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Article Summary: The designer of Wyuka used winding avenues on sloping land to imitate the look of an English garden. The park-like atmosphere of such cemeteries stimulated the development of public parks in the United States.

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Photographs / Images: outline map of Wyuka showing the original 40 acres (platted 1871, 1890, and 1895) as well as the northern 40 acres, platted 1909; Wyuka receiving vault; Wyuka gate lodge

Wyuka: A "Rural" Cemetery in Lincoln, Nebraska

BY PENELOPE CHATFIELD

The winding brick avenues of Wyuka Cemetery of Lincoln, Nebraska, along with the gently sloping terrain, trees, handsome gravestones, and well-groomed appearance, offer a pleasant interlude in considerable contrast to the surrounding grid pattern of the city. Wyuka Cemetery, with its park-like atmosphere, is an unusual cemetery for Nebraska. Planned in the picturesque English garden school manner, it is significant to the history of landscape design in Nebraska as one of the few, and the earliest, examples of a "rural" cemetery in the state.

The design of rural cemeteries in the 1830s was an American phenomenon which inspired the public park movement in the United States.¹ For the first time Americans were exposed to the English garden school of landscaping with curving paths and picturesque plantings. Also for the first time a landscape was designed for the enjoyment of the public.

A physician and health reformer, Dr. Jacob Bigelow of Boston, is credited with establishing the first rural cemetery. He was concerned about conditions in the crowded and unkept churchyard cemeteries of Boston. The Massachusetts Horticultural Society joined Dr. Bigelow in the sponsorship of the first rural cemetery, Mount Auburn, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In subsequent years horticultural societies commonly joined forces with health reformers in advocating rural cemeteries. New cemeteries—either privately or municipally owned—on the outskirts of town (hence the name "rural" cemeteries) were recommended for the health of the community. The design followed that of the English garden school of Humphrey Repton, J. C. Loudon, and others in England; it included curving streets, informal landscape plantings, rustic gates and outbuildings, irregular pools, quaint

bridges, grottos, bowers, and other devices.² Some famous examples of the type are Laurel Hill in Philadelphia (1836), Greenwood in New York (1838), Cave Hill in Louisville (1848),³ and Forest Home in Milwaukee (1850).⁴

The popularity of the cemeteries as pleasure spots astounded the proponents. Summer visitors flocked to the cemeteries by the hundreds for picnics and other summer pursuits. Andrew Jackson Downing and others cited the huge public response to the rural cemeteries in advocating the need for public parks.

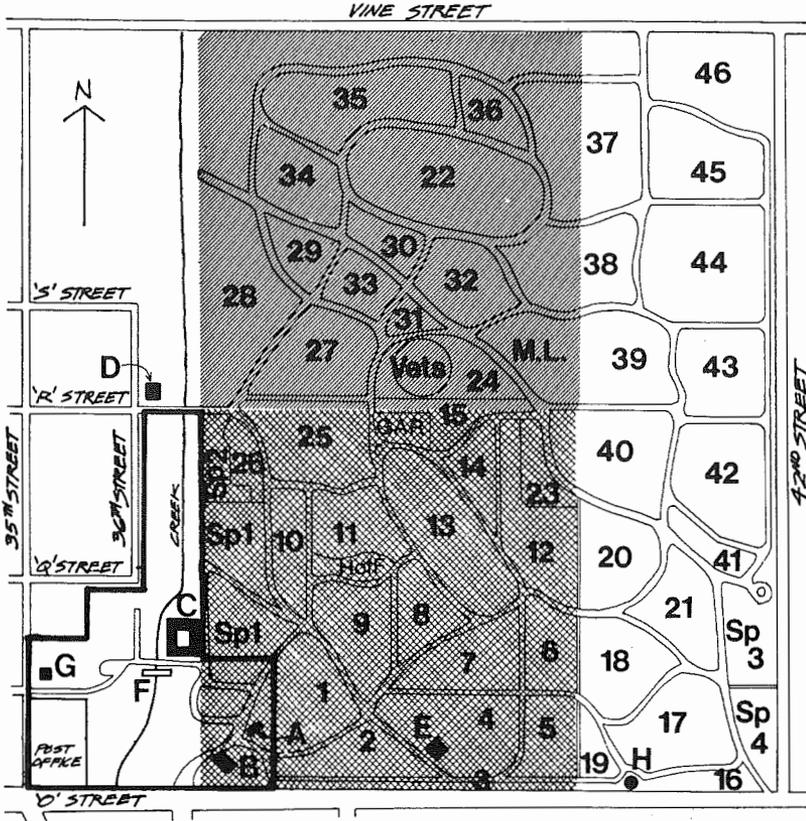
Following the establishment of Mount Auburn in 1831, rural cemeteries were platted throughout the country. Historian John W. Reys states that rural cemeteries were common in cities throughout the country by the 1870s.⁵ Landscape Architect H. W. S. Cleveland, a friend and contemporary of Frederick Law Olmsted, designed rural cemeteries from the 1850s through the 1880s and was responsible for plans in Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Junction City, Kansas; and Dwight, Illinois, as well as Concord, Waltham, and Gloucester, Massachusetts.⁶ Four examples are currently known in Nebraska, two in Omaha and two in Lincoln.

Besides the graceful curving avenues, the rural cemetery had other distinctive characteristics. The avenues were laid out according to the topography to aid in drainage. Enclosures, hedges, and fences were discouraged because they were considered to detract from the open lawn and rural appearance. Private vaults were not recommended for the same reason. The Spring Grove Cemetery of Cincinnati, one of the nationally prominent rural cemeteries, had a standing rule in 1869 allowing only one monument per family burial lot. This monument was placed in the center of the lot and inscriptions placed on all sides. Individual gravemarkers, where necessary, were to be simple—nearly level with the ground. A suitable area for a cemetery requires easy access, undulating land, and remoteness from the city.⁷

Unique in cemetery ownership, Wyuka Cemetery was established by an act of the Nebraska Legislature in 1869 as the state cemetery, reputedly the only one in the nation. The infant capital city was less than two years old, and a cemetery was felt to be necessary to provide a resting place for Lincolnites, inmates of state institutions at Lincoln, and any other Nebraskan who so wished. A board of three trustees was

WYUKA CEMETERY

Lincoln, Nebraska



LEGEND

-  Original 40 Acres. Platted 1871, 1890, & 1895.
-  Northern 40 Acres. Platted 1909 by Arthur W. Hobert, Landscape Architect.
-  Landscape Plan by Arthur W. Hobert in 1909.

- A** Rudge Memorial Chapel
- B** Office
- C** Barn
- D** Florist's Residence
- E** Receiving Vault
- F** Bridge
- G** Employee's House
- H** Water Tank

elected to administer the new cemetery; since 1959 they have been appointed by the governor. The trustees are responsible to state government in that they must report annually and provide burials as requested by the state, but they are financially independent, a system which continues to the present day.⁸

An 80-acre tract near the present Van Dorn Street and Southwest 12th Street was originally provided for the cemetery. The trustees did not approve of this land and instead purchased the original 40 acres of the present site, which is roughly bounded by O Street, R Street, 36th Street, and 40th Street.⁹ The cemetery was named Wyuka, an Anglicized corruption of the Dakota or Sioux word "wanka," meaning "he rests or he lies down."¹⁰ At this time Wyuka was one-and-one-half miles east of the city.

The arrangement of avenues in graceful curves considerable upon the topography is critical to the distinction between a rural cemetery and a traditional grid plan. The earliest known site plan of Wyuka, filed in 1871 for the southern half of the original 40 acres, shows that Wyuka was planned along rural cemetery lines from the beginning. There are no straight avenues in the plan. The undulating line running southeast-northwest through the plan and partially through one avenue is a drainage line or creek still in evidence today. During the 19th century this drainage line was drawn on other plats as a creek with bridges or fords.¹¹ The sections in the 1871 plat correspond to sections 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, and Spl on today's map. The straight avenues on the present map do not appear on the original map. The north-south straight roads were originally grass-covered access paths within a section; only in later years were they made permanent avenues.

The notations, "Potter's Field," "Citizens," and "Lawn," describe the original uses of these sections. "Potter's Field" was reserved for state burial lots. The "Lawn" is the most interesting designation. The area, now Section 13, was set aside as open space, free of burials, for the pleasure of visitors. The 1890 plat labels it "the park," perhaps the most significant piece of evidence of the intention of the designer and trustees to provide a pleasant, park-like space, in the tradition of the rural cemetery.

The draftsman of the 1871 plat is listed as James T. Murphy,

deputy county surveyor. Possibly he is the designer of this fairly sophisticated plan; more probably he is responsible only for the drawing of the plat. No other information about the designer has come to light. The most reliable source, the minutes of the Board of Trustees for the period, 1869-1883, have not survived.

Accepted rural cemetery practices are reflected in the earliest list of rules available for Wyuka, July 9, 1883: "no enclosures around lots or graves allowed; no trees can be set about lots or graves; all plantings of flowers or shrubs must be done under the direction of the Sexton."¹² No enclosures are visible today in Wyuka. Curbing and raised lots were outlawed in 1893; there are only a few examples of curbed lots.

Controls were placed on private vaults in 1889.¹³ Vaults were only allowed in a certain area and the plans and materials were required to be submitted to an architect named by the board for his approval. James Tyler, prominent Lincoln architect, was chosen by the board in 1894 "in regard to the building of vaults, etc., and to prepare rules and regulations for same."¹⁴ There are four older private vaults of nearly identical design built in one area. The only vault of different design is the largest and oldest, the receiving vault, which is recessed from the avenue. Intended for the temporary storage of caskets awaiting burial during the winter months, or for caskets awaiting transport to other cities, it was built in 1886 to the designs of architect J. H. W. Hawkins, Lincoln. The vault is similar in style to his other extant works, the R. O. Phillips House, Lincoln, and St. Matthias' Episcopal Church, Omaha.¹⁵

With a waterworks system functioning for the first time in 1889, Wyuka started planting trees, shrubs, and flowers. In the spring of 1894, flowers and ornamental shrubs were purchased to beautify the grounds. A contract was awarded that September for 8,000 cuttings of geraniums, cannas, roses, and bulbs; and fruit trees were planted around the sexton's house. In the following year, 1,500 elm, 1,500 ash, and 50 Russian olive seedlings were purchased and planted.¹⁶ Evergreen trees and a windmill were installed in 1899. In the rules and regulations of 1903, reference is made to a general plan for ornamentation and embellishment of the grounds: Wyuka presumably, was then planting to an overall scheme.

A nursery was established for the first time when the greenhouse of D. C. Mosher of Lincoln was purchased and installed at Wyuka. A florist, J. H. Hadkinson, was hired to oversee the operation. Hadkinson was an officer in the Nebraska State Horticultural Society. By 1897 his contract called for him "to grow, plant, and care for 15,000 plants; trim, water, mow, design new beds, and care for shrubs" for a wage of \$30 per month.¹⁷ Wyuka's nursery operation had grown quickly.

The first boulevard paved in brick was the drainage line on the 1871 plat which transversed the south half of the original 40 acres. This is still visible today as a concave avenue which is considerably lower than the other boulevards or surrounding sections. It was paved to prevent erosion damage to the grounds and to reclaim land for burial spaces. The local newspaper applauded the improvement.¹⁸

Along with these improvements, which were in keeping with the rural cemetery tradition, the board made an unfortunate decision which eliminated one of the cemetery's assets. The "Lawn," "park," or "mall" (Section 13), the area set aside as a park, was divided for the sale of lots. In a letter of protest to the local newspaper, C. M. Parker described the pleasure of visitors who for 30 years had rested in the park, which is "in fact the only park in or near Lincoln."¹⁹ In spite of this protest, the decision was made to divide Section 13. The lots are platted in an oval following the shape of the section, which is also a typical feature of rural cemeteries. Section 13 is the larger of only two sections in Wyuka which follow this pattern. It has since become the showplace for early 20th century cemetery monuments in Lincoln. Pergolas, statuary, elaborate stone, and decorative bronze work decorate the monuments of some of Lincoln's elite.

Rural cemetery tradition recommended one family monument per family lot, and Wyuka did have such monument restrictions in the 19th century. A common marker arrangement in the original 40 acres is that of one tall family monument surrounded by low individual markers. This arrangement is required in certain sections. Other sections were divided into individual lots, and so individual markers were constructed there. No markers were allowed in Potter's Field. In the sections platted in the 20th century, flat markers, level



The Wyuka receiving vault (center), 1914, was designed by J. H. W. Hawkins and built in 1886. On each side are private mausolea. . . . (Below) Wyuka gate lodge, 1927, with superintendent's residence to the left of the entrance road and the office to the right. It was demolished in 1965.



with the ground, are required. Trustees Don L. Love, an attorney, and E. H. Barbour, a University of Nebraska Professor, were well aware of current cemetery practice nationally when they decried the mass of gravestones in Wyuka, in which "it is not possible to get a good scenic effect or harmonize it into a beautiful park."²⁰

From 1908 to 1914 the Wyuka Board of Trustees entered an expansion phase unique in its history. Landscape architect Arthur W. Hobert of Minneapolis planned a majority of the present cemetery, about 63 acres, for new burial sections, a new entrance, and the location of new service buildings.²¹ A gate lodge (office, superintendent's house, and entrance), barn, greenhouse, shed, and outbuildings were constructed, as well as the bridge, lake, swan house, fountain, concrete curbs, and the avenues paved in brick. Plans for the office, barn, house, and greenhouse were accepted from Lowell A. Lamoreaux, a prominent Minneapolis architect, in 1908.²² The power plant, barn (extant), greenhouse, and outbuildings were completed in 1909, whereas the most significant structure, the gate lodge, was delayed for lack of funds and not finished until 1911. The gate lodge provided a significant and successful sense of entrance to the cemetery. The brick and stucco structure was recessed from O street and spanned the angled entrance road. The gateway was flanked by a two-story office and by a two-story superintendent's residence on the west, facing the lake. The successful entrance was recognized in the publication, *The Cemetery Handbook*, complete with photographs.²³

The barn, the only extant building from this construction phase, is similar stylistically to the gate lodge. Covered in stucco, it has a two-story facade with centered entrance opening into a courtyard enclosed by one-story work buildings.

The previous sexton's residence was moved to the R street entrance, stuccoed to resemble the new buildings, and remodeled as a residence for the florist who was also responsible for watching that entrance. This two-story house remains today, although it is now in private hands.

In 1911 the ravine in the southwest corner of the cemetery, near the entrance, was dammed to create a picturesque lake. The dam was disguised as a bridge. Plantings of flower beds, trees, and willow trees surrounded the lake. On the small island in the lake, a swan house was built and swans imported

from Europe. Ducks completed the scene. The view was the most beautiful park scene in Lincoln at that time.

Wyuka became a garden spot with the aid of the new, larger greenhouse, which was again replaced in the 1920s. Well-tended flower beds and trees decorated the cemetery. The nursery supplied trees for transplanting. The most significant grouping of trees is the double row of evergreens lining both sides of the ravine which parallels the western boundary. The mature trees provide a definite sense of division between the cemetery and the adjacent residential neighborhood. A similar row of evergreens lines the northern border.

By 1914 the Wyuka trustees had spent over \$60,000 on capital improvements. The physical complex was at its height, and judging from historic photographs, it was excellently planted and maintained. Since that time most of the buildings have been removed; the barn, florist's residence, bridge, front fence, and receiving vault remain. The impressive Rudge Memorial Chapel was added near the entrance in 1938.

Arthur W. Hobert had a considerable and highly successful impact on the landscape design of Wyuka. A cemetery superintendent from Minneapolis, his plans continued the rural cemetery tradition with curving avenues executed for pleasant appearance and good drainage. All the new burial sections required flat markers, a development designed to create a more park-like appearance. The angled entrance was a harbinger of the interior plan. All of the major new buildings were pleasantly arranged about the lake. The buildings were united by material (stucco) and style.

A visitor's first view of Wyuka from 1911 to 1965 would probably have been from the corner of 35th and O Streets as the visitor arrived from downtown Lincoln. This corner was well-planted with trees and shrubs and bordered with the cemetery's iron fence. The lake was just east of the corner. From the higher elevation on O Street, the picturesque view of the lake, swans, weeping willows, bridge, barn, and flowers would be highly visible, with the gravestones only barely visible in the trees in the background. East of the lake was the angled entrance and gate lodge.

Hobert's emphasis on this beautiful entrance scene of lake, plantings, and buildings was the focal point of the cemetery and achieved the goal of the rural cemetery—a park view. The

scene captured the imagination of local citizens; it is often the first view called to mind in their reminiscences.²⁴

Hobert's picturesque entrance was unfortunately altered in the changes of 1965-1967. A 165 x 300-foot parcel of land at the 35th and O Street corner was sold and a US Post Office substation erected on the site. The gate lodge was demolished, after being termed in poor condition, and a small one-story administration building erected at one side of the entrance road. After problems with the city over drainage through the lake and creek and with mosquito control, the lake was drained.

A few local citizens expressed displeasure at the sale of the cemetery land to the post office in letters to the local newspaper: "This seems contrary to the wishes of the people living in the area. There are many other places a post office can be built and not destroy a point of beauty." The Wyuka board was willing to sell the site because Wyuka's policy did not allow the area near a public road to be used for grave sites. Therefore, funds from the sale were the only income potential for the property. Funds were then used in the other changes planned at the time.²⁵

Wyuka has retained the distinctive form of a rural cemetery in spite of changes. Historically, rural cemeteries preceded and, by their success, encouraged public park development. Wyuka was developed before the city park system was seriously started. The current staff of Wyuka recounts many stories of visitors' fond memories of past visits.²⁶ A Minneapolis city park engineer, Alfred C. Godward, who was studying Lincoln's parks in 1915, said, "Lincoln's most scenic and beautiful spot is Wyuka."²⁷

NOTES

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