state and city authorities also moved to disrupt any chance of seaborne transmission of the disease. The method employed by cities such as Boston, Massachusetts and Alexandria, Virginia was a forced quarantine between 15 and 30 days of any vessels arriving from Philadelphia.²⁴⁶ Some cities even went so far as to authorize city watches to guard against any entry, clandestine or otherwise, of either goods or people from Philadelphia, illustrating the level of fear and suspicion they were experiencing.²⁴⁷ Yellow fever presented one of the first nationwide moments of disease anxiety and provoked questions about how to effectively combat infectious disease.

The power of this epidemic, and countless others that followed it, dogged the living, so much so that as the eighteenth century shifted into the nineteenth century, American communities—mirroring the steps taken in Philadelphia—organized boards of health with the express purpose of combatting particularly virulent and infectious diseases. Scientists, naturalists, spiritual leaders, and lay observers debated the form these contagions took, and soon reports began to emerge from all corners of the new republic. Much of the work performed by these boards of health relied heavily on observation, both their own and those of medical colleagues, from within their own communities and

²⁴⁵ Carey, *A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, Lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: With a Statement of the Proceedings That Took Place on the Subject in Different Parts of the United States*, 37–38.

²⁴⁶ Carey, 48–51.

²⁴⁷ Carey, 41.

beyond. The key question that emerged from most early republic medical debates was whether the origin of the disease was local or imported, contagious or confined.²⁴⁸

The celebrated American patriot and medical man Dr. Benjamin Rush exemplified the uncertainty between local origin or importation in an August 24, 1793, letter to Dr. Hutchinson, a Philadelphia based colleague. Dr. Rush wrote, “A malignant fever has lately appeared in our city, originating I believe from some damaged coffee, which putrefied on a wharf near Arch-street.” Rush continued, “This fever was confined for a while to Water-street, between Race and Arch-streets; but I have lately met with it in Second-street, and in Kensington; whether propagated by contagion, or by the original exhalation I cannot tell.”²⁴⁹ Dr. Rush believed that the disease itself had a natural and discernible source—damaged coffee beans. But he had no explanation for how it continued to spread and infect more people, and this lack of clarity fostered expedient solutions with unintended consequences for the nature of death.

Dr. Hutchinson and others continued to wrestle with the disease, but the consensus these Philadelphia doctors arrived upon was similar to Dr. Rush’s initial observation of local origination. As Dr. Hutchinson noted in his reply to Dr. Rush, “It does not appear to be an imported disease; for I have heard of no foreigners or sailors that have been hitherto infected; nor has it been found in any lodging houses.” Hutchinson concluded that the disease was, “on the contrary, principally confined to the inhabitants

²⁴⁸ J. H Powell, *Bring out Your Dead: The Great Plague of Yellow Fever in Philadelphia in 1793* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); J. Worth Estes and Billy G Smith, *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic* (Canton, MA: Science History Publications, 1997); Simon Finger, *The Contagious City: The Politics of Public Health in Early Philadelphia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 120–62.

²⁴⁹ Rush, *An Account of the Biliious Remitting Yellow Fever ... of Philadelphia ... 1793*, 17.

of Water-street, and such as have done business, or had considerable intercourse, with that part of the city.”²⁵⁰ The opinions of men such as Dr. Hutchinson served to further the argument in favor of some sort of local origin connected to the wharfs and docks of Philadelphia, despite other claims to the contrary, including Mathew Carey, who presciently questioned the timing of the disease and its possible connection to the arrival of refugees fleeing from the Haitian Revolution. Yet, observations similar to those of Drs. Hutchinson and Rush emerged from the American medical community and were further supported by the leading theories from continental Europe and Great Britain. American medical minds and the public who followed their guidance associated the worst contagious diseases with local conditions that produced the most foul and repellent smells.

Deriving their understanding of contagious diseases from direct observation, medical practitioners believed that the worse the smell, the more deleterious effects it had. This miasmatic theory served the American medical community as the catchall explanation for the origin of the numerous and deadly diseases that plagued cities and towns. Miasma theory does not seem entirely inappropriate or backwards at first, tapping into a visceral and instinctual human sensory reaction to get away from particularly offensive smells. It follows logically that if an object smells horrible it is likely unhealthy and perhaps injurious. And tracing a particular disease to an offensive odor allowed for quick—albeit most times ineffective—solutions. Clean up the area and the miasma dissipates, and so too does the disease, they hoped.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ Rush, *An Account of the Bilious Remitting Yellow Fever...*, 20.

²⁵¹ Thomas Apel, *Feverish Bodies, Enlightened Minds: Science and the Yellow Fever Controversy in the Early American Republic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), chap. 1 "Context and Causes".

The actual characteristics of miasma continually occupied the imagination of the American medical and lay communities. During the 1793 epidemic, Dr. Rush describes the origins of miasma as quite variable. “It is no new thing for the effluvia of putrid vegetables to cause malignant fever,” he wrote. “Cabbage, onions, black pepper, and even the mild potatoe [*sic*], when in a state of putrefaction, have all been the remote causes of malignant fevers.”²⁵² Once established, common sense indicated that avoiding the dangerous area would safeguard a person from contracting the “malignant fever.” Yet the propensity of these diseases to spread throughout the city regardless of the miasma’s original location, convinced the medical community that the danger drifted for miles. Dr. Rush claimed, “morbid exhalations, it is well known, produce fevers at the distance of two and three miles, where they are not opposed by houses, woods, or a hilly country.”²⁵³ Compare Rush’s argument from 1793 with that of a New York Board of Health member in 1822. Of the yellow fever he claimed, “though the circle of infected atmosphere, or poison, or whatever it be that produces yellow fever, gradually enlarges itself in all directions around its original source its malignity is in no way abated.”²⁵⁴ In each case, though, there was less than scientific clarity about the actual root of the problem. From Rush’s indictment of decaying vegetables to the much broader claims of the New York Board of Health, medical understanding of contagious diseases relied mostly on observational guesswork.

²⁵² Rush, *An Account of the Biliious Remitting Yellow Fever...*, 25.

²⁵³ Rush, 25.

²⁵⁴ Board Health, *A History of the Proceedings of the Board of Health, of the City of New-York, in the Summer and Fall of 1822*, 195.

The New York Board of Health in 1822, for example, delivered a pointed critique of the state of knowledge concerning miasma and fevers. “The difference in opinion among medical men, on the subject of importation, domestic origin, and contagiousness of the yellow fever, has been the cause of serious evils to the city,” the Board concluded. This uncertainty “has so far prevented the advance of knowledge, as to the true nature and proper treatment of the disease, as to make it appear that the faculty in this city are as deficient in this important particular, as they were twenty years ago.”²⁵⁵ This pointed observation illustrates the confusing inconsistency guiding medical professionals in tracing the origins and spread of potential miasmas and the diseases they supposedly effected in the young nation.

No matter the genuine confusion or perceived common sense that linked deadly odors and disease, miasma theories tapped into a powerful worldview that saw living bodies and the nature that surrounded them as extremely influential on one another, for good and ill. In the early republic the body was regarded not as a closed off and distinct from the natural world around it, but instead as permeable and immersed in the environs it occupied. This holistic vision led whites to believe, for example, that their physical makeup did not allow them to labor and survive in the hot and humid summers of the American South. Scientists and naturalists alike surmised and argued that this perceived white weakness towards tropical diseases and climates was traceable to their origin—in white minds—in the colder and more northerly climates of Europe.²⁵⁶ Similarly, it was

²⁵⁵ Board of Health, *A History of the Proceedings of the Board of Health, of the City of New-York, in the Summer and Fall of 1822*, 6.

²⁵⁶ For more on this fascinating ideology and its effects please see: Valencius, *The Health of the Country*; Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies*.

this holistic health view that propped up the mistaken belief that African and African Americans thrived under the harsh conditions of American slavery due to their ancestors', or their own personal, equatorial heritage. Miasmatic theory represented just one facet of a much larger and entrenched ideology that placed human bodies and health within the larger ecosystem that surrounded them.

The holistic vision that early republic Americans subscribed to supported their relationship with the dead. Death and decay represented the final steps for the physical human body and constituted a universal and entirely natural process, which their souls left behind as they ascended to the afterlife. Just as nature in the form of climate seemed to determine white Americans' ability to endure the semi-tropical conditions of the American South, so too was nature infused in Americans' understanding of death. Nowhere did nature more clearly breach the boundaries of the body than in the burial and decomposition of the dead. Conceptions of miasma and of the nature of death clearly reflected the larger proto-ecological view held by most Americans in the early republic. Despite their rapacious consumption of natural resources, Americans all realized they existed within and not apart from the natural world and disease and death served as poignant reminders of the power of nature.

Because miasma theory reflected this holistic and environmental ideology, it is unsurprising that the solution to miasma and its diseases centered on altering the environment to eliminate the cause of the smell. In response, medical minds in America and abroad advocated programs of cleanliness and sanitation. If disease appeared within a town or city, it most likely originated within some neglected and baleful smelling area that merited cleaning, many reasoned. Yet cleaning up America's cities during the early

republic presented a nearly herculean task.²⁵⁷ While the sanitation crusade of the closing decades of the nineteenth century remained in the distant future, many voices did argue for the betterment of human health by regular cleaning and greater attention to refuse and waste disposal.²⁵⁸

A chief target for miasma theorists was decay or putrefaction. As we have seen, Dr. Rush in 1793 placed the origin of the yellow fever outbreak in decaying coffee on Philadelphia's wharves.²⁵⁹ The New York Board of Health, likewise, recommended their city combat dangerous smells to fight yellow fever in 1822. "It is further recommended, that the citizens generally cause lime to be thrown in their privies, and also in the gutters in front of their respective houses," they concluded, "and to use every means in their power to remove from their premises every cause of nuisance and infection, and to keep their cellars dry and clean." Echoing Dr. Rush, the New York Board of Health linked the propagation of disease with the unsightly and noxious conditions produced by city privies, damp cellars, and even their own streets.²⁶⁰

Cleanliness, temporary or permanent, emerged as an effective rallying cry in the fight against miasmas and disease during the early republic. By embracing the crusade against noxious smells, the deplorable state of basic levels of sanitation—declining

²⁵⁷ For a comprehensive view of just how challenging a task cleaning up American cities presented please see: Martin V Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, Creating the North American Landscape (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

²⁵⁸ For more on the topic of cleanliness in American culture both within the early American history and beyond please see, Kathleen M Brown, *Foul Bodies* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2011); Suellen M Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), chap. 1 "Dreadfully Dirty"; Melosi, *The Sanitary City*, pt. I "The Age of Miasmas."

²⁵⁹ Rush, *An Account of the Biliious Remitting Yellow Fever ... of Philadelphia ... 1793*, 17.

²⁶⁰ Board of Health, *A History of the Proceedings of the Board of Health, of the City of New-York, in the Summer and Fall of 1822*, 71.

steeply as American cities grew in population—could only be improved, providing an additional benefit to the people. Cleanliness also dominated prescriptions for personal health, and responsibility shifted toward individuals who would shoulder greater blame for the maladies they suffered. One consequence (and perhaps the most insidious) was the stigmatization of and discrimination toward certain groups as personal cleanliness—judged according to standards that some groups and classes did not embrace or lacked the means to meet—was associated with susceptibility to disease. Disease then became a personal fault of the sufferer, which justified further condemnation, neglect, or discrimination.²⁶¹ The New York Board of Health illustrated this during an 1822 outbreak of yellow fever. They observed, “The fears excited by these reports *of the existence of Malignant or Yellow Fever*, were soon dissipated by the fact... [that the fever] was confined to Bancker-street and its immediate vicinity, and its attacks were principally on the black population of that part of the city, together with a few white persons of the most abandoned and dissipated habits.”²⁶² For New Yorkers, skin color and personal habits sometimes borne of poverty blunted the alarm that should have sounded at the sudden and numerous deaths occurring in their city in 1822. But by associating disease with poor hygiene or low standards of cleanliness (as they defined them), officials and their supporters could blame the victims and respond inadequately, allowing personal and public health crises to proliferate.

²⁶¹ For a greater and masterful treatment of this concept please see: Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

²⁶² Board of Health, *A History of the Proceedings of the Board of Health, of the City of New-York, in the Summer and Fall of 1822*, 6.

The simple, inadequate approaches adopted to address the staggering problem of infectious disease during the early republic created groups of human scapegoats; not only were personal habits of the living stigmatized, but so was death itself. Drawing a connection between cadavers and infectious disease struck the medical community as logical. Equipped with the miasmatic theory, American medical professionals drew convincing links between the smell of decomposition and the spread of various and deadly ailments all under the umbrella of malignant or bilious fever. The 1822 Board of Health report, for example, stated this exact connection without any qualifications: “The laws under which the Board of Health act, recognize both importation and domestic origin, . . . and the measures pursued by your honorable body indicate that filthy streets, noisome privies, improper burials, &c. may be the cause of malignant fevers.”²⁶³ What constituted “improper burial” is not explicated by the Board of Health, but what is evident is the very low opinion that medical thinkers had towards traditional burial patterns more generally. The Board equated mortal remains and burial with the garbage heaped in streets or collected in latrines, which required sanitary disposal. The regularity of deadly pathogens that visited American cities almost every summer additionally created an anxious environment that demanded proposed solutions—no matter their efficacy.²⁶⁴ With a frightened population looking for answers, doctors followed their

²⁶³ Board of Health, *A History of the Proceedings of the Board of Health, of the City of New-York, in the Summer and Fall of 1822*, 71.

²⁶⁴ Richard Folwell, *Short History of the Yellow Fever, That Broke out in the City of Philadelphia, in July, 1797: With a List of the Dead; of the Donations for the Relief of the Poor, and a Variety of Other Interesting Particulars*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Richard Folwell, 1798); “Domestic.: Summary of the City Hospital Report.,” *The Evening Fire - Side; or, Literary Miscellany* 1, no.4, September 21, 1805; Henry P. Russell, *An Official Register of the Deaths Which Occured Among the White Population in the City of Savannah, during the Extraordinary Season of Sickness and Mortality Which Prevailed in the Summer and Fall Months of the Year 1820* (Savannah: Henry P. Russell, 1820).

sense of smell and identified what they considered disease-carrying properties in decaying substances. While a small cadre of medical theorists argued for a distinction between decomposing vegetable matter and decaying animal matter in the 1790s, by the opening decades of the nineteenth century they all broadly warned of the fatal danger that these powerful odors represented, no matter the source.²⁶⁵ Tapping into a fearful population and unsure of their own conclusions, doctors fostered a perfect setting for a heightened and concentrated attack on customary mourning and burial practices that helped to undermine and erode the American nature of death, which had its foundations built upon the intimate closeness of the living and the dead through corpse preparation, funeral processions, burial rituals, and the graveyard setting itself.

Powerful and foul odors served as the central concern for miasmatic theory, and any places producing such smells alarmed the public. During the opening decades of the nineteenth century, city and town churchyards, despite their necessity and familiarity, became scenes of apparent grave danger to be avoided or shut down. The fear they felt was experienced locally but also felt internationally, as Americans wished to avoid facing their own version of the half-decayed bodies and unsightly conditions of the Cimetiere des Innocents in Paris, which was closed in the late 1780s.²⁶⁶ The New York Board of Health decided on a like course of action in attempting to combat the yellow fever outbreak that gripped their city in the year 1822. In particular, the Board alighted upon the venerable and prestigious Trinity Church, which stood at the very heart of early New York City, and censured it. The inspectors, tasked with ferreting out any potential sources

²⁶⁵ Rush, *An Account of the Bilious Remitting Yellow Fever ... of Philadelphia ... 1793*, 160–66.

²⁶⁶ Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*, 28–29.

of miasma, found the smell of a well-used graveyard during the summer to be potentially deadly. Concerning Trinity churchyard the Board argued “that the yard of that church is at times, offensive to persons in its vicinity, and that, in the evening especially, the exhalations are such as perhaps are dangerous to the health of the citizens in the immediate neighbourhood.”²⁶⁷ Despite the lack of any real concrete evidence, outside of a general offensiveness (one that must have been common in the pungent early nineteenth-century city), the Board imposed a complete prohibition of any burial during the duration of the disease.

Interestingly, their reasoning did not rely exclusively on smell alone, undercutting the fundamental principle at work within miasma theory. Instead, the Board lamented the congregation of mourners who would visit and participate in a funeral as custom dictated. “As long as the funerals take place in that Church Yard [Trinity], a crowd of persons will be collected very near the infected district,” an inspector wrote, “and, in many cases, not more than fifty feet from the residence of persons who have sickened with Yellow Fever.”²⁶⁸ Here the problem of disease has less to do with actual offensive odors and more with the physical act of burial itself. The Board saw danger in the large group of people who would be potentially exposed to the miasma while attending a burial. From this avoidable exposure, in the minds of the Board, contagion could be spread quickly among the gathered mourners and then spiral out from them as they returned to their homes. The public dynamic of American funerals during the early republic, which was a

²⁶⁷ Board of Health, *A History of the Proceedings of the Board of Health, of the City of New-York, in the Summer and Fall of 1822*, 49–50.

²⁶⁸ Board of Health, *A History of the Proceedings of the Board of Health, of the City of New-York, in the Summer and Fall of 1822*, 50.

central pillar of the direct connection that Americans had to their dead and the nature those bodies and ceremonies represented, now appeared increasingly dangerous during seasons of disease.

The paranoia that drove New Yorkers in 1822 to close Trinity Church to all funerals and interments, while based on shaky evidence, nonetheless reflected the same type of terror that gripped Philadelphians during their struggle with disease in 1793. During those months in 1793 when the epidemic raged, the entire burial process and its mourning rituals, while not prohibited, became a source of great apprehension. This horror Americans felt undermined funeral attendance and caused the dead to become an object of fear in need of private and quick disposal, and that even resulted in mourners being shunned by their neighbors. This shift in behavior caused misgivings in some, but for others it represented progress, so much so that an observer of a later epidemic in Philadelphia argued for even stronger steps that foreshadowed the reaction of both the Board in New York City in 1822 and the nation. “The idle parade of a number of people at burials, ought to have been forbidden, as also the custom of ringing bells.” The author then concluded, “However irreligious it may seem, places of worship ought to have been universally shut up.”²⁶⁹ While those angry proclamations from the 1790s did not take root in Philadelphia, by 1822 the Board of Health in New York appeared to hear that writer loud and clear. The important distinction between these two moments was that late eighteenth-century Philadelphians improvised their avoidance of burial and mourning during epidemics, whereas in New York City during the 1822 epidemic those, proscriptions were now thought-out and had the force of law behind them, dramatically

²⁶⁹ Folwell, *Short History of the Yellow Fever, That Broke out in the City of Philadelphia, in July, 1797*, 12.

undermining the fundamental connection that Americans maintained with their dead and the natural processes evinced through this relationship.

The Board of Health's attempts to arrest the spread of yellow fever in 1822 furthered the growing fear of dead bodies as disease ridden and dangerous. Over three weeks, five New York City churches faced censure by the Board of Health. All of the churches mentioned by the report, including Trinity, had varying amounts of lime spread about their gravesites, from a staggering 192 bushels to a more modest 40. Though only five churches garnered specific mention by name, the report also noted that "some other churches were attended to by the congregations to which they belong."²⁷⁰ Thus some parishioners and church organizations had been convinced of the danger that corpses and burial presented and were proactively changing their own relationship with death.

Considering only the churches named in the report, nearly ten percent of all Manhattan churches faced public scrutiny over the state of their graveyards and burial practices.²⁷¹ When weighed against the reality that not all churches possessed attached burial grounds during this period and that other churches unnamed took similar actions, it seems clear that New Yorkers were increasingly changing their understanding of burial grounds and burial itself. An increasing number felt danger rather than comfort and intimacy associated with the dead, disturbing their older worldview.

Anti-burial activists in other states paralleled the actions of the New York Board of Health. F.D. Allen of Boston, Massachusetts, for example, published in 1823 a work

²⁷⁰ Board of Health, *A History of the Proceedings of the Board of Health, of the City of New-York, in the Summer and Fall of 1822*, 201–3.

²⁷¹ Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library. "Plan von der Stadt New-York." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed June 12, 2018. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-efeb-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

titled *Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture: or, Security for the Living, with Respect and Repose for the Dead*. Allen argued passionately against the practice of burial within city or town limits. Nominally, he wrote in response to the city government of Boston passing a resolution to continue allowing the burial of bodies within the vaults underneath two specific churches.²⁷² A strange mix of disease prevention, superstition, and scientific progress formed the backbone of the argument he put forward. Allen called burials a “retrograde step in the march of science and civilization,” which was “contradicted by medical testimony, general history, and common observation.”²⁷³ This powerful statement posits that traditional burial practices were not only a danger during periods of epidemic but also at all times and in every American city and town. Allen’s argument presents a clear attack on all of those activities, from the cleaning and preparation of corpses to funeral ceremonies and burial itself. Allen thus set himself at odds with the worldview of death that prepared Americans for their own mortality and drew them into the natural world through its processes.

F.D. Allen expanded the contours of his attack through appeals to history. He noted for example that Republican Rome—a compelling model for Americans in the early republic—buried its dead outside of towns and cities along the various roads that connected Rome to its possessions.²⁷⁴ American burial thus contradicted the practices of one of the most advanced and well-respected western civilizations of all time. Allen also informed his readers that there was a long record of early death and illness among

²⁷² F. D. Allen, *Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture: Or, Security for the Living, with Respect and Repose for the Dead* (Boston: Phelps and Farnham, 1823), 5.

²⁷³ Allen, *Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture...*, 6.

²⁷⁴ Allen, *Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture...*, 7.

sextons and gravediggers because of their continued exposure to the “noxious fumes” expelled by the dead. He extended this claim by arguing that proximity to the dead fostered worse diseases than visiting a hospital full of the sick.²⁷⁵ F.D. Allen reflected and advanced the growing desire within middle and upper-class American communities to upend the traditional way that Americans physically interacted with their dead. His arguments, and those of others, drew a direct line between the intimate handling of human remains and premature death, which positioned almost all of the rituals and practices that composed the worldview of death as not just backwards but deadly.

Allen’s *Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture* additionally attacked burial grounds themselves. Drawing on the New York Board of Health’s response to the 1822 epidemic, Allen argued that the Trinity churchyard case was irrefutable proof of the fatal danger that burial grounds presented. He relied extensively on series of letters between himself and Dr. Samuel Akerly of the New York Board of Health. Through Akerly’s words, Allen attempted to drive home the connection between graveyards and the constant diseases that afflicted Americans. In one of the letters Dr. Akerly wondered, “Can the neighborhood of Trinity church-yard be otherwise than the cause of sickening exhalations? Can anyone believe it is healthful and safe to live near such a place?” To his rhetorical questions he answered, “If this evil is not corrected, this cemetery will be injurious to health at all times except in months of frost and hereafter its malignant influence may show itself earlier in the season.”²⁷⁶ Akerly’s argument propelled Allen to propose more than mere remediation of the fetid odors produced by burial spaces during

²⁷⁵ Allen, *Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture...*, 11–12.

²⁷⁶ Allen, *Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture...*, 48.

the warmest summer months. He argued instead that the entire system of interment near human habitation needed to be discarded and rethought. Such solutions directly attacked the personal responsibility and desire of the living to take care of their own dead and to contemplate their own mortality within their local graveyard spaces. “Can anyone believe it is healthful and safe to live near such a place?” Dr. Akerly asked.²⁷⁷ Whether he was correct did not actually matter. Fear and suspicion often trumped facts and evidence, and what led to more anxiety than the silent and invisible killer that was contagious disease?

Evidence contradicting Dr. Akerly, F.D. Allen, and others was not uncommon, even in the documentation gathered by the New York Board of Health. Dr. Akerly himself might have even realized the intellectual shortcomings of their knowledge concerning the origins of pathogens. Despite his claim that graveyards and corpses represented real danger, his conclusion remained infuriatingly vague. “The conclusion must follow, that the atmosphere contaminated by the putrid exhalations from the grave, has at least aggravated the symptoms of the disease, if it has not generated it.” He then wrote with finality, “In either case, it becomes us to correct these sources of corruption, and prevent similar occurrences.”²⁷⁸ Dr. Akerly admitted in this passage that no one really knew how these deadly maladies such as yellow fever actually spread. It appeared to him, however, that graveyards had some role in it and that by changing burial practices and removing burial grounds the problem would end. For Akerly and Allen, this represented a powerful and simple argument with an attainable solution that assuaged fears in an era of fleeting and uncertain life. People were desperate for results. Yet, as

²⁷⁷ Allen, *Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture...*, 48.

²⁷⁸ Allen, *Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture...*, 50.

D.D. Walters of the New York Board of Health noted, though “some ingenious persons did . . . labour hard to prove that the source of mischief was to be found in the burying ground attached to Trinity Church, . . . it is only necessary to state the fact, that the poison which actually did cause the disease, was spreading daily in every direction, from the place of its appearance, for one month before it reached the vicinity of the churchyard.”²⁷⁹ Various medical minds of the early republic did not really understand contagious disease. But burial grounds represented a convenient, seemingly plausible scapegoat, like intemperance, poverty, or even skin color, as authorities struggled to come to grips with their frightening and humbling reality.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the fledgling nation found itself entering into a monumental century. Americans witnessed a changing world that included their independence from Great Britain, the growth of their cities from colonial backwaters into urban centers, and the march of reason, science, and industry. Despite all this, however, Americans continued to bury their dead with the feelings, sentiment, and understanding of the natural world that they had known since the first Europeans arrived in North America. Yet death and burial faced a dramatically changing cultural moment in the United States, and as their cities and towns began to flourish so too did highly infectious, recurring, and seemingly incomprehensible diseases. These diseases undercut people’s confidence and added even more unease to already tenuous lives. As the medical community attempted to understand outbreaks of deadly diseases, such as those that afflicted Philadelphia in 1793, Boston in 1798, and Savannah in 1820 or New York in 1822, they cast about for answers. One answer they found was miasma and the fear of

²⁷⁹ Board of Health, *A History of the Proceedings of the Board of Health, of the City of New-York, in the Summer and Fall of 1822*, 170.

noxious and foul smelling air—something that decomposition always produces. Yet catastrophic disease alone was not enough to overturn and replace the everyday nature that human remains and burial represented. Another catalyst was necessary to push Americans into a completely different relationship with their dead. And that catalyst was something the first half of the nineteenth century would supply almost without end: Immigrants.

CHAPTER VI

PEOPLE OF LOW CHARACTER

In speaking of the influx of foreigners, we have on one or two occasions unintentionally omitted to make the distinction between Popish and Protestant emigrants. But we know not a person in the whole community, who does not cheerfully welcome the latter to our shores.... The Irish Protestants are without exception, enlightened and intelligent; while the Irish Catholics are as generally, ignorant, superstitious, and bigoted.

B.²⁸⁰

We are persuaded that there is nothing, which has operated, and is operating, so unfavorably upon the peace and prosperity of the Union, as the irruption [sic] of these hordes of vicious and ignorant vassals from Great-Britain and Ireland, who pour in upon us like Goths on Rome, diminish the wages of our own hardy and intelligent laborers, degrade their notions of decency and of comfort by the contamination of an example of the most revolting wretchedness and filth, and, like columns of locusts, sweep in clouds over the land, and blast every green spot upon which they settle. The utter and unaspiring ignorance of these people constitutes the chief objection against them; for where ignorance is, there will despotism find tools.

E.S.²⁸¹

In the early 1830s, the American republic was approaching sixty years in existence. In a short span of time, the fledgling nation fought two wars against Great Britain, witnessed the massive expansion of its borders with the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon Bonaparte, and watched nervously as the divisions between free and slave, North and South, hardened into animosity that would explode in deadly fashion in 1861. America was a restless young nation, which drew people from all over Europe in massive numbers during the nineteenth century. Many Americans saw these arrivals as vital to refreshing the country itself and welcomed them. Yet others viewed this seemingly unchecked immigration with fear and hostility. Among those who

²⁸⁰ B., "Papists and the Laws.: An Additional Fact.," *Zion's Herald (1823-1841)*; Boston, May 20, 1835.

²⁸¹ E.S., "Foreign Pauperism in the United States.," *New - England Magazine*, December 1834, 497.

cast a suspicious and antagonistic eye towards immigrants was a man calling himself Brutus, who loudly decried the existence of a “Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States” in his November 1834 article for the *New York Observer and Chronicle*.

The particular target of Brutus’s ire was Irish Catholics. These men and women represented, for Brutus and other anti-Irish voices, an almost sub-human threat to the values and very survival of the United States. “The *two-fold* character of the enemy who is attacking us must be well considered,” Brutus wrote. “Popery is doubly opposed,—civilly and religiously,—to all that is valuable in our free institutions. As a religious system it is the avowed and common enemy of every other religion in the land.”²⁸² Catholicism represented a threat not only to national civil institutions but also to the spiritual soul of the country itself.²⁸³ Brutus began with an unsubtle recommendation: “I have said that we must awake to the reality and extent of the danger, and rouse ourselves to immediate and rigorous action in spreading religious and intellectual cultivation through the land.”²⁸⁴ For Brutus and like-minded Americans, Protestant Christianity—and its domination of the United States—ensured the freedom and success of the nation.

America before the onset of the nineteenth century, despite some conflict, enjoyed at least a loose Protestant consensus and had made strides toward greater religious

²⁸² Brutus, “Miscellaneous.: Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States. No. X.,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* 12, no. 44, November 1, 1834, 176.

²⁸³ This is a significant pairing for while the United States maintained a clear separation of church and state it was nonetheless a deeply religious and spiritual nation—and for many the functioning of the secular government depended on the religious values held by the people who governed it. For many Americans, unchecked immigration of non-desired religious ethnic groups represented a fundamental assault on their very culture necessitating a real and considered response.

²⁸⁴ Brutus, “Miscellaneous.,” 176.

toleration and freedom, as embodied in the new United States Constitution.²⁸⁵ Also critical to fostering a new national identity was the shared understanding that Americans, whether natives or newcomers, had their roots abroad. America was in the year 1800, as it is today, a nation of immigrants built upon sometimes fictive notions of fresh starts and new opportunities.

The Irish were particularly entranced by this vision of America, subjected as they were at home to foreign rule, dwindling economic prospects, and an approaching famine of historic proportions during the 1840s. Yet despite the inspirational ideology that guided Americans and called to the Irish, Americans did not believe that this extended to every immigrant who arrived. One commentator's assertion that Americans gloried in their title as an asylum for the oppressed, for example, was quickly followed by a contradictory statement: "Unless the evil [that is, immigration] be checked it will distend itself until it press like a horrid incubus upon the energies of our high-minded native population."²⁸⁶ Many Americans felt similarly and held complex, if not contradictory, views of what type of immigrant they would welcome. And the judgments that would be passed on whole ethnicities and classes of people reflected dynamic shifts in the cultural and material landscape. As Americans debated the relationship between sanitation, disease, and death, new immigrants generated unique challenges to the familiar, necessary, and natural graveyard, and their burial grounds were perceived as repellent, foreign-dominated spaces, thereby setting the stage for nothing less than an entirely new American relationship with death.

²⁸⁵ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*.

²⁸⁶ E.S., "Foreign Pauperism in the United States," 497.

In 1790, the population of the United States stood around 4 million people, with white immigration before the nineteenth century a steady trickle. Over the course of the next 40 years, the levels of immigration increased, and the population increased exponentially, arriving at nearly 13 million by the year 1830, with complications in light of the status of African Americans within the nation itself.²⁸⁷ While natural increase accounted for a significant portion of the population gains during these opening decades, immigration was also factor. The precise numbers of immigrants who entered the United States before 1819 is challenging to follow, because federal authorities did not document foreign immigration data until that same year. Some statistics are nevertheless available. In the years following 1793 and until the year 1817, immigration into the United States never exceeded 10,000 people and averaged 6,000 annually.²⁸⁸ These numbers, nonetheless represented significant influxes of people in the much less densely populated communities of the early republic.

The newcomers before the 1820s consisted mostly of what could be termed “desirables” to Americans in the early republic. Despite their foreign birth, these immigrants were mostly Protestant Christians who hailed from either Great Britain or the various German-speaking states. Most of these new Americans arrived in possession of useful artisanal skills and easily found productive employment in their adopted home.²⁸⁹ Usefulness emerged as a central concern for American immigration observers. Benjamin Franklin opined upon its importance in his pamphlet, prosaically titled, “Information to

²⁸⁷ “Statistics 1 -- No Title,” *Niles' Weekly Register* 46, no. 1196, August 23, 1834, 425.

²⁸⁸ *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York. One Hundred and Twenty-Second Session. 1899*, (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1899) 967.

²⁸⁹ Edwin G Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11.

Those Who Would Remove to America.” Of the prospective immigrant he wrote, “If he has any useful art, he is welcome; and if he exercises it, and behaves well, he will be respected by all that know him.”²⁹⁰ Franklin also evinced the importance of religion, and stressed the centrality of it to Americans and concluded his entire pamphlet by meditating on its significance. “To this may truly be added, that serious Religion, under its various denominations, is not only tolerated, but respected and practiced,” Franklin opined.²⁹¹

The first wave of immigrants did not undermine any of the core features of mourning and interment—including those rites and practices that best exemplified the centrality of nature to American burial. Caring for the dead began with a brief laying out period of one to three days, to accommodate the weather and the need to inhumate a body quickly before decomposition set in. Most preferred to physically carry the body to its final place of interment, a practice that depended on the convenient—often central—locations of both denominational and non-denominational graveyards. Additionally, public funeral processions presented unique opportunities to draw attention to and reinforce the inevitability of death. Coffin design too was largely uniform among the native-born and the recently arrived, constructed of wood to facilitate and aid in the process of decomposition at the heart of the nature of death. The corporeal remains of friends and family members, while cherished and memorialized via tombstones and through mourning rituals, needed disposal, and the countless microbes and insects contained within the dirt rendered human remains back into their most base elements, fulfilling a powerful and cyclical system of death and growth. The distinction between

²⁹⁰ Benjamin Franklin, *Two Tracts: Information to Those Who Would Remove to America, And, Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America* (London: John Stockdale, 1784), 8.

²⁹¹ Franklin, 24.

the body of a recently arrived British Anglican and a native-born Virginian Methodist mattered little to the worms once the corpse rejoined the earth. Immigrant or otherwise, in the years prior to the rapid escalation of foreign migration in the nineteenth century, the nature of death and the American worldview of mortality that it sustained remained on steady cultural ground.

The graveyards of America's growing towns and cities themselves reflected the uniformity and continuity of cultural practices in the years directly preceding the 1820s. Graveyards accommodated both the native-born population and the smaller waves of immigrants without issue. Take New York—soon to be the most important entrepôt for immigrants into the United States—where the total number of deaths for the years from 1805 until the year 1817 did not exceed 2500 people.²⁹² As a percentage of the population, these numbers did not overly concern or alarm New Yorkers in the 1820s, as indicated by the lack of attention given to the immigrant populations or potter's fields within the Board of Health report for the year 1822. The potter's field primarily served as the public burial grounds within most communities and housed the remains of the poor, the dispossessed, and sometimes the criminal.²⁹³ As a free and public space, it would become a crucial cultural battleground after arrival of the Irish. Yet in the 1820s, this public burial ground did not raise the concern of the members of the Board of Health. The Board noted concisely, "Your assistants beg leave to report, that they have visited the Potter's Field on the eighteenth inst. and found the same in good state."²⁹⁴ While

²⁹² F.U.J., "American Intelligence", *The American Journal of the Medical* 22, no. 43, May 1838, 246.

²⁹³ Thomas Bahde, "The Common Dust of the Potter's Field: New York City and its Bodies Politic, 1800-1860," *Common-Place* 6, no. 4, 2006.

²⁹⁴ Board of Health, *A History of the Proceedings of the Board of Health, of the City of New-York, in the Summer and Fall of 1822*, 52.

numerous churchyards in the city faced censure and temporary closure in the wake of the yellow fever epidemic, the potter's field escaped criticism. In the years and decades prior to the first great waves of immigration, foreign populations did not tax communal graveyards and instead helped to reinforce predominant American cultural practices concerning their dead.

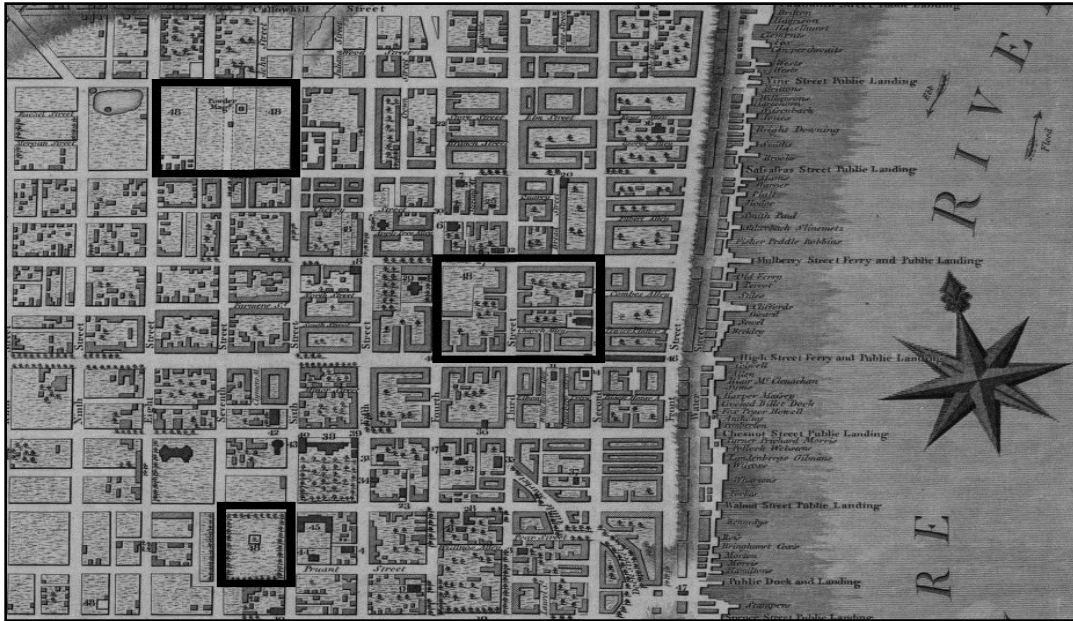


Figure 11. Map of burial grounds (highlighted by black boxes) in Philadelphia in 1796 from “This Plan of Philadelphia and its Environs” (Philadelphia: John Hills, 1796).

Examining the potter's field, the home of the immigrant and poor dead within early national communities illustrates another way that death and nature permeated American culture. Almost all American cities and communities of any size contained a place for public burial (and sometimes execution). Potter's fields—like the more prestigious churchyard burial grounds—usually warranted convenient locations to best facilitate the task of inhumation and decomposition. Maps of numerous American cities and towns during the early republic visually demonstrate the centrality of these public

burial grounds. The preceding map from 1790 (figure 11) captures this curious feature of early republic life within the city of Philadelphia.²⁹⁵

The clean symmetry of Philadelphia's grid setting is fully displayed within this detail of a much larger map of the city and its surrounding area. Commercial wharves line the right side of the image alongside the square outlines of the various homes, businesses, and buildings that occupy the city's center. The map, however, is not solely concerned with the living. The three highlighted areas indicated by dark black boxes mark "burying grounds."²⁹⁶ The middle square, for example, indicates the location of the famous Christ Church burial ground, while the lack of any nearby churches in the other two—top and bottom—indicates that these spaces were unaffiliated public burial grounds. Of particular interest is the location of the southern potter's field, one block south of both the Pennsylvania State House and Philadelphia City Hall. It is also directly west of Philadelphia's lone jail and is the likely resting place of those consigned to death either by execution or by privation.²⁹⁷ The location of this burial ground so close to the civic center of both the city and the state made it a prominent space within the landscape of Philadelphia. The northerly graveyard appears to occupy a less conspicuous position. Closer examination reveals, however, that it was sited within two blocks of the University of Pennsylvania as well as the German Lutheran Free School. This location, so near to these educational institutions and its students, might have provided a sobering

²⁹⁵ John Hills, *This Plan of the City of Philadelphia and Its Environs (Showing the Improved Parts)*, (Philadelphia: John Hills, 1796).

²⁹⁶ John Hills. *This Plan of the City of Philadelphia and Its Environs (Showing the Improved Parts)*.

²⁹⁷ John Hills. *This Plan of the City of Philadelphia and Its Environs (Showing the Improved Parts)*.

lesson to the young minds of Philadelphia.²⁹⁸ Ultimately, the potter's field represented a conspicuous public space suffused with death within cities and communities that were growing denser by the day.

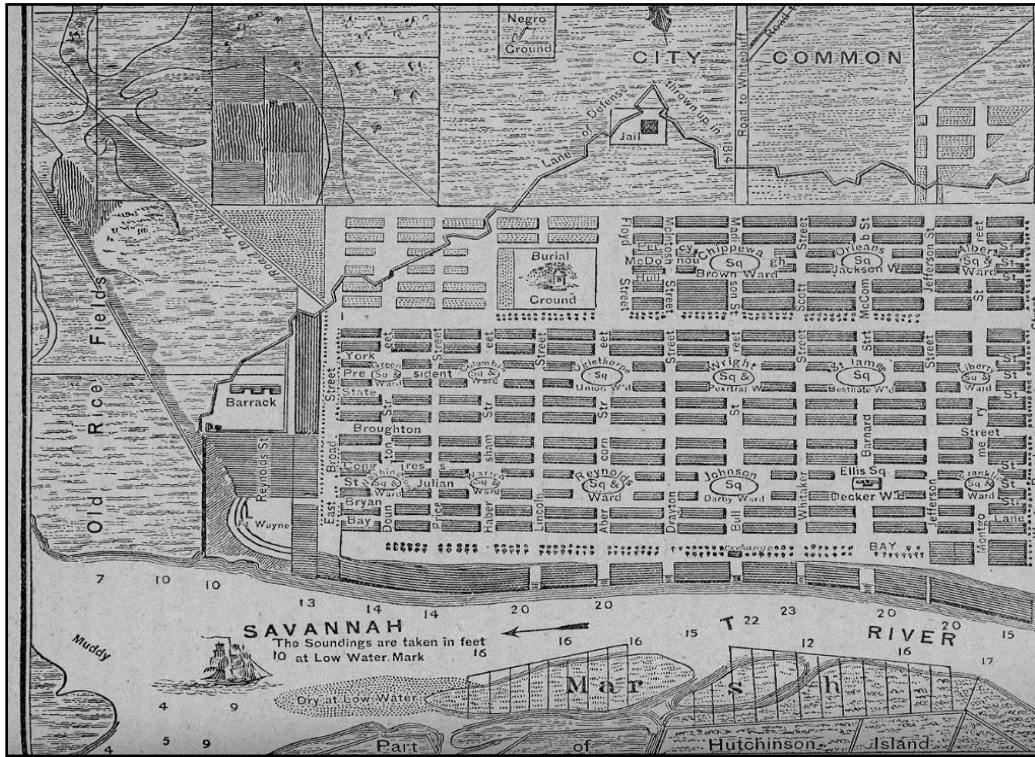


Figure 12. Map of Savannah's central burial ground and African-American burial ground in 1818 from the *Report on the Social Statistics of Cities, Pt. II* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Census Office, 1886).

The highly trafficked areas that often surrounded potter's fields and public burial grounds did not occur only in large northern cities. Southern cities such Savannah, Georgia, paid close attention to the location of their public burial ground. The city of Savannah (figure 12), like Philadelphia, utilized a grid system, as seen in the preceding

²⁹⁸ John Hills. *This Plan of the City of Philadelphia and Its Environs (Showing the Improved Parts)*.

city map from 1818.²⁹⁹ The “Burial Ground,” located centrally and occupying considerable space in the northern part of the city, is prominent. Unattached to any specific denomination or church, it is a public mortuary space knit into the fabric of an American community, surrounded on almost all sides by the living citizens of Savannah.³⁰⁰ In Savannah, as in Philadelphia, public burial grounds were not stigmatized places but instead anchored and served as important cultural landmarks through which the city defined its own space and brought its people face to face with death, decay, and nature.

The 1818 map of Savannah, however, contains another burial ground, located well north of the city. This place of interment expressed the segregation maintained between white Americans and African Americans, in death as in life.³⁰¹ The images utilized by the mapmaker to denote the two locations are strikingly different and embody this tragic juxtaposition. Symbolizing the city burial ground—in the lower center of the image—is a simple but evocative depiction of a leaf-wreathed monument. Contrast that image with the “Negro Ground,” which appears to be an open hole in the earth—in the upper center of the image—ready to receive a body. For the main, whites only graveyard, the mapmaker deploys a quintessentially tranquil mortuary image grounded in familiar natural motifs, here healthy plant life surrounding a tombstone. The African Americans and their burial ground, however, warrant a foreboding hole in the ground devoid of any

²⁹⁹ George Waring, Jr., *Plan of the City & Harbour of Savannah, in Chatham County. State of Georgia. A.D. 1818.*, Report on the Social Statistics of Cities, Pt. II (United States Census Office, 1886), http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/savannah_city_1818.jpg.

³⁰⁰ Waring Jr., “Plan of the City & Harbour of Savannah, in Chatham County. State of Georgia. A.D. 1818.”

³⁰¹ Waring Jr., “Plan of the City & Harbour of Savannah, in Chatham County. State of Georgia. A.D. 1818.”

ornamentation.³⁰² An open grave is no less natural than verdant leaves; however, it encapsulates the stark separation American whites maintained between themselves and African Americans. Perhaps the choice of an open pit to denote the African American burial ground was the mapmaker's statement that their burial was a purely utilitarian concern. Despite these important differences, the actual look and purpose of southern African American burial grounds replicated the normal patterns of white burial grounds. And, in many ways, African American burial grounds served as a segregated "public" burial ground version of northern potter's fields, in both appearance and style. The crucial difference for the American worldview of death was the spatial dynamic these segregated burial grounds introduced. The separation represented by slave burial grounds foreshadowed a growing trend that would mark the evolution of the American worldview of death and challenge the role of nature embodied through it as the republic grew economically and demographically during the nineteenth century. When those dying faced stigmatization as unworthy or undesirable, and their population numbers grew too noticeable, the preeminent solution became to bury them outside of the town or city, which had the additional "benefit" of hiding away the suffering and privation they so ably demonstrated in life. Instead of a lesson to understand or a natural cycle to embrace, the dead—of a particular skin color or class—became a filthy burden in need of disposal and concealment as quickly and as far away as possible.

In the early republic, Americans understood the nature at the heart of decay and had never advocated for anything other than the efficient disposal of human remains before decomposition, but the idea that certain classes or colors of Americans deserved to

³⁰² Waring Jr., "Plan of the City & Harbour of Savannah, in Chatham County. State of Georgia. A.D. 1818."

be hurried off to a remote burial site overturned traditional relationships with American potter's fields and burial grounds. Necessity placed public and denominational burial grounds, proto-green spaces, within the heart of so many American communities, as maps attest. Potter's fields sometimes served an additional purpose, as execution grounds.³⁰³ More than any other spaces but town squares or commons, potter's fields were the early republic equivalent of public parks. When the famous French balloonist Jean Pierre Blanchard visited Philadelphia in 1793 to launch the first aerial balloon flight within the United States—an event attended by George and Martha Washington—the potter's field became the viewing area for the citizens of the city. As one description of the potter's field on the day of the “ascension” noted, “[it] was jammed with spectators.”³⁰⁴ Casual visits, sometimes similarly unrelated to interment, also occurred, as various citizens sought out these public, often quiet spaces. “As I was walking, some weeks ago near the Potter's-field, to the westward of the city, I perceived a funeral approaching it,” one Philadelphian wrote. “I walked onward to the grave which was prepared for the reception of the corpse and awaited their arrival.”³⁰⁵ The author's curiosity alone moved him to participate in the funeral events for an unknown and impoverished fellow American.

Burial in the potter's field thus did not necessarily connote social stigmatization or divide Americans by class in this period. An entry in *The Massachusetts Magazine* from 1792, for example, captured a powerful moment of widespread citizen participation

³⁰³ Bahde, “The Common Dust of the Potter's Field....”

³⁰⁴ LANG SYNE, “Reminiscences of Philadelphia.: Our City.,” *The Register of Pennsylvania (1828-1831); Philadelphia*, January 10, 1829, 23.

³⁰⁵ T, “The Pedestrian, No. 2.,” *Philadelphia Repository and Weekly Register (1800-1805); Philadelphia*, September 12, 1801, 348.

in a potter's field burial following the death of an African American woman named Mrs. Gray. The short description of Mrs. Gray's funeral makes an important point: "The funeral of Mrs. Gray a black woman, was attended to the Potter's Field burying ground, by a large procession of white citizens."³⁰⁶ While Mrs. Gray's body was not buried in a denominational churchyard, her funeral procession to the potter's field was no less public or well attended, even crossing racial lines in this case. To be buried in a potter's field clearly carried with it the social stigma of poverty and dependence, which were inimical to American values, but that did not mean that the physical space of the potter's field was forbidden or dangerous, or that the funeral processes that played out within them were less revered by or moving for the better off as well as the poor.

Public necessity and use of potter's fields fashioned these burial grounds into potent schools upon the nature of death and decay, as strong as any of the other prestigious or denominational graveyards that dotted American communities, and for many Americans the potter's field became an enduring emblem of the finite reality of human life—a powerful and present *memento mori*. Wrapped within that understanding, additionally, was the realization of a person's place within the natural world. The potter's field emerged as a focus of literary sojourns and meditations, and publications throughout the young nation ran pieces that helped crystallize the enduring connection between death and nature at the heart of early republic mortality. As "Julius" opined for the *Religious Remembrancer* in 1817, when passing a defunct potter's field already in the process of being turned into a public square, "there is scarcely a place on this globe, where at some

³⁰⁶ "Domestick Chronicle.: Georgia. South Carolina North Carolina. Virginia. Kentucky. Western Territory. Maryland. Delaware. New Jersey. Pennsylvania. New York. Connecticut. Vermont. Rhode Island. Massachusetts.," *The Massachusetts Magazine; or, Monthly Museum. Containing the Literature, History, Politics, Arts, Manners & Amusements of the Age* 4, no. 7, July 1792, 469.

period or another, some unfortunate being has not suffered or wept.”³⁰⁷ Inspired by this realization, Julius then turned towards the ephemeral quality of life on earth, a key component of the American worldview of death. “Yet man unmindful of these solemn warnings, lays plans for the employment of many years to come . . . , until the grave yawns beneath his feet, and discovers to him the uncertainty of life, and the instability of all earthly pursuits.”³⁰⁸ While Julius’ statement was not explicitly about trees, flowers, soil, or sky, his ruminations revolve around the vastness of the planet and the countless deaths that have touched every single corner of it. Additionally, Julius acknowledges that the “earthly pursuits” that drive his fellow citizens are ultimately subject to the fallibility of their own natural bodies. Such a realization depended on confronting death physically in places like the potter’s field, encouraging a glimpse into the grave “beneath his feet.”³⁰⁹

An anonymous essay in the American literary magazine, *The Knickerbocker*, prompted by an opportune visit to a local potter’s field, similarly brought the dynamic connection between nature and death to the forefront. The author began by prosaically describing the potter’s field: “Four or five rude and ill-shapen excavations, of some three feet depth, were here yawning for their tenants.”³¹⁰ The author here emphasizes the simple and organic quality of the potter’s field graves, their wild and untamed appearance, which could describe an antique excavation, or perhaps an ancient Native

³⁰⁷ Julius, “Letter 1 -- No Title: STANZAS.,” *Religious Remembrancer*, May 31, 1817, 159.

³⁰⁸ Julius, 159.

³⁰⁹ Julius, 159.

³¹⁰ “Article 4 – No Title,” *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 12, no. 4, October 1838, 375.

American burial space. In a rapidly changing and industrializing century, finding these types of spaces and relationships—imaginary or otherwise—took on more urgency as Americans wondered at the direction their lives and nation were taking.

The writer drives home a simple and powerful message about the power of nature grounded within the processes of death and decay. Instead of shifting his thoughts towards the Almighty or other ethereal concepts, his continued description of the potter's field stays firmly planted within the soil. He rhapsodized about the open graves, "In the damp corners of one or two of them, were squatted three or four bright green toads, the 'precious jewels in their heads' sparkling in the falling light and their semi-recumbent bodies bathed in the morning dew. No one can turn from scenes like these, and think lightly of the disposition of the body after death."³¹¹ Woven throughout these sentences are instances of the power and the beauty of the natural world and its processes. The author is enraptured by the natural spectacle in front of him, the "falling light," the "morning dew," and the "bright green toads" with their "recumbent bodies."³¹² The passage, significantly, highlights the power of nature to inspire through the simple, organic, and primal state of the location and the scene.

In seventeenth-century British folklore, toads and frogs were believed to be born from "putrefying" and "corrupt" matter, and it was even thought that baby toads emerged from the burnt ashes of full-grown toads.³¹³ The Knickerbocker writer suggests this connection between toads, death, and life. The writer's reference to the "jewels in their

³¹¹ "Article 4 – No Title," *The Knickerbocker*..., 375.

³¹² "Article 4 – No Title," *The Knickerbocker*..., 375.

³¹³ Edward Topsell et al., *The History of Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents...*, (London: E. Cotes, 1658), 728.

head” might similarly draw on the folk belief that posited the existence of a stone within the toad’s head, which possessed miraculous healing properties and which was sometimes mounted within jewelry to ward off disease.³¹⁴ Clearly, toads represented powerful natural symbols and uncanny powers over sickness and health, death and rebirth. In any event, the writer embraces the natural destruction of bodily remains that perpetuates the creation of the next living organisms and the powers the entire natural cycle. From such writing and their own experiences, Americans understood their world as natural, in a way that enveloped humans, who, like all organisms, died, decayed into the soil, and became nutrients for other living creatures.

Beginning in 1820, as immigration steadily increased, the American population expanded from nearly 9.7 million people to just under 13 million by 1830, a growth of around 33 percent from the population totals of 1820. The U.S. continued to increase in population each decade after 1830 at a rate that oscillated between 32 and 35 percent through 1870.³¹⁵ After 1870, American population growth decreased to between 20 and 25 percent even dropping into the teens over the course of the 20th century. Heightening the sheer scale of immigration between 1820 and 1870, the decrease in numbers in the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries did nothing to stop Americans from targeting and maligning new groups of immigrants arriving primarily from eastern and southern Europe.³¹⁶ This dynamic epoch in American demographic history was unprecedented and transformative, particularly because this growth was fueled substantially by the advent of

³¹⁴ Topsell et al., *The History of Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents...*, 727.

³¹⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970. Bicentennial Edition, Parts 1 & 2* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 8.

³¹⁶ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States...*, 8.

new immigrant groups who were poor and non-Protestant. For many observers these new Irish Catholic arrivals were “undesirable” and threatening, in life and in death.

While immigrants spread throughout the nation, America’s cities and urban areas absorbed much of the human flow. Paramount among those places was the city of New York. In the decades following 1820, New York experienced one of the most explosive periods of population growth in American urban history. New Yorkers witnessed their city changing month by month as more foreigners and rural poor took up residence in their midst. In 1824, the number of immigrant arrivals stood at 4,889. In 1825, the number increased to 7,662. Two years later in 1827, the number rose to 12,602. In 1828, 19,860 people arrived in New York City. Finally, in 1835, the number reached a staggering 52,715.³¹⁷ These massive numbers of people, while not always remaining in New York after arrival, nonetheless occurred at a time when only one American city had a population numbering 100,000 people.³¹⁸ For the people of New York, watching their city exponentially increase in size over the ‘20s, ‘30s, and beyond must have made them wonder if they lived in the same place.³¹⁹ The new arrivals shared very little in common with the previous generation of immigrants, and these differences combined with their sheer numbers presented a distinct problem. Most new arrivals were unabashedly Irish,

³¹⁷ State of New York, *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York. One Hundred and Twenty-Second Session 1899* (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1899), 1094. Statistics at this point are much more accurate as the both the State of New York and the Federal government are recording the numbers of immigrants into New York City.

³¹⁸ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970. Bicentennial Edition, Parts 1 & 2*, 11.

³¹⁹ Charles Lee, “Art. II. Medical Statistics; Comprising a Series of Calculations and Tables, Showing the Mortality in New York, and Its Immediate Causes, during a Period of Sixteen Years. - American Periodicals,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, vol. 19, no. 37, November 1836, 50.

Roman Catholic, and unskilled. In the years from 1821 to 1830, nearly 51,000 Irish arrived in America, and between the years 1831 and 1840 that number leapt to just over 207,000. Finally, from 1841-1850 the number reached nearly 800,000.³²⁰ For native-born, mostly Protestant New Yorkers, their previous cultural homogeneity had vanished.

These new Americans represented a demographic challenge for New York. Where would they live? Where would they work? These types of concerns did not end when they died. And die they did, often and in large numbers, from the horrible conditions they endured trying to survive, which then necessitated their burial in public or Catholic graveyards, taxing these spaces to their limits. Two burial locations in particular became their usual destination, the Catholic graveyard attached to the original St. Patrick's Cathedral in lower Manhattan and the municipal potter's field, which rapidly changed locations during these years to accommodate the increasing numbers of bodies.³²¹ Protestants objected to developments in both burial grounds, with the potter's field sullied by Catholics and St. Patrick's grounds overrun with the corpses of indigents. Further damaging the perception surrounding recently arrived Irish Catholics, they found interment in both places. All of this fueled Protestant New Yorkers fears about the destructive force presented by the Irish culturally, physically, and spiritually.

The numbers of interments spurred on this widespread stigmatization of the Irish by native-born New Yorkers. Between 1805 and 1823, recorded—and reported—burials never exceeded 3500 people, including premature and stillborn deaths.³²² During the

³²⁰ State of New York, *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York. One Hundred and Twenty-Second Session. 1899*, 1096.

³²¹ Bahde, "The Common Dust of the Potter's Field".

³²² F.U.J., "American Intelligence," 247.

1820s as immigration levels began to climb, the corresponding numbers of interments increased apace. In 1824, deaths climbed over 4000 for the first time in New York's history. This proportional increase in mortality continued throughout the decade, reaching over 5000 burials in 1830 until topping out at 7000 deaths in the year 1836 when the data set ends.³²³ Five thousand or even seven thousand burials over the course of a year had a substantial impact, even on a city as large as New York. Five thousand deaths in any given year represented between three and five percent of the entire population of the city or, more starkly, one out of every twenty to thirty people.³²⁴

American communities up and down the eastern seaboard mirrored the trends occurring in New York. A comparison of relative mortality in American and European cities published in 1831 illustrates these similarities. In Baltimore, the report recorded that one out of every thirty-six people perished per year; similarly, in the southern city of Charleston the ratio stood at one out of thirty-five, while the authorities in Boston claimed that one out of every forty-one residents perished in 1831.³²⁵ These cases demonstrate the general increase in deaths occurring throughout various American communities as the population began to climb from both internal reproduction and external immigration. Significantly, among both immigrants and the native-born, adult men and women in their most healthy and productive years, twenty to fifty, died in the largest numbers. In Baltimore in 1825, nearly 500 of the 1500 people who died came

³²³ F.U.J., "American Intelligence," 247. I have purposely omitted two years from the data presented above, as 1832 and 1834 contained outbreaks of cholera, which claimed the lives of 9975 and 8590 people, respectively. While certainly noteworthy, these spikes in mortality do not represent normal circumstances concerning numbers of deaths in New York.

³²⁴ F.U.J., "American Intelligence," 245, 247.

³²⁵ "Probabilities of Life: In Different Places.," *Christian Watchman* 12, no. 16, April 22, 1831, 64.

from that crucial age group.³²⁶ Additionally of concern for Americans was the high rate of infant mortality, with cities such as Boston reporting that one in every three children did not survive to their first birthday.³²⁷ The number of deaths in conjunction with the public style of funerals during the early republic meant there was little chance for Americans to ignore the grim reality that one out of every thirty to forty people, child or adult, man or woman, would not survive the year. Whether neighbor or stranger, human remains traveled to their final resting place in ever increasing numbers. As living populations grew, so too did the dead in need of burial.

The increasing numbers of deaths alone were not enough to challenge the American death worldview; instead, previously mentioned concerns such as the religion, class, and skin color of the people dying attracted new attention. Looking at a snapshot of interments from New York City in 1838 helps illustrate the statistical numbers upending traditional patterns and places of burial. The city inspector reported 8053 burials within the city, and of those 8000 or so deaths, about fifty-two percent, or just under 4200, were either Catholic or buried at public expense within the potter's field. Roman Catholic interments were the largest of all documented burials, standing at 2685.³²⁸ The potter's field, alternatively, handled just over 1500 burials, making it the second most used burial ground for the year.³²⁹ The city inspector, additionally, broke the numbers down even

³²⁶ "Statement of Deaths in the City and Liberties of Philadelphia, for the Year 1825," *The North American Medical and Surgical Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, 478.

³²⁷ "Statement of Deaths in the City and Liberties of Philadelphia, for the Year 1825," 482.

³²⁸ Henry G. Dannel, "Domestic Summary: Annual Interments in the City and County of New York, for the Year 1838: With Accompanying The Interments Were in the Cemeteries Belonging to the Following Denominations From the Returns, It Appears There Died in the Following Places," *The Medical Examiner*, vol. 2, no. 14, 217.

³²⁹ Dannel, "Domestic Summary....," 217.

further and made a case—purposeful or not—that just over 800 of the 1500 potter’s field burials emerged from the almshouses, prisons, and city hospitals.³³⁰

In tabulating New York’s 8053 burials, the city inspector demarcated between foreign born and native-born deaths. Looking at “consumption”—a catch all name for lung diseases, including tuberculosis—the inspector recorded that of the 1,225 fatalities, 665 were native-born, while 539 were recent immigrants.³³¹ The strict categorization of death into various subgroups within the 1838 *Annual Report* that included religion and nativity demonstrated a clear concern on the part of civic authorities in New York to separate New Yorkers from each other. The 1828 yearly report of the same name, interestingly, utilized no such distinctions and instead relied only on sex and skin color.³³² Such a change gestures towards increasing suspicion of immigrants arriving and their impact on the landscape of death within the city.

New York City was not alone in breaking down mortality via nativity. Albany, New York, and Charleston, South Carolina, for example, took the time to note the foreign-born status of the deceased within their communities. In the case of Albany, the city noted that of its 336 deaths in 1832, 108 were Irish, while English immigrants constituted the second largest group at a paltry 15.³³³ Charleston did not specify place of birth—perhaps due to the earlier publication year of the data, 1826—but did note that of

³³⁰ Dannel, “Domestic Summary...,” 217.

³³¹ Dannel, “Domestic Summary...,” 217.

³³² Isaac Warren and Seymour B. Durst, *Annual Report of Deaths in the City & County of N. York, for the Year 1828* (New York: Peter Van Pelt, 1829), 4–13.

³³³ Richmond Telegraph, “Statistics 1--No Title,” *Journal of Health. Conducted by an Association of Physicians* 4, no. 5, January 1833, 152–53.

the 353 deaths within the white population “Foreigners” constituted 91 of the fatalities.³³⁴ In each of these cases, mortality and “foreignness” were enmeshed and emphasized that increased mortality centered on immigrant populations. The numbers presented by the authorities in New York City, Albany, and Charleston did not editorialize or condemn the “foreigners” outright, but instead allowed their readers to pass their own judgments.

For literate Americans reading through these routinely published mortality bills, the numbers must have exacerbated concerns that their cities, and their graveyards, were filling with foreign bodies. Those reports were heavily shaped by native medical practitioners and statisticians cum journalists. An account authored by Dr. Charles Lee and published in 1836, for example, analyzed the relevant statistics and concluded that the high preponderance of immigrants and the poor—or both—among the dead accounted for New York’s elevated levels of mortality during the sixteen years he surveyed. Dr. Lee claimed, “The principal of these is the immense immigration of poor foreigners who annually land in this city, destitute of the comforts and even necessities of life.”³³⁵ Dr. Lee’s observation, while certainly not incorrect or exaggerated, nonetheless stigmatized the already marginalized immigrant and impoverished populations. In what might seem an attempt to increase sympathy for the plight of the immigrants, he instead expands the already significant stain on their group character. “Arriving, as they mostly do, in the spring and summer, instead of going directly into the interior, a large proportion seek the cheapest lodgings, where, huddled together in filth,

³³⁴ “Statement of Deaths in the City and Liberties of Philadelphia, For the Year 1825,” 480.

³³⁵ Lee, “Art. II. Medical Statistics...,” 26.

and destitute of proper nourishment, they perish in large numbers,” he observed.³³⁶ Lee ascribes limited humanity to the deceased and emphasizes their apparent lack of intelligence or commonsense in not moving inland. His comment that they “perish in large numbers” feels more suited to livestock than human beings.³³⁷

Dr. Lee drove his overall argument home with a direct comparison of immigrant burials to those of other religious groups and other years, ultimately consigning the entire problem of New York’s soaring mortality to these marginalized groups.

That a large proportion of the deaths occur among the poor transient population, is evident from the fact that in 1834, of the 971 persons who died of cholera, 361 were buried at the public expense; still a larger ratio in 1832; and out of 5,537 interments in 1830, 1,177 were paupers, and 1,110 buried in the churchyard of St. Patrick’s cathedral, making one-fourth of the whole number, who died in a state of complete destitution.³³⁸

Within this cascade of numbers, Dr. Lee displayed very little concern about why these people might be dying in such large numbers; instead, he stressed only that they were, and worse, that they all represented a certain group completely dependent on the “largesse” of the “public.” Lee’s litany, however, was incomplete until he deployed a damning comparison. “During the year 1834 there were only 67 interments in all the Presbyterian grounds in the city, and but 85 in the Episcopal.”³³⁹ This comparison served only to reinforce the belief that the blame for the soaring mortality and overtaxed burial

³³⁶ Lee, “Art. II. Medical Statistics...,” 26–27.

³³⁷ Lee, “Art. II. Medical Statistics...,” 27.

³³⁸ Lee, “Art. II. Medical Statistics...,” 27.

³³⁹ Lee, “Art. II. Medical Statistics...,” 27.

grounds lay at the feet of the Irish, the Catholic, and the poor. For New Yorkers and other native born Americans, these types of reports—cloaked in the shield of “objective data”—either reinforced their own growing prejudices and fears or planted the seed of those twin problems. The statement of doctors became even more significant when it confirmed what people’s own senses told them; specifically, that St. Patrick’s Cathedral and the potter’s field represented dangerous sites of the intertwined problems of increasing Catholic influence, exploding foreign populations, and soaring poverty. The truth behind these interlaced concerns did not actually matter in the end. The opinions of professionals persuaded many in New York and throughout the states that these foreign bodies and traditions were already permeating their spaces and might overturn nothing less than their entire way of life.

The exponential increase in immigration corresponded with an increasing clamor among health professionals and others about the dangers of interment within city and town limits in light of contagious disease and uncleanness. All throughout America’s largest cities loud calls against the old traditions that bound death and burial to local and familiar churchyards and graveyards were heard. Not the least among those targets were the various potter’s fields and Catholic burial grounds that housed the ever-increasing numbers of destitute and foreign dead. What had once been a powerful tradition that linked people to their local burial grounds, and, in turn, the power and processes of nature, soon became superstitious holdouts of old European Catholic traditions, no matter their actual denomination.

One of the most widely reprinted anti-graveyard accounts in the United States was Dr. Felix Pascalis’ monograph, *An Exposition on the Danger of Interment in Cities*,

which was published in 1823.³⁴⁰ The 1823 publication date is significant, only one year removed from a virulent outbreak of yellow fever that ripped through America's major cities. Moreover, Dr. Pascalis' condemnation of churchyard burial emerged four years after New York's most explosive immigration year to date, 1819, when nearly 19000 immigrants arrived in the city, presaging the sustained growth that would continue over the entirety of the 1820s, '30s, '40s, and '50s.³⁴¹ *An Exposition of the Dangers of Interment in Cities* served as both the basis and the evidence for countless other anti-graveyard advocates throughout the country.³⁴²

The powerful appeal of *Exposition of the Dangers of Interment* centered largely on the fact that he brought together, in English and for the first time, much of the research emerging out of Europe concerning both disease and putrefaction. Pascalis' work depended on anecdotal evidence gathered together by two European thinkers and anti-graveyard burial advocates, Félix Vicq-d'Azyr and Scipione Piattoli. Yet for all the authority Pascalis ascribes to them, their contributions did not go un-criticized. Pascalis

³⁴⁰ Félix Pascalis-Ouvière, M. Félix Vicq-d'Azyr, and Scipione Piattoli, *An Exposition of the Dangers of Interment in Cities: Illustrated by an Account of the Funeral Rites and Customs of the Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, and Primitive Christians, by Ancient and Modern Ecclesiastical Canons, Civil Statutes, and Municipal Regulations, and by Chemical and Physical Principles* (New-York: W. B. Gilley, 1823).

³⁴¹ "Society for the Prevention of Pauperism in the City of New York," *Christian Herald* 7, No. 21, March 3, 1821, 694.

³⁴² For only a few examples of Pascalis's reach see: Felix Pascalis, "Art. XII. An Exposition on the Danger of Interment in Cities; Illustrated by an Account of the Funeral Rites and Customs of Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, and Primitive Christians; by Ancient and Modern Ecclesiastical Canons, Civil Statutes and Municipal Regulations; and by Chemical and Physical Principles. Chiefly From the Works of Vicq D'Azyr, or France, and Prof. Scipione Piattoli, of Modena; with Additions.," *The Philadelphia Journal of the Medical and Physical Sciences* 7, no. 14; Alexander Walsh, "Letter from A. Walsh, Esq; To the New-York Horticultural Society," *The Genesee Farmer and Gardener's Journal* 3, no. 2, 1833; "Arts and Sciences: Minutes of Conversations at Dr. Mitchill's Mortality in New-York City for 1824," *The Minerva; or, Literary, Entertaining, and Scientific Journal: Containing a Variety of Original and Select Articles, Arranged Under the Following Heads: Popular Tales, the Gleaner, the Traveller, the Drama, Biography, Arts and Sciences, Literature, Poetry, Etc.* 2, no. 26, April 2, 1825.

himself even notes, “Those two writers [Vicq-d’Azyr and Piattoli] having written at different periods, and in different languages, they often repeat the same arguments and quote the same authorities.”³⁴³ The anti-interment manuscript that drove the argument in the United States, therefore, emerged from two sources who, without collaboration, nonetheless used the exact same events and quotations more often than not. This argumentation based on limited evidentiary breadth was then repeated in the United States, with the same claims and quotations reemerging, year after year, and decade after decade, even 70 years after its initial publication.³⁴⁴

The analysis of *An Exposition of the Dangers of Interment in Cities*, while ostensibly scientific, often fit the anti-Catholic polemics that suffused the debate against interment within cities. The first half of the work recounts the history of inhumation among various ethnic groups and nations from ancient Jewish traditions to the Roman Empire, alongside the myriad communities that practiced Christianity throughout Europe from the medieval period to Dr. Pascalis’s present. Much of this history lifted up the burial traditions of ancient Western civilizations while disparaging emergent Christian burial traditions.³⁴⁵ Dr. Pascalis laid the blame for church interment on the vanity of bishops and prelates, and on the desire for prestige among the nobility and the wealthy. Once those two groups began burying their dead within the confines of the church, it then spurred on everyone else to emulate their social betters and, they hoped, help their

³⁴³ Pascalis-Ouvière, Vicq-d’Azyr, and Piattoli, *An Exposition of the Dangers of Interment in Cities*, 4.

³⁴⁴ Augustus G. Cobb, *Earth-Burial and Cremation: The History of Earth-Burial with Its Attendant Evils, and the Advantages Offered by Cremation* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1892).

³⁴⁵ Pascalis-Ouvière, Vicq-d’Azyr, and Piattoli, *An Exposition of the Dangers of Interment in Cities*, chaps. III–VI.

chances at salvation. Concerning the shift, Dr. Pascalis argued, “superstitions daily arose that blinded the pious to their danger; and the flattering hope of participating in the merits of the just by being consigned to the dust which had been consecrated by their ashes.” He continued, “and the honour it was to have been judged worthy of this favour, warmed the religious zeal of some, and excited the self-love of others, until the reigning custom was a total breach of the law.”³⁴⁶ Pascalis, whether purposefully or not, painted the Catholic religion and its adherents—inheritors of the traditions of the oldest strain of Christianity—as backwards, ignorant, and ultimately dangerous to progress and enlightened civilization.

Dr. Pascalis’ work had far reaching implications for American death and burial over the course of the nineteenth century, but his work also touched off swift and local changes within the city of New York, presaging the anti-local burial patterns that swept through America’s communities in the ensuing decades. After reviewing Dr. Pascalis’ argument, the civic authorities of New York hastily passed a statute forbidding burial within the city limits.³⁴⁷ The law directly emerged out of the miasma crisis that dogged Trinity Churchyard during the 1822 yellow fever epidemic. The statute, however, only forbade burial within densely populated sections of Manhattan, as the borders of the city experienced a great amount of fluidity throughout the nineteenth century. The new restrictions, while welcomed by many, did spark controversy as various religious

³⁴⁶ Pascalis-Ouvière, Vicq-d’Azyr, and Piattoli, *An Exposition of the Dangers of Interment in Cities*, 37–38.

³⁴⁷ D.D., “Literature: Remarks Addressed to the Honourable Corporation of the City of New-York, on a Work Recently Published in This City, by Dr. Felix Pascalis on the Subject of Interment,” *The Minerva; Or, Literary, Entertaining, and Scientific Journal: Containing a Variety of Original and Select Articles, Arranged Under the Following Heads: Popular Tales, the Gleaner, the Traveller, the Drama, Biography, Arts and Sciences*, *Literature* 2, no. 18, August 9, 1823, 142.

communities within the city rose up in solidarity and sued the municipal government, asking for special leave to bury within plots already owned and controlled by New Yorkers.³⁴⁸ While the administration of the law was fraught with inconsistency, a larger purpose was accomplished, and that was the stigmatization of corpses and burial within the minds of many well to do and middle class residents of the city.

An even more sensationalist work titled *Gatherings from Graveyards* saw publication in 1839. Whereas Pascalis' short work confined its examples to either New York or France, *Gatherings* took a muckraking approach, charting seemingly numberless examples of the most depraved burial grounds within contemporary London. While Americans were already disgusted at the miasmas supposedly emanating from their burial grounds, *Gatherings* provided the visual spectacle of exposed bones, scavenging dogs, and open pits half-full of the still decaying remains of the impoverished dead of London.³⁴⁹ *Gatherings* concluded that at the center of London's macabre predicament were its poorest people. Again, while direct blame never fell on the destitute, the work established that without their presence the problem might cease to exist. From the homegrown New York to the most influential metropolises of Europe, America's cities and communities watched with growing concern as they too experienced rapid growth among both the living and dead. And works akin to *Gatherings* further prompted fearful anxiety about the possibility of half-buried bodies savaged by feral dogs in their own local graveyards. As long-held traditions that reinforced Americans' understanding of

³⁴⁸ "General Summary," *The Cincinnati Literary Gazette* 3, no. 9, 71.

³⁴⁹ George Alfred Walker, *Gatherings from Grave Yards: Particularly Those of London: With a Concise History of the Modes of Interment Among Different Nations, from the Earliest Periods. And a Detail of Dangerous and Fatal Results Produced by the Unwise and Revolting Custom of Inhuming the Dead in the Midst of the Living* (London: Messrs. Longman and Company, 1839), 149–87.

their own place within the natural cycles of life and death came under attack in New York, cities all over the eastern seaboard quickly moved to follow, setting a precedent for the entire nation as it expanded westward.³⁵⁰

As Americans approached midcentury, they had changed from a collection of 4 million or so mostly Protestant souls to a country of nearly 25 million people, many of whom had recently arrived with only the clothes upon their back. While the poverty of these new Americans elicited measures of sympathy, many viewed them with suspicion and anxiety. Particularly troublesome for some native-born Americans, many newcomers practiced a foreign and hated religion, Catholicism, which represented not only a religious threat but also a challenge to the very principles and beliefs that undergirded the country.

American burial practices, like other aspects of American society and culture, became enmeshed in these struggles, particularly as unfortunate immigrants perished in great numbers in American cities. A report from 1832 captures the fear of taint and permeability surrounding immigrants and the poor. It read, “the intemperate it is true, are the most prominent victims, at the breaking out of the disease, but the pestilence in its devastating course, has swept has swept off hundreds and thousands of individuals of regular and correct habits.”³⁵¹ Many Americans saw the bodies of the poor and Catholics as a disturbing window into the problems of social degradation, which they glimpsed everywhere. Fear for one’s life and culture was a great motivator and the clamor—literary, regulatory, legal, or otherwise—to forbid interment within the confines of towns

³⁵⁰ Allen, *Remarks on the Dangers and Duties of Sepulture*.

³⁵¹ “Cholera in New-York City,” *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald*, 6, no. 52, August 1832, 207.

and cities grew ever larger as wealthy and middle-class Americans feared the deleterious effects of overcrowded burial places. A new, secular, and sanitary way forward was not without cost, however, and the traditions and commonsense ideology that drew Americans—no matter their denomination, class, or location—into close and familiar contact with the nature at the core of each human life and death approached midcentury on extremely precarious ground.

CHAPTER VII

HIDDEN FROM MORTAL EYES

Why should we go behind that which we see, and conjure up all the stages of decay, and all the secrets of the closed vault, in order to make death more disgusting and horrible? Why should we exhibit our idea of him as a skeleton form, which is only the result of natural causes that operate upon the inanimate and corruptible flesh? Why should we go behind that which is apparent to us, and search out that which God has kindly veiled from us to make death more terrific?

Reverend Edwin H. Chapin³⁵²

“Twenty years ago, nothing better than a common grave-yard, filled with high grass, and a chance sprinkling of weeds and thistle, was to be found in the Union.”

Andrew Jackson Downing³⁵³

In 1843, the still youthful twenty-nine year old Edwin Hubbell Chapin had already distinguished himself as a minister and a writer. Five years earlier he had assumed responsibility for shepherding the Universalist community of Richmond, Virginia. By 1840, however, he and his small family felt a new calling that drew them first to Charlestown and then to Boston, Massachusetts, where he served as the pastor of the School Street Society Universalists. Chapin lived in Boston for eight years before moving more permanently to New York, where he served as pastor for the Fourth Universalist Society until 1878, only two years before the end of his life in 1880.³⁵⁴ Throughout that time, the Reverend Chapin proved to be a prolific author, publishing numerous sermons, poems, and moral treatises on subjects ranging from the proper role

³⁵² Edwin H. Chapin, “Moral and Religious.: Religious Views of Death. A Sermon,” *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine* 16, no. 7, August 5, 1843, 25.

³⁵³ D. R., “Rural Cemeteries.,” *Southern Cultivator* 9, no. 3 March 1851, 43.

³⁵⁴ Sumner Ellis, *Life of Edwin H. Chapin* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1883), chaps. 6–9.

of young women to the problems facing America's growing cities. But in 1843 his mind reeled with something much more personal and saddening.

In the opening months of his ministry in Boston, the Reverend Chapin lost his beloved first-born son, Edwin Channing Chapin. This singular death rocked him. As his sole biographer wrote, "Like the reed to the sweep of tide, his stout and buoyant heart bowed under the grief."³⁵⁵ The sorrow Chapin felt at the passing of "Little Eddie" did not confine itself solely to his personal life, and instead inspired a fundamental new direction within his spirituality. Again the words of his 1883 biography illuminate: "From this time on there was . . . a tenderer and sweeter strain in his sermons, a more subdued and trustful note in his prayers, than had been heard in them before."³⁵⁶ The grief Chapin felt poured out of him in series of sermons that revolved around and attempted to reconcile his personal sorrow with the hope of Christianity. His biographer eloquently captured this shift, writing, "Directly there came other pathetic and solacing sermons . . . as in the evening sky one star after another comes forth to light the shaded scene."³⁵⁷

During this period of soul-searching Chapin wrote many sermons, including "Religious Views of Death," which asked of himself and his parishioners what the proper role of a burial place should be. He questioned the seeming macabre symbolism etched upon so many gravestones and decried what he viewed as the deplorable, haphazard wildness that marked churchyards. He wondered aloud why anyone should wish to witness the death and decay of a loved one in such a raw and primal way. "Death, so far

³⁵⁵ Ellis, 94.

³⁵⁶ Ellis, 94.

³⁵⁷ Ellis, *Life of Edwin H. Chapin*, 94.

as it is known to us, is cessation of life,” Chapin observed plainly before he posited, “This is all we know of death, and sad as its visitations are, I know not that we should go beyond the hour when the form dear to us was laid in the grave, and rake up all the processes of change and decay that go on in the silent earth, hidden from mortal eyes.”³⁵⁸ For Edwin Chapin, as both minister and man—grieving over the loss of his beloved young son—death, mourning, and burial presented enough difficulty without the reminder of the natural processes that reclaimed all life. Edwin Chapin wished for nothing less than a new and reformed worldview of death. This evolution in ideology, which Edwin Chapin participated in, altered the American landscape of death both physically and spiritually, and in its ultimate desire to soften the characteristics of mortality, to hide its most grim features, it additionally obscured the very real, primal nature that had anchored Americans’ previous embrace of death and decay.

The Reverend Edwin Chapin’s desire to alter the way Americans experienced mortality converged with multiple streams of thought and action occurring throughout the United States. From the scientific community the Reverend Chapin heard a rising clamor against poor sanitation and its role in perpetuating the most virulent and deadly maladies of the era. The medical activists’ crusade for better sanitation, while noble, indulged also in scapegoating that targeted alcohol consumption, particular ethnic groups, and graveyards and the treatment of human remains generally. Social reformers, meanwhile, loudly trumpeted the danger presented by the ever increasing numbers of Irish Catholic immigrants, who brought only poverty and their reviled religion with them and were filling up America’s burial grounds with their toxic dead. The large immigrant population

³⁵⁸ Chapin, “Moral and Religious,” 25.

had few options in housing, forcing them into the most squalid and overcrowded situations and feeding a vicious cycle of poverty, disease, and death. These dire conditions, as well as vicious nativism, supported and sustained the push to reform and rearrange the landscape, including the physical spaces of burial and the process of mourning itself. The fear of overcrowded and noxious smelling potter's fields, Catholic graveyards, and even some middle and upper class burial grounds contributed to a dramatic reorientation of America's landscapes of death. While the Reverend Chapin's evolving view of mourning and burial emerged out of the personal tragedy of his son's death, he exemplified the voices calling for a fundamental realignment in the way Americans interacted with, mourned for, and buried their own dead. Chapin's adopted home of Boston afforded him an unparalleled look at the physical shape this would take and served as a powerful source of inspiration for his own spiritual understanding of mortality. For in the year 1831, on the border between two Boston suburbs—Cambridge and Watertown—Mount Auburn Cemetery opened its gates to the people of Boston and the nation. Mount Auburn signaled the beginning of a new era in death that prioritized sanitation instead of intimacy, cultural “parity” with evolving European sentiments instead of traditional practices, and beauty and comfort instead of unfiltered natural reality. Ironically, the environmental qualities that featured so prominently in older mourning rituals and graveyards were overturned by a new investment in nature, though in a dramatically different aesthetic form.

Mount Auburn Cemetery's major advocates found inspiration both abroad and at home, in the Parisian cemetery, Père Lachaise, and in New Haven, Connecticut's New Burying Ground, now known as the Grove Street Cemetery. Numerous scholars have

investigated, analyzed, and explored the history of these places and their preeminent position as catalysts for the design of Mount Auburn and its later imitators, now collectively called “rural cemeteries.”³⁵⁹ Père Lachaise provided the clearest inspiration for the numerous cemeteries that would appear over the course of the late 1830s, ‘40s, ‘50s, and beyond, particularly in its solution to the problem of overcrowding in charnel houses, burial grounds, and catacombs of Paris, and French fears of noxious fumes and contagions associated with decaying bodies. As one American observer noted in 1839, “The French model has already found copyists at home, and Boston and Philadelphia can now boast of their transatlantic imitations of the celebrated spot which bears the name of the confessor of Louis the Fourteenth.”³⁶⁰

As with so much American history during the early national period, American middle and upper classes looked to Continental Europe and Great Britain for guidance in fashioning their evolving and dynamic culture. As the French medical community began to push against traditional burial patterns and practices, American doctors and reformers readily adopted their positions. As we have seen in Chapter 5, *An Exposition of the Dangers of Interment in Cities* by Dr. Felix Pascalis garnered praise in the United States and influenced thinking on disease, death, and burial grounds. Locally, the major forces behind the creation of Mount Auburn Cemetery was the celebrated physician and professor of medicine and botany at Harvard, Dr. Jacob Bigelow.

³⁵⁹ Ariès, *The hour of Our Death*; Thomas Bender, “The ‘Rural’ Cemetery Movement: Urban Travail and the Appeal of Nature,” *The New England Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (1974): 196–211; Sachs, *Arcadian America*; Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*.

³⁶⁰ J. L. M, “Pere Lachaise:,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 5, no. 11, November 1839, 773. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, pt. IV.

Dr. Bigelow and others were inspired by the aesthetics and physical location of the famed French cemetery. Père Lachaise—and New Haven’s New Burying Ground—represented the first real attempts to carefully plan the landscaping of a burial ground and to remove them from their central locations. These new so-called rural cemeteries would stand in stark contrast to the wild, over-congested, unplanned, and prominently placed traditional graveyards in the U.S. The haphazard rows of sinking headstones, wreathed in grasses and wild plants and shaded by native trees, would be replaced by curvilinear pathways and manicured stretches of grass interrupted by artificial ponds and shrouded by decorative trees and plants. Burial places that had once been spontaneous and governed by necessity now evolved into consciously executed landscapes designed to evoke a pastoral “organicism” through their artifice.³⁶¹

An 1833 description of the New Burying Ground in New Haven helps capture this dramatic evolution. “The cemetery, itself, seems perfectly rural; for few houses are near it, and they are screened from view by umbrageous trees. Almost every part of the ground commands an extensive prospect,” the author wrote.³⁶² One of the first and subtle changes that this description demonstrates is the use of the word “cemetery.” Philippe Ariès was the first to argue that this shift in terminology demonstrated a significant tonal change that dovetailed with the emerging desire for a gentler death of the kind that the Reverend Chapin advocated.³⁶³ A closer look into the word itself is useful. The original

³⁶¹ For more specific analysis of rural cemeteries themselves see, Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*; Bender, “The ‘Rural’ Cemetery Movement”; Sachs, *Arcadian America*; Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity*.

³⁶² B. Edwards, “The Burial Ground at New-Haven.,” *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 2, no. 3, September 1833, 202.

³⁶³ Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, pt. IV.

Greek, *koimētérion*—the root of the subsequent Latin and then English word “cemetery”—means dormitory or sleeping place.³⁶⁴ While death had long been associated with the idea of sleep, neither the terms graveyard nor churchyard contains any such allusion or hidden depth; they simply stand for what they are. The use of the word cemetery, then, was a direct attempt to ameliorate the harsh but realistic truths, nature-based or otherwise, evoked through the simple graveyard designation. The dead as eternal sleepers contrasts starkly with the reality of decomposing corpses. The meaning of the word cemetery evolved further over time, so that by the end of the nineteenth century it denoted a burial ground explicitly defined by the characteristic of being detached and separate from any church.³⁶⁵ The author additionally draws attention to the “rural,” secluded, and private feel of the burial ground, in marked contrast to the busy, unkempt, and public style of America’s churchyards, graveyards, and potter’s fields. While understated, the author’s use of the words cemetery and rural to describe New Haven’s New Burying Ground represented calculated choices that repudiated not only the decay and destruction of human remains but also the public and crowded reality of graveyards, two sets of characteristics that brought Americans face to face with the nature of their own bodies.

The author’s full description of the grounds and graves at the New Burying Ground illuminates the physical way these new cemeteries differed from churchyards and began to obscure the primal nature evinced by death with pleasurable vistas. The author

³⁶⁴ OED Online, s.v. “cemetery, n.,” accessed June 2017.
<http://www.oed.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/view/Entry/29562?redirectedFrom=Cemetery>

³⁶⁵ OED Online, s.v. “cemetery, n.”

first commented on the “views” within the Grove Street Cemetery: “the view embraces the picturesque cliffs called West Rock The groves that mantle this eminence hide a part, only, of the crags and precipices of East Rock and on three sides, at least the landscape is such a painter would love to remember.”³⁶⁶ The writer’s choice of the word picturesque—an important aesthetic term—is critical to the shift underway in the American approach to mortality. The concept in aesthetics was first popularized by the Irish philosopher and statesman Edmund Burke in his 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* before being refined by the English artist and cleric, William Gilpin.³⁶⁷ Burke’s first distinction, between the beautiful and sublime, revolves around the difference in both feeling and appearance that the two qualities consist of and evoke within the viewer. The quality of beauty depends on symmetry and smoothness and is solely pleasurable to the observer, while the sublime is irregular, wild, and inspires feelings of awe and even a thrilling terror. Consider, for example, the difference between Michelangelo’s David and New York State’s Niagara Falls. David is beautiful—a perfectly formed vision of the human form constructed of smooth marble—while Niagara Falls is sublime—irregular, loud, chaotic, and physically intimidating. The picturesque complicates these two categories. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as an object or view “suitable for a picture; pleasing and striking in

³⁶⁶ Edwards, “The Burial Ground at New-Haven,.” 202.

³⁶⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: J. Dodsley, 1767); William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty: On Picturesque Travel: And on Sketching Landscape: To Which Is Added a Poem on Landscape Painting* (London: R. Blamire, 1794).

appearance; scenic.”³⁶⁸ William Gilpin emphasized the roughness or ruggedness of the picturesque.³⁶⁹ Both Gilpin and Burke agreed that a chief feature that distinguishes the picturesque from the beautiful is the irregularity that breaks up the smoothness and symmetry of the beautiful, represented for example in the difference between the highly polished and smooth marble of a classic Hellenic monument—the beautiful—and a half ruined Greek temple, embodying in its erosion the work of nature and history.³⁷⁰ The picturesque does not evoke feelings of terror or awe, as in the sublime, but rather stimulates interest and pleasure. In using the word picturesque, the author’s portrait of New Haven’s burying ground rises to status of a landscape painting. It is a place pleasing to the eye and worth remembering or capturing in one’s own memory. In 1833, this was a novel way to view such spaces.

The author found novelty as well in the unique layout of the graves: “[The] Great part of the ground is plotted out in little parallelograms divided by a whitened strip of board fastened low to standing posts.”³⁷¹ Here the author highlighted the conscious design and planning that went into the construction of the actual space, as opposed to the organic and chaotic layout of America’s usual burial grounds. These new domains of the dead, while still full of nature, began to gain cultural capital as carefully designed,

³⁶⁸ OED Online, s.v. "picturesque, adj. and n.", OED Online, accessed June 2017.
<http://www.oed.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/view/Entry/143510?rskey=3pMgjw&result=1&isAdvanced=false>

³⁶⁹ Gilpin, *Three Essays*, 6–7.

³⁷⁰ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 213–14; Gilpin, *Three Essays*, 7.

³⁷¹ Edwards, “The Burial Ground at New-Haven.,” 202.

discrete private spaces that spoke specifically to an aestheticized vision of the natural world.

These new burial grounds also addressed a much more prosaic problem for their advocates; they were isolated from the living. Graveyards had become easy targets, especially in warmer weather, as unpleasant odors signaled dangerous, disease carrying miasmas. Eliminating these miasmas meant removing burying grounds from the central locations they occupied within early republic cities and communities. Unlike these traditional graveyards, the New Burying Ground was more remote and pastoral, with the footways leading to it “chiefly unpaved, and . . . shaded by lofty elms.”³⁷² Such placement combatted fears about perceived airborne contagions while insuring greater peacefulness and privacy—itself an innovation that ran against the traditional public quality of American mortuary customs.

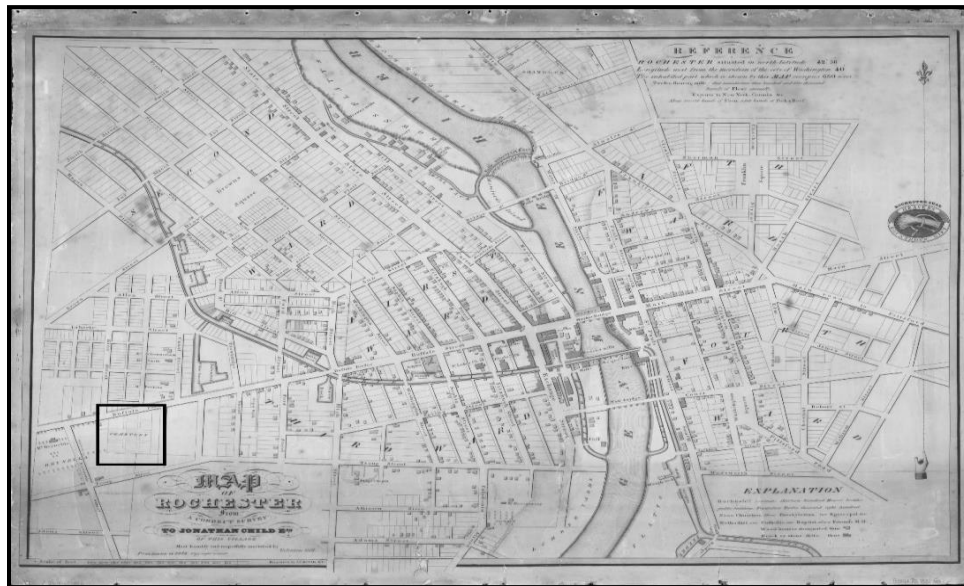


Figure 13. Map of Rochester, New York, and its lone burial ground (indicated by a black square) from a “Map of Rochester from a Correct Survey” (New York: Valentine Gill, 1832).

³⁷² Edwards, “The Burial Ground at New-Haven,,” 201–2.

Numerous maps of cities and towns that emerge out of the 1830s and beyond expose the dramatic movement of these landscapes to the margins of America's communities and the isolation from human mortality these new sites fostered. The maps additionally show that this relocation affected not only non-denominational potter's field but the burial grounds of the most established and prestigious congregations as well. One map (figure 14) that illustrates this transformation comes from the northern city of Rochester, New York in the year 1832, which captures a growing American community of 12,800 people.³⁷³ The majority of the population lived on both sides of the Genesee River with the black squares representing lots, buildings, residences, and other structures. The map also shows that significant swathes of Rochester were unoccupied. The only listed burial ground is found within these unpopulated districts in the southwest corner of the map.³⁷⁴ The "Cemetery," as the map refers to it, presents a clear echo to the secluded and isolated location deemed praiseworthy in the city of New Haven, Connecticut. The positioning of it on the outskirts of Rochester catered to public health advocates and shielded the living from the perceived dangers of miasma so often linked with America's conventional burial grounds. This location, however, also insulated the people of Rochester from death by physically removing the familiar graveyard setting from people's sight. What had once been a ubiquitous feature of every church and town center ceased to exist or faded into unused obscurity. So too did the powerful daily reminders of human mortality that these places exemplified through their regular use and visitation,

³⁷³ Valentine Gill, "Map of Rochester from a Correct Survey," (New York: Valentine Gill, 1832).

³⁷⁴ Gill, "Map of Rochester from a Correct Survey,"

and that directly facilitated a very real and concrete physical understanding of the processes of death, decay and nature.

The shifting of burial spaces to the physical and mental periphery of American life replicated itself all over the eastern seaboard—North, South, city, or village. Planning maps shed light on the way that new or growing settlements built their communities with the burial ground conspicuously placed outside of the most thickly populated regions. One village community in Schuylkill County Pennsylvania, Pottsville, found itself redrawing its borders often throughout the nineteenth century as it acquired new land and increased in geographic size. Surveyors found themselves busy creating maps; one in particular (figure 14) dated to August 1847 exemplifies the new geographic reality of American burying grounds.³⁷⁵

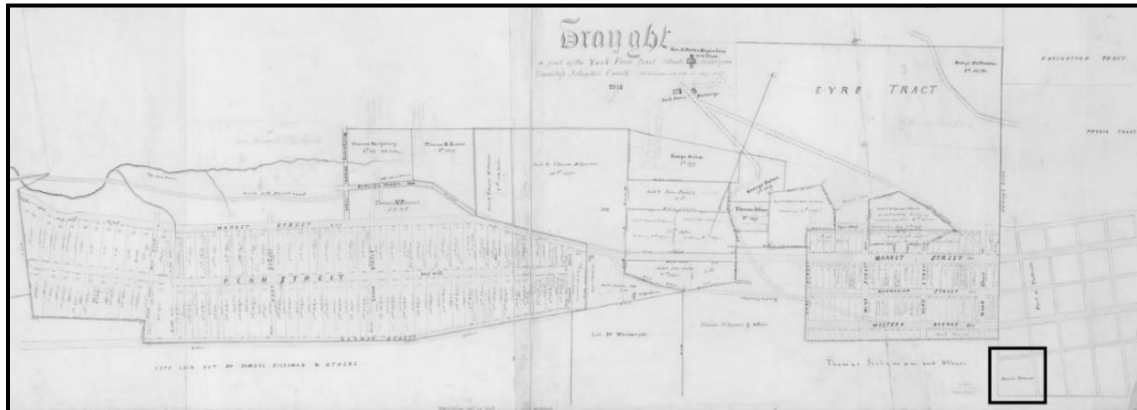


Figure 14. Map of Pottsville's burial ground (indicated by a black square) from a “Draught of a Part of the York Farm Tract Situate in Norwegian Township, Schuylkill County: As Divided into Lots in Aug. 1847” (1847).

The draughtsman’s goal for this map was to indicate the location of the extant lots and roads alongside the new tracts created out of the recently acquired York farm tract.

³⁷⁵ Samuel Lewis, “Draught of a Part of the York Farm Tract Situate in Norwegian Township, Schuylkill County: As Divided into Lots in Aug. 1847,” 1847.

Of particular interest—indicated via the black border—is the location of the sole burying ground in the far eastern and uninhabited part of the Norwegian Township (the village of Pottsville was part of the larger Norwegian township). The map clearly signals the isolated position of the burying ground away from all of the most populated parts of this smaller, rural community. Reinforcing this seclusion, the major road that threads together the two halves of Pottsville, Market Street, does not run along or near the burying ground.³⁷⁶ While the record never mentions miasma, the distant positioning of the burying ground represents how widely accepted the impulse to decentralize and remove burial from the main thoroughfares of community life both spiritually and physically had become.

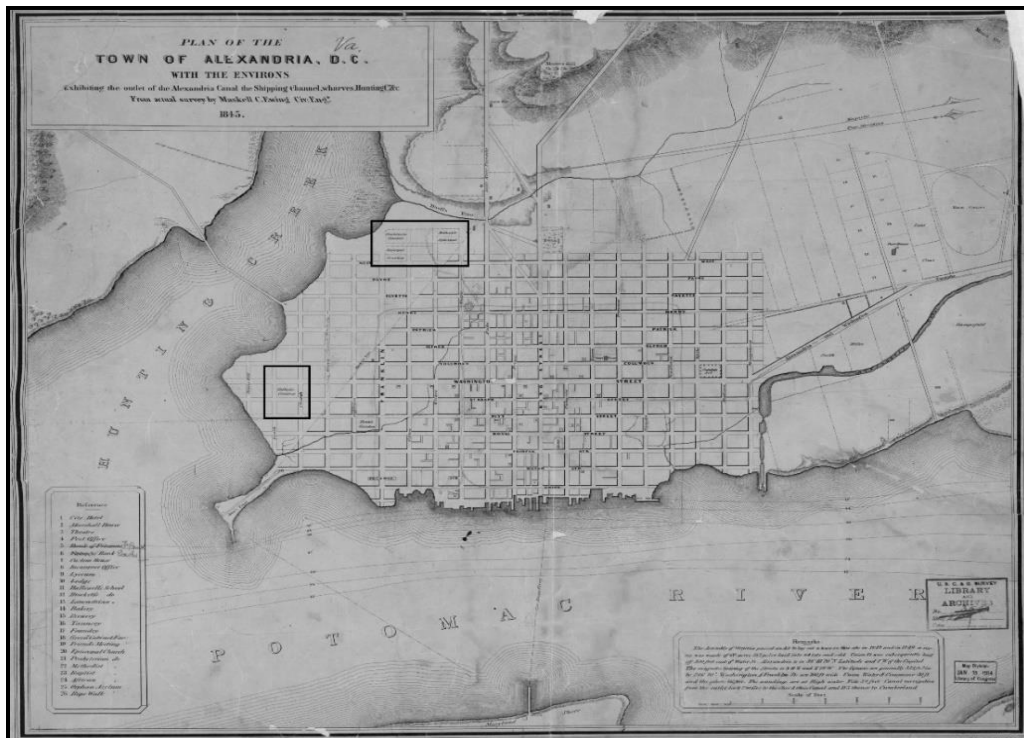


Figure 15. Map of Alexandria depicting its two burial grounds (indicated by black squares) from a “Plan of the Town of Alexandria, D.C. with the Environs” (Philadelphia: T. Sinclair, 1845).

³⁷⁶ Lewis, “Draught of a Part of the York Farm Tract Situate in Norwegian Township....”

As northern cities and towns began to push burial grounds to the margins, their southern counterparts quickly followed suit, as an 1845 snapshot of Alexandria, Virginia reflects (figure 15).³⁷⁷ While Alexandria had officially existed since at least the middle of the eighteenth century, much of it was ceded to the federal government to facilitate the creation and expansion of Washington D.C. In the end, federal authorities returned much of the Alexandria cession back to Virginia, having decided against incorporating the land into the District of Columbia. Civic authorities in 1845, therefore, had the task of reimagining and planning Alexandria.

Beyond creating a navigable grid system of streets and apportioning the land into uniform blocks, the planners of Alexandria understood the necessity of setting aside space for the burial of its citizens. The two black boxes in the western and northwestern portion of the map indicate Alexandria's proposed burial grounds for all their religious denominations.³⁷⁸ Similar to Rochester and Pottsville, each burying grounds' position was outside of the most populous portions of Alexandria.

The Alexandria map exposes additional, hidden information about the banishment of burials to the outskirts of American communities. Initially, the distance between the two planned burying grounds appears of no consequence, but the map helps frame a different story; namely, the separation of the Catholic burial ground in the west from all of Alexandria's Protestant—Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian—denominations to the north.³⁷⁹ Instead of devoting one large section of Alexandria to burial, the planners

³⁷⁷ Maskell C. Ewing, "Plan of the Town of Alexandria, D.C. with the Environs : Exhibiting the Outlet of the Alexandria Canal, the Shipping Channel, Wharves, Hunting Cr. &c.," (Philadelphia: T Sinclair, 1845).

³⁷⁸ Ewing, "Plan of the Town of Alexandria, D.C. with the Environs...."

³⁷⁹ Ewing, "Plan of the Town of Alexandria, D.C. with the Environs..."

elected to create two different burying grounds separated from each other by nearly a mile, serving to heighten the segregation of American Catholics from Protestants. Additionally, the western or Catholic burial ground backed up against Hunting Creek, and the elevation of Hooff's Run provided a natural barrier around the Protestant graveyard so that each location also satisfied the growing demand for picturesque landscaping. Protestant Alexandrians sought not merely to distance themselves physically from Catholics in life but also in death, and they arranged an even greater separation from the African American community, whose burial ground is not even indicated on the map.³⁸⁰

The relocation of American burial to the margins of community life extended to all American citizens, whether rich or poor. After the 1830s, as the immigrant population continued to swell, Americans became more and more disgusted at the prospect of a potter's field in their midst. An 1840 article from New York's *Mirror: A Weekly Gazette of Fine Arts and Literature* captures their outrage. In it, an unnamed reporter voiced the thoughts of many middle and upper class city dwellers. "It is, we are bound to say, a disgusting spectacle, and to speak honestly, disgraceful to the city of New York," argued the reporter. "It is enough at present to repeat, that the management of the Potter's Field is grossly disgraceful, and that the city government is neglectful of all duty in permitting it to continue."³⁸¹ For this journalist, the potter's field—a familiar community marker—had become an eyesore, a repulsive and retrograde space ill-befitting an America on the

³⁸⁰ Ewing, "Plan of the Town of Alexandria, D.C. with the Environs..."

³⁸¹ "Article No. 2 – No Title," *The New-York Mirror: a Weekly Gazette of Fine Arts and Literature* 17, no. 49, May 1840, 391.

rise. City authorities moved quickly and relocated the potter's field, transferring it to more remote Randall's and Ward's Island in the East River.³⁸² These new "potter's islands" represented a fundamental alteration in the landscapes of death in New York City and elsewhere, as civic authorities throughout the nation relocated public burial grounds.

The relocation of the potter's fields erased a vital reminder of the nature of death. An anonymous author from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, writing about the disappearance of the city's potter's fields, claimed, "All that was left to show that once the supposed quietness of the last resting-place was ever on the fated spot, were the remains of a willow tree that moaned and sighed in the biting March wind, and whispered a requiem over the surrounding desolation."³⁸³ The expiring tree here symbolizes the disappearance of nature and death from the daily lives of the living, emblematic of a growing mental distance between the living and the dead and the dynamic physical connection the living had shared with death and nature.

As the ranks of the destitute multiplied throughout the 1830s and beyond, many among America's upper and middle classes consciously moved, both physically and mentally, farther and farther away from these poorer and ethnic elements. Two *New York Daily* journalists demonstrated this spatial and conceptual shift in their chronicle of the lengthy journey they took to reach the new potter's fields. "So we took a Second avenue car, paid twice half a dime and were set down at 'the Red House' in Harlem, crossed the Race Course, held up at the Ferry, was rowed across in open boat ..., was set down at the

³⁸² "New Potter's Field," *New York Daily Times*, March 1854, 4.

³⁸³ "The Old Potter's Field," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, April 1857, 276.

Ward's Island Hospital wharf and told to turn south and push on to the end of the Island if we wished to visit the Potter's Field."³⁸⁴ The language here reads like a tedious travelogue, using multiple modes of transportation and slogging over long distances. The accessibility and local nature of the potter's field was no more. In New York and elsewhere, the middle and upper classes successfully created barriers between themselves and the living poor, and the removal of public burial grounds and the creation of isolated "potter's islands" effectively extended this barrier to include the dead.

From Massachusetts to Georgia a quintessential contradiction was underway. As middle and upper class Americans attempted to build a wall between themselves and the marginalized communities of both the living and dead, they helped upend the traditional nature of death. This marked evolution entailed more than geography. Altering American attitudes towards death and burial also depended upon changing mortuary practices, re-envisioning the very way burial grounds looked, felt, and even smelled. For Americans, Père Lachaise and the New Burying Ground of New Haven crystallized an idea, which developed more fully in two different American cities—Boston and New York. In Boston, as we have seen, Dr. Jacob Bigelow presided over the opening of Mount Auburn Cemetery. Meanwhile in New York, two collections of like-minded entrepreneurs banded together to create separate city cemeteries, each named for their most striking quality, marble. While one style came to dominate the nation—Bigelow's Mount Auburn—both visions nonetheless share many concepts and exemplify the significant changes in the way Americans wished to experience death, mourning, and the natural world.

³⁸⁴ "New-York City," *New York Daily*, August 1855, 3.

New York's twin Marble Cemeteries represented a decidedly sanitary and commercial remedy that distinguished and separated middle and upper class New Yorkers from the denigrated immigrant and Catholic populations.³⁸⁵ These two cemeteries represented fully commercial—not religious or denominational—mortuary enterprises. For those who could afford it, burial within the Marble Cemeteries marked one as a person of wealth, refinement, and modern sensibilities. The popularity of the first New York Marble Cemetery was so great that *The New-York Mirror* was obliged to report on it, observing “its value was so well understood by the wealthiest and most respectable members of the community, that the whole number of vaults was immediately purchased.”³⁸⁶ These cemeteries positioned themselves as graveyards of distinction, whose added benefit for the vault purchaser was seclusion and segregation from the rapidly increasing ranks of the lower classes and immigrants. The Marble Cemeteries signaled the new relationship Americans wished to have with their dead, one that would push them further and further away from the nature of decay and death.

The Marble Cemeteries employed a mode of burial that eroded the dynamic connection between the living, their dead, and the natural environment. *The New-York Mirror* described the new ceremony in 1832. “That the rapidity with which the funeral ceremonies are here conducted... divests them of much of their protracted horror.” He noted, “The procession moves to the spot, and the body is placed in a room, in which

³⁸⁵ These two New York Marble Cemeteries were actually unrelated organizations created at the same time and with the same purposes; therefore, despite their position as two different commercial burial enterprises the similarities between the two render them useful to analyze in conjunction with one another and as indicative of the new types of approaches to burial being employed there.

³⁸⁶ “Article 4 – No Title,” *The New-York Mirror: A Weekly Gazette of Literature and Fine Arts* 9, no. 46, May 19, 1832, 367.

there is nothing loathsome.”³⁸⁷ Here the descriptive language stresses the ease of disposal for the family and argues for an entirely different relationship between living and dead. What had once been a connection that acknowledged and grappled with death in all its facets, whether horrible or hopeful, shifted to one of convenience, comfort, and efficiency. The description continued, “The mourner hears few of those soul-harrowing and lengthened details, which on similar occasions usually make the blood curdle and excruciate the soul. The necessary circumstances are soon performed, and the sleeper is left in his resting place.”³⁸⁸ Burial at the Marble Cemeteries and places like them masked the harsh nature of death and the inevitability of decay for every living creature.

Paramount among the Marble Cemeteries owners’ claims about the superiority of their new burial place was its promotion of sanitation and public health. No longer, they argued, should Americans bury their dead in a confused and jumbled family plot. Instead, each body would be laid within the vault separately, memorialized in marble, which would allow “such friends as were distant at the time of interment, to gaze again on the features of those they love.”³⁸⁹ This idea represented a repudiation of the nature of death that had buttressed the spiritual and physical relationship that New Yorkers—and Americans—maintained with their dead since their first arrival. An 1836 *New-York Mirror* article returned to the idea of preservation. The journalist observed, “We may account for the extraordinary preservation of bodies in these cemeteries, by adverting to the dry soil they occupy, their structure of limestone, etc., and the admirable manner in

³⁸⁷ “Article 4 – No Title,” *The New-York Mirror: A Weekly Gazette of Literature and Fine Arts*, 367.

³⁸⁸ “Article 4 – No Title,” *The New-York Mirror: A Weekly Gazette of Literature and Fine Arts*, 367.

³⁸⁹ “Article 4 – No Title,” *The New-York Mirror: A Weekly Gazette of Literature and Fine Arts*, 367.

which they are built.”³⁹⁰ This stress on arresting decay and preserving the body, which could become its own memorial, was a novel idea. The crypts and vaults of the Marble Cemeteries, as well as those in numerous American rural cemeteries, sought to create not just a new mode of burial but also a new connection between the dead and the living. While the act of communing with the remains of the dead that these vaults supported certainly connected Americans to mortality, such a connection ironically depended upon subordinating a natural process—decay. The Marble Cemeteries’ new aesthetics and mortuary structures and landscapes undermined Americans’ traditional conception of the natural world, which integrated their bodies into nature and its messy trophic dynamics.

The physical landscapes of the Marble Cemeteries also radically departed from the old, familiar churchyards. The passerby could no longer easily engage with the natural landscapes contained within the cemetery, and New York City lost a dynamic environmental space because of this.



Figure 16. A 1910 photograph of one of New York's two marble cemeteries from *The First Marble Cemetery, 1910*. (Photo courtesy of the New York Public Library.)

³⁹⁰ “City of New-York,” *The New-York Mirror: A Weekly Gazette of Literature and the Fine Arts* 14, no. 10, September 3, 1836, 74.

Prominently featured in this 1910 photograph (figure 16) are the walls made of solid stone towering twelve feet above the earth, which shielded the Marble Cemeteries from the rest of Manhattan.³⁹¹ What the image does not show is the ornate and impassable wrought-iron gate that served as the entrance to these spaces. The walls and the gates provided the isolation and exclusivity desired by those seeking to bury their dead within the Marble Cemeteries. This was not a space for uninvited guests.

The photograph also exhibits the cemetery's sterility. This is purposeful, as middle and upper class Americans sought to distinguish themselves from the perceived unhealthy, dangerous, and barbarous conditions of the graveyards of immigrants and the poor. In the unprecedented density of New York City in 1845, a writer for the *Ladies' Garland and Family Wreath*, John Elkinton, complained, "If a grave yard were now filled up as rapidly ... the air closed in like a funnel by numerous buildings, and the sun acting upon it, disease must arise."³⁹² But the owners of the Marble Cemeteries had built their walls and stone tombs without anticipating such a consequence, instead seeing them as the best means of achieving sanitation and modernity. The trustees of the New York City Marble Cemetery wrote, "[the vaults] are constructed of materials which contain the same deodorizing principles, [so that] when hermetically sealed the general local health will not be endangered by interment within."³⁹³ Both statements attest to New Yorkers'

³⁹¹ *The First Marble Cemetery*, 1910, Gelatin Silver Print, 5 3/8 in x 3 1/8 in, 1910, http://collections.mcny.org/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult_VPage&VBID=24UAYWD77RRI&SMLS=1&RW=1280&RH=895.

³⁹² John A. Elkinton, "Discussion of a Lecture on the 'Physical Evils Arising from Interment of the Dead in Cities'", *Ladies' Garland and Family Wreath Embracing Tales, Sketches, Incidents, History, Poetry, Music, etc* 4, no.6, June 1, 1845, 286.

³⁹³ *Report of the Trustees of the New York City Marble Cemetery in Second Street to the Owners of the Vaults*, (New York: James McGee, 1872), 16.

growing fixation with sanitation as a critical concern when burying the dead, which encouraged abandonment of an older, organic appreciation of mortality as a fundamental part of nature and everyday life.

New York's two marble cemeteries were both products and producers of the evolving American death relationship underway in the 1830s and beyond. Yet despite their success with New Yorkers—President James Monroe's mortal remains resided there until their reburial in his native Virginia in 1858—they did not have the same impact on the American imagination as Mount Auburn in Boston, Massachusetts.³⁹⁴ New York City, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Worcester, Massachusetts, and countless communities, villages, towns, and cities across the country soon fashioned their own Mount Auburns.³⁹⁵ Americans embraced the new model cemetery, and increasingly showed disdain for traditional burial spaces. American writer Joseph Holt Ingraham's popular two-volume travelogue, *The South-West*, for example, wrote about older country graveyards: "Most of them crown some bleak hill, or occupy the ill-fenced corners of some barren and treeless common, overrun by cattle, whose preference for the long luxuriant grass, suffered to grow there by a kind of prescriptive right, is matter of general observation."³⁹⁶ Evolving American aesthetic values encouraged the creation of more artificial pastoral spaces, more pleasing grounds that presented softened visions of death, ones that obscured the real, macabre, natural processes occurring beneath the ground. The

³⁹⁴ "Exhumation of the Remains of President James Monroe.," *New York Times*, Jul. 3, 1858, 4.

³⁹⁵ "Art. 4--Rural Cemeteries. North American Review, Vol. 53, Article 4." *The Methodist Quarterly Review* 4, January 1844, 90.

³⁹⁶ Joseph Holt Ingraham, *The South-West* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1835), 1: 150.

desire for burial ground that pleased the senses served as the touchstone for the rapid creation of rural cemeteries.

The visionaries behind Mount Auburn Cemetery were represented in the person of Supreme Court justice Joseph Story at the dedication ceremony in 1831. His address laid bare the many concerns that drove the creation of Mount Auburn. Story began by meditating on the universality of death, but he quickly shifted from that idea to answering the more basic question: why was Mount Auburn necessary? After criticizing the present state of burial grounds and funerary practices, he asked, “Why should we deposit the remains of our friends in loathsome vaults, or beneath the gloomy crypts and cells of our churches...? Why should we measure out a narrow portion of earth for our grave-yards in the midst of our cities, and heap the dead upon each other with a cold calculating parsimony, disturbing their ashes and wounding the sensibilities of the living?”³⁹⁷ He condemned the status quo as unfeeling, unsanitary, and miserly, all themes that he returned to and expanded upon as he continued to address the crowd. “Why should we expose our burying grounds to the broad glare of day, to the unfeeling gaze of the idler, to the noisy press of business, to the discordant shouts of merriment, or to the baleful visitations of the dissolute?”³⁹⁸ Here, Justice Story turned his ire on the public character of burial grounds, arguing against the openness that he purported invited “idlers” and the “dissolute” at the expense of proper mourners and welcome sojourners alike. Justice Story concluded forcefully. “It is painful to reflect, that the cemeteries in our cities,

³⁹⁷ “Mount Auburn Cemetery: Address of Judge Story,” *Mechanics’ Magazine, and Journal of the Mechanics’ Institute* 2, no. 1, July 1833, 46.

³⁹⁸ “Mount Auburn Cemetery,” *Mechanics’ Magazine, and Journal of the Mechanics’ Institute*, 46.

crowded on all sides by overhanging habitations of the living are walled in only to preserve them from violation. And that in our country towns they are left in a sad, neglected state exposed to every sort of intrusion, with scarcely a tree to shelter their barrenness, or a shrub to spread a grateful shade over the new made hillock.”³⁹⁹

Ultimately, Story extolled two critical components of the new American burial ground. The first was that rural cemeteries fostered privacy by removing burial grounds from the public gaze, thereby securing them from any intrusion and additionally preventing the spread of dangerous diseases. Secondly, Story characterized graveyards as of crucial importance in softening the processes of death and mourning by cloaking it in beautiful, carefully maintained and manufactured nature.

In order to create these beautiful spaces, rural cemetery planners relied upon suburbanizing—in the case of urban rural cemeteries—or eliminating burying spaces from the main thoroughfares of community life. This relocation to the suburbs or margins of American communities addressed attendant fears of rising populations, increasing disease outbreaks, and class prejudice. The suburbanization of death freed rural cemeteries from any association with the growing ranks of poorer Americans. One journalist writing in 1836 about improvements to Cincinnati—nine years prior to the establishment of their rural cemetery—articulated his case for a new cemetery by focusing on the perceived ills of city burial grounds. “Who that has his heart in the right place, would be content to lay the body of a relation or friend in the cemetery of a city, amid dust and noise, and the stir of business, if a garden of willows were at hand, where

³⁹⁹ “Mount Auburn Cemetery,” *Mechanics’ Magazine, and Journal of the Mechanics’ Institute*, 46.

seclusion, and trees and flowers, hold their tranquil reign?”⁴⁰⁰ The author deftly positioned the rural cemetery as simple common sense. Who could challenge the logic behind the desire for “seclusion” in contrast to “dust and noise” or trees and flowers holding “tranquil reign” over “the stir of business”?⁴⁰¹ The central value, however, that BD trumpeted the loudest, aligning with the voices of men such as Justice Story, was privacy. The retreat from the older relationship with death deemphasized the highly public style that had marked the previous decades and the notion that all people benefitted from exposure to and participation in mortuary processes was overturned. Death while always personal had become exclusively so. For rural cemetery boosters throughout the nation, places like Philadelphia’s Laurel Hill or Brooklyn’s Green-Wood evinced some of their greatest strengths by functioning outside of city or town cores, safely isolated in the suburbs away from the problems of the city.

While celebrated for their health-preserving role and privacy, the spatial distances that marked rural cemeteries disrupted a key component of traditional religious burial practices. No longer could family or friends physically carry the body in procession to the appointed gravesite; the hearse now became a necessity.⁴⁰² The need for a hearse overturned two key pillars of the worldview that suffused American death. First, Americans no longer needed to, could, or desired to carry their own dead, which undermined a powerful physical ritual that had forced them into intimate contact with human mortality. Second, by outsourcing the transportation of the dead Americans made

⁴⁰⁰ B. D., “Art. III.--Cincinnati: A City Hotel--a City Hall--a Rural Cemetery.,” *The Western Monthly Magazine, and Literary Journal* 5, no. 3, March 1836, 155.

⁴⁰¹ B. D., “Art. III.--Cincinnati: A City Hotel--a City Hall--a Rural Cemetery.,” 155.

⁴⁰² “Funerals,” *The Ariel. A Semimonthly Literary and Miscellaneous Gazette* 3, no. 20, January 1830, 157.

the carriage into an object of prestige and status, pushing directly against the humility and equality inherent in the physicality of carrying the deceased.

The Ariel, a literary journal, chronicled the more distant relationship to the dead that the hearse allowed. While the publication of the piece in 1830 predated the opening of America's rural cemeteries, it nonetheless illustrates two new characteristics of American burial in the mid-nineteenth century and beyond—mental and physical distance. The writer observed wryly, “We were dreadfully shocked in our younger days on inquiring of a hearse-driver, whose corpse he had just delivered at its last resting place, by his replying that he did not know!” The author lamented, “Here we are driven to our long homes by strangers ignorant of our very names, and mourned over by people whom we never saw. What mockery of sorrow!”⁴⁰³ The author's longing for the intimacy of older, traditional ceremonies remains palpable. The familiarity created by carrying the departed to their grave that undergirded Americans' mortality worldview was gone. Families increasingly insulated themselves from the dead and, in turn, weakened their connection to the grim but no less natural truths evinced through death and decay.

The use of the hearse also prioritized wealth over the simple, natural, religious message of traditional burial. Contained within *Spirit of the Times*, a men's interest publication, a writer observed this growing trend. The author explained, “[T]he chief end of man is to be decently buried and attended to the grave by a large number of carriages.”⁴⁰⁴ The language deployed is self-evident: the spiritual significance of death

⁴⁰³ “Funerals,” *The Ariel. A Semimonthly Literary and Miscellaneous Gazette*, 157.

⁴⁰⁴ “A Funeral Pair,” *Spirit of the Times; A Chronicle of the Turf, Agriculture, Field Sports, Literature and the Stage* 18, no. 42, December 1848, 497.

pales in comparison to the display of wealth and prestige. The ever-increasing line of carriages testified to the changing American landscapes of death, which pushed further away from the idea that death embodied a universal and natural leveler. An author called E commented on the natural equality found in death, “I see under the same sod, and within the same narrow enclosure, the haughty and affluent master and his despised menial; the one never boasted of his possessions, the other plumed himself upon his grandeur – now their possessions are equalized!”⁴⁰⁵ Yet the hearse contradicted these entrenched sentiments. Every American still died, but those with means could distinguish and separate themselves from the common lot.

The isolation of rural cemeteries in the suburbs spurred on the adoption of bodily preservation, which weakened Americans’ embrace of decay and additionally strengthened the American desire for a softer more sentimental version of mortality. One of the core precepts of Christian burial revolved around the centrality of corporeal dissolution. As the Book of Genesis declared, “by the sweat of your brow you will eat food until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you will return.”⁴⁰⁶ The imagery is clear: human decay is both necessary, natural, and divinely sanctioned. The dictates of Genesis were so strong within Americans that arresting decay was almost literally a foreign notion. In a unique moment from 1824, Massachusetts General Hospital obtained an Egyptian mummy for study. While the medical scientists’ chronicle mostly focused on the sophistication of Egyptian technique,

⁴⁰⁵ E., “Communicated for The Guardian. The Grave-Yard,” *The Guardian, or Youth's Religious Instructor* 3, no. 3, March 1, 1821, 90.

⁴⁰⁶ Gen. 3:19 (King James Version).

it also commented on the state of embalming and preservation in America before rural cemeteries. “The science of the moderns has never been directed to the preservation of the dead, except for anatomical purposes; of course the practical perfection of the art of embalming does not exist in so high a degree, as among the ancient Egyptians,” read the report.⁴⁰⁷ These doctors confirmed that, prior to rural cemeteries, preservation may have been the norm for the Pharaohs but not themselves. The advent of the rural cemetery, despite its appeals to the natural through its curvilinear pathways, verdant decoration, and tranquil pools, ushered in a whole new series of products and innovations that upended the real nature at work within human bodies as they decayed.

The rarity of preservation before rural cemeteries meant that as the movement gained in popularity many felt compelled to extol the previous connection graveyards fostered between nature and death, humans and mortality. The influential writings of the Scottish horticulturist, landscape gardener, and Protestant John Claudius Loudon are demonstrative. Loudon, born in 1783, perfectly captured the confusion surrounding just what constituted proper burial during this transitional period. For Loudon, the burial of the dead was an integral part of both the natural world and the spiritual realm. Furthermore, Loudon—a major proponent of maintaining “natural” spaces within an increasingly industrializing landscape—felt graveyards served dual religious and physical purposes. It is through this lens that he explained the centrality of unaltered decomposition to human physical well-being. Loudon began by observing a problem: namely, that new methods of burial, including lead or metal coffins, and the use of vaults,

⁴⁰⁷ John Collins Warren, William B. Annin, and George Girdler Smith, *Description of an Egyptian Mummy: Presented to the Massachusetts General Hospital: With an Account of the Operation of Embalming, in Ancient and Modern Times* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, & Co, 1824), 16.

catacombs, or mausoleums, effectively prevented the body, as he eloquently noted, from “its union with the earth.”⁴⁰⁸ Loudon’s conscious use of the word “union” is significant. Union literally means to join two things together; however, it has two additional meanings that highlight Loudon’s emphasis on the importance of natural decomposition. First, union means to unite for the creation of a harmonious concord. Second, it means joining in matrimony.⁴⁰⁹ Loudon’s emphasis upon the “joining” of the physical body with the soil is paramount here. His observation placed bodily remains not just inside the soil to break down, but as an actual part of earth itself. Death becomes a genuine act of union, or even consummation, between two individual parts—man and nature. Earth inhumation was not just expedient for Loudon, but a powerful example of the reunion between humans and the earth that birthed and sustained them.

Loudon’s criticism of preservation techniques continued via an appeal to powerful religious imagery that gave the prior relationship between nature and death the weight of divine authority. The new modes of burial prevented the body from being “mingled with the soil, or, in the evocative language of Scripture, be returned to the dust from which they sprung.”⁴¹⁰ Here Loudon’s Biblical allusion is clear; preventing decomposition and the body’s return to the earth flew directly in the face of Christian theology and cosmology. It is no wonder that he saw anything that challenged decomposition as a

⁴⁰⁸ Loudon, “The Principles of Landscape--Gardening and of Landscape--Architecture Applied to the Laying out of Public Cemeteries and the Improvement of Churchyards; Including Observations on the Working and General Management of Cemeteries and Burial-Grounds ...,” 47.

⁴⁰⁹ *OED Online*, s.v. “Union,” accessed June 2017, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/view/Entry/214678?rskey=jWB0Df&result=2>

⁴¹⁰ Loudon, “The Principles of Landscape--Gardening and of Landscape--Architecture Applied to the Laying out of Public Cemeteries and the Improvement of Churchyards...,” 47.

“danger to the living,” which “cannot be continued much longer in a highly civilized country.”⁴¹¹ Loudon’s rhetorical finale challenged his audience to regard natural decomposition as nothing less than a marker of civilized people—an ironic claim as rural cemeteries created circumstances that evinced the exact opposite idea. Despite his impassioned defense of wooden coffins and decay, the growing number of undertakers and sextons who advertised—in ever-increasing numbers as will be demonstrated—the very products Loudon found so problematic indicates that his warning largely fell on deaf ears. While the grounds of America’s rural cemeteries would champion nature, the celebration was only surface deep, with beautiful flowers and stately trees obscuring the worms, soil, and bacterial nature driving decomposition. Loudon died in 1843, the same year his work on burial was published, making his impassioned defense ever more prescient of the changing times he had witnessed during his life. Loudon and others like him, best represented the older worldview that held decay and the return of corporeal remains to the earth as fundamental to human mortality, an idea that became increasingly repugnant in the age of the rural cemetery and sanitized, sentimentalized, and aestheticized death.

While men like Loudon decried preservation as a critical departure from the previous relationship with decay that had guided Americans, the flood of commercial preservation products during the 1830s, ‘40s, and beyond indicated America’s shifting preferences. An 1856 advertisement in the *Christian Observer* illustrated this: “To avoid burying a departed relative or friend in ice, which is so repugnant to feelings, call and use my Patent CORPSE PRESERVER, in which the bodies may be preserved... [and] may

⁴¹¹ Loudon, “The Principles of Landscape--Gardening and of Landscape--Architecture Applied to the Laying out of Public Cemeteries and the Improvement of Churchyards...,” 47.

be conveyed hundreds of miles.”⁴¹² Preservation blunted the hard organic truths of nature and aligned with the emerging desire for a softer, easier, and more sentimental vision of mortality. Additionally, the advertisement reflected the notion that decay, while natural, was inconvenient because of the greater distances that had to be traversed to reach places like Mount Auburn.⁴¹³ The “corpse preserver” was marketed to the individual consumer, but more significant were the professional undertakers who could purchase the “corpse preserver” and gain commercial advantage by adopting and familiarizing themselves with preservation techniques.⁴¹⁴ Burial technology rapidly evolved to deal with both the physical and spiritual distance that America’s new rural cemeteries fostered, directly challenging the naturalness of decay.

American burial also reexamined the purpose of the coffin. The proliferation of rural cemeteries facilitated new coffin styles whose sole purpose was to separate human remains from the earth. Advertisements from the 1830s and onward chronicled the shift in the American mindset. Two examples, one from Kentucky and one from New York, demonstrate both the characteristics of the change and the breadth of its acceptance. The first advertisement, for Kentucky undertaker Robert F. Hill, prioritized his skillset and his wares.⁴¹⁵ In it, he called attention to the products he offered, most significantly the “lead coffins always on hand.”⁴¹⁶ Their purpose was to insulate the corpse from the earth by

⁴¹² “Advertisement 2--No Title,” *Christian Observer* 35, no. 2, January 1856, 8.

⁴¹³ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*.

⁴¹⁴ “Advertisement 2--No Title,” *Christian Observer* 25, no. 34, August 21, 1846, 136.

⁴¹⁵ “Advertisement 1--No Title,” *Christian Observer* 34, no. 41, October 13, 1855, 163.

⁴¹⁶ “Advertisement 1--No Title,” *Christian Observer*, 163.

holding it in perpetuity and rejecting the notion that human remains should rot and return to the soil. Similarly, an advertisement from the 1850 *New York Evangelist* read, “A.J. CASE.... Undertaker in general.... Interments procured in Green-Wood, Oak Hill, and all other cemeteries in the city and country.... Metallic Air-Tight, Lead and Ice Coffins, and every necessary artifice supplied at the shortest notice.”⁴¹⁷ It’s ironic that A.J. Case mentions the use of his products in conjunction with Brooklyn’s rural cemetery Green-Wood in 1850, for in 1867 Dr. Jacob Bigelow—the major force behind Boston’s rural cemetery—made an impassioned but seemingly futile defense of decay. “On the other hand, when nature is permitted to take its course, when the dead are committed to the earth under the open sky, to become early and peacefully blended with their original dust, no unpleasant associations remain. It would seem as if the forbidding and repulsive conditions which attend on decay were merged and lost in the surrounding harmonies of creation.”⁴¹⁸ Despite, Dr. Bigelow’s belief in the goodness and efficacy of decay, products like those marketed by Hill and Case directly contradicted him. Undertakers increasingly positioned the coffin as tool of preservation that prevented the entrance not merely of the soil but of the very air itself, upending the union of the body and nature through death, indeed working to keep nature itself at bay.

From Richmond, Virginia, to Boston, Massachusetts, newspaper accounts of rural cemeteries reflected this contradictory elevation of aesthetic, healthful nature over the nature of death and decay embodied in the new burial ground. An 1839 article in *The*

⁴¹⁷ “Advertisement 6--No Title,” *New York Evangelist* 21, no. 41, October 1850, 163.

⁴¹⁸ Jacob Bigelow, “On the Burial of the Dead, and Mount Auburn Cemetery,” *Modern Inquiries: Classical, Professional and Miscellaneous* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1867), 132-133.

New-York Mirror mentioned the dead only three times throughout its depiction of the newly opened Green-Wood Cemetery.⁴¹⁹ However, no space was spared in describing the cemetery's verdant scenes, for example in the promise, "you again pass through a variegated landscape of plain, dell, and forest, presenting every description of rural scenery, water views, and more secluded patches and pathways in the green wood."⁴²⁰ The author obscures the reality of decay and death while emphasizing the beautiful and picturesque aesthetics of nature. In describing Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery, *The Southern Christian Literary Messenger* eagerly celebrated how little death and decay were on display. "We would, therefore, have our depositories of the dead made attractive places of resort for the living . . . [that] they may come to consider the last call as one to a more peaceful state of existence."⁴²¹ *The Messenger* thus deemphasized the grim but real nature of death and instead highlighted these places as attractive "resorts" for the living first and burial grounds second.

⁴¹⁹ "Original Local Sketches: The Greenwood Cemetery," *The New-York Mirror: a Weekly Gazette of Literature and the Fine Arts* 17, no. 6, August 1839, 45.

⁴²⁰ "Original Local Sketches: The Greenwood Cemetery," *The New-York Mirror: a Weekly Gazette of Literature and the Fine Arts*, 45.

⁴²¹ "Notices of New Works: Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Holly-Wood Cemetery," *The Southern Literary Messenger; Devoted to Every Department of Literature, and the Fine Arts* 15, no. 8, August 1849, 517.

beautiful monuments and shaded ponds and trees. Each of the smaller drawings contains living onlookers, with one even showing a tourist-laden carriage moving through the grounds. The stylized grounds of America's rural cemeteries served as a therapeutic distraction from death. As America and Americans matured, the middle and upper classes wished to revise both their obligations and their exposure to mortality. The omnipresence of death and its visceral and grim reminders of the short and sometimes futile human experience flew in the face of a nation that believed it was evolving into a cultural force not only equal to but exceeding Europe. Rural cemeteries, additionally, created a space for Americans to pay homage to the dead without embracing all of its most repellent—but natural—features, no matter what its architects believed. A female writer, Mrs. M. E. Doubleday, drew attention to this very irony. Writing in the religious journal the *New York Evangelist*, she noted, “the freshness of the monuments, seemed to make it rather a place for the living than the dead, and I felt more as if I was visiting some pleasure grounds, ornamented with marble monuments, than the land of tombs, the habitations of the departed.”⁴²³ Americans no longer went to the cemetery to think of decay and death. Instead, people went to celebrate the joyous and healthful benefits of a cultivated, gardenlike nature.

Meanwhile, contemporary writings about rural cemeteries expressed an extreme distaste for the old, unkempt, and backwards churchyard. An 1839 essay, describing Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia, compared the old and the new and made a clear case against tradition. “In winding along the paths of our more modern cemeteries, the

⁴²³ M. E. Doubleday, “A Visit to Greenwood Cemetery,” *New York Evangelist* 15, no. 45, November 1844, 180.

observer must be impressed with the better taste that characterises the present period... Formerly, the most disgusting representations of Death were figured on the tombs, and the eye rested with horror, rather than with reverence, on the emblems of the charnel house.”⁴²⁴ Americans no longer wished for the blunt, unadulterated, and often repugnant reality of death to guide their understanding of mortality. In the face of disease, squalor, immigration and the increased levels of mortality, middle and upper-class Americans clamored for softer, more “civilized,” and altogether less grounded versions of the death. The author juxtaposed the macabre, disorganized, and altogether “unpleasant” state of traditional churchyards with the “better taste” of the rural cemetery. The human skull, which had been emblematic of mortality by appealing to the natural limits of life became repugnant, horrific, and frightening.

Another visitor to Laurel Hill mirrored and exceeded these sentiments and positioned traditional graveyards and burial practices as markers of coarseness and vulgarity. “Here the visitor will not be shocked with the mouldering coffin or sunken yawning grave; here the dead will repose amid the beauties of nature, and their memories be associated with the most soothing and most simple emblems of mortality.”⁴²⁵ The anonymous author exclaimed that Americans should feel nothing less than shock at the lack of refinement displayed by the churchyards they had once frequented and meditated within.⁴²⁶ At Laurel Hill, on the other hand, the dead rested “amid the beauties of

⁴²⁴ “The Journal of Belles Lettres.: Rural Cemeteries--Laurel Hill.,” *The Journal of Belles Lettres*, no. 4, July 23, 1839, 1.

⁴²⁵ “Laurel Hill Cemetery.,” *Mechanics’ Magazine, and Journal of the Mechanics’ Institute* 9, no. 1, January 1837, 57.

⁴²⁶ “Laurel Hill Cemetery.,” *Mechanics’ Magazine, and Journal of the Mechanics’ Institute*, 57.

nature.”⁴²⁷ This controlled nature erased the pain of loss exacerbated apparently by the natural process of death and decay.

Mount Auburn, Green-Wood, Laurel Hill, and countless other rural cemeteries, like Père Lachaise before in Paris, advocates hoped, would mark American town and cities with a distinction and a level of sophistication worthy of their new nation. An 1832 essay from the *New York Farmer* noted, “Among the improvements of the present day, few are more deserving of notice and admiration, than the establishment of the *Mount Auburn Garden and Cemetery*, in the vicinity of Boston.”⁴²⁸ The writer wished that New York might imitate the new cemetery in Cambridge. An 1839 letter to *The New-Yorker* similarly asked, “Philadelphia and Boston have their ‘Mount Auburns’, and why should not we?”⁴²⁹

A new approach to death and interment seemed essential to American civilization. As Joseph Ingraham wrote in the *South-West*, “The more refined and cultivated are a people, the more attention they pay to the performance of the last offices for the departed.”⁴³⁰ He argued, “The citizens of the United States will not certainly acknowledge themselves as second to any nation in point of refinement. But look at their cemeteries.”⁴³¹ How could Americans tolerate such deplorable burial grounds? How could Americans show such disdain for the dead by interring them in such poor graves?

⁴²⁷ “Laurel Hill Cemetery,” *Mechanics’ Magazine, and Journal of the Mechanics’ Institute*, 57.

⁴²⁸ Alexander Walsh, “Mount Auburn--Pere La Chaise,” *New York Farmer*, vol. 5, no. 18, May 3, 1832, 170.

⁴²⁹ “Rural Cemetery,” *The New-Yorker* 6, no. 18, January 19, 1839, 286.

⁴³⁰ Ingraham, *The South-West*, 1:150.

⁴³¹ Ingraham, 1:150.

Mount Auburn was a great alternative, which should be imitated: “The Bostonians, in the possession of their lonely and romantic Mount Auburn, have redeemed their character from the almost universal charge of apathy and indifference manifested by their fellow countrymen upon this subject.”⁴³²

Alexander Walsh, a New York City lawyer, seized upon the popularity and prestige that rural cemeteries fostered and presciently predicted that “cemeteries like that of Mt. Auburn, will soon be established in the vicinity of all large cities.” Proudly, Walsh observed the new cemeteries influence abroad: “A very magnificent one has been commenced near London.... In Germany several cemeteries have been projected.”⁴³³ Proclaiming that Mount Auburn served as an inspiration for Europeans was no small thing as Americans hoped to elevate their own national culture to the level of their continental cousins, or to exceed them. At the opening of Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1845, another federal judge, Justice John McLean, directly linked the elevation of American culture to the creation of rural cemeteries. “Americans are constantly stigmatized as a cold, formal, and unfeeling race—as having nothing of the poetry of the world in their existence.” McLean countered, “Mount Auburn, Greenwood, and Laurel Hill, are monuments of our sensibility, that would do honor to an older people, a more poetical race.”⁴³⁴ Americans readily believed in their emerging, superior cultural prowess, and in ever-increasing numbers genteel Americans linked this to the

⁴³² Ingraham, 1:152.

⁴³³ Alexander Walsh, “Letter From A. Walsh, Esq.,” 254.

⁴³⁴ John McLean, “Art. VI.--Address Delivered at the Consecration of the Spring Grove Cemetery, near Cincinnati, August 20th, 1845.,” *The Western Review* 1, no. 1, April 1846, 159.

construction of their own rural cemeteries, which demonstrated their modernity and progress.

As the platitudes heaped upon rural cemeteries increased both at home and abroad, Americans readily embraced these new spaces and the changes to death and mourning they brought about. Yet some observers did wonder if these new spaces lost sight of their true purpose. Many saw that these rural cemeteries, while undeniably picturesque, clean, and indicative of American greatness, fostered a host of new problems. Chief among them was the very aesthetic nature that defined them. An anonymous author wondered, “For what is the main impression which burial-grounds ought to excite?” The answer came in the form of additional questions: “Is it not one of solemnity, one under which the mind, drawn away from external objects contemplates the ground merely as the place of last for the dead? And does the beauty of the ground help this impression, or draw away the mind to the decorations and adjuncts of the place.”⁴³⁵ An inherent contradiction resided within the rural cemetery space. The beauty of Greenwood or Laurel Hill was undeniable but that attractiveness distracted visitors from the true purpose of burying grounds; the dead. Something was lost in these new, celebrated spaces: “We do not believe that a solemn impression is made on any mind The planted trees and walks, these views of the river, these iron settees, inviting rest, draw away attention from the tombs; and the sum total of the impression carried away is, that it is a very beautiful spot.”⁴³⁶ In this author’s mind, the focus needed to remain on death

⁴³⁵ “Art. I.--Cemeteries and Monuments.,” *New Englander* 7, no. 28 , November 1849, 492.

⁴³⁶ “Art. I.--Cemeteries and Monuments.,” *New Englander*, 492.

and its contemplation, and rural cemeteries obscured that relationship by clothing it in luxuriant landscapes and hiding it beneath gleaming marble monuments.

But for many middle and upper class Americans the changes were welcome. When the Reverend Edwin Chapin penned his 1843 sermon on the proper role of death, burial, and mourning, he had just returned from a visit to Green-Wood Cemetery. During his time among the winding pathways and still ponds, he found inspiration. Within Green-Wood, Chapin saw more than just beauty, tranquility, and seclusion. He saw written in nature an entirely new and modern way to understand death. The mourner “does not want that which shall add to his gloom by exhibiting death associated with everything repugnant and stern; with the mouldering clod, and the dank grass and the frightful revelations of the half-open charnel-house,” explained Chapin, “he requires that which shall pacify and comfort. . . . And the beautiful objects in our modern cemeteries are calculated to produce just these results. No one can enter their green and silent paths without acquiring calmer and better ideas of death.”⁴³⁷ The uncompromising power of nature displayed through bones, rot, and the chaotically organic burial ground challenged Americans to embrace their frailty as natural objects. The grim spectacle of a shrouded coffin being carried to an overcrowded burial ground packed with headstones frustrated Americans who no longer wished to be bound by the natural limits placed upon them. America was a nation on the move, demographically, scientifically, and spiritually, and the old lessons grounded in the destructive power of nature through death challenged American notions of their own progress as a people destined to take their prominent place within the world. Nature was to be subdued, controlled, and applied through human

⁴³⁷ Chapin, “Moral and Religious.: Religious Views of Death. A Sermon,” 25.

power, and death patently denied Americans that role. Reverend Chapin's desire to strip death of all its most unflinchingly macabre elements sprung from this evolution in American thinking. Chapin articulated the new spiritual vision that was reorienting the American death worldview away from the actual processes and characteristics of mortality, and Americans readily discarded their former intimacy with death for it.

American communities from the largest cities to the smallest hamlets abandoned their old graveyards, and embraced rural cemeteries in their place. "Nature and art have here combined to render the place beautiful – beautiful beyond description," exclaimed one overwhelmed editor of *Green-Wood* in 1853.⁴³⁸ However, for all the praise heaped upon the nature of rural cemeteries, Americans, ironically, had lost an innate connection to nature encapsulated in those old, somber, graveyards.

The churchyards that anchored the landscape of America in the nineteenth century were environmental spaces that fostered a tangible relationship to nature through the dead. Through graveyards, Americans experienced and understood nature firsthand as physical processes that enveloped and shaped them. Decay and death, worms and dirt, wooden coffins and skull-adorned headstones, all indicated the place of humans within the larger environmental cycles that governed all things. Burying grounds represented an integral part of the worldview of death that humbled and readied Americans to confront the finite limits of their physical and natural selves. Places such as Trinity Church Yard in New York, the Granary Burying Ground in Boston, or even a family plot at Carysbrooke Plantation in Virginia, intimately connected living Americans to nature through death. Rural cemeteries both helped create and crystallize a dramatic realignment of the former

⁴³⁸ The Editor, "Greenwood Cemetery," *The Ladies Repository: A Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Art and Religion* 13, August 1853, 344.

intimacy and connectivity that Americans physically experienced through death by replacing those grim but inherently biological processes with a distant, beautiful, and ironically, less human inclusive entity. America's rural cemeteries, while devoted to death, actually deemphasized human mortality, and instead elevated a picturesque view of not only the natural world but also of death itself.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

The idea of rural cemeteries is becoming a favorite one with the people of our cities and towns, and is one of the many evidences of the march of improvement. There can scarcely be anything more absurd than the practice of our ancestors in the location of their burial-places. Burying the dead among the living, and in places which are liable to be wanted for building and other purposes, or in close proximity to a church, is absurd, and we have little doubt, will soon pass away, and will be characterized as relict of barbarism.

Anonymous⁴³⁹

Last spring, at Green-Wood cemetery in Brooklyn, where the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat is buried, another conceptual artist, Sophie Calle, launched an installation called “Here Lie the Secrets of the Visitors of Green-Wood Cemetery.” For the next 25 years, anyone passing by will be able to write down their most intimate secrets and bury them in a grave designed by the artist. The cemetery also hosts moonlit tours, cocktail parties, dance performances, and even yoga classes. Death is hot right now, and upbeat gatherings in cemeteries are just a small part of the trend.

Marissa Meltzer⁴⁴⁰

Whether in 1848 or 2018, Americans continue to reevaluate and reorient their relationship to mortality. Our fascination with death remains so strong that, despite their 180 year separation, clear echoes can be heard reverberating between Marissa Meltzer’s wryly titled article, “How Death Got Cool” and *The Christian Advocate and Journal*’s reporting on the opening of Cypress Hills Cemetery in Long Island, New York. Both commenters, though more consciously in the pages of the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, position their eras’ particular approach to mortality as welcome and part of a

⁴³⁹ “Cypress Hills Cemetery,,” *Christian Advocate and Journal* 23, no. 48, November 29, 1848, 190.

⁴⁴⁰ Marisa Meltzer, “How Death Got Cool,” *The Guardian*, January 12, 2018, sec. News, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/12/how-death-got-cool-swedish-death-cleaning>.

larger evolutionary narrative. Marissa Meltzer's claim that "Death is hot right now" suggests that our relationship to mortality has never been better.⁴⁴¹ The anonymous 1848 reporter's observation that that rural cemeteries represent "one of the many evidences of the march of improvement" and that the prior death relationship represented a "relict of barbarism" makes very much the same point, more stridently.⁴⁴²

Neither author seems to see much benefit in looking backwards to those "absurd" churchyards and graveyards whose cramped headstones and unkempt environs were less conducive to hosting yoga classes and cocktail parties.⁴⁴³ Yet these spaces were crucial incubators of an American worldview of death, mortal remains, and nature in the early republic. Americans spent their days in a landscape built, literally and figuratively, around and upon their dead. Just stepping outside their door often meant glimpsing row upon sunken row of timeworn graves in a nearby churchyard or passing by a freshly dug private family plot on the way to their fields. The mortality confronting Americans in these spaces was raw, visceral, powerful, and humbling. The mortuary rituals they practiced also supported their embrace of death and colored all aspects of their lives and their expressions, from the letters they wrote to each other, the novels that they read, and the very way they placed their loved ones within the soil. To attend to the dying was not an inconvenience but a responsibility and duty brimming with lessons for the living born of the very dead themselves. The core of this instruction was straightforward and

⁴⁴¹ Meltzer, "How Death Got Cool."

⁴⁴² "Cypress Hills Cemetery.," *Christian Advocate and Journal*, 190.

⁴⁴³ "Cypress Hills Cemetery.," 190; Meltzer, "How Death Got Cool."

sobering—to be vigilant and prepared for one’s own death and the deaths of friends and neighbors, mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, and sons and daughters.

Preparation and acceptance of their mortality, however, did not mean Americans lived in a despondent, morbid daze. Instead the opposite was true. Americans understood death and their own mortality to be crucial part of a divinely ordered and structured natural world. This was a broad organic system that recognized and drew strength from the messy, repellent, dangerous, and dirty side of the natural world as much as its positive, affirming, picturesque, and beautiful characteristics. Important reminders of this proto-ecological view were everywhere in the early republic from the cornfields in which Americans labored to the “malignant fevers” that assailed them each summer. Yet death, unlike a thermometer reading or a rooster’s crow, directly placed their own bodies within and subject to the system. Americans believed that their physical bodies were part of a perfected natural continuum of birth and life that could only be sustained by dissolution and decay. They experienced this humbling connection in their crowded and ubiquitous burying grounds, they imbibed the message from their epitaphs, they meditated upon it in their churches, and they elevated it in their poetry. Nature literally grounded an American worldview of human mortality.

Yet as America matured over the course of the nineteenth century Americans actively recast their worldview of death, and what had once been a source of humbling strength instead became a retrograde step in the march of progress. A host of independent but interrelated factors undermined the intimacy, personal responsibility, and public dynamic that had been hallmarks of the prior American relationship to mortal remains. Particularly explosive and destructive epidemics raged through American communities,

and in response Americans recast corpses as disease-bearing nuisances to be disposed of quickly and efficiently, touched by as few hands as possible. As American urban prosperity grew so too did the nation's population, swelled by ranks of Irish immigrants whose poverty and religion seemed to assail America's national progress. The perceived problems these stigmatized immigrants brought did not end when they died, as the apparent blot on their character followed them into their burying grounds, which groaned under the strain of accommodating their ever-increasing numbers. Rejecting Catholic graveyards as well as potter's fields, middle and upper-class Americans increasingly sought to isolate the immigrant dead, removing them further and further from the main thoroughfares of life, directly undermining the public connection so critical to their previous embrace of mortality.

Americans found the solution to their concerns in the 1830s, when a group of path-breaking Bostonians set aside land to create a new style of "cemetery" at Mount Auburn in nearby Cambridge. The "rural cemeteries" that followed in Mount Auburn's wake were consciously planned and meticulously landscaped monument parks that inspired through beautiful artifice. Older churchyards and graveyards became a blighted reminder of a less "civilized" time. As one author rhapsodized, "Oh! Should not all our grave-yards instead of being dull and gloomy receptacles of the dead, be made pleasant gardens and have 'Mount Hope' inscribed over the gates of these silent cities?"⁴⁴⁴ Yet the natural splendor of these places was built upon changing burial technologies and suburbanization, which upended or arrested the natural processes working through death and decay. While those old "gloomy" and "dull" churchyards may not have always been

⁴⁴⁴ C. E. R., "The Beautiful Graveyard.: Mount Hope, Rochester, N. Y.," *Christian Parlor Magazine*, March 1847, 348.

pleasant, neither is nature. In an ironic twist, Americans replaced the older nature of death with nature, but nature in a more controlled, narrowed, sentimental, less human-inclusive but undeniably beautiful form.

Rural cemeteries did not “solve” the problem of human mortality—no more than we have solved death through science and medicine today—but it did inaugurate a dramatic realignment of the way Americans approached our inevitable dissolution. The isolation of death and mortal remains from the living, the professionalization of corpse preparation and disposal, the heroic efforts to encapsulate the dead in sealed coffins, and the sentimentalizing and obfuscation of decay and dissolution beneath gleaming marble monuments and “picturesque” nature remains fundamental to our modern American approach to mortality. We can see this written into our very landscapes, as cemeteries remain on the outskirts of most communities and municipal burial grounds—our modern equivalent of the potter’s field—have almost completely disappeared from sight. The size and scope of the American funeral industry also testifies to how little we interact with our own dead and mortal remains. The only responsibility we have towards our deceased is to possess enough wealth to pay for funeral directors and morticians to take care of “it.” Our flight from mortality—and from nature—has become so magnified that the idea of open-casket wakes strikes many as macabre and disturbing, a vestige of older less “enlightened” religious sentiments and rites. And while the graveyard space never disappeared—as a quick walk through modern New York City or Richmond will confirm—it has ossified in the years that followed the American embrace of rural cemeteries and sentimental death and the further trends that have emerged on the American landscape of death in the 20th century. Instead of dynamic spaces constantly

being renewed through our own natural remains, these burying grounds have become frozen in time, relic snapshots of particular eras and places with little impact on the living beyond mere curiosity.

Yet as Marissa Melzer's article humorously observes and as this project has illustrated, Americans are nothing if not restless when it comes to mortality. Present-day Americans have increasingly found renewed value and perhaps guidance in a direct connection between life and death, mortal remains and nature. In a sign of the times, (living) artist Jae Rhim Lee wore a fungus-seeded burial bodysuit in a 2011 TEDTalk, which has been viewed nearly 1.5 million times. Increasing numbers of Americans are, if not persuaded, intrigued by the new phenomenon of green burial and the organic links it cultivates between humans, death, and our natural world. Here, as in so much of history, the past is prologue. Americans in the early republic well understood that death, no matter how little it was desired, was inevitable, necessary, and embedded in the functioning of their world. Their mortality worldview accepted that death could be sudden or protracted, strike in the flower of youth or in the evening of old age, be terribly agonizing or quiet and peaceful, and that this biological reality colored the lives of the living. Death in the early American republic was *natural*, and nature itself was comprehended, in part, through death. Perhaps with both the lessons of the past and promise of the future, death might be so again.

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