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From Yoga to Movie Nights: How Cemeteries Are Trying to Attract the Living

These cemeteries around the country are more public space than burial ground

A movie screening at Hollywood Forever. (Flickr, vmiramontes)

By [Jennifer Billock](#)

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When [Graceland Cemetery](#) in Chicago first opened in 1860, it was designed not simply as a place of burial, but also a stunning natural park for all to enjoy. Landscape architects designed the layout, and as the cemetery grew and more residents were interred, the design grew with it. Now, it's not only a cemetery—it's a [certified arboretum](#) with more than 2,000 trees. Locals today use it as a park, basking in the natural surroundings for walks or picnics.

Graceland's past (and present) is in line with the Victorian concept of the cemetery: they were designed to be public use parks. The trend in the U.S. traces its origin to 1831 with the first large-scale cemetery, Mount Auburn, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was a time when public spaces—like parks, art museums, and botanical gardens—didn't really exist in the United States.

“Cemeteries we built for ourselves, increasingly after 1830, were places with winding roads and picturesque vistas,” Keith Eggener, author of [Cemeteries](#), [told The Atlantic in a 2011 interview](#). “You suddenly had large pieces of ground, filled with beautiful sculptures and horticultural art. People flocked to cemeteries for picnics, for hunting and shooting and carriage racing. These places became so popular that not only were guidebooks issued to guide visitors, but also all kinds of rules were posted.”

The cemeteries began popping up across the country as part of the “[rural cemetery movement](#),” a period in which cemeteries as parks became the big thing for city residents needing a place to escape and relax. The movement began to lose steam in the late 1800s, though, when those cemeteries inspired large burial-free city parks. Social activities transferred over and a shift began where people started to see cemeteries more as revered memorials and less as public hangout spots. They became associated with grief rather than entertainment, and many closed their gates to public activities.

But now, for the slightly morbid curiosity in some of us and the nature lover in all of us, we can happily say that multi-use graveyards and cemeteries are booming back into style. These seven are pushing the movement forward with everything from yoga and running to dog parks and movie nights.

Congressional Cemetery; Washington, D.C.

Congressional Cemetery’s Lummi Nation totem poles. (Flickr, Tim Evanson)

Aside from housing national icons like John Phillip Sousa and J. Edgar Hoover, [Congressional Cemetery](#) offers a full slate of programming for locals and visitors. Some of the favorites are outdoor movies, pet walks, beekeeping workshops, photos with Santa, concerts, and even a celebration all about dogs. Kelly Carnes, who teaches yoga in the cemetery, told [Smithsonian.com](#) she’s planning to have her wedding reception there in September. “It’s a beautiful 35-acre green space in downtown DC,” she said, “and if people avoided it for fear of it being too spooky or morose, they’d really miss out on one of the capitol’s best gems.”

Cedar Hill; Hartford, Connecticut

A Purple Japanese Threadleaf Maple in Cedar Hill Cemetery. (Creative Commons)

From scavenger hunts and mushrooming to in-depth discussions on Mark Twain’s obsession with the supernatural, [Cedar Hill](#)’s events cover a huge range of historical and natural topics. The [cemetery’s foundation](#) is in control of programming, with a singular goal of helping visitors discover all the art, culture and beauty of not only the gravesites themselves, but the entire 270 acres of park-like grounds.

Evergreen Cemetery; Portland, Maine

Civil War Memorial in Evergreen Cemetery. (Creative Commons)

Events at Evergreen Cemetery focus mainly on [historical walks](#) through the site, but the topics are enough to keep you coming back on a regular basis. Learn about shipwreck victims from 1861 on The Wreck of the Otraska walk. Take the Suffragist Tour and visit the gravesites of

powerful Maine women who helped gain the right to vote. On the Portland Rum Riot Tour, you'll see the final resting place of men who died in a mob that attacked city hall.

Oakland Cemetery; Atlanta, Georgia

Oakland Cemetery. (Flickr, Chris Lexow)

Something new happens at [Oakland Cemetery](#) every week, with special topical tours running from March to October. One of the favorites explores brewers and beer symbolism throughout the graves. In addition, the cemetery hosts Victorian Street Festivals, spooky Halloween nighttime tours, garden volunteer days, scavenger hunts, arts and crafts sales, races and even a food history and happy hour tour. The Historic Oakland Foundation offers visitors the chance to buy a membership to the cemetery that garners discounts on programming and shop items, advance ticket sales for cemetery events, and a regular newsletter.

Green-Wood Cemetery; Brooklyn, New York

Battle of Brooklyn reenactment in Greenwood Cemetery. (Lisa Alpert)

Ever heard of a cemetery with its own trolley? [Green-Wood](#) has one, and it carries visitors on a guided tour throughout the cemetery's 478 acres overlooking Brooklyn. Birding is big here, too, with weekend workshops covering the basics of the hobby. The cemetery also hosts equinox celebrations, special tours like the sold-out Dead Distillers trolley tour, and perhaps one of the most unique cemetery activities of all: a workshop where you can make your own mini grave monument.

Hollywood Forever Cemetery; Los Angeles, California

Bon Iver performs at the Hollywood Forever cemetery. (Megan Westerby / [Flickr](#))

[Hollywood Forever](#), as the obvious choice of burial place for celebrities of all kinds, keeps the party going even among the shroud of death. The cemetery has an ongoing roster of cultural activities and concerts, and even food and wine mixers and fundraisers. Most of the events are held in the Masonic Lodge on the property and if the weather is nice (is it ever not?), concerts happen on the Fairbanks Lawn.

Valley of the Temples; Kaneohe, Hawaii

Byodo-In Temple in the Valley of the Temples. (Hawaii Tourism Authority, Chuck Painter)

This cemetery is also a 240-acre park with a zen garden, worship temples, meditation areas and a koi pond. The [Byodo-In Temple](#) is here, as well—a state landmark that hosts weddings and has been in multiple TV shows. It's meant to commemorate when the first Japanese immigrants came to Hawaii. Most events at [Valley of the Temples](#) are held at Byodo-In; recent happenings have included a book signing, a photography exhibit, an art demonstration and jewelry workshops and displays.



About Jennifer Billock

Jennifer Billock is an award-winning writer, bestselling author, and editor. She is currently dreaming of an around-the-world trip with her Boston terrier. Check out her website at jenniferbillock.com.

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