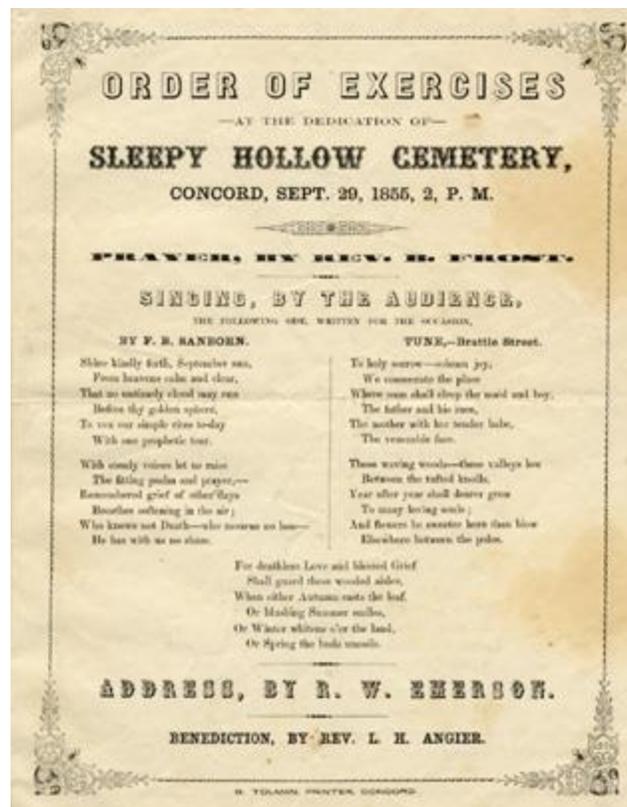


A History of the Oversight of Concord's Public Cemeteries Part I: 1841-1864

A Resource for Cemetery Committee Members, Superintendents and Supervisors

The information below was provided through archival research by Tish Hopkins, Concord Cemetery Supervisor since 1988, and through an interview with her conducted by Paul Cooke, Chair of the Concord Cemetery Committee (2016-2021), who wrote the narrative found below.

The Concord Cemetery Committee has been given the charge of preserving and protecting the Town of Concord's cemetery grounds. These include the Town's most extensive site, intended to be a "consecrated garden," to use a phrase Ralph Waldo Emerson took to describe Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in his Dedicatory Address, given on September 29, 1855. Sleepy Hollow Cemetery was one of the first cemeteries in the United States to be designed to have a sylvan character. In recognition of its special relationship to the surrounding nature and its unique place in the American story, it has also been listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Serving on Concord's Cemetery Committee is thus a trust of real importance. This brief history of its early years has been written to help give present and future Committee members, as well as Cemetery Superintendents and Supervisors, some sense of the context and significance of the work with which we on the Committee, and they as its caretakers, have been entrusted.



The Concord Cemetery Committee was born when Sleepy Hollow was born, and Ralph Waldo Emerson became its first chairman. In his Address he set the tone with which he and others would preside over the care of Sleepy Hollow and all of Concord's cemetery grounds. He wrote in the text of his Sleepy Hollow Dedicatory Address, "What work of man will compare with the plantation of a park? It dignifies life. It is a seat for friendship, counsel, taste and religion. I do not wonder that they are the chosen badge and point of pride of European nobility. But how much more are they needed by us, anxious, overdriven Americans, to stanch and appease [the] fury of temperament which our climate bestows!" Mr. Emerson also said back in 1855, "This spot for twenty years has borne the name of *Sleepy Hollow*. Its seclusion from the village in its immediate neighborhood had made it to all the inhabitants an easy retreat on a Sabbath day, or a summer twilight, and it was inevitably chosen by them when the design of a new cemetery was broached."

The tone contained in Emerson's remarks suggests the spirit he hoped would guide those who would oversee the preservation and protection of Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in the future as a place both to refresh the living and honor the dead. This implicit charge would later be extended to all of Concord's burying grounds.

Before the inauguration of Sleepy Hollow in 1855, Concord's Superintendent for Public Grounds completed an annual report for the Town's three burying grounds—Old Hill, South, and New Burying Ground, but upon Sleepy Hollow's dedication, Concord began to have a cemetery committee; it was elected by Town Meeting through ballots at polling places, a practice continued through the middle of the twentieth century. The cemetery committee was then called "The Sleepy Hollow Cemetery Committee," as was stated on the ballot.

Originally the committee was responsible only for Sleepy Hollow (which by then included the "New Burial Ground" on its western edge), until the early twentieth century, when it began also to take responsibility for the two older burial grounds. The last report from the Superintendent of Grounds that mentions the two older burial grounds is 1892. Then in 1911 the Cemetery Committee reports show it had taken over care for both of the older burial grounds; therefore somewhere between 1892 and 1911 the Committee became responsible for all of Concord's burying grounds.

In 1982 the Town decided to put all cemetery operations under a department known as Community Services, which subsequently became the Department of Public Works; the Cemetery Committee oversaw those operations. With this change, in the following year, 1983, the number of committee members was enlarged from three to five, and these five were no longer elected but appointed by the Town Manager. At the same time the present "Charge" detailing the responsibilities of the Concord Cemetery Committee was created and given to the committee outlining its responsibilities. The "Charge of 1983" is still the document that governs the work of today's committee.

Though Concord's cemeteries only officially began to be supervised by a cemetery committee in 1855, the earliest record of cemetery oversight in the Concord archives is dated 1841. The brief note from the records of that year reads:

\$67.85 paid to Daniel Shattuck for stone posts, setting the same, trees, righting gravestones, laying up wall and c. in burying ground. (\$1.50 paid to Timothy Prescott for burying old horse found dead in road.)

This document has the form of a superintendent's report but not the explicit label explaining who authored it. At that time there was apparently not a cemetery supervisor but a position called "sexton," whose duties included caring for the burying grounds.

A similar document in the records archived in the Concord Library covering the years 1845-1846 reveals that the consistent concerns of cemetery oversight haven't changed dramatically since before the middle of the 19th century. It shows there's still the impetus to improve the appearance of the cemeteries, that much importance is attached to being scrupulous about expenses and a wish to detail by name who-has-done-what concerning any improvements:

\$50.00 sent for improving the burial grounds. Samuel Staples--\$13.00 making new gate and cleaning up old burial ground, \$3.38 for stone posts. T.F. Hunt--\$2.25 for hanging gate and setting posts....

In 1849-1850 we find a record from what appears to be the first annual report from an official with the title of Superintendent of Public Grounds. This report notified the town that there was \$77.75 in the town treasury for burial grounds. Here's the rest of the entry:

About 25 pines were set in the New Burying Ground—nearly all lived. The Hearse house near the entrance to this ground was moved to the east corner to improve the appearance. The gap it left in the front wall was filled and the entrance widened. Dead trees and limbs removed and raking done. Few burials in the old part and not one in the new lots at the east end has been recorded by the sexton. Using the old book and headstones a new record was compiled by the superintendant. Friends of those without monuments are requested to furnish necessary information, so as not to be overlooked. Plan of lots was drawn, names of families who have taken them inscribed on each wherever it was known. It was then decided that not less than 600 people have been buried here since it was laid out in 1823, of which 430 are recorded. Suitable alleys were laid to afford access without crossing another's lot. Stone corner posts were used to mark edges of lots.

A lot happened with Concord's cemeteries in the year 1849—a year in which some of the most famous authors later buried in the yet-to-be-created Sleepy Hollow Cemetery were all alive and well: Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May, was 50 (he was born in 1799); Louisa May was just 17; Henry David Thoreau was 32, Nathaniel Hawthorne was 45 and Ralph Waldo Emerson was 46. New Burying Ground had been inaugurated, as we learn in this entry, in 1823. It would eventually become the westernmost part of the future Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. New Burying Ground in 1849 already containing 600 graves. The Thoreau family would have a plot there and Henry would be buried in it before his remains eventually were moved to the new Thoreau family plot on Author's Ridge.

We read next in the Superintendent of Public Grounds' Report for 1850-51, signed by John S. Keyes (the name, it appears, earliest associated with this position found in the records), under a list of expenses for the year, the following line: "H.D. Thoreau—Surveying West Burying Ground—\$1.00." Here is an intriguing reference to one of Concord's famous sons, surveying the grounds in which he'd later be laid to rest.

In Mr. Keyes' report for the following year (1851-1852), we see the location later to become the town's most famous cemetery was already known as "Sleepy Hollow," though at the time it was an informal park or retreat enjoyed by local citizens. But here in this year's Superintendent of Public Grounds' Report we find the first explicit mention of a wish to appropriate the scenic spot for the expansion of the cemetery:

Lots in this ground [the East Burying Ground] and new ones must be laid out unless some movement is made toward procuring a cemetery. With some attention from citizens this might easily be done. If [the] road to Bedford is laid out by county commissioners this spring we may be able to secure the lot called "Sleepy Hollow" for that purpose.

Four years later, in 1855, Sleepy Hollow Cemetery was dedicated and a cemetery committee was formed. While the care of the other three burying grounds of note in Concord—Old Hill, South, and New—remained under the authority of the Superintendent of Public Grounds, Concord's Cemetery Committee took care of a fourth burying ground, the new Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

One year later it is noted at the Superintendent's Report for 1856-57 that John S. Keyes "declines re-election." Mr. Keyes appears to have been Superintendent of all the burying grounds before Sleepy Hollow's inception; then he was part of the first Cemetery Committee overseeing only Sleepy Hollow. It appears that John Keyes may have declined election as Superintendent of Public Grounds and at the same time moved over to the Cemetery Committee.

In that year's report, as well, we find a list of the names of the first five members of the Cemetery Committee: John S. Keyes, J.M. Cheney, R.W. Emerson, Joseph Holbrook and Nathan Barrett. Here, of course, we find mention of another of Concord's most famous sons, Ralph Waldo ("R.W.") Emerson.

At their first meeting the record shows the newly formed committee established cemetery regulations "and had them painted and posted near [the] entrance." Keyes reported that this year "nearly 700 trees were planted around border and lining avenues." There was also an event on April 19th called the "Tree Bee," in which "citizens came to the cemetery with more than 100 trees." These were "planted by volunteers." We read here, too, the first mention of a cemetery committee's collective wish: "Borders are well filled but open part needs more trees. The committee hopes to celebrate every anniversary with `Tree Bee.'"`

One can also read in Mr. Keyes' last Superintendent of Public Grounds Report (for 1856-57), the statement calling for a full-time cemetery superintendent:

Large heap of mud and leaves kept in the hollow and turned to assist decomposition. Grounds are so large and require so much attention that a superintendent is needed full time.

Mr. Keyes also wrote of a fundraiser to support the upkeep of the cemetery: "Ladies of the town raised \$116.75 at a 4th of July breakfast and floral exhibit to widen roads and move back fence at entrance."

In 1856-57 there now begin appear two annual reports with bearing on Concord's burying grounds: one from the Superintendent of Public Grounds and another from the Cemetery Committee. The Cemetery Committee report for this year ends with a statement of the committee's collective displeasure regarding the behavior of certain individuals because somebody had been cutting down trees in the cemetery against regulations:

The only drawback of the committee in making this "Home of the Dead" pleasant and attractive is the breach of regulations—especially cutting trees on lots. Total lots sold, of the original 100, is 65, with 56 interments, about half of which were removed from other grounds.

Now the next year—1857-58—the Report from the Superintendent for Public Grounds is signed by Samuel Staples, and we find confirmed that there are now two bodies supervising the cemeteries—Mr. Staples for Old Hill, South and the New burying grounds, and the Cemetery Committee for the new Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

The second annual report of the new Cemetery Committee—for 1857-58—gives a fuller flavor for the concerns of those involved in caring for the newest Concord burying ground, and the report also shows the popularity of the new site and the need to govern its use:

Proceeds from the 4th of July paid for widening of road near entrance, sidewalk was built, fence reset, slope soiled and seeded to improve approach to grounds and usual care taken. Two new areas laid out, 35 new lots to meet demand. One third sold at once. Ornamental shrubs and plants were transplanted and set in different areas. A row of Silver Poplar was put on sandy embankment on road. Late spring prevented "Tree Bee" but the committee hopes people will remember to plant a tree or a shrub. Two difficulties are: taking and occupying lots without permission before paying and cutting trees and clearing lots not in accordance with regulations. Superintendent really needed to be always present and by whom all work should be done.

The following year, in its third annual report (1858-59), the Cemetery Committee initiated the significant change that had been wished for in former reports: the hiring of a

fulltime caretaker. It is not clear if his responsibilities included caring for the other cemeteries as well as Sleepy Hollow:

Gardener hired to maintain grounds—Mr. James Wood has many years' experience in Scotland and several in this country. Earns \$27.50 per month plus house, rent, and fuel for eight working months. He started in April with much skill and success.

The Cemetery Committee also had a recommendation:

Committee recommends selling meadow north of cemetery which needs dressing over. If a fair price is obtained we should be able to erect a neat and comfortable house for groundskeeper within the grounds.

In his 1859-1860 report as Superintendent of Public Grounds Mr. Samuel Staples writes that he “suggests Mr. Keyes as superintendent of both public grounds and cemetery.” It sounds as though Mr. Staples wants to give the job back to Mr. Keyes who, it seems, may have continued his involvement with Concord's burying grounds as a member of the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery Committee, but is now being urged also to retake oversight of the other burying grounds.

Meanwhile, in its fourth annual report (1859-1860), the Cemetery Committee recorded the involvement of two different groups of citizens in the cemetery's support for the year:

“Concord Musical Society donated ornamental trees and shrubs planted nearest to the village from Concord proceeds” and “Ladies raised nearly \$200.00 at 4th of July for excavating pond. The mud dug out was sold for a fair price which money was used to gravel the pond bank.

The pond mentioned here is probably Cat's Pond, located on the north side of what came to be known as “Authors' Ridge.” This was not a natural pond but a man-made affair suggested by those who developed Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. The pond's dimensions seem to have been laid out by a local surveyor named Henry David Thoreau.¹

The Committee's report for the following year, 1860-61, includes a renewed recommendation to the town's ladies “to get up donations to improve ground” and “to citizens to plant a tree on April 19th.”

In the Committee report of 1862-63, written when then United States had been involved in the Civil War for over a year, we read that E.W. Bull has become Chair of the Cemetery Committee. Ephraim Bull, who developed the Concord grape and began selling the product of his cultivation in 1853, had been elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives the year Sleepy Hollow Cemetery was dedicated, and he would be buried 32 years later—in the fall of 1895—not far from Emerson and the Concord literary lights on Authors' Ridge. We also read that a citizen named A. Stacy was treasurer for the Cemetery Committee; in those days the committee kept track of its own funds.

In 1863-64 Cemetery Committee report we see the connection between the town meeting and the Cemetery Committee as we read this cryptic note: “Cemetery committee reduced from 5 to 3 at Town meeting. Now Louis Surette, Albert Stacy and Albert Tolman.” Then, as now, the ultimate authority in municipal government in Concord, as in many New England towns, is still the Town Meeting. It was in this year that a permanent private fund for Sleepy Hollow Cemetery’s support was set up with the following original contributors—many of whom had at one time or were presently serving on the cemetery committee: William Munroe (gave \$250), John S. Keyes (\$200), Frederick Hudson (\$125), David P. Barrett (\$100), William Whiting (\$100), George M. Brooks (\$100), George Keyes (\$100), and Louis Surette (\$50), for a total of \$1,025. Three trustees were appointed to invest the funds, the interest from which was to be used in caring for the grounds. The report reads, “Owners of lots are invited to subscribe to this fund for their interest in this beautiful ‘Home for the Dead.’”

End of Part I

Submitted by Paul Cooke, Chair, Concord Cemetery Committee, February 27, 2021

¹ Daniel Joseph Nadenicek, “Emerson’s Aesthetic and Natural Design: A Theoretical Foundation for the Work of Horace William Shaler Cleaveland,” in Joachin Wolschke-Bulmahn, ed., *Nature and Ideology: Natural Garden Design in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1997), pp. 75-76