



DC's Greatest
Undertaking

The Graveyard Gazette



As fall arrives at Historic Congressional Cemetery, we find ourselves in an exciting chapter of the cemetery's history, one that gives us plenty to celebrate while also looking ahead to what comes next.

Throughout the past year, we have continued to build on the work that makes Congressional Cemetery such a special place: preserving its historic landscape, educating about our interred residents, expanding opportunities for visitors to connect with its stories, and investing in the future of this remarkable site. In this issue, we are especially proud to share news of our new arboretum accreditation, fitting as the trees burst into the magnificent colors of fall, and bring to you a collection of thoughtful articles exploring the people, places, and stories from our nation's 250 years that make the cemetery so extraordinary.

These accomplishments reflect the work of our staff, board of directors, volunteers, partners, supporters, and wider community. As we celebrate how far we have come as a community, we are equally energized by the opportunities and the work ahead.

We hope you enjoy this fall edition of the *Graveyard Gazette* and everything it has to share.



Letter from the Chair

Dear Friends,

I'm excited to introduce myself as the Chair of the Board of Directors of Historic Congressional Cemetery. It is a true honor to serve in this leadership role during an exciting moment for one of Washington's most remarkable historic places. As a long-time member of the K9 Corps community, I've met many of you who love and appreciate HCC as much as I do. Congressional Cemetery has long been a place of history, memory, community, and discovery—and today, it is also a thriving urban greenspace. Now we've reached an important milestone: Congressional Cemetery is an accredited arboretum through ArbNet!

ArbNet is the largest international network of its kind in the world. They set professional standards for arboreta and recognize institutions committed to the stewardship, conservation, and public appreciation of trees. This recognition celebrates something our community has long understood, that the cemetery's landscape is one of its greatest treasures. Our remarkable collection of trees provides shade and habitat, supports biodiversity, improves the health of our city, and creates the beautiful setting that makes Congressional Cemetery a true urban oasis. We are especially grateful to our dozens of tree sponsors whose generous donations have contributed to the care of these amazing communal treasures.

ArbNet accreditation also reflects our larger commitment to thoughtful environmental stewardship. Caring for Congressional Cemetery means safeguarding not only its monuments and stories, but also the living landscape that surrounds them. I am proud this work is being recognized, and even more excited about what it will allow us to build upon in the years ahead.

As chair, I look forward to working alongside my fellow board members, our dedicated staff, volunteers, supporters, and the entire Congressional Cemetery community during this next chapter. There is tremendous momentum here, and I am grateful for the opportunity to help steward this extraordinary place into its future.

I hope you will join me in celebrating this latest achievement of Historic Congressional Cemetery..
Warmly,

Julia Roberson

Julia Roberson
Chair, Board of Directors
Historic Congressional Cemetery



The Association for the Preservation of Historic Congressional Cemetery

1801 E St. SE
Washington, DC 20003
202-543-0539
www.congressionalcemetery.org
staff@congressionalcemetery.org

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Contributors:

Kitty Linton, *Photographer and Social Media Specialist*
Laura Lyster-Mensh, *Death Doula-in-Residence*
Sharon Metcalf, *Circle of Life Designer and Arboretum Partnership Coordinator*
Ashley Molese, *Curator-in-Residence*
Phillip Post, *Bee Ambassador*

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The Association for the Preservation of Historic Congressional Cemetery is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. All donations are deductible to the extent permitted by federal tax laws. Funding for the preservation and maintenance of Historic Congressional Cemetery is provided in part by the Congressional Cemetery Endowment, which was created with matching funds provided by the U.S. Congress and administered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.



From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,



For over a century, the Gatehouse at Congressional Cemetery has served as our residential and administrative hub. Completed in 1923, it replaced an 1832 structure that was topped with a cupola containing the bell used to announce funerals—the same bell used today. Designed to serve as an office and domicile for the caretaker, the Gatehouse served this dual purpose into the 21st century.



During the past two decades, as the cemetery's staff has grown and the need for a residential caretaker is gone, the use of the building has changed substantially. Today the Gatehouse serves multiple functions, housing offices and other workspace, records storage, and the gift shop. A growing staff and other needs associated with the robust level of activity demonstrate the need to renovate and expand.

As part of our master planning process, Congressional Cemetery engaged the services of Hartman-Cox Architects to help us reimagine the Gatehouse and environs. Under their guidance, we developed concept designs to reconfigure and expand the current office spaces, create a new learning center, and build a welcome kiosk at the main gate. This summer we moved into the next phase of planning and expanded the team working on the design to include landscape architects and mechanical, civil, and structural engineers.

Soon we will complete the current design development phase, that will include review by local organizations and agencies, as well as opportunities for public comment. We look forward to sharing these exciting ideas with the Historic Congressional Cemetery community.

Sincerely,

Mark Hudson

Mark Hudson
Executive Director



Support Our Mission

Our Wish List for Fall 2026

This fall, we are asking our community for funds to go towards specific, mission-critical items like field trips to support our K-12 education partnerships, supplies for programs, and equipment for grounds maintenance and beautification. Each of these items has been carefully chosen for maximum impact on the wellbeing and care of our beloved grounds, visitors, and staff. Each item on our list has a sliding scale option and every little bit helps!

Please explore our list below and scan the QR code to donate. Would you rather contribute by check? No problem! Please use the attached envelope in this physical edition and write in where you'd like the funds to go. We greatly appreciate your support and look forward to sharing updates through the fall as we reach each of these goals!

No matter what connects you to Congressional Cemetery, thank you for your support. We count on our community to ensure that our historic grounds remain a welcoming place of respite and reflection for generations to come.



View our Wish List here!



Hose - \$50; 10 needed

Your gift will bring water to thirsty plants around the cemetery through a new 100' hose.



Laptop Computer - \$1,000; 2 needed

Help support our growing team of amazing staff by funding laptops for their use!



Datalogger - \$250; 1 needed

Over two centuries of cemetery records are wishing for a datalogger that will record temperature and humidity in the records vault.



Short-Throw Projector - \$1,500; 1 needed

If you make this wish come true, you will never see someone walk in front of the projector at a program again. Isn't that worth it?



Foldable Cart - \$300; 2 needed

What can you carry in a cart? Art supplies, books, snacks, drinks. The possibilities will be endless when you fulfill the wishes of the programs team.



Snowplow Attachment - \$3,000; 1 needed

By making this wish come true, you will allow us to use our Bobcat to clear the roads and walks for humans and their K9 friends. So, let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!



School Field Trips - \$500; 10 needed

Make a wish come true for a K-12 student by covering the cost for a school bus to bring them to the cemetery for a field trip.



Wood Chipper - \$3,500; 1 needed

How much wood could a woodchuck chuck? We don't know, but our grounds crew can make lots of wood chips and mulch if you make their wish come true.



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

Celebrations and Signage

2026 has been filled with commemorations. In June, the cemetery again hosted Gays & Graves: A Big Gay Festival. This second annual celebration brought hundreds of visitors to Congressional, where they showed off their Pride and supported local LGBTQ+ and allied vendors. Programming included remarks from artist Miram Julianna, whose *Eon's Cranes* installation filled the chapel with 1,000 stained glass creations. Throngs of attendees assembled to hear activist Randy Wicker deliver keynote remarks at a rededication ceremony of Gay Corner. Wicker, 88, has fought for civil rights and equality for all since 1958 and was the first organizer of a gay picket in the United States. He helped unveil new signage that shares the history of this special cemetery section.

On the Fourth of July, the spirit of 1776 came alive in the approximately 100 people who braved the summer heat to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Independence Day. A ceremony held in conjunction with the District of Columbia Society of the Sons of the American Revolution occurred at the gravesite of politician and statesman Elbridge Gerry. Gerry is the only signer of the Declaration of Independence buried in the nation's capital. This semiquincentennial celebration included the unveiling of interpretive signage that details Gerry's life and career, including his governorship and vice presidency.

Activist Randy Wicker and Director of Programming A.J. Orlikoff unveil new signage that tells the history of Congressional Cemetery's Gay Corner.
Vincent Vassall

Emily Gerry, a descendant of Founding Father Elbridge Gerry, with History Education Manager Kurt Deion at the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.



Featured K9 Corps Member



Name: Daisy

Age: At least 10

Member Since: 2018

The Evans-Maupin Family

Likes: Head pats and attention, children (they're apt to give or drop food), nightly cooked sirloin snacks, the cornucopia of cemetery scents, and being the world's gentlest dog

Crucial Conservation

Stabilizing dangerous gravestones and uprighting fallen gravestones remain important tasks. Since 2009, Congressional Cemetery has contracted Devlin McDonald of DMC Restoration to return destabilized monuments to their proper state. Devlin repaired 27 stones in the early stages of 2026, and he is working on 36 stones for the fall. This year he has also worked on

private family vaults, and he helped fix the lock on the historic Public Vault. Over \$120,000 of the cemetery's funds were put toward this conservation.

Congressional Cemetery continuously evaluates areas in need of repair. If you would like to support this meaningful work, we welcome your

donations! Scan this QR code to contribute to the cemetery's Monument Conservation Fund.



Interment Department Updates

The Interment Department is finishing the 2026 Reclamation Project. Unoccupied sites without family contact for over 75 years were listed in our spring newsletter and on the website (within the newsletter) in early 2026. Lineal descendants of the sites are eligible to go through a reclamation process and regain ownership of family graves. The timeline to reclaim any of these sites will conclude on December 1, 2026. The 2027 Reclamation Project will have new sites announced in the first week of January 2027 on our website and in the spring newsletter.

The Interment Department, along with the Building & Grounds Committee and subcommittees, has been working on reviewing, reorganizing, and updating HCC's rules and regulations. We're hoping to have these new documents ready in 2027, and they will be updated on our website when available. As always, our goal is to make our rules and regulations clearer in concept and easier to navigate for visitors, interment right owners, Adopt-A-Plot volunteers, and those creating monument designs. Stay tuned!



Want to attend an upcoming event or program? Check out our events calendar by scanning here.





The American Soundtrack: Francis Scala, John Philip Sousa, and the United States Marine Band

By Philip Espe

An integral part of Washington, DC's summer soundscape are the strains of the United States Marine Band wafting from the Capitol steps along the National Mall. For many, the repertoire of the Marine Band is the sound of America. For years, the Marine Band, known also as "The President's Own," has described itself as "performing America's music since 1798." That music tends to be a grand potpourri of Sousa marches, popular songs, and music from the classical canon. This mix of music, which exists in the American imagination of "patriotic music," has its roots in the Marine Band's programming. Francis Scala and John Philip Sousa, two important leaders of the United States Marine Band who are both interred at the Congressional Cemetery, cemented this musical *mélange* as the

American soundtrack, paving the way for the Marine Band of today and other ensembles across our country.

Scala was born around 1820 and trained in his native home of Naples, a center of music for centuries in pre-unification Italy. Scala attended the *Real Collegio di Musica*, where he would have been immersed in Naples's musical life: a life that was centered around operatic innovation. However, the concert and operatic music of Naples represents only one side of the Neapolitan musical fabric. Outside of the opera hall, Naples was filled with popular and folk songs written and sung in the local dialect. Although the most familiar Neapolitan songs like "O sole mio" and "Funiculi funiculà" were not written until after Scala's immigration to the United States, one imagines this mix of art and popular music simmering in Scala's mind.

Scala initially enlisted in the United States Navy as a Musician Third Class on the USS *Brandywine* in 1841. However, things went south for Scala soon after the *Brandywine* left to cross the Atlantic. He was terribly susceptible to seasickness and "determined that [he] should never again go near salt water..."

After leaving the Navy and declining an enlistment in the United States Army, Scala enlisted in the Marine Band on August 11, 1842. At the time, the Marine Band was an extremely different organization than the world-class music ensemble it is today. In Scala's time, the Marine Band had little official organization beyond the 1798

Marine Corps charter which provided for "thirty-two drummers and fifers."

Scala quickly rose through the ranks of the Marine Band during a period of significant growth and was



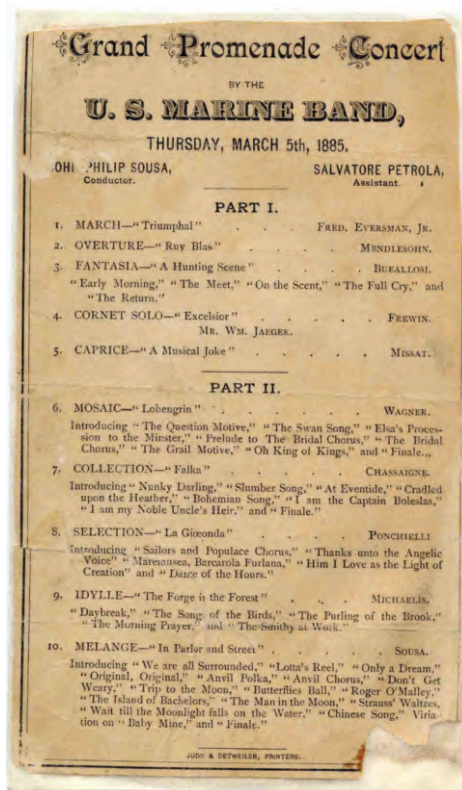
Earliest known photo of the Marine Band in detail. This is an inset of a full battalion photo taken on the Parade Deck of Marine Barracks Washington in 1864. *United States Marine Band Library and Archives*

placed in charge of the band in 1855. Scala described the Marine Band of 1842 as simply “ten or twelve members...enlisted as fifers and drummers.” A twenty-two part arrangement of Black American songs for the Marine Band by Scala’s predecessor, Rafael Triay, gives a clue of the band’s size by the 1850s.

Scala’s musical upbringing is reflected in his collection of music for the Marine Band. Music by contemporary Americans is represented, like the marches and quicksteps of Claudio Grafulla. However, the art music of Scala’s homeland has great representation. Arrangements of operatic selections make up a disproportionately large amount of Scala’s library. One of these operatic fantasies includes an arrangement of music from French operetta composer Jacques Offenbach’s *Geneviève de Brabant*. It includes the melody of the gendarmes duet from the 1861 version of the operetta. This duet’s melody has an uncanny resemblance to the modern-day Marines’ Hymn, making Scala one of the first musicians to introduce the Marine Corps to the melody of its beloved hymn.

A Marine Band program of the time effortlessly blended a mix of American patriotic favorites, selections from the European opera house, and novelty and popular music of the day. In Scala’s era, the Marine Band presented weekly concerts at the White House which were a panacea for the music-loving President Abraham Lincoln. Francis B. Carpenter, a painter who lived at the Lincoln White House for a time, quoted a frustrated Lincoln, who said, “I wish they would just let me sit out there quietly, and enjoy the music.”

The favor Scala carried with President Lincoln led to the most important piece of legislation involving the Marine Band. On July 25, 1861, Lincoln approved an act of Congress that formally established the United States Marine Band. It established the band with one principal musician, designated the “Leader” of the Marine Band, thirty musicians, and retained the Drum Major as



A concert as programmed by John Philip Sousa in 1885, featuring a characteristic mix of classical, popular, and works by Sousa. *United States Marine Band Library and Archives*

authorized in 1798. This cemented the Marine Band’s place in the civic life of Washington, DC, and gave the Marine Band a base to flourish.

John Philip Sousa would have known Scala’s Marine Band well. Sousa was born on November 6, 1854, in Washington, DC, to two immigrants: João Antônio de Sousa, of Spanish birth to Portuguese parents, and Maria Elisabeth Trinkaus, of Bavarian birth. João Antônio, known as simply Antonio in the United States, played trombone in the Marine Band under Scala. John Philip, the third of ten children, followed in his father’s musical footsteps.

Young John Philip enlisted in the Marine Corps at age thirteen as a boy apprentice musician, then served as a musician in the Marine Band, and left the service for a career in theater music. His talents, however, garnered him an invitation to return to the Marine Band as its leader in 1880.

Sousa’s musical world was vast. He learned from the Marine Band that musical variety was of primary importance. He is most famous for his 130 marches. However, he composed in varied genres and forms, from art song to operetta and long-form instrumental works. During his tenure as leader of the Marine Band, Sousa looked to realize the work begun by Scala, transforming the band into a symbol of American musical talent and innovation.

In 1880, however, Sousa inherited a band that was not prepared for the national stage. Then-Marine Corps Commandant Charles G. McCawley remarked that, “The band gives me more trouble than all the rest of the corps put together.” Sousa imposed new performance standards on the band’s members and recruited more accomplished musicians to the Marine Band’s ranks.

Eventually, the Marine Band rose to the international prominence Sousa dreamed of. The acme of Sousa’s career with the Marine Band was its two national tours in 1891 and 1892. On the band’s first tour, a Chicago critic wrote, “the playing of the band, so far as accuracy of note and purity of tone are concerned, is so nearly



The Marine Band, as led by John Philip Sousa, on its first national tour in 1891. *United States Marine Band Library and Archives*

faultless, that it is virtually the perfection of band music.” This was high praise in comparison to Commandant McCawley’s frustrations with the band in 1880.

Sousa’s programming on these tours was eclectic to say the least. The programs opened with an overture from the classical canon, like Felix Mendelssohn’s *Son and Stranger* Overture or Richard Wagner’s overture to *Rienzi*. The program closed with an American patriotic song. For the 1891 tour, it was one of the *de facto* anthems of the United States, “Hail! Columbia” or “The Star Spangled Banner.” Much of the program consisted of orchestral transcriptions of works like Franz Schubert’s *Unfinished Symphony*. Sousa’s longer works like *The Chariot Race* and works that featured both guest soloists and soloists from within the band filled out the program. Encores were played throughout, featuring shorter pieces like Sousa’s marches.

These concerts were appealing to all. Sousa knew he had hit upon a winning formula. He wrote, “I try to cater to all tastes. Every one of my programmes will have one or two pieces of a high character, then three or four of a lighter character, and the rest is of the intensely popular order.”

In the twenty-first century, the Marine Band boasts an impressive ability to perform an incredible variety of music. Beyond its ability to perform classical music as a concert band, marching band, or chamber orchestra, musicians from the Marine Band perform in a myriad of configurations: as a big band, as a Latin jazz ensemble, as a rock band, and as world music ensembles. Following a 2023 state dinner in honor of Prime Minister Narendra

Modi of India, the Marine Band received praise from the Hindu-language press for its performance of Indian classical music.

The Marine Band is committed to presenting, commissioning, and recording a wide breadth of musical styles. As a significant example, the Marine Band commissioned composer David Rakowski in 2000. The result of this commission, Rakowski’s *Ten of a Kind*, a concerto for ten solo clarinetists and wind ensemble, was a finalist for the 2002 Pulitzer Prize in music.

The Marine Band’s concerts still reflect the influence of Sousa and Scala’s programming styles: a blending of old and new music, art and popular music, and the profound intersections of the two. Take, for example, the blend of music presented at the Marine Band’s 2023 change of command concert. That concert effortlessly

blended marches by Sousa, songs of Irving Berlin, concert band masterworks like Percy Grainger’s *Lincolnshire Posy*, orchestral transcriptions, and world première works. The legacy left by the Marine Band’s historic directors is one that has defined the American soundscape for generations. It is a proud legacy that the Marine Band will continue to cultivate in the years to come.

Staff Sergeant Philip Espe is a Librarian and the Historian of “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band.

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The Legal Fight for Freedom: The Bell Family's Court Battles against Enslavement

By Kennedy Simpson, Programs and Education Coordinator

Winning freedom from slavery in pre-emancipation America came in many forms. The commonly held image stands as enslaved African Americans making their escape, traversing the “Underground Railroad” route from safe house to safe house in the dead of night. Escapees did so at great risk to themselves and their families, as armed slave hunters frequently hounded after freedom seekers. Capture often resulted in death or re-enslavement if they were unable to reach the abolitionist North.

However, this was not the only means of escape. Enslavers could manumit their enslaved people, for example, or an enslaved person could purchase or otherwise negotiate their freedom. Another, more unlikely, path to freedom was by way of the courts and judicial system. Although the law upheld the institution of slavery, there were legal outlets to file freedom suits, such as a petition to receive recognition for a person's free status as established by manumission, contract, or a combination of related factors. If a jury in a freedom suit trial ruled that a person was free, then they were free.

One enslaved family, the Bells, is well-remembered for

their fight for freedom, having fought it unilaterally on all of the beforementioned fronts—the courts included. They tirelessly worked to win freedom for every member of their family. Ann Bell and her sister-in-law Mary Bell were among those who took their fight to court. Both directly challenged the District's enslavement laws as they were interpreted at the time. Ann and Mary faced juries without a single peer, yet they still braved a legal system that not only questioned whether or not they had their freedom—but whether they were human at all.

When Marylander Gerard T. Greenfield inherited the people enslaved by his aunt, Maria Anne T. Greenfield, in her 1824 will, the inheritance came with a set of conditions. None of the inherited enslaved people could be sold or be moved outside of Maryland, otherwise, they would immediately be freed. Among the people bequeathed in the will was Ann Bell.

In 1839, Gerard chose to flout the terms of his aunt's will by attempting to sell his “inherited property,” an act that would immediately free the person being sold, James Ash in this case. This violation of the will prompted Ash to file a freedom suit for his promised emancipation upon sale, a case that he won when the jury ruled in favor of the terms of the inheritance.

Ann, who had lived in DC as a free woman for over a decade, with full knowledge of the Greenfield family, sued for her freedom in 1840, one year after Ash's successful suit. However, while Ash vs. Greenfield argued from the basis of his status as inherited property, Bell did not have this option. Greenfield had not broken the terms of Maria Greenfield's will in regard to Ann and her two children; Bell had not been sold or moved out of Maryland. She had been manumitted by Maria Greenfield's brother, Gabriel Greenfield, in his will. Gabriel P. T. Greenfield's will, however, was invalidated by a court of appeals, bringing her manumission into question.

Although invalidated, the court admitted Gabriel P. T. Greenfield's will into evidence. Forced to change tactics,

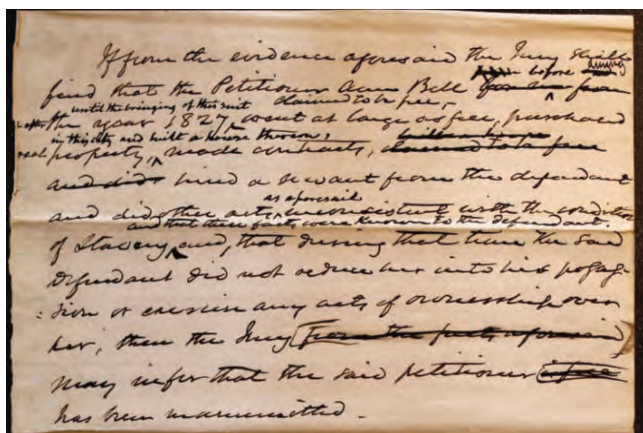


William S. Door, *View of the Interior of the Jail in Washington—Fanny Jackson*. 1836.

Ann and her lawyer, Joseph H. Bradley (who also represented Ash), argued that she demonstrated that she was living as a free person with full knowledge and awareness of the Greenfields, thus implying de facto manumission. With testimony from the community, they argued that Ann had owned property in DC since 1824, had built a house, had conducted her contracts, and had even hired a household servant from the Greenfields themselves. It was difficult for the defense to argue that she was not a free woman; she lived as one, and the Greenfields had not stopped her. The jury agreed, sufficiently swayed by the evidence and testimony provided. As her children were born while she was free, they too were granted the status of free people by the same suit.

These two examples illuminate the central issue at the heart of all court cases brought by enslaved people. Bradley put it best when he rhetorically asked 'Can property be entitled to a trial by jury...?' He argued that, paradoxically, enslaved people were able to file cases in court, afforded certain freedoms such as making contracts, and held responsible for breaking the law. Property could do none of these things. So were freedom suits a matter of property? Or should they count enslaved people as human beings with rights?

Mary Bell came up against this conundrum when she filed her freedom suit in 1847. Although she had been freed by the will of Robert Armstead and lived as a free woman for eight years, Armstead's widow, Susan Armstead, was still able to raise a case to claim that Mary's manumission was void. Robert, Susan claimed, had not been mentally fit when he had written his will and thus Mary and her children still belonged to the estate. The Armsteads had known about Mary living freely in DC, and, if Ann's case was legal precedent, this implied Mary's freedom and the validity of her manumission. However, this was not how the court and appointed jury chose to try the case. Instead, the



If from the evidence aforesaid the Jury shall find that the Petitioner Anne Bell ~~was~~ ^{was} ~~freed~~ ^{freed} from the bondage of the said ~~Gerard T. Greenfield~~ ^{Robert Armstead} until the bringing of this suit ~~claimed to be free~~ ^{was} ~~in the year 1827~~ ^{was} ~~as large as free, purchased in this city and built a house thereon~~ ^{freed by the will of Robert Armstead} ~~and~~ ^{and} ~~had~~ ^{had} ~~hired a servant from the defendant~~ ^{as aforesaid} ~~and did then act, inconsistent with the condition of Slavery and, that during that time the said Defendant did not advise her into his possession or exercise any acts of ownership over her; then the Jury (from the facts aforesaid) may infer that the said Petitioner ~~is~~ ^{has been} manumitted.~~

Jury Instructions, March 1840. Ann Bell v. Gerard T. Greenfield.

claimant argued from a property standpoint, positing that a will made when the writer was not of sound mind was invalid, even if signed and attested. Therefore, the jury decided that the standard disbursement of property to the heirs would apply, not any conditions in the will. This included the nullification of Bell's release from slavery and the allocation of the enslaved to the immediate family.

The loss endangered the Bell family's safety. Susan Armstead, in a bid to recoup legal costs and lost revenue from eight years without her enslaved property, planned to sell off Mary and the Bell children. Daniel Bell, Mary's husband and the brother of Ann Bell, had to buy his family out of slavery or risked being separated from them. He only ended up having enough money for Mary and two of his children. The others were sold off to different areas of the country. Eleanora Bell, who had been born while Mary lived as a free person, had been enslaved as a result of Mary's trial. Ten-year-old Eleanora sued the Armsteads herself in 1849, arguing for free personhood, as Ann did. She lost on the same grounds as her mother.

The courts of antebellum Washington, DC, that decided these cases were swayed by the views of the judge and jury. The central question they examined was foundational: is individual freedom based upon personhood, or upon status as property? A jury determined that Ann was free due to being allowed to conduct herself as a freed person by her enslavers. Property laws were not found to apply. Mary, on the other hand, also lived freely, and the courts took that freedom away because she was property, not a person. This haphazard method of determining legal personhood illustrates a fundamental tension of slavery existing in a nation that professed freedom as a right for all. The Bell family illustrates how African Americans were suspended between this inherent contradiction between the legalities of freedom and enslavement that ultimately would not be resolved until the end of the Civil War.

In the end, the Bells were emancipated under the law, but were no longer whole. Several of Mary's sons never reunited with their family, sold off when they were deemed property instead of people. The Bell family suffered the cruelty and absurdity of slavery in a way that foreshadowed the fault line upon which the American Civil War erupted. The opposing Union and Confederacy fought countless battles arguing the same questions that were being asked in court. Was it right to enslave a human being? The United States was not free or whole until the matter was settled with blood.

A bibliography for this article is available upon request.



Adapt or Die: The Lively Evolution of North American Cemeteries

By A.J. Orlikoff, Director of Programming

This article was first published in the April 2026 issue of American Cemetery and Cremation Magazine.

On a mild December afternoon, I walked with a colleague through the oldest section of Washington, DC's Historic Congressional Cemetery. Before us stretched a landscape shaped by more than two centuries of mourning, memory, and change. As we discussed programming, community use, and the growing expectations placed upon historic cemeteries, I was struck by a quiet realization: those who first gathered in this burial ground also stood at the edge of an unknown future.

On July 20, 1807, congressmen, government officials, military officers, and members of Washington society assembled at a modest 4.5-acre burial ground on the city's eastern edge, overlooking the Anacostia River. Owned by Christ Church Washington Parish, the cemetery had no official name and only months earlier had received its first burial: William Swinton, a stonecutter who helped build the U.S. Capitol. Now, in full ceremony, the mourners watched as Senator Uriah Tracy of Connecticut was laid to rest. Tracy's burial was born of necessity rather than intention. Transporting his body home by carriage was impractical, and the young capital lacked a burial ground within the bounds of Washington City. Those in attendance evidently approved of the location, and dozens of Congressional interments followed, giving the cemetery its enduring name.

It is doubtful that those who laid Tracy to rest were aware of the dawning changes on the horizon. They stood at the precipice of a transformation not only for Washington and the new nation, but for American

cemeteries themselves. Over the ensuing decades, cultural attitudes toward death, mourning, and remembrance shifted dramatically. The landscapes of cemeteries mirrored these changes, evolving from utilitarian burial grounds into pastoral retreats, commemorative parks, and eventually highly regulated spaces of perpetual care. In this way, cemeteries have never been static institutions. They have always adapted, consciously or otherwise, to the social, cultural, and practical needs of the living.

Scholars and practitioners alike have long documented these cycles of transformation. The Rural Cemetery Movement of the nineteenth century, beginning with Mount Auburn in Cambridge, MA, reimagined burial grounds as landscaped public spaces, places for contemplation, promenading, and even recreation. Victorian mourning customs reshaped memorialization practices and funerary art, while the rise of embalming and the professional funeral home in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shifted deathcare away from the home and into specialized institutions. In the twentieth century, lawn-park cemeteries emphasized uniformity and perpetual care, and in recent decades, cremation, green burial, and personalization have further diversified memorial practices. Each shift reflected broader societal changes in how death was understood, managed, and integrated into daily life.

Today, approximately two centuries after the first interments at Congressional Cemetery, cemeterians and deathcare professionals find themselves on the edge of another profound transition. Ever-evolving cultural norms about how people talk about, think about, and experience death are once again transforming the landscape of remembrance. Across North America,

cemeteries are increasingly reasserting themselves not solely as spaces of burial, but as active cultural landscapes, places of interpretation, community engagement, environmental stewardship, and public life.

At Congressional Cemetery, this evolution is visible in ways both subtle and striking. Once primarily a destination for funerals and genealogical research, the cemetery today serves as an urban green space, a site of historical interpretation, and a gathering place for community programming. Daily dog walking through the K9 Corps membership program brings hundreds of visitors onto the grounds not in moments of grief, but in moments of routine life. Programs that Congressional deploys, including the *Cemetery Speaker Series* featuring authors and scholars, *Soul Strolls* immersive historical theater tours, and thematic races such as *Dead Man's Run* and the *Cherry Blossom 5K*, reframe cemeteries as places of historical learning and community engagement, almost like an outdoor museum curated by those who lived the history. These initiatives do not diminish the cemetery's sacred character; rather, they reactivate its historic role as a communal landscape where the living and the dead coexist within a shared space of reflection and meaning.

This shift is not unique to Washington, DC. At Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, GA innovative interpretive programming, such as *Capturing the Spirit of Oakland*, blends costumed historical storytelling with immersive engagement, inviting visitors to encounter the past in dynamic and corporeal fashion. Jessica VanLanduyt, Historic Oakland Foundation's Vice President of Experiences & Engagement, says that *Capturing the Spirit of Oakland* tours "(are) designed to enlighten, not frighten...to share the history and stories



Actor Otto Adelman portrayed Congressional Cemetery interred resident Dr. Millard Thompson at *Soul Strolls: Graverobbing and Resurrection* (2025) *Vincent Vassall*

of Oakland...(to) celebrate the legacies of those within our grounds." Programs like *Capturing the Spirit of Oakland* and *Soul Strolls* reframe cemeteries as spaces of education and cultural connection rather than solely as sites of mourning.

Similarly, cemeteries like Hollywood Forever in Los Angeles and Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa have embraced film screenings, concerts, and cultural events that draw diverse audiences into memorial landscapes. While these activities may appear unconventional at first glance, they echo nineteenth-century practices, when rural cemeteries functioned as places for picnicking, strolling, and civic gathering. In many respects, contemporary programming represents not a departure from tradition, but a return to earlier conceptions of cemeteries as integrated public spaces.



5K races, such as the *Cherry Blossom 5K*, are another example of how Congressional Cemetery engages with the community and encourages communal gathering.

Kitty Linton

Perhaps most notably, the growing death-awareness movement has played a significant role in reshaping public engagement with cemeteries. Death cafés, end-of-life planning workshops, and the emergence of death doulas reflect a broader cultural shift toward openness about mortality. Notably, Congressional even hosts a Death Doula in Residence, Laura Lyster-Mensh, who is now entering her 4th year in residence at the cemetery. Where previous generations often shrouded death in silence and institutional distance, many individuals today seek opportunities to discuss grief, remembrance, and legacy in communal and supportive environments. Cemeteries, by their very nature, are uniquely positioned to facilitate these conversations. Programs focused on grief, remembrance, and death literacy do not sensationalize mortality; instead, they foster empathy, reflection, and a deeper understanding of the human experience.

At the same time, broader urban and environmental trends are influencing how cemeteries are perceived and utilized. As cities become denser and access to green space becomes increasingly limited, historic cemeteries have emerged as vital ecological and recreational resources. Mature tree canopies, preserved landscapes, and open lawns offer environmental benefits and restorative spaces within urban environments. Many cemeteries are accredited arboretums, a status Congressional aims to achieve this year. Institutions like Bellefontaine Cemetery in St. Louis, MO, and Arlington National Cemetery enjoy a Level III arboretum status, with at least 500 species of trees. This ecological dimension aligns naturally with the historic mission of many cemeteries as places of perpetual care, now expanded to include biodiversity, sustainability, and environmental education. In this context, cemeteries function not only as repositories of memory, but as essential components of urban infrastructure and community well-being.

Undergirding all these developments is a fundamental shift in cultural attitudes toward death and remembrance. Contemporary society is increasingly individualized, mobile, and digitally connected, yet paradoxically searching for authentic spaces of grounding and continuity. Cemeteries provide a tangible link to the past in an era often defined by ephemerality. Visitors may arrive for a tour, a walk, or a cultural event, but they inevitably encounter the enduring presence of those who came before them. This encounter fosters a form of historical empathy that cannot be replicated through books or digital archives alone.

For cemetery professionals, these changes present both opportunities and challenges. Traditional models

centered exclusively on burial revenue and passive visitation are increasingly difficult to sustain, particularly for historic cemeteries operating in urban contexts with limited available burial space. At the same time, expanding programming and community engagement requires thoughtful stewardship to ensure that innovation remains respectful of the site's commemorative purpose. The task is not to transform cemeteries into entertainment venues, but to thoughtfully integrate contemporary relevance with solemn remembrance.

In this sense, the current moment represents not a rupture with tradition or established models, but a continuation of a long pattern of adaptation. Just as the founders of early American burial grounds responded to the practical and cultural needs of their time, today's cemetery leaders must respond to the expectations of post-modern communities. To remain relevant, cemeteries must embrace their multifaceted roles as sites of memory, education, ecology, and civic life. Resistance to change risks rendering these landscapes increasingly disconnected from the communities they were created to serve.

While walking through the grounds of Congressional Cemetery, it is difficult not to reflect on the layers of transformation embedded within the landscape itself. From a modest burial ground born of necessity to a nationally significant historic site and evolving urban greenspace, the cemetery has continually adapted to the needs of each generation. Those who gathered for Senator Tracy's burial could not have foreseen the cultural, environmental, and social roles cemeteries would one day occupy. Yet their choice of this landscape set in motion a legacy of evolution that continues today.

North American cemeteries now stand at another precipice. Cultural openness about death, the need for communal green spaces, and the desire for meaningful historical engagement are reshaping public expectations of memorial landscapes. Cemeteries that thoughtfully embrace this evolution are poised to remain vital institutions of memory in the twenty-first century. Those that resist risk becoming static relics—preserved, perhaps, but increasingly disconnected from the living communities whose histories they steward. The path forward is not one of abandoning tradition, but of reaffirming the North American cemetery's enduring role as a living landscape of remembrance, where past and present meet, and where memory continues to find new forms of expression.



Batalá Washington performs at Congressional Cemetery's Spring Celebration in 2025. *Vincent Vassall*



Photo credit to Ralph Garboushian

PUT DOWN ROOTS

At Fulcrum we believe in putting down roots — honoring our past, celebrating our present, and growing our future. That's why we love our partnership with Congressional Cemetery, a place where history, community and a love for this city come together.

And this season, there's even more to celebrate: Congratulations to Congressional Cemetery on officially becoming a Level 1 Arboretum!



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DEAD MAN'S RUN

Saturday, October 10 • 5 PM
@ Historic Congressional Cemetery
Purchase tickets at congressionalcemetery.org

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