



DC's Greatest  
Undertaking

# Historic Congressional Cemetery Newsletter

Spring is a season of vibrant change in the nation's capital. As the beloved cherry blossoms and other flowers come to life in the cemetery, this spring ushers in a new season for Historic Congressional Cemetery. Thanks to our community, the cemetery is flourishing with life. And while we are proud and grateful for how far we have come, we remain committed to fully realizing the core tenets of our non-profit mission. We are a place of rest and respite for the grieving. We are a National Historic Landmark, a one-of-a-kind portal into the past. We are a place for people to gather, to celebrate life. We are an urban oasis, full of flora and fauna of all kinds. We are DC's Greatest Undertaking.

Along with this new season, comes a new look! By now you have started to notice some new things, including the newsletter. And a new newsletter deserves a NEW name, decided by you! Scan the QR code below to vote for your favorite of 4 options!

- *The Congressional Columbarium*
- *The Graveyard Gazette*
- *The Bi-Annual Pulse*
- *Beyond the Grave: Congressional News*







## Letter from the Chair

**A**s we walk these hallowed but vibrant grounds, surrounded by weathered tombstones, cherry blossoms, and art installations, it is easy to lose ourselves in Congressional Cemetery. The stories etched into the stones on this 35-acre piece of land carry many stories of those interred here. And yet, as volunteers, visitors, and K9 Corps members grace our front gates from day to day, we are all reminded that this place is not merely a repository of memories—it is alive and well.

This perspective is one we that we are working to maintain as we balance the needs to restore, renovate, and maintain our historic cemetery, while also offering opportunities for the community to come and visit us—whether it is to run a 5K, watch a movie, or participate in a tour led by one of our dedicated docents. The board is focused on this balance as we support Jackie and her staff in their persistent efforts to keep the cemetery's priorities aligned towards our mission to preserve, promote, and protect this place, while celebrating the legacy of those interred here through education, historic preservation, community engagement, and environmental stewardship. Without a doubt staying true to these principles is akin to walking a tightrope—a delicate act of equilibrium.

From that perspective, I believe all of us are in this together to help foster this unique place on Capitol Hill. Whether you have adopted a plot, sponsored a cherry blossom, visited the wind phone exhibit, donated, or contributed in other ways, you play a special and necessary role in our efforts to achieve our mission. For that I am grateful.

Sincerely,

*Richard Greene*

Richard Greene

*Chair, Association for the Preservation of Historic Congressional Cemetery*



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**P**erspective. That is what I want to write to you about for this new rendition of our cemetery newsletter. Not just mine, but some of the perspectives that have been shared with us and that I carry with me into my third year as president of this community space.

For many people, Congressional Cemetery doesn't appear to be a traditional cemetery or a traditional community center, but it's actually a bit of both, and we work to keep a balance between those roles. For some, we are the final resting space of their nearest and dearest. We are the space that holds their grief and provides solace. For others, we are an extension of their backyard— a space for walking, gathering, and socializing. To the public, we are the place with dogs, movies, and 5Ks. We are the historic cemetery with Sousa and Hoover and thousands of Washingtonians. We are the quirky place that dresses up like our residents and serves drinks in our public vault. Each person has their own take on what Congressional Cemetery means to them.

But, it seems, we are never really all of these simultaneously to anyone.

I have found myself listening to people's descriptions of their mentions of Congressional Cemetery with individuals who are not familiar with us, and I have tucked them away in my brain. My favorite comments are when someone blushingly admits that they have had to explain to friends and family why they spend so much time in a cemetery— willingly and for fun. They inadvertently find themselves coming to our defense. Below are interactions that have been reenacted to me by people discussing the cemetery with their friends and family, who just don't get it. Do you share any of their perspectives?

"Lola gets to run freely there, and she has so much fun! It is the only space I can do that in DC, and no one wants to fight for space in a dog park."

"It might seem weird, but it really isn't. I watched a concert there last summer for free that would have been super expensive at the Kennedy Center—and with N.S.O. performers."

"Their movies are much better than the theater! Plus, there is free popcorn. Who doesn't want to watch a ghost movie in a cemetery?"

"I know you think it is bizarre, but it provides me with a space to think in nature within the city without having to be surrounded by tourists. Congressional Cemetery is relaxing and way cheaper than therapy."

"I have been struggling with the loss of my mother. Coming to the wind phone exhibit and saying to her what I never got to say in life has really had a profound impact on me. The interruption of the happy, frolicking dogs reminds me to enjoy life while I can."

Are you one of these people—an accidental advocate? Someone who finds themselves mentioning Congressional Cemetery and its programs in conversations with friends and strangers? If so, I want to thank you. You may not realize it, but each time you mention this space to someone else, you are keeping it alive. You are helping us to put into words why it is so special, and why each of us should do our part to help it flourish.

Thank you for helping me every day to push past the hustle and bustle, the daily challenges, the heaviness of carrying other people's grief on my shoulders, for helping me keep perspective. Your accidental advocacy reminds me that the ultimate goal I am working towards is creating a space that enables you to share what Congressional means to you.

Have a perspective to share? Email us at [staff@congressionalcemetery.org](mailto:staff@congressionalcemetery.org) for a chance to be featured in future mailings and social media posts. We want to share your voices, too.

For now, enjoy the perspectives in this newly-branded newsletter.

Yours in service,

Jaclyn Spainhour  
President





## Support Our Mission

### RMD and Planned Giving: How YOU can make a difference



- Did you know you can donate all or a portion of your IRA's required minimum distribution (RMD) directly to Historic Congressional Cemetery? Beyond the tax benefits, donating some or all of your RMD is a straightforward way to build your legacy at this important pillar of our community.

The recent SECURE 2.0 Act raised the age that you must begin taking RMDs to age 73. If you reached age 72 in 2023, the required beginning date for your first RMD is April 1, 2025. Full details from the IRS can be found online or you may contact a trusted financial advisor.

When you donate your RMD to HCC, you help ensure a prosperous future for this National Historic Landmark.

- Planned Giving is another way to help us preserve history and building community. Sometimes called Legacy Giving, Planned Giving is the process of making a significant charitable gift that is paid upon the donor's death. The gift can be established as part of your overall estate plan. It is as easy as including Historic Congressional Cemetery as one of your estate beneficiaries. Planned Gifts may come in the form of cash, property, or assets like stocks and bonds. No assets are transferred until your death. Pledging your Planned Gift today will influence HCC for decades to come.

Interested in RMD or Planned Giving to help preserve our National Historic Landmark? Contact our front office and our passionate staff will be happy to assist you.



- Need to send flowers to the living or adorn the final resting place of a cherished individual at Congressional Cemetery?

Introducing our newest fundraiser and partnership with Crayola Flowers, allowing you to send blooms anywhere, anytime, and support our nonprofit historic cemetery.

Crayola Flowers offers a seamless service and a wide array of vibrant hues and timeless arrangements, ensuring your gesture is as unique as your sentiments.

Every purchase not only spreads joy but also directly supports our nonprofit's mission, as a portion of each sale goes to our organization.

So go ahead, say it with flowers while making a difference with each vibrant bouquet.

Thank you for your support!

Scan here to  
learn more!



Want to make a tax deductible donation to Historic Congressional Cemetery? Scan the QR code to give online! Want to contribute in a different way? No problem! Please send us the enclosed envelope. We greatly appreciate your support.



# Around the Gatehouse



A new season at Congressional Cemetery means a new offering of vibrant events, including the signature programs you know and love. We invite you to discover our upcoming programs by visiting our website, but we wanted to share with you directly some of the programs we are most excited about in 2024.

## Calendar

June 7	Pride 5K	August 16	Outdoor Concert
June 15	Cemetery Speaker Series: Leonard Matlovich	August 24	Cemetery Speaker Series: The War of 1812 and the Burning of Washington
June 22	Peterbug 5K	September 6	Cinematery: The Summer of Spirits— <i>Casper</i>
June 29	Gentleman's Gambit: A Prohibition Era Mystery	September 20	Outdoor Concert
July 5	Cinematery: The Summer of Spirits— <i>The Sixth Sense</i>	October 12	Dead Man's Run 5K
July 20	Cemetery Speaker Series: Women in the Victorian Period	October 18, 19 20, 26	Soul Strolls
August 2	Cinematery: The Summer of Spirits— <i>The Haunted Mansion</i>	November 6	John Philip Sousa Birthday Concert featuring the Marine Band



## The Return of Soul Strolls and Gentleman's Gambit



We LOVE how our immersive theater events literally bring history to life! Soul Strolls will return in October, along with another spooky program we aren't quite ready to talk about yet...

But we are excited to

announce the return of Gentleman's Gambit on **June 29, 2024**. We hope that you will join us for an exclusive one night only immersive and interactive prohibition mystery themed experience.



Gentlemen's Gambit tickets on sale now!

## Cinematery: The Summer of Spirits



While we can't attest to the presence of any lost souls at the cemetery, we can confirm the visits of some select spirits this summer. We hope that you will join us for Cinematery:

The Summer of Spirits, screenings of four iconic haunted films!

## A Dead Sprint: 5Ks

HCC may be a place of final rest, but our 5K races get your pulse racing! This fast, flat, and certified course that includes the cemetery grounds and the Anacostia River Trail helps support the cemetery AND your health! Be on the lookout for news about Dead Man's Run in October and our new Cherry Blossom 5K every spring, as well as the DC Frontrunners Pride 5K every June.

## HCC Archivist Looking for Volunteer Help!

Archivist Dayle Dooley is leading a project to map Congressional Cemetery gravesites with GPS. She is utilizing Find a Grave, a popular third-party internet database that contains over 238 million burial records from around the world. As of May 2024, Find a Grave listed the burial information for 50,758 Congressional Cemetery residents, but only 9% of those included GPS coordinates. Dayle is seeking volunteers to help make these records more complete, which would assist in making interment sites easier to locate for the general public. Education Specialist Kennedy Simpson has created an instruction sheet with pictures that shows how simple it is to add GPS coordinates using the Find a Grave mobile app. If you are familiar with Find a Grave and its mobile app's GPS feature, you already have the tools you need to begin and contribute. If you are unfamiliar with Find a Grave but would like to contribute toward this project, please email [staff@congressionalcemetery.org](mailto:staff@congressionalcemetery.org) and ask for Dayle.

## Love history? Love HCC? Book a Private Docent Tour!

Our Docent Corps or the "Dozen Decent Docents," as they were originally fashioned, are always eager to welcome visitors on docent tours, whether it's an Introductory Tour or a special topic tour. But did you know that you can book your own private docent tour? Is an out-of-town history lover visiting you? Looking for the next team-building experience for your office or organization? Maybe you have an unusual request, like a tour focusing on the Civil War, suffragists, LGBTQ+ civil rights leaders, and/or American Indian chiefs? For whatever reason or occasion, our dedicated docents are here to make your experience an amazing and memorable one.



Interested? Contact our office OR scan the QR code below to request your tour today.

Receptions and other rentals in addition to your tour are available upon request.



## Featured K9 Corps Member

Name: Snooks

Age: 8

Member Since: 2018

The Soloviev Family

Likes: Ice, but only the ice from HCC; pets; "knocking" on the back door for ice





# It Takes a Village:

## Hidden White House History at Congressional Cemetery

**T**he date was April 30, 1789. All eyes gazed transfixed on the second-floor balcony of Manhattan's Federal Hall, decorated with red and white curtains. The crowd gathered on the street below buzzed with anticipation to see the inauguration of the first president of the United States of America.

At 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the ceremony's participants emerged from the Senate chamber, and the assemblage below erupted in cheers. As the newly-established ritual was set to begin, New York Chancellor Robert Livingston prepared to administer the oath of office. At the center of everything was the man whose actions from that day forward would set precedents for all inaugurations to follow. That man was, of course, Samuel Allyne Otis, the premiere secretary of the United States Senate. Otis stood center stage clutching a red velvet pillow, atop which rested the masonic Bible, upon which George Washington swore he would preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution.

First Lady Hillary Clinton popularized the idea that

“it takes a village” to raise and support the children of America. The adage is also true of commanders-in-chief. For while the office of the presidency is occupied by one person at a time, it takes a collective effort from numerous individuals to support that president and make the executive branch effective. Transition team members, Secret Service personnel, chefs, press secretaries, ushers, speech writers, and cabinet officers are just some examples of those individuals who make the office function.

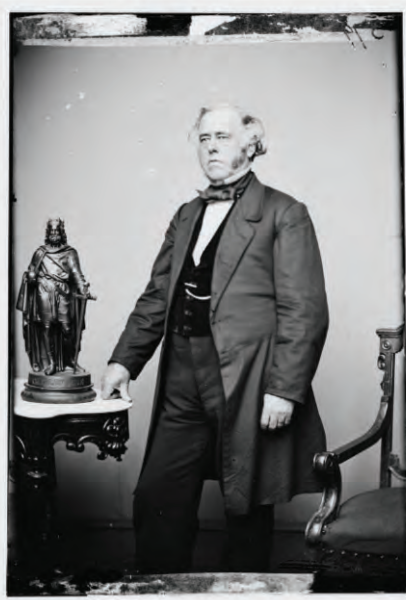
Long before the spouses of incoming presidents began to hold the ceremonial Bible (or law book) at swearings-in, these duties were generally fulfilled by the chief justices who administered the oath, or in George Washington's case, by Secretary Otis. Otis, who in his quarter-century in the Senate followed the federal government from New York to Philadelphia, and then to Washington, DC, lies buried at Historic Congressional Cemetery – one of many interred residents who impacted the office of the presidency and its occupants, in ways large and small.

Another such figure interred at Congressional was a one-time fixture in Washington who is often overlooked in contrast to the president whose memory he preserved in the historical record. Benjamin Brown French held the now-abolished post of commissioner of public buildings under three chief executives, including Abraham Lincoln. Between his two stints in that role, he served as chief marshal of Lincoln's inauguration. When he was reappointed as commissioner, his duties were various. Who announced guests at the first lady's receptions? Who ensured that there was enough wood and coal to keep the Executive Mansion's fireplaces ablaze during the dead of winter? Who took charge of the funeral for the Lincolns' son, Willie, so that the first lady could mourn and the president could attend to matters of the Civil War? The answer to all is Benjamin Brown French.



Samuel Otis holding the masonic Bible atop a pillow in *The Inauguration of Washington*, 1876 by Currier & Ives.





Benjamin Brown French, [between 1855 and 1865]. Brady-Handy photograph collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

me half to death with wants with which it is impossible to comply, for she has an eye to the dollars!" Notably, in December 1861, he ran interference for Mrs. Lincoln when she was "in much tribulation" about exceeding the \$20,000 budget that Congress allotted for the redecoration project. French approached the president on the first lady's behalf, taking the brunt of the chief executive's wrath. He did not achieve Mrs. Lincoln's desired objective of persuading her husband to approve the exorbitant bills in his capacity as president. Recorded French, Mr. Lincoln declared, "I'll pay out of my own pocket first – it would stink in the nostrils of the American people to have it said that the President of the United States had approved a bill over-running an appropriation of \$20,000 for flub dubs for this damned old house, when the soldiers cannot have blankets." French successfully lobbied Congress to reallocate \$4,500 from other district projects to bail out the president.

French's fealty to the presidency and its officeholders transcended death. Following Lincoln's assassination in April 1865, French assumed responsibility for much of the planning for the funeral. The day the president died, he directed that the White House be draped in black, as was tradition in that period when a home's occupant passed away. He also ordered the Capitol closed and adorned in black cloth as well. French's son, Frank,

French's diary has proven to be a valuable source of insight into the inner workings of the Lincoln White House. He had a close working relationship with Mary Lincoln and wrote about their interactions. This included when he oversaw the expenditures for the redecoration of the Executive Mansion, which was not among his favorite responsibilities. He complained that the first lady, "plagues

designed a catafalque to hold up Lincoln's casket. He then directed Assistant Commissioner Job W. Angus and others to construct the catafalque according to his son's design. He asked his wife, Mary, to cut and sew the fabric to decorate the bier. The influence of this task has remained relevant in the sixteen decades since Lincoln's death, as dozens of public figures – including eleven of Lincoln's White House successors – have lain in state upon the handiwork made at French's direction.

Some people of import to presidents have aided them not only during their presidency, but beforehand too. Tobias Lear was recommended to George Washington by General Benjamin Lincoln in 1784, shortly after he resigned his military commission at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War. Lear, another of Congressional's permanent residents, served as the retired general's executive secretary. His duties included managing Washington's expense reports to the Congress of the Confederation, in addition to tutoring Martha Washington's grandchildren. Professor P. Bradley Nutting, once chair of the history department at Framingham State College, provided a list of the numerous tasks that Lear undertook during Washington's first presidential term. He described him as a person "of incredible versatility" who "drafted presidential speeches, planned good will tours, engaged in covert activity, conducted informal diplomacy, assisted with patronage, controlled access to the President, protected his image, and served as his alter ego." Lear was an indispensable employee and, eventually, family. In 1795, he married Fanny Bassett Washington, who was both the niece of the first lady and the widow of the president's nephew. As a wedding gift, the chief executive bestowed the Lears with 360 acres of land from his Mount Vernon plantation.



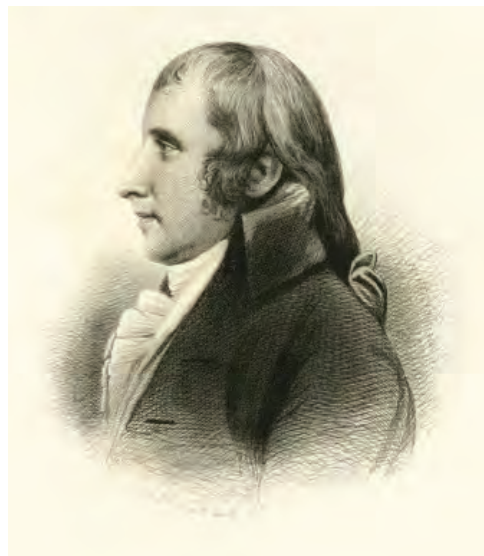
Lincoln Catafalque, photographed 2006 by Architect of the Capitol.



Even when circumstances would seemingly necessitate a termination of their employer-employee relationship, Lear remained in Washington's inner circle. During a period of personal financial difficulty, Lear dared to retain rent money due to Washington that he collected on his behalf from a tenant in Alexandria. When Washington discovered the theft in June 1798, he wrote to his secretary that he was disappointed that his actions "put you, the payer & myself in an awkward situation[.]" Washington requested a statement of accounts and upbraided Lear. "[I]t would be uncandid and inconsistent with the frankness of friendship, not to declare that I have not approved[,], nor cannot approve, of having my money received and applied to uses not my own, without my consent [...] which, among other improprieties of the measure, involves [...] awkward, and unpleasant consequences [.]" Nevertheless, Washington signed multiple letters pertaining to the incident in a warm manner. He concluded one, "With the greatest esteem & friendship—I remain Your Affectionate Go: Washington."

The following year, Lear was present at Washington's bedside in his final moments, as the former president succumbed to a brief bout of quinsy (an illness of the throat and tonsils). Lear recorded intimate details in his diary, as he suspected the death of such a consequential figure "will be memorable in the History of America, and perhaps of the world[.]" He wrote down who was present, the remedies applied by physicians, and the signs of his employer's steady decline.

It was to Lear that the president spoke his last words. Fearful of being entombed alive, the weakened



Tobias Lear, 1869 by Henry Bryan Hall.

Washington entrusted his secretary in ensuring that his body not be placed in the Mount Vernon burial vault before three days' time had passed since he was declared dead. Lear initially bowed his head in assent,

as he "could not speak." After Washington requested verbal confirmation and Lear gave it, a satisfied Washington ended his final conversation with, "'Tis well." Lear's diary recounts that he died shortly afterward "without a struggle or a sigh!" Washington's last request to Lear was fulfilled, as it was four days before his interment was held. Following the commencement of the mourning period, the widowed Martha Washington tasked Lear with penning appreciative responses to condolence letters.

Lear, Otis, and French represent just a sampling of the figures buried at Congressional Cemetery who, although not household names, took substantial supporting actions in the lives, careers, deaths, and legacies of the nation's commanders-in-chief.

By Kurt Deion

Education Specialist and Future Resident  
Historic Congressional Cemetery

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# Funerary Art Past and Present:

## Iconography and Artistry at Congressional Cemetery

**A**cross the 35 acres of Historic Congressional Cemetery, you'll discover not just the final resting places of many notable figures, but also a diverse collection of funeral art spanning centuries. From intricate carvings to solemn statues, the cemetery's landscape tells stories of love, loss, life, and the human desire for immortality through art. Serving as a visual language, they convey messages about the deceased's identity, beliefs, and the cultural milieu of their time.

Cemetery iconography and funerary art surged in popularity during the Victorian Era, fueled by the era's sentimental values, fascination with symbolism, and funeral rituals. This period was characterized by a heightened awareness of death due to high mortality rates, particularly among infants and young children. As a result, grieving families sought solace in elaborate mourning practices, including the adornment of graves with intricate symbols and motifs.

Symbols such as the sleeping child and lamb are poignant representations of innocence, purity, and the brevity of life. Roses, the eternal symbol of love, are one of the most popular floral engravings and symbolize enduring affection and devotion for the departed. The



**“The Handshake”**—An intricate symbol of unity, farewell, or a greeting to eternal life, captured by Kitty Linton



**“The Lamb”**—A poignant symbol of innocence, youth, and the brevity of life, photographed by Kitty Linton

urn was used in funerary customs by many countries and civilizations. Originating as a repository for the ashes of the dead, it often represents death itself, mourning, and the body as a vessel for the soul. After the cross, the urn is one of the most used cemetery symbols, often found on top of columns and mausoleums, and there are several variations.

Another popular symbol during this time was human hands. There are several key types of hand carvings on grave markers, and they all represent different themes depending on the direction they point. One example is clasped hands or “The Handshake,” which was also used by the Masons, and can signify eternal devotion between



partners, farewell, or a greeting to eternal life. This use of hands to express meaning is still commonly found even today on modern headstones.

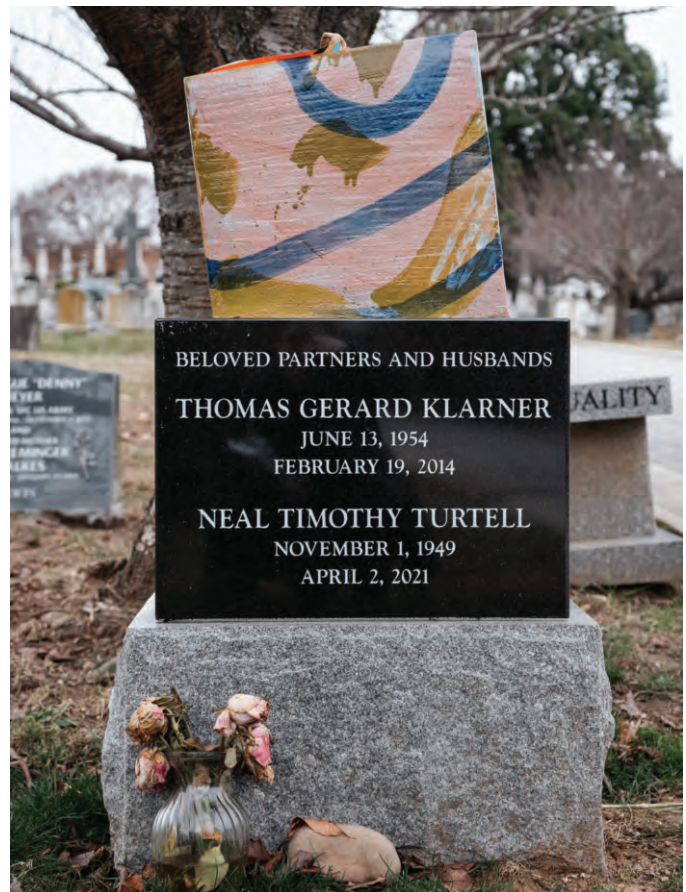
Many of these wonderful symbols and more can be found across Congressional Cemetery; but in addition to traditional grave markers, the cemetery is also home to a growing number of creative contemporary memorials that reflect evolving attitudes towards death and commemoration. These grave markers transcend the ordinary, becoming extraordinary works of art in themselves and telling a unique narrative in unconventional shapes, colors, and materials.

One notable example is the unique grave marker of Neal Turtell and his partner of 35 years, Thomas Klarner. They were known for their impressive contemporary art collection and unwavering support for the National Gallery of Art. The creative design of their tombstone was a meticulously planned endeavor, taking well over a year to complete. Inspired by a work by the artist Carlos Torres, whose pieces Neal and Tom avidly collected, the tombstone pays homage to their shared passion for art.

The concept for this tribute, combining Torres's artistic influence and Neal and Tom's love for art, originated from Steve Turtell, Neal's brother.

What ensued was a remarkable collaboration involving Steve, ceramicist Andrew Cornell Robinson, Todd Wolfe of Columbia Gardens Memorials, and Brian Adams, Neal's executor. Together these four individuals worked closely to bring the vision to fruition. Situated in the LGBTQ+ section of Congressional Cemetery, the choice of location adds significant depth to their story, and the text is drawn from Auden's poem "Elegy for J.F.K."

Another striking piece is the memorial for Thomas S. Foley, the 49th speaker of the United States House of Representatives. His memorial in Congressional Cemetery is a distinctive work of art that stands out amongst the cenotaphs. It takes the form of a grand circular sculpture titled "Endless Curve No. 5," crafted from stainless steel by the talented Chinese artist Wenqin Chen. Choosing this work for the memorial, Foley's wife, Heather, an avid collector of contemporary art, envisioned it resonating with Tom's affinity for its chrome-like aesthetic and the simplicity of its design. To her, Endless Curve No. 5 embodies the cycle of life and the art of compromise, reflecting not only their own divergent tastes in art but also Tom's steadfast belief in the significance of finding common ground. Reflecting



The creative gravemarker for Neal Turtell and Thomas Klarner. Range 24, Site 163. A tribute to art and love, captured by Kitty Linton

on her late husband's legacy, Heather Foley remarked, "My husband will be remembered not only as a great man but as someone who believed in listening to all sides of an argument and then working out an agreement that was acceptable to everyone. I think this piece represents his ability to bring people together."

These final resting places are more than memorials; they're masterpieces capturing the essence of those who've passed, celebrating creativity, individuality, and remembrance. At Historic Congressional Cemetery, the past and present converge, offering a glimpse into the diverse landscape of American history and culture, etched in stone for future generations to contemplate. So as you wander through the cemetery grounds, keep an eye out for these artistic grave markers and historic symbols, each telling stories of lives lived and legacies left behind.

**By Kitty Linton**

Photographer and Social Media Specialist  
Historic Congressional Cemetery



# What Green Burial Means to Me



A recent green burial setup at Congressional Cemetery.  
Photo courtesy of Lily Buerkle

“I don’t exactly know why, but I can only tell you that it made me feel better. It was healing. Like tucking my daughter in.” These words have stayed with me. They were shared shortly after a father had buried his thirty-something-year-old daughter in a green burial. It was a tragic loss for this family. She had died so young. She had so much life and love to give, until she couldn’t. Cancer had other plans for her.

My work brings me so regularly close to death that, while things do start to run together sometimes, a few things consistently stand out. One of them is that when families can put their grief into action in the face of death, they do feel better.

In this father’s case, he was referring to the physical hand-lowering of his daughter’s shrouded body directly into the earth. This act was restorative at his darkest time as a father. Death renders us powerless—doctors with no cure and families helpless. But when you can do something—anything—it helps. Doing helps. I find that my green burial families are often the real doers in death rituals. They have an interest not just in honoring the earth, but in participating in care of their loved ones after death. And green burial families are usually the ones willing to go against the grain in the face of what have become common funerary practices in this country.

Whether it’s challenging the funeral home that may be expecting to embalm or upsell an expensive casket, or participating in the bathing or shrouding of your person, it’s in taking action after death that families find healing. Hands-on participation is a balm. And with that, comes pride. And with pride, comes peace. It doesn’t make the sadness go away, but it does make you feel better knowing you took care of your person, that you went upstream to help them do it their way. With green burial in particular, it means their last act on earth was not one that polluted it. That is what green burial means for me. My green burial families don’t just want it done for them, they want to *do*.

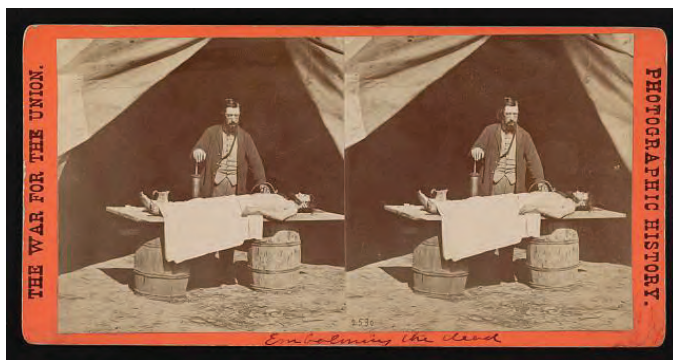


I remember the first time I stepped foot on the grounds of Historic Congressional Cemetery about a decade ago. I was here as a representative of the funeral home I worked for at the time, and I was here for a green burial. I was absolutely taken by the giant swamp oak near the main gate, the friendly staff, and the history that permeated every inch of the place. But what I didn’t expect was the true spirit of flexibility that Congressional offers families.

Since that day, I’ve spent about 10 years in funeral service, and to this day, Congressional remains a haven for families who don’t want their person filled with formaldehyde, their organs pierced with the sharp end of the trocar and filled with caustic cavity fluid, their body placed in a metal casket and encased in a stainless-steel vault. We are still one of only a handful of cemeteries in all of DC, Maryland, and Virginia that permit green burial at all. Congressional is technically considered a hybrid cemetery as opposed to a green burial cemetery, because we also allow what is considered “traditional burial” with embalming, caskets, and vaults.

I’m proud to work at a place that allows me to serve a family’s individual needs. And I love not having to fight the system to take care of green burial families. My past





Dr. Richard Burr, embalming surgeon, Army of the James.  
Library of Congress

funeral home experience allows me to serve Congressional families in a way that most deathcare professionals cannot. And it gives me the unique position of being able to help families engage funeral homes in getting what they want when it comes to green burial.

So what is green burial exactly? I think about green burial, really, as original burial. It's the way burial always was and, certainly when Congressional started burying people in 1807, there was no other way to bury. It wasn't until around the time of the Civil War that embalming practices expanded. On the battlefield, Northern soldiers were embalmed, usually with arsenic, to preserve their bodies so they could withstand the long train ride back home to their families for burial. Some of the earliest embalming photos from the battlefield were taken by Congressional resident Mathew Brady.

While green burial has been around for an eternity, for many, green burial feels like a new idea. And many families feel like they have to struggle to get it. With green burial, there is no chemical preservation of the body to slow down the natural decay that begins soon after death. The body is simply prepared with bathing and dressing and then may be placed in a casket of natural material—or, for the greenest families, no casket at all. Just a simple shroud will do. Many green burial cemeteries will insist on no marker at all or a very simple natural marker. At Congressional Cemetery, we allow for traditional headstones and markers of all kinds. There is no dedicated green section at our cemetery; it is permitted in any plot suitable for a full burial.

### To address some frequently asked questions:

**Do green burials require immediate burial?** No. Refrigeration allows for plenty of time to coordinate with the funeral home and perhaps a place of worship, out-of-state family planning to travel, and the cemetery.

Unless you plan for a very public viewing of the body, or you need to transport the body out of the country (there are no embalming requirements for domestic flights), there is little need for embalming generally speaking (I write this with the sensitivity that in some cultures embalming is still expected, and for some it brings comfort particularly when someone has been killed tragically and they want their loved one restored as much as possible).

**Is embalming required?** No. It is illegal for a funeral home to embalm without consent and for them to tell you that someone must be embalmed, though most funeral homes will insist on embalming for a public visitation. (But in my professional experience, an embalmed body is just as likely to “leak” as an unembalmed body. And yes, I have put my professional neck on the line, and I have gone to church with an unembalmed body in an open casket—often against the advice of my colleagues—and it's been just fine.)

**Does Congressional require a grave liner?** No. Unlike most cemeteries who want to keep their land perfectly flat, we gave up on that long ago. Our land at Congressional has its own natural undulation—it waves up and down from hundreds of years of burials next to virgin plots still waiting for their person. Does the grave sink after burial? Sure. They all sink a little. They all have to be filled in with additional dirt over time. The sinking is a natural process that occurs with both green burials and burials with a graveliner.

**How do I find a green friendly funeral home?** I highly recommend using the Green Burial Council (GBC) as a resource for funeral homes. But the truth is that all funeral homes can do green burial, even if that is not their usual practice. It's important to tell your funeral home what you want to do during the first phone call. You'll get the sense right away if they're going to be supportive or hesitant. Be specific. Tell them you don't want embalming, just bathing and dressing. If you want your casketed body (even for a closed casket) to be taken to a place of worship before interment at the cemetery, ask them directly if they'll permit it. Some funeral homes have archaic rules about unembalmed bodies going to church, even when the casket is closed. All funeral homes carry a “plain pine box” casket. And most have shrouds available. However, if you are using a shroud only, without a casket, you will want to be sure that you get a sturdy natural burial shroud (see below).

The GBC and Funeral Consumers Choice of Maryland and Environs (FCAME), as well as the

National Home Funeral Alliance (NHFA), are wonderful resources for green burial families looking to be more hands-on with death rituals. The GBC has a handy map of green cemeteries and green friendly funeral homes. And the NHFA is crucial for families wanting guidance on doing funeral vigils with the body at home.

**Don't wanna use a casket?** If you're planning to use a shroud instead of a casket, you need to make sure you have a sturdy natural burial shroud with handles attached to it that is strong enough for carrying the body from the hearse to the grave. And bonus points if your shroud has a back board to better support the body. Additionally, a funeral home may say they have shrouds available, but these shrouds are usually what would be used in a traditional Jewish burial with the intention they will be placed inside a "plain pine box" casket - they are not sturdy enough for a casketless burial.

If you're not burying at Congressional, you'll want to confirm that the cemetery you are working with will permit casketless burial. Any cemetery will bury someone who is not embalmed and in a natural casket, however most will still insist on the use of a graveliner to support the earth (and keep their grounds flat).

Passages International is a great resource for both natural caskets and burial shrouds. Or, for a more local option, check our Reside Burials, a natural casket and shroud maker in Baltimore.



Willow Carrier from Passages International with a natural shroud

**With all funeral plans, be ready to pivot.** Plan and pivot. None of us know what the condition of our bodies will be when we die. If you've been hospitalized for a while and receiving fluids, you could have significant edema which might lead your family to consider using a simple natural casket instead of just a shroud. There are times when families who always thought they would have a natural burial pivot to cremation. In the end, the living have to live. You have to work within your budget and family constraints and just do your best. Cut yourself some slack. You can offset your carbon footprint in other ways. Don't put so much

pressure on yourself in the end. If you need to do a simple cremation and delay gathering family until later, it really is okay.

**Are there other green death care options?** Aside from beautiful natural burial, there are other green alternatives becoming available. Natural Organic Reduction (NOR), commonly called human composting, was started in Seattle, Washington by Katrina Spade. Spade's company, Recompose, has been offering NOR since 2021, and there have been legislative efforts nationwide to make NOR more broadly available. The process involves placing the body in a vessel along with straw, woodchips, and alfalfa. In the course of about a month, the body slowly transforms into soil. I am proud to say I have been working on a side project to get a NOR bill passed in the DMV for the past two years.



Maryland Governor Wes Moore signed our bill, HB 1168, into law on May 9, 2024. In addition to NOR, the bill also legalizes water cremation.

In the end, funeral planning is a gift to the family and the friends you leave behind. Your family wants to know what you want, even if they haven't exactly asked you directly. Whether you plan to do a green burial or a simple cremation - have a plan, write it down, and tell your family where the file is. Research funeral homes that can honor your wishes and your budget, and identify cemeteries that can meet your needs. And with any funeral plans, I recommend giving your family the permission to pivot if they need to. End-of-life can be so hard. For some it means years of decline and illness, with many living way beyond having quality of life. Sure, death can be sudden and tragic, but more often, it can be completely exhausting, and at those moments, families just have to do their very best to take care of each other, whatever way they can.

**By Lily Buerkle**

Director of Site Sales and Funerals  
Historic Congressional Cemetery



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The President's Own, the Marine Band, marches into Congressional Cemetery to perform at the grave of John Philip Sousa. Photo taken by Vincent Vassal

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