

The Story of
The Woodlawn Cemetery

by Edward Streeter

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THE WOODLAWN CEMETERY

Executive Office: 20 East 23rd Street
New York, New York 10010

Cemetery Office: Webster Avenue & 233rd Street
Bronx, New York 10470

Mausoleum Office: Jerome & Bainbridge Avenue
Bronx, New York 10470

(1975c.)

“Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender sympathies of its people, their respect for the law and their loyalty to high ideals.”

WILLIAM E. GLADSTONE,
*Prime Minister of England
under Queen Victoria*

Preface

The Woodlawn Cemetery was organized in 1863 during the third year of the Civil War. Its history covers a period which has witnessed greater changes than occurred during any similar span of time in the life of man. It has grown and mellowed during these years while a world in transition has flowed by it like a stream around a boulder.

This booklet is an introduction to Woodlawn, one of the nation's most beautiful cemeteries. The rules and regulations which govern its administration must, of necessity, be amended from time to time to conform to new laws and to meet new requirements. For this reason they have been included in a separate booklet. The matter of bequests and trusts for the special care of lots and single graves has also been treated in a separate folder. Both are available upon request.

To those who are interested, many questions are bound to arise which are not included in these booklets. The officers and staff of the Cemetery will be glad to answer them either by con-

sultation or phone at the New York office of Woodlawn Cemetery at 20 East 23rd Street (Algonquin 4-4470), at the Administration office, just inside the Webster Avenue entrance (547-5400) or at the Cemetery Sales Office, at the entrance gate at Jerome and Bainbridge Avenues (653-2431). There will be someone available at the latter office every day of the week to show mausoleum crypts and niches, lots and single grave sites to prospective purchasers.



Woodlawn was founded as a rural cemetery, and has been maintained as such for over a century.



Many families prefer above-ground entombment. In Woodlawn's Chapel Community Mausoleum clean, dry, crypts and niches are available at attractive prices.

The Story of The Woodlawn Cemetery

1.

Extending southward through Connecticut and Westchester County are a series of rocky ridges which converge north of Manhattan Island to form what is geologically known as the Fordham Gneiss. It disappears under the Harlem River and only reappears again in the form of a few rocky islands in the East River and at one point in Long Island City. "However it remains the underlying layer of the whole city area...."*

One of these ridges separates the Bronx River Valley from the valley which ultimately leads into the Hudson River at Spuyten Duyvil. At its highest point, flanked to the west by Van Cortlandt Park and to the east by the meandering Bronx River and the parkway which bears its name, lies The Woodlawn Cemetery.

The suburbs of New York long ago by-passed the ridge and now extend far to the north and yet, within the life span of three seventy-year-old men, indians hunted through the virgin forests that formerly covered these slopes and

* John Kieran: "Natural History of New York City."

New York was a seaport town with a population of approximately 14,000 persons.

Farming villages, entirely disassociated from New York, slowly formed along the banks of the Hudson and in the valleys which flank it on either side. When, on the night of August 29, 1776, Washington gave up his hopeless position on Long Island and succeeded in evacuating his army across the East River to Manhattan Island, it was the start of his move north to Westchester County. There he chose one of these villages, White Plains, in which to make a stand against the British. His line of retreat to White Plains lay along what was then known as the Broncks River Valley.

In order to delay the British troops he ordered General Heath of the Continental Army to construct a redoubt at the southeast corner of what is now The Woodlawn Cemetery, its guns pointing down the present Bronx River Parkway and covering the Old Post Road and an important bridge over the river.

The custom of referring to this modest little stream as a river caused embarrassment to at least one British general and illustrates the difficulty of fighting a distant war during the eighteenth century. It is recorded that General Howe of the British Army was criticized in England for not attacking Washington's retreating army

from the rear by sailing his gunboats up the Broncks River, which is scarcely navigable for a canoe.

Memories of the Revolution were pushed into the background during the next seventy-five years by the spectacular westward surge of the United States. Fordham Ridge, as it was then called, became a place of peaceful farms and woodlots and the dust from marching columns no longer rose from the valleys below.

Nothing of historical significance seems to have happened on the ridge until December 29, 1863 when, a few weeks after Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg address, the founders of Woodlawn acquired a large section of its land under a state charter authorizing the establishment of a cemetery.

Woodlawn was created to serve the northern part of New York and Westchester County as Green-Wood Cemetery served the southern part of the City and Brooklyn. Funeral processions were finding it increasingly difficult to penetrate the traffic from 42nd Street (which then marked the northern edge of the City) to the ferries which transported them to Brooklyn and thence to Green-Wood. Those of us who complain about the present congestion of our streets have little concept of the mid-nineteenth century bedlam on our cobblestoned thoroughfares. They were

devoid of red and green lights and, in most cases, of police control. Horse-drawn vehicles of every description, from overburdened drays to cabs and private carriages, filled them wheel-to-wheel. In the absence of horns, shouting was the approved way of pushing one's way through, and crossing an intersection was a matter of the survival of the boldest.

The *New York Daily Times*, under date of March 30, 1866, published "A sketch of the History of All the Cemeteries in and around the cities of New York and Brooklyn." In its discussion of Woodlawn it said, in part, "It is sufficiently remote from the island to be beyond the reach of its noise and the apprehensions of disturbance from the extension of the city limits. It is essentially a rural cemetery and must remain so for years to come." The *Times* made a poor forecast on the growth of the City, but it was correct when it said that Woodlawn would remain a rural cemetery "for years to come."

The closing paragraphs of the *Times* article made certain statements which are of interest as an illustration of our changing point of view. The founders wished, said the *Times* "to have it more accessible than any of the other cemeteries in the suburbs. Those, with the exception of Trinity Churchyard, all lie across navigable waters, and are approached by crowded streets

and ferries. These occasion delays to the funeral processions and often furnish sights and sounds very little in keeping with the wounded sensibilities of the sorrowing. In the approaches to Wood-Lawn (it was originally written as a hyphenated word) the public has the advantage of steam cars and a railway, as well as the ordinary modes of conveyance by avenues not yet thronged with business.”

“Funeral parties,” the *Times* continued, “with the remains of their dead, are conveyed by special trains in thirty-five minutes from any of the city stations on the Harlem Railroad to the main entrance of the Cemetery. By contract made with the railroad company, cars can be chartered for this purpose at reduced prices and at convenient hours, while the cost of carriage hire at both ends of the route may often be avoided and when incurred is much less than that required to convey the same parties to Greenwood, and if the trip be made wholly in carriages it is not more expensive in money or time to those who live in the upper part of the city.” A century ago the average New Yorker appears to have been definitely economy-minded.

“These advantages,” the *Times* pointed out, “are more readily appreciated by the public than would have been anticipated and already the current of the sorrowing and bereaved is turned

toward Wood-Lawn. People in the City are so accustomed to travel by the cars and to remove their dead by them to their early homes in the country, that there is found to be little if any prejudice against this mode of conveyance. It is gradually working a change in our funeral customs and, woman, who has so long been excluded from funeral processions, is coming back to her appropriate place in the circle of the bereaved and at the sepulcher.”

Woodlawn was laid out as a "rural cemetery," a product of the Romantic Era. As Henry Hope Reed, Jr., pointed out several years ago in an article which appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune Sunday Magazine*, the first cemetery in the "natural" English style was Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which dates from 1831; the second was Green-Wood (1838) and "a possible third" was Laurel Hill in Philadelphia. Referring to Woodlawn he says, "This Garden of Graves differs from Père Lachaise (in Paris) or the Metairie (in New Orleans) in being a leafy bower rather than a series of temple-lined paths or miniature Via Appia Anticas."

The Reverend Absalom Peters has been called the Father of Woodlawn. For many years he strove to interest civic minded citizens of New York and Westchester in a "rural" cemetery whose natural beauty would be guaranteed by its distance from the city limits. According to Dr. Peters' concept it was to be developed and administered by a Board of Trustees authorized

by law to accept endowments and bequests in trust in the same manner as other public and semi-public organizations.

Dr. Peters was a man of many talents; a theologian, a poet, a man of vision and, fortunately for Woodlawn, endowed with an extraordinary tenacity of purpose. In the early '60's he assembled eight prominent residents of New York City, who were convinced that the churchyards and existing public cemeteries would soon reach their capacity.

This group explored the countryside north of the City for a desirable site for the proposed cemetery. At last they found it on the ridge which Washington had fortified almost 90 years before. It was occupied by a farm which had been owned and operated by the Bussing family for generations. The old redoubt was still there and the site has since been marked with a plaque by Woodlawn. The original purchase consisted of 313 acres of which a quarter was in woodlots.

If one did not use the railroad, the drive from midtown New York to Woodlawn and return required the better part of a day. It took courage and vision to invest the relatively large sums of money necessary to employ engineers and landscape architects, to clear at least a portion of this land, to free the subsoil of rock ledges and boulders, to lay out and build roads, paths and bridges



"The End of the Day." The Vernon W. B. Castle Memorial. Sally Farnham, Sculptor.



A rural cemetery has many aspects.

and to erect the necessary service buildings.

Dr. Peters' enthusiasm was infectious, however. He was determined that Woodlawn should be the country's most beautiful cemetery. Gradually, without the aid of bull-dozers or any other modern equipment, the Woodlawn of today, in part at least, began to take shape.

The first interment, that of Mrs. Phoebe E. Underhill, was made during January, 1865, some three months before Lee surrendered at Appomattox. An era had come to an end. The United States had spanned a continent. The days of the swashbuckling adventurers were numbered. Indians continued to roam the plains and "bad men" were still laying the foundations for Western Mythology, but new forces were at work which would change all these things into memories with astonishing speed.

Under the impetus of the research which always accompanies a great war, inventions and discoveries, forced into being by necessity, were put to peaceful uses and the United States started on the path of industrial development from which it has never since deviated.

Woodlawn belonged to this post-war era. New York City, which always responds to the national tempo, increased in population by leaps and bounds and Absalom Peters' certainty of the need for a new cemetery was fully vindicated.

The first meeting of the founders was held December 29, 1863. At this meeting the corporate name of "The Wood-Lawn Cemetery" was agreed upon (soon after changed to Wood-lawn). The number of the trustees was fixed at 12 and the first board was elected consisting of:

WILLIAM A. BOOTH	ABSALOM PETERS
JAMES D. SMITH	CALEB B. KNEVALS
HORACE F. CLARK	DAVID HOADLEY
LUCIUS HOPKINS	AUGUSTUS SCHELL
SAMUEL B. PARSONS	CHARLES CRARY
BENJAMIN W. BONNEY	WILLIAM E. MORRIS

On December 30, 1863, the following officers were elected:

President	WILLIAM A. BOOTH
Vice President	ABSALOM PETERS
Treasurer	LUCIUS HOPKINS
Secretary	JAMES D. SMITH

Shortly thereafter additional land was purchased from Samuel Valentine who owned an adjacent farm. The present receiving vault occupies the site of the old Valentine homestead. There did not seem to have been any great pressure to develop this newly acquired land, however, for at its meeting on June 15, 1864, the board passed a resolution permitting Mr. Valentine to cut rye on his former property.

During the year 1864, 60 acres were enclosed

with a white picket fence; 321 rods of roads were built; a stone bridge was constructed over the brook; iron gates were placed at each entrance; a receiving tomb was erected; the Harlem Railroad agreed to build a new station near the northeast entrance to be called Woodlawn; 60 lots were sold and to facilitate its work the Cemetery bought two yoke of cattle,* several carts, three horses, a roller and a stone digger.

During April, 1865, a newly created Executive Committee was authorized to borrow \$12,500. Being a non-profit organization the Trustees of Woodlawn have always steered a narrow course between red and black figures. Their 1866 report, for example, discloses receipts of \$40,399.10 and expenses of \$40,592.34 (including \$21,543.33 for labor).

There were 54 interments during 1865; the stone cottage at the northeast entrance was completed; an ice house was built, roads were extended; the picket fence was rebuilt to enclose 100 additional acres; a hearse was bought for the "convenience of funeral parties" coming to Woodlawn by train and 137 lots were sold.

* In those early years stones for mausoleums and grave markers were transported by rail to the Woodlawn station and then transferred to ox-carts to be hauled to the Cemetery.

During succeeding decades the story is one of steady growth. Surpluses and deficits alternated, with the volume of surpluses exceeding that of deficits sufficiently to establish in 1913 the all-important General Care Fund of the Cemetery on a sound financial basis.

The growth of the Cemetery can be measured not only in increasing lot sales and interments, but also by the constant expansion of the labor force as new acreage was developed from the sites of the old farms and woodlots, roads and paths were extended, new trees and shrubs planted and more labor was needed to care for the increasing number of those already installed.

The Trustees' report for 1867 lists 16 men employed during the winter months. This number was reduced to four "during bad weather" and during the summer months the total force was increased to 30. By 1872 the labor force had increased to a winter minimum of 45 and a summer maximum of 75.

At the annual meeting held during January,

1873, the controller outlined a program of special work to be done during the current year which would necessitate increasing the summer force to 100. He might have been surprised could he have known that in 1964 the routine upkeep of the Cemetery would require a summer force of 300 men working with the most modern equipment available.

At the end of its first decade the Cemetery owned 380 acres of land of which 69½ acres had been cleared and graded; over five and a half miles of roads had been built and approximately four miles of paths; 2,848 lots had been sold.

Woodlawn was being recognized as one of the beautiful cemeteries of the world.

The Cemetery continued to grow, to add to its natural beauty and to strengthen its financial position. New York City, originally so remote, moved northward with the irresistible force of a glacier, but park-flanked Woodlawn remained untouched.

To pass through its great entrance gates into its tree shaded roads is like entering another world. It is a world of trees, and shrubs and flowers. Because of this it has been for many years a natural bird sanctuary, both for migrant birds and for those that make it a permanent residence. Several years ago a group of young ornithologists made a check and reported 119 species varying from common white-breasted nuthatches, starlings and sparrows to the rarer Eastern kingbirds, white-eyed virios and yellow bellied flycatchers.

Some of the migrant birds find life so pleasant at Woodlawn that a few remain each year. A familiar sight, as one crosses the stone bridge over the narrow end of the lake, is a flock of 35 to 40 Canada geese, interspersed with a dozen

or more mallard ducks. These are old timers who have adopted the lake as their home. On sunny days they stand or sit on the narrow strip of grass which separates the lake from the road at the end of the bridge, watching the automobiles drive slowly past as if they might be doing a bit of "spotting" on their own.

As the various areas of Woodlawn were developed the woodlots disappeared and it was necessary to plant new and more suitable trees. A survey of shade trees made in 1960 listed 3,388. It did not include any of the ornamental flowering trees which are abundantly present in all parts of the Cemetery, nor did it include the numerous Japanese maples, both weeping and upright, or the unusual specimens such as golden rain trees, hackberry, katsura, silver bell, Kentucky coffee trees and cork trees.

King of them all is a massive white oak which stands in the northern part of the Cemetery and in all probability predates its hundred-year-old charter by a century or more. It stands strong and vigorous with a girth of 14½ feet, a spread of 100 feet and a height of 75 feet.

Only a few places like Woodlawn have been able, because of their situation, to withstand the pressures of a changing world. A stranger, revisiting the Cemetery for the first time since the turn of the century, would recognize the old roads

twisting and turning among the trees. The trees themselves would be bigger, however, the shrubbery thicker, the myrtle and ivy more dense. Nothing would have changed basically, but the entire area would have a different look; older, but with more serene maturity.

If the visitor entered through the Jerome Avenue gate he would note the absence of the old bell which, for 40 years, hung in the tower of the entrance lodge and was tolled as each funeral procession entered the Cemetery. He would re-discover it in the white belfry of the beautiful colonial revival chapel given to the Cemetery by Velma B. Woolworth.*

The feature that would strike him most forcibly as he walked along the turf-bordered paths would be the number of famous names on the monuments and mausoleums which had been erected during the half century and more of his absence. Here indeed is the world's most diversified Hall of Fame; men and women whose lives have left permanent marks on the history of their country. Some amassed wealth, some saved lives through medical research, some saved souls, some governed, some influenced the course of civilization through the arts, some made thousands happier with their wit: O. H. P. Belmont,

* This is a non-denominational chapel which is available for services in connection with Woodlawn funerals.



The O. H. P. Belmont Mausoleum, based on the famous Chapel of St. Hubert at the Chateau of Amboise in France. R. H. Hunt, Architect.



The lake at Woodlawn is a haven for waterfowl, both migratory and permanent residents.

Nellie Bly, Vernon Castle, George M. Cohan, Clarence Day, James Montgomery Flagg, John H. Flagler, Jay Gould, Oscar Hammerstein, Victor Herbert, Collis P. Huntington, Charles Evans Hughes, Fritz Kreisler, Fiorello H. LaGuardia, Herman Melville, Joseph Pulitzer, Philip Kip Rhineland, Grantland Rice, Damon Runyon, F. W. Woolworth. Without these men and women the United States would not be the land it is today and yet their names are but a random sampling.

Modern Woodlawn continues to be a "rural" cemetery and it is hoped, by those charged with its maintenance, that it will always remain so.

However, during the decades since the first interment in 1865 the original 400 acres have gradually been sold, until it was possible to estimate the number of years that would elapse before Woodlawn became what is known as a "closed cemetery."

This was not a unique situation, nor was it unexpected when large cemeteries across the country were pondering the same inevitable problem. As a result, what are known as "community mausoleums" began to appear in some cemeteries.

A community mausoleum is a building containing multiple crypts which may be sold to various purchasers, as compared to private mausoleums for single or family occupancy.

Such community mausoleums were at first more or less experimental, but the public acceptance of this new concept of above ground burial

was immediate. Woodlawn began to receive inquiries on the subject. In 1967 it created its first community mausoleum by re-adapting to crypts and niches for cremation urns the former receiving vaults near the Webster Avenue gate. The project was so successful that in less than two years it became evident that additional space must be created on a far larger scale if the increasing demand was to be met.

In determining the site of the new structure, it was decided that the lovely Woolworth Chapel, standing on a broad expanse of lawn inside the Jerome Avenue gate, would make an ideal center for an ultimate complex of mausoleum buildings.

Ground was broken for the first of the "Chapel Mausoleums" in the autumn of 1969. Long before the building was completed, crypts were being purchased. In an increasing number of cases, a series of adjacent crypts would be purchased to insure the future propinquity of family interments just as family lots had formerly served to do.

The new building began to function in 1971. A year later 60% of its available space had been sold, and ground was broken for a second building to the north of the Chapel, designed to contain more than 1,200 crypts and a proportional number of niches.

At this point, all but 29 acres of the original

400 had been sold or absorbed by roads, landscaping paths, etc. How best to use these remaining acres to meet the requirements of a future public, and at the same time to maintain Woodlawn's natural beauty, became an immediate problem. A survey of the available acres was made to determine what land was best suited to future community mausoleum buildings and what areas were best adapted for ground burials.

As a result of this survey, a long range plan has been drawn up in which sites have been set aside for community mausoleums and areas for ground burials. Happily, these choices do not conflict. The rolling hills of Woodlawn are underlaid with rock. At points where the topsoil is thin, underground burial is, and always has been, impractical. On the other hand, these are usually the most desirable locations for community mausoleums.

And thus, at a time when land available for ground burials was coming to a foreseeable end, the public acceptance of community mausoleums has made it possible to project the useful life of Woodlawn for many years to come.

Persons wishing detailed information regarding community mausoleums should phone 653-2431.

Although the natural beauty of Woodlawn remains unchanged, the problems involved in its financing and administration have changed greatly since the first sixty acres of its property were enclosed by a white picket fence and the labor force ranged from four during "the bad days of winter" to 30 during the peak of the summer season.

These changes have been brought about by a number of circumstances. Most of Woodlawn's 400 acres have been put into condition for burial purposes. This has required a corresponding growth in the executive and labor forces. To this must be added the great decrease in the value of the dollar, particularly since 1890 when a dollar had four times the purchasing power that it has today, a situation which has raised problems in connection with cemetery administration.

How is the present operation financed?

The cemeteries of New York State are supervised by a Cemetery Board consisting of the Secretary of State, the Attorney General and the

Commissioner of Health. These appointed officials may, and do, appoint deputies to carry on the day-to-day work of the Board.

Included in its supervisory duties the Cemetery Board controls the prices which individual New York State cemeteries may charge for ground interments, gardening work, foundations and a number of other items. It must also approve the rules and regulations of all non-sectarian cemeteries such as Woodlawn.

The Cemetery's sources of income are the revenues from the various services whose prices are controlled by the State Board and the net return from land sales as well as the sale of crypts and niches in community mausoleums.

Under the law a specified percentage of the proceeds from land sales, and by a decision of Woodlawn's Trustees from sales of crypts and niches, goes into what is known as the Permanent Maintenance Fund. In addition a percentage of sales relating to the community mausoleums is placed in a fund to supplement the Permanent Maintenance Fund in the maintenance of these buildings. After all obligations have been met, the rest of the income is placed in a fund known as the General Care Fund.

Both the Permanent Maintenance Fund and the General Care Fund are fully invested. When the last lot is sold and the capacity of the com-

munity mausoleums has been reached, the upkeep of the Cemetery must be met largely by the income from these investments plus gardening fees and charges for interments and a few minor services.

In spite of the fact that the price of Cemetery lands has increased many times since 1863, net income from the various sources mentioned has failed to keep up with the inflationary tendencies of the period, particularly since World War I.

It became apparent a number of years ago that persons desiring special planting and special care on their family burial places, as many quite naturally do, could only insure themselves of accomplishing this over the years by establishing endowments, either during their lifetime or by will, to be held in trust for the benefit of their particular properties.

Woodlawn is authorized by law to accept such trusts in the form of cash or securities and to use the income therefrom for the maintenance of specified lots, private mausoleums or single graves. Such maintenance trusts are, in fact, required by the Cemetery before a private mausoleum may be erected in order to cover the necessary repairs to the stone work which inevitably are needed.

Before establishing such a trust, it is highly desirable to allow the Cemetery to estimate the

principal amount required to produce sufficient income to insure the desired care. This subject is treated in more detailed form in Woodlawn's leaflet on how to establish an endowment.

The Cemetery also provides what is known as Special Annual Care for single graves, lots and some of the older unendowed mausoleums, the cost of which is billed each year. This has not proved entirely satisfactory due to the fact that, when those particularly interested in the upkeep of a lot or single grave move away or die, annual care is apt to be dropped, leaving the lot with special planting which the Cemetery is unable to maintain with the general maintenance funds available.

These facts are today generally recognized, with the result that Woodlawn currently holds nearly 8,000 trusts for the permanent care of lots and mausoleums and that new trusts are being established at the rate of approximately \$500,000 annually.



Across cloister-like gardens, Woodlawn's new Chapel Community Mausoleums flank the lovely Woolworth Memorial Chapel.



Bronze doorway of the Moritz B. Philipp Mausoleum. A. Franco, Sculptor.

This briefly is the story of Woodlawn. On January 14, 1865, there was only one interment. To-day nearly 230,000 persons have found their final resting place within its rolling, tree-shaded acres.

Absalom Peters' dream has materialized.

A cemetery is not merely a plot of land set apart for burial purposes. It is a place of such beauty that it becomes a perpetual memorial to those interred within its boundaries. A cemetery is not a gloomy area that speaks of death, but a vigorous entity that vibrates with life—a place of growing things which pass through the cycles of the seasons, bursting forth in the spring of each year into new youth, new vitality.

Absalom Peters visualized all these qualities in a rural cemetery. Woodlawn has been maintained as such for over a century. Those presently charged with the direction of its policies propose to keep it so through the years ahead.

