Naming America's Graveyards, Cemeteries, Memorial Parks, and Gardens of Memories

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While many urban cemeteries today bear the stamp of perpetually endowed conformity, America's burial grounds still attract the interests of linguists, historians, folklorists, and anthropologists seeking to understand cultural cycles transmitted by the communities of the dead. The naming patterns for cemeteries reflect evolving tastes and attitudes.

Brief History Of Cemeteries In "Western" Culture

An overview of centuries of the historical abodes of the dead (Ragon 1983) is useful before considering name patterns of burial grounds in the United States. Egyptians named their tombs "eternal habitations"; the term was taken up by Israelites, who also used "houses for life."

In most civilizations, the houses of the dead were more magnificent than the houses of the living. The Etruscan tomb was a veritable underground house. The ancient Greeks, like the ancient Romans, buried their dead under the stone floors of their houses (hygienic concerns later forbade this practice). Until the second century of the Christian era, the practice of incineration spread until cremation was scorned by the influence of Christianity. A period of transition from the cremation urn to the coffin came during the fourth and fifth centuries. Then burial became almost exclusively prevalent.

In the era of Christian influence, prominent individuals were buried under the floor of a building until space was filled, and then the bones were moved to the attics.

Church members of lesser prominence were buried in the churchyard, but overcrowding led to the creation of charnelhouses beginning in the fourteenth century (Ragon 1983, 51).

By the fifteenth century, cemeteries had become popular in European centers of population. The number of burials in the Saints-Innocent Cemetery is Paris is claimed as two million, with another one million persons buried in Pere-Lachaise, and 800,000 in the Montparnasse Cemetery (Ragon 1983, 52).

In America, plainspoken Puritans, who never bothered with being euphemistic about death, placed their corpses in burial grounds and inscribed epitaphs warning the living to repent. In keeping with unadorned speech regarding death, the burials were made in *graveyards, churchyards,* and *burying grounds.* Only later would euphemisms and macabre names such as *marble orchard, boneyard, Marble City, skeleton park, hell's half acre,* and *underground jungle)* appear (Pound 1936, 201). Another common reference to the cemetery, especially in the western United States is *Boot Hill* (Flexner 1976, 178). As a separate item in the questionnaire for *Dictionary of American Regional English,* Frederic G. Cassidy (1985) asked for joking names for cemeteries. The two responses recorded were *Cement-ary* and *cement tree.* Louise Pound (1936) offers an explanation for the switch from early Puritan bluntness: "Eulogists and scoffers alike shun a forthright mention of the concrete evidences of death. The elaborateness of the figures suggests the strength of the taboo" (201).

The word *cemetery* comes from the Greek meaning 'place where one sleeps' (Ragon 1983, 207). This definition might explain why Homer, and later Virgil, described death as a *deep rest, a deathly sleep* (Ragon 1983, 207-208). The earliest occurrence of *cemetery* as an English word in print was found in the fifteenth century (*Merriam-Webster* 2004). Until the eighteenth century in France, cemeteries were places of public gatherings and festivities. Local edicts were legislated

frequently to discourage drying of clothing, fairs, grazing of cattle, tennis games, refuse dumping, taverns, and dancing in the cemeteries (Ragon 1983, 145).

As European churchyards filled with burials, retaining walls added more vertical space, but by the beginning of the nineteenth century, crisis developed when human remains spelled onto the streets. Locations were no longer adequate for disposing of the dead. Health and aesthetic concerns led eventually to political action, and resources were mobilized to rebuild the system. In Paris, millions of skeletons were removed from churchyards and stacked decoratively in the catacombs of underground quarries. Then Paris sought to avoid subsequent disasters by inventing a new kind of cemetery that mirrored the changing nature of European life — the so-called *garden cemeteries* (Brown 1994, 43)

By 1804, regulations relating to cemeteries resembled, more or less, those in force today. Coffins began to be obligatory. Landscaping and funerary sculptures were transforming urban cemeteries into museums.

Researching Contemporary United States Cemeteries

In the United States today, determining the number of cemeteries is problematic for several reasons. United States Geological Survey (USGS) maps and the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) designate probably no more than 50 percent of the burial places in the country. Two primary reasons account for the omissions. First, the USGS is unaware of the small cemeteries, sometimes containing only one grave, that have been inventoried by local genealogical societies. Second, when the USGS maps are created for a rural community, there is often a cluster of names for a settlement, a church, a cemetery, and a school all repeating the same name. However, USGS generally does not include all four features. Typically, the cemetery and its name survive after the church and school have disbanded, and the community becomes extinct.

As an alternative to the USGS, telephone directories and yellow pages prove invaluable, although limited, in many branches of onomastics; their value, however, is restricted in scope for a study of cemeteries. Telephone books are oriented toward listing individuals and institutions with telephones, and the majority of cemeteries, especially those outside of large urban areas, have no telephone listing.

In spite of research limitations, a survey of yellow page listings for the term *cemetery* in seven national metropolitan areas, a random sampling of recurring names for cemeteries in the USGS listing for Texas, and a study of two non-urban Texas counties provided some insight into naming practices.

Although *cemetery* is the USGS generic feature designation, the evolution of terms considered to be more euphemistic is gaining in popularity, especially instances of *memorial park*, and *garden*. An occurrence of *memorial estates* could be a harbinger of a future generic. An example of its usage was noted in Chicago for *Mt. Vernon Memorial Estates Incorporated*.

Yellow page listings for cemeteries were examined for the metropolitan areas of Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, New Orleans, San Antonio, and San Francisco. (The topical heading for this section of the yellow pages in Houston, San Antonio, and San Francisco is *cemeteries and memorial parks*; for the other four cities researched, the heading is simply *cemeteries*.)

In greater Boston, strong religious assertion is reflected in the cemetery names, demonstrating the traditional Roman Catholic influence in the area. In the use of a generic feature, the Boston names are more traditional than those of the other cities, with the following distribution: *cemetery* (35), *memorial park* (2). Eight of the cemeteries were named for saints, 6 for biblical places, 7 for landscape or scenery, and 5 for communities. Two names indicated Jewish ethnic cemeteries.

The other cities investigated had separate listings for pet cemeteries, but for Boston, the *Angel View Pet Cemetery and*

Crematory and in Chicago, the *Illinois Pet Cemetery* took their alphabetical position among the cemeteries for human clientele.

Greater Chicago listed 84 cemeteries, the greatest number found among the seven cities studied. Among name sources, location and landscape references (15) included *Burr Oak, Chapel Hill, Forest Hill, Forest Home, Chapel Hill, Forest Home, Rosehill,* and *Westlawn.* The *Mt.* prefix was used 10 times, and the *St.* prefix was used 10 times, in addition to *Queen of Heaven* and *All Saints* in the same semantic category. Services to special groups were represented by *Bohemia Cemetery Association, Funerarias del Sagrado Corozon, Koran Service Corporation, Mt. Isaiah Israel, Shalom,* and *Waldheim Jewish* cemeteries. In addition to the cemeteries named for saints and biblical mountains, religious significance was communicated in 5 instances by *Ascension, Assumption, Calvary, Holy Cross,* and *Holy Sepulchre.*

In greater Dallas, the following generic distribution is found: *cemetery* (8), *memorial park* (11), *memorial gardens* (3), and *memorial park cemetery* (1). Religious significance is connoted in the names of *Calvary Hill, Crown Hill, Holy Redeemer, Old Calvary Hill,* and *Sacred Heart.*

Until the 1960s, yellow pages, especially those in the South, contained segregated listings for cemeteries, distinguishing between burial grounds for whites and for blacks. The separate listings have disappeared, and the reader can only assume in the Dallas listing that *Carver Memorial Park* and *Lincoln Memorial Cemetery* are primarily for the black community. An indispensable source for black cemeteries in the South is *Lay Down Body. Living History in African American Cemeteries* (Wright and Hughes, 1996).

Occasionally, the entry in the yellow pages will contain an additional line designating the ethnic group served by the cemetery. In Dallas, users of the yellow pages must surmise that *Emanu-el Cemetery* serves the Jewish community

The most popular motif of Dallas cemetery names is scenic tranquility, as exemplified by *Bluebonnet Hills, Forest Lawn, Greenwood, Grove Hill, Hillcrest, Hilltop, Laurel Land, Oak Grove, Pleasant Mound, Ridgeview,* and *Roselawn.* Peace and repose are suggested by *Rest Haven* and *Restland.*

In greater Houston, the generic designation of *cemetery* occurs 21 times, followed by *memorial park* (6), *memorial gardens* (1), *garden of memories* (1). A rare instance in which *cemetery* is not the final component of a name is found in *Cemetery Beautiful.* Landscape plays a role in the names of *Brookside, Forest Lawn, Forest Park, Glenwood, Grand View, Greenlawn, Greenwood, Memorial Oaks, Rosewood,* and *Woodlawn.* Among names resonating religion are *Calvary Hill, Holy Cross, Paradise, and Resurrection* cemeteries. Four cemeteries are named *Forest Park,* but they are differentiated by the addition of *East, Lawndale, The Woodlands,* and *Westheimer.* Although *Mt. Olivet Catholic Cemetery* recognizes a biblical place, there are no Houston cemeteries bearing the name of a saint. Tranquility is suggested by *Resthaven* and *Restwood.* The name of *Morales Cemetery* projects a subliminal appeal to families of Hispanic ancestry.

In the New Orleans area, cemetery names are overshadowed by the above-ground burials. Many family tombs contain more than one vault, each holding a single casket. When a new death occurs, the oldest casket in the tomb is removed — provided time has elapsed to permit disintegration — and the remains are placed toward the back of the vault or in a special compartment. Then a new casket is sealed in the vault until time for the procedure to be repeated. Thus, a single family tomb of only two or three vaults may eventually serve multiple generations (Tarpley 1963, 324).

Among generic designations in New Orleans are *cemetery* (12 instances), *memorial park* (2), and *memorial gardens* (2). *Hope Mausoleum* includes no reference to a burial ground.

Seven cemeteries bear the names of saints, testifying to the significant Roman Catholic population. Religion is also

reflected in two other names: *Mount Olivet* and *Providence Park*. Landscape influences the names of *Cypress Grove, Forest Lawn, Greenwood,* and *Lake Lawn* while the connotations of optimism and peace (tranquility) are present in *Hebrew Rest, Hope,* and *Resthaven*.

In the San Antonio area, *cemetery* is the generic used 8 times, *memorial park* (5), and *burial park* (1). No generic occurs in *Mission South*. Redundancy of generics appears in *Fort Memorial Park Cemetery*. Spanish language influence is seen in *El Carmen, San Fernando I,* II, and *III,* and *San Jose*. Landscape is involved in *Meadowlawn, Mission Park,* and *Sunset* – the latter name also suggesting mortality.

The listings for San Francisco cemeteries and memorial parks are notable for ethnicity and use of non-English names. The generic *cemetery* occurs at the end of a name 11 times, memorial park (8), the absence of an English generic (4), and *garden of remembrance* (1). *Bai Ling Yuan* appears without explanation, but other ethnic names are transparent as in *Greek Orthodox Memorial Park, Italian Cemetery, Japanese Cemetery, Northern California Korean, Orthodox Memorial Park, Santo Nina* (followed by the comment: the First Filipino-American Cemetery), Serbian Cemetery, and *Societa; Italiana Di Mutua Beneficenza*. Religious significance is found in *Eternal Home, Hills of Eternity, Holy Cross, Home of Peace, Olivet, Orthodox, Salem,* and *Santo Nina*.

Landscape is employed in the names of *Cypress Lawn, Evergreen, Greenlawn, Mountain View, Skylawn,* and *Woodlawn*. A unique generic in the names analyzed in the seven cities is *San Francisco Columbarium*, which specializes in providing niches for cremation urns. The word dates from 1846, based on Latin *columba* ('dove'), referring to a structure of vaults lined with recesses for cinerary urns (*Merriam-Webster* 2004).

Cemetery Name Patterns In Texas

An examination of cemetery names in other American urban areas would, no doubt, reveal other distributions and

reflections of local influences. Trends in generic terms and popular names would become apparent if the analysis were extended to all metropolitan areas.

A search for patterns in the naming of cemeteries in Texas examined several lexical concepts in the Geographic Names Information System. One unique name in Texas is *Eternity Park* occurring in Houston. Another unique name in Texas is *Revelation Cemetery*, found in Brazoria County. *Evergreen Cemetery*, suggesting eternity, claimed 32 Texas listings by USGS. The biblical name of *Gethsemane* was given for 2 Texas cemeteries. *Holy Cross Cemetery* is the designation for 7 Texas burial grounds, and *Holy Family* Cemetery for 1. Religious optimism is expressed 13 times in *New Hope*.

The concept of a cemetery as a place of memory is employed in 2 Texas instances of *Memorial Park* as the complete name, in 5 occurrences of *Memory Gardens*, 1 of *Memoryland Memorial Park*, and 1 of *Memory Park Cemetery*. The view of life as a pilgrimage is suggested in *Pilgrim Cemetery* 2 times and in *Pilgrim Rest Cemetery* 4 times. The association of "cemeteries" with "tranquility" is also found in *Rest Cemetery* (4), *Rest Haven* (8), *Rest Lawn*, (3), *Rest-Ever Memorial Cemetery* (1), *Resthaven* (5), *Restland* (11), and *Restlawn* (3).

No Texas entries were found in USGS for *God* or *Godly;* the *Godley Prairie Cemetery* in Bowie County originated as a combination of the name of the Godley family and the terrain. Unintentional connotations emerge when a community name designates the local cemetery as in *Sweat Box Cemetery* (Hunt County) or *Elysian Fields Cemetery* (Harrison County).

Among some of the other arresting names of Texas cemeteries are *Glad Tidings* (Hardin County), *Dreamland* (Fayette and Hall counties), and *Valhalla Mausoleum* in Midland County.

Significant conclusions await a detailed analysis of cemetery names in Texas.

Rural Texas Cemeteries

In contrast to the seven metropolitan areas selected for an analysis of cemetery names, two non-urban counties in Texas—*Austin* and *Cherokeel*—were studied to determine their cemetery naming patterns and the percentage of their cemetery names recorded by USGS. Austin County, thirty miles west of Houston, was chosen for two basic reasons: it is the birthplace of Anglo-American settlement in Texas, colonized by Stephen F. Austin in 1821, and it has an exemplary and extensive survey of its cemeteries. The cemetery directory lists 171 burial sites, of which only 52 are identified on USGS map. Thus, 121 (or 70 percent) of the names are not included on official federal maps. Of the cemeteries whose name origins have been determined, approximately 65 percent were given for families, 22 percent for communities, 10 percent for churches, and the remaining 3 percent for other sources.

The second non-urban county study was for Cherokee County, located ten miles south of Tyler in northeast Texas. Several reasons led to the choice of this county: an active historical commission presently engaged in creating a complete gazetteer for the county, seven detailed volumes of cemetery surveys, and one of the densest concentrations of rural placenames in the state. As in Austin County, the majority of the 113 cemetery names were not recorded by USGS. Names not recognized by USGS account for 59 (or 52.2 percent) of the total, and names listed by USGS account for 54 (or 47.8 percent). Of the names whose origins have been determined, approximately 50 percent are for families, 35 percent for communities and locales, 10 percent for churches, and 5 percent for other sources.

Most American counties now have in print a cemetery book in one form or another. The onomastician using the compilations will encounter problems in locating the cemetery because geographic coordinates are rarely used and travel directions to the sites are generally reported as traveling on

Highway 10 from the courthouse, taking a right turn five miles out of town at the old Smith place, and then turning left on a gravel road for another two miles. The orientation is useful only for those well-versed in county history and geography.

Few of the cemetery books contain historical profiles of the burial grounds or specific information about the source of the name. Occasionally, the date of the founding, the donors of the land, and the names of the first persons interred will be revealed. Without specific information, the researcher must use detective skills to determine if the name coincides with that of a nearby church, community, church, or geographical feature. By counting the number of marked graves with names identical to that of the cemetery, the researcher can report that "12 of the 16 marked graves in the Bledsoe Cemetery are for members of the Bledsoe family, and the earliest marked grave, dating from 1860 is for David Bledsoe." The conclusion about the name origin is then left to the reader.

If a state historical marker has been awarded to the cemetery, it is likely that the inscription will contain information about the name origin, land donors, and first burials. Cemetery scholars quickly learn to rely upon the markers as invaluable sources of information.

Conclusions

Although the cemetery, for all its stillness and tranquility, may be perceived as an ever-static cultural institution, perpetual change is a paradox in spite of the inherent conservatism (Jordan 1982, 7). Transitions from houses for the dead, to tombs, to incineration, to coffin burials in churchyards, to unhygienic crises, to catacombs, to garden cemeteries mark major divisions the human history.

Just as personal names change with onomastic fashion, so do funeral architecture, epitaphs, and tombstone inscriptions. Imported from Puritan England, "the bleak and unbending message, which provided stern instruction rather

than comfort to the bereaved, remained popular into the twentieth century" (Brown 1994, 32). The epitaph then became "more intimate and ominous by the use of the first person conversational form to stimulate a discourse between the decreased and the visitor" (33).

Conformity in some urban memorial parks has eliminated individualism in the types of monuments permitted, epitaph styles, and grave decorations. The modern commercial cemetery has been decried as "the necrological equivalent of a fast-food joint" (Jordan 1982, 7). The lexical drift from *graveyard*, to *cemetery*, *memorial park*, and the prophetic use of *memorial estates* portends future evolution of the generic that will be used with a myriad of specific names. Past and present, the cemetery provides intriguing ground for onomastic study.

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