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In partnership with Congressional Cemetery, the Circle of Life was created and funded by Sharon Metcalf and Circle collaborators -- Nancy Brennan, Kay Tarum, Mary Kay Blake and Margaret Tobe -- all of whom have chosen gravesites within the Circle for their final resting place. For more info, email metcalf.sharon@gmail.com

The circle of trees, engraved stones, and native plantings are a gift to preserve the cemetery’s natural environment for future generations.

https://congressionalcemetery.org/circle-of-life

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A celebratory circle in tribute to past and future stewards of the land and surrounding burial sites;
A peaceful space with garden benches for reflection in situ.

The Circle of Life is in the cemetery’s SE quadrant, on the hillside above the family vaults as shown.

CIRCLE OF LIFE LANDSCAPE DESIGN

The Cemetery’s outdoor monument was designed to enhance the natural environment of this National Historic Landmark. Facing the southern horizon, the hillside memorial offers full views of sunrise and sunset. Over centuries, ancient civilizations and Native Americans have created circular spaces in such open landscapes to follow the sun’s movement and celebrate significant seasonal changes.

Establishing a natural boundary for the Circle of Life, eight linden trees were planted in a 60° circle corresponding with the eight directional points of the compass rose (North, South, East, West, NE, NW, SE, SW) to follow the sun’s orbital path. Over the coming decades the trees will provide a serene spot to rest beneath their shading canopy. Every spring and summer, the flowering linden branches laden with scented blossoms will be a rich source of nectar for pollinators.

Steppingstone paths wander among granite engravings and scenes of nature. The trees, stoneworks and open horizon invite visitors to pay homage to the environment by stopping, listening, walking, and observing the surrounding flora and fauna. The slope overlooks humming beehives, a row of venerable family tombs and a pet cemetery. In the distance beyond the tree line is the confluence of the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers.

SOLSTICE AND EQUINOX VANTAGE POINTS (illustrative map on back)

Not unlike the rituals of Stonehenge, visitors can celebrate the change of seasons by tracking the sun’s path across the aligned symmetry of the circular ‘tree-henge.’ The summer solstice begins its long day’s journey from the NE linden tree. The sun intensifies and then mellows as it finally casts a shadow across the NW tree 16 hours later. The winter solstice dims the light and shortens the SE to SW solar track across the Circle’s southern horizon in just over 10 hours.

Welcome rays of sun spread dancing tree shadows across the arc of the Circle during the vernal (spring) and autumnal (fall) equinoxes. Twice a year, day and night are of equal length as the sun rises above the east tree, moves directly across the center of the compass rose, and sets 12 hours later beyond the west tree.

COMPASS ROSE & NATURE ENGRAVINGS

At the heart of the Circle is a granite compass rose embedded with colorful and patterned pieces of stone that direct one’s gaze outward to the surrounding trees, and inward to the monument’s core. Symbolically, the four points or ‘winds’ of the compass represent: infinite possibility, the present, the past, and the future.

The compass ‘rose of the winds’ was used by ancient Greek mariners to chart their course at sea. Each star point of this terrestrial centerpiece radiates to the trunk of the corresponding tree around the Circle’s perimeter.

Along the north to south axis of the Circle, and surrounding the centerpiece, are eight engraved roundels that present a visual narrative of earth’s natural cycles. The 30” granite medallions portray the four seasons, flora and fauna, and sunrise and sunset. As simple contemporary depictions, the rock carvings are somewhat akin to the petroglyphs left by indigenous peoples to teach, warn, or pass on significant messages to their descendants.

Four centuries ago, the Nacotchtank, Anacostan and Piscataway tribes inhabited this area and left artifacts and hammered stones – later unearthed along the banks of the Potomac and Anaostia Rivers. Succeeding generations may interpret this sacred space and the granite engravings found within the Circle of Life as an appeal to environmental stewardship at a time when warming climate and pollution threaten our society.

CONSERVATION AND NATURAL BURIAL

Natural or ‘green’ burials are designed to have minimal environmental impact and conserve earth’s resources. Congressional is the only cemetery in Washington DC that offers this eco-friendly option for interment. In keeping with its ecological focus, the Circle of Life is a living memorial to those who choose this simple and sustainable end to their existence.

In a typical green burial, the body is not cremated, prepared with chemicals, or buried in a concrete vault. It is simply placed in a biodegradable container or shroud and interred in a gravesite to decompose fully and return to nature.

The natural and organic disposition of one’s body is a gift to the earth – one that connects our end to the beginning of life for other living organisms. Science tells us that energy and matter cannot be created or destroyed, only converted from one form to another. Green burial cases the transformation of biomass, contributing to the complex ecosystem that continues the cycle of life.

BACKGROUND & COLLABORATORS

Plans for the Circle of Life memorial began in 2019. A group of friends, interested in the history of Congressional Cemetery and in green burial, worked with cemetery staff to designate a space to honor environmentally friendly interment.

In partnership with the Cemetery, linden trees were planted on the hillside to create a sylvan outdoor sanctuary within the cemetery’s hallowed grounds.

CONGRESSIONAL CEMETERY – 1801 1ST STREET SE DC

Winter solstice setting sun – December 22, 2022