

Celebrating in the style of 19th century impresario William Niblo, who threw grand parties at his Greenwood Cemetery mausoleum before his death. Opposite page: The beauty of Woodlawn Cemetery.

Built for the dead, cemeteries are now happy to welcome the living By Sharlene Breakey

THE GRAVE

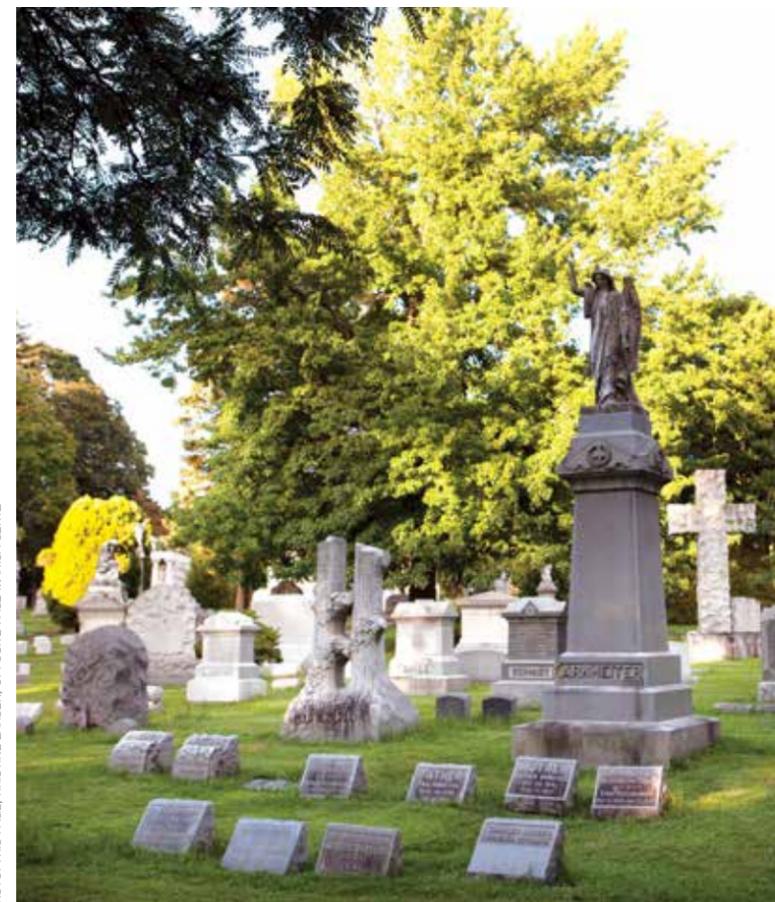


PHOTO: THIS PAGE, KRISTINE LARSEN; OPPOSITE PAGE, MARISA GERTZ

“IT WASN’T CREEPY—AT ALL.” THESE days that’s a common response of visitors to some of New York’s sprawling old-time cemeteries. Wooded, serene, dripping with history, graveyards like Woodlawn in the Bronx, Maple Grove in Queens and Green-Wood in Brooklyn want to be seen as more than crypt keepers. You can bird-watch with the Audubon Society or forage for mushrooms. You can wish a happy birthday to suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton or take a trolley tour past what remains of “Boss” Tweed.

“Our goal is to create something people can connect with,” says David Ison, executive director of 152-year-old Woodlawn Cemetery, which recently co-hosted a jazz concert with Lincoln Center in the corner of its 400 acres—the final home of such musical greats as Miles Davis and Duke Ellington. Woodlawn has even developed an app, featuring maps and links to Wikipedia entries and songs of its famous residents. But if the tactics are modern, Ison is taking cues from days gone by. “Just 20 years ago, people packed up their families and came out to picnic with lost loved ones,” he says. “We find that people still yearn to pay respect to the past—if

we can get them engaged.”

Chelsea Dowell, manager of programs and membership at Green-Wood Cemetery agrees. “All we have to do is get people here and they are in love.” The nearly 200-year-old, 478-acre National Historic Landmark is the highest point in Brooklyn, but that’s not why people stop in. For a while now, Green-Wood has lured visitors through its gothic gates with events such as “Dark Wonderland,” a series of candlelit walks that culminate in light shows, or performances by the likes of local guitar god Vernon Reid.

These events are not just modern marketing. For the past 104 years, the Church of the Intercession has organized a visit to Trinity’s Cemetery in Washington Heights, where they pay homage to “’Twas the Night Before Christmas” author Clement Clarke Moore. A reading of the poem and carol service precedes a lantern procession and laying of a wreath at the author’s gravesite.

Poke around these cemeteries’ thousands of crypts and it’s quickly obvious that even deceased, New York’s fancy class knew how to entertain. “The wealthy got architects and landscapers to design their mausoleums,” says Ison. “Everything they did in life, they brought into death.” So visiting one feels like dropping by a grand old home, in miniature. Railroad baron Jason “Jay” Gould’s, for instance, resembles a petite Parthenon, surrounded

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by a weeping birch tree and sloping lawn that cries out for an old-fashioned lawn party.

Occasionally the party started early. At Green-Wood, William Niblo, who ran the 19th century’s premier entertainment house, built a marble lion-flanked mausoleum years in advance so he could host affairs there. Noe Dowell’s team

bands with vaudeville and performing arts group Bindlestiff Family Cirkus to transform Niblo’s resting place into a summertime extravaganza of old-time games, fire-eaters and contortionists.

For visitors, the experience is part park, part outdoor history museum. And it’s the modest stones that often unearth the grandest



Relaxing in the Trinity Churchyard in Lower Manhattan.

TOP PHOTO: LEAH REDDY/TRINITY WALL STREET, BOTTOM PHOTOS TRINITY WALL STREET (1), KRISTINE LARSEN (2,4), GREEN-WOOD CEMETERY (3)

TOP PHOTO: KRISTINE LARSEN, BOTTOM PHOTOS: COURTESY OF GREEN-WOOD CEMETERY (5,7), KRISTINE LARSEN (6,8)

stories. “You can spot an interesting character just by wandering. One of my favorite things is to discover the story behind the names I find,” says Carl Ballenas, historian at Maple Grove, a nearly 150-year old, 65-acre haven in Queens. “John Allan, a ferryman who died in 1880, brought people between the boroughs before the bridges were built. The physician who attended Lincoln after he was shot is also here.”

Then again, calling attention to inhabitants’ stories provides more than an appreciation of the past. It also lures much-needed revenue. “As we fill up, we will be doing the cemetery business less, so we need to depend primarily on cultural events,” says Dowell. The truth is, full cemeteries can end up abandoned for lack of funds. That was the fate of the Staten Island and Fountain Cemeteries, until they were rescued by Friends of Staten Island. Now once a year, on—when else?—All Hallows’ Eve, the group throws open the gates to invite the living in for a flashlight tour. “We don’t do a bunch of decorating,” says director Lynn Rogers, who hires actors to dress as the deceased and tell the graveyard’s ghost tales. “It’s dark, and this cemetery has a history of being haunted.”

Cemeteries are, after all, cemeteries. Every once in a while you still have to leave one saying, “That was creepy. Really creepy.”



Exploring robber baron Jay Gould’s Parthenon-inspired mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery.

The city’s graveyards have something for everyone. This fall, if you want to:

CELEBRATE A SUFFRAGETTE. Check Woodlawn’s website (woodlawn.org) for details about Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s birthday.

STEP BACK IN TIME. Join the Transit Museum for a nostalgic ride in a WWI-era subway car from Manhattan to Woodlawn, ending there with a picnic and flashlight tour (web.mta.info/mta/museum/programs).

HONOR THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CIVIL WAR. Head to Maple Grove (friendsofmaplegrove.org) for an event meant to introduce you to the dozens of Civil War characters, famous and infamous alike, buried on the grounds.

GO BACK TO SCHOOL. There won’t be a test, but Green-Wood (green-wood.com) will be celebrating Eberhard Faber, father of the popular No. 2 lead pencil.

LEAF PEEP. Forget Vermont; these cemeteries offer acres of trees and wildlife. So stop by for a laid-back stroll, trolley tour or private group tours. Trust Woodlawn Conservancy’s Susan Olsen when she says: “We kick the Botanical Gardens’...”

BE AFRAID. Plenty of graveyards cash in on Halloween. Check out St. John the Divine (stjohndivine.org) for its annual Crypt Crawl and Halloween Extravaganza. Trinity Church (trinitywallstreet.org) and Maple Grove throw kid-friendly trick-or-treat events. And for that flashlight tour at Staten Island and Fountain Cemeteries: Take the #40 bus from the Staten Island Ferry to 1562 Richmond Terrace (at the corner of Alaska Street).

BOLDFACE NAMES

Discover the interesting lives lived. Alexander Hamilton (1) is at Trinity Cemetery. Woodlawn Cemetery is the final resting place for Miles Davis (2), Irving Berlin (4), Fiorello La Guardia (6) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (8). Find artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (3) and Leonard Bernstein (7) at Green-Wood Cemetery, where 19th-century illustrator William Holbrook Beard’s unmarked grave (5) is now adorned with a bear. Ask Google why.

