The Religious Symbolism of Laurel Hill Cemetery

IN THE AUTUMN OF 1835 a distraught father returned home from the grave of his five-year-old daughter. She had died that year of scarlet fever and was buried in the Philadelphia Quaker graveyard at Fourth and Arch Streets. John Jay Smith was not comforted by his visit, but alarmed instead. He was not absolutely certain he had found the grave of his daughter. Following Quaker tradition, no markers were permitted on the graves. Smith then recalled that when he buried his daughter the coffin had been lowered into clay soil which acted like a cup holding accumulated water.1 In his Recollections Smith accused the Quakers of “greatly neglecting the last resting-place of the people who were not without sensibility when alive. The friends of those buried long deplored this want of proper feeling.”2 For Smith, the final insult to the dead would come when the Quakers built the Arch Street Meeting House on top of the old

1 Smith’s comments on Philadelphia’s poor soil are mentioned in “Laurel Hill,” Godey’s Lady’s Book 28 (1844), 107; and in John Watson, Annals of Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1909 ed.), 138. The loss of his daughter’s grave was cited in Smith’s memoranda book (Nov. 8, 1835), which is now lost. Jim Quinn, “The Resurrection of Laurel Hill,” Philadelphia Magazine 69 (September 1978), 174-76, 224-30, mentions the memoranda book and the problem of the lost grave. In 1978 the memoranda book was owned by Drayton and Jane Smith. According to current Laurel Hill caretakers, they were killed in a car accident and the memoranda book cannot be located.


graveyard. "There is no deep cellar, it is true," Smith explained, "but
the foundations displaced many bones, skulls, etc."³

In spite of his Quaker upbringing, John Jay Smith displayed a
feeling for the dead which, while contrasting with earlier Quaker
traditions, was in keeping with the sentiments of many Philadelphians.
The Society of Friends tried to guard against the excesses of mourning,
funeral processions, and grave markers, but a new attitude toward
death rituals increasingly prevailed in the city. Unable to change the
theological outlook of his denomination, as a private citizen Smith
did take steps to remedy what he understood as a serious moral
problem—how to care for the dead. That November, Smith and five
other laymen formed the "Laurel Hill Cemetery Company." The
next year they purchased thirty-two acres of land which had been a
country estate and later a Catholic boarding school. Situated high on
a hill, three miles down the picturesque Schuylkill River from Phil-
adelphia, the land had already been partially landscaped. Smith and
the other investors struggled through the economic depression of 1837
and by the 1840s had firmly established their cemetery. According
to Philadelphia's influential Godey's Lady's Book, by 1844 Laurel Hill
served as the resting place "of our most responsible families in every
walk of life."⁴

The rural cemetery movement resulted from changing attitudes
toward death which historians believe began in Europe during the
eighteenth century.⁵ The opening in 1804 of the Parisian cemetery
Pere Lachaise established a new standard for the creation of burial
parks separated from religious control. Crowded church burial yards,
charnel houses storing bones, and epitaphs warning of the unpredict-
dable and unglamorous character of death gave way to new attitudes
about the place of the cemetery in the city and the proper way to
commemorate the dead. Père Lachaise's winding paths through eleg-
ant trees and luxuriant vegetation encouraged the visitor to meditate

³ Ibid., 267.
⁴ "Laurel Hill," 108.
⁵ The interest in the study of death as an indicator of cultural change was begun by
Philippe Aries in Western Attitudes toward Death, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore,
1974), and later in an expanded version, The Hour of Our Death (New York, 1983). See
also Michel Vovelle, Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIe siècle: les attitudes
not on the finality of death but on the glories of heaven. By the height of its popularity in 1825, visitors to Père Lachaise could pause at the tomb of the lovers Abelard and Héloïse, marvel at the view of Paris, and find moral uplift in the aesthetic sculpture placed throughout the cemetery. Père Lachaise's prominence went unchallenged until the development of similar cemeteries in Great Britain and the United States.6

During the 1820s and 1830s reform movements in the English-speaking world echoed the concerns of the French for privately-controlled cemeteries situated in a natural environment free from urban blight, and filled with gravestones that promoted civic and domestic virtues.7 The rural cemetery movement culminated in the establishment of modified versions of Père Lachaise in most British and American cities: Low Hill General (Liverpool, 1825), Mount Auburn (Boston, 1831), Kensal Green (London, 1833), Laurel Hill (Philadelphia, 1836), Greenwood (Brooklyn, 1838), Highgate (London, 1839), Allegheny (Pittsburgh, 1844), Spring Grove (Cincinnati, 1845), Hollywood (Richmond, Virginia, 1849). These cemeteries—and hundreds of others established throughout the century—sought to alleviate the pain of death by providing comfort and moral in-

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struction. Picturesque landscapes purified the sentiments of visitors, while monuments to the dead evoked a sense of history, continuity, and patriotism. The cemetery founders expressed very practical, hygienic reasons for the establishment of cemeteries outside of the city limits, but as Stanley French concludes, "the rural cemetery through its intended capacity as cultivator of the finer emotions was another facet of the conservative cultural uplift movement during the Age of the Common Man."^8

While liberalizing trends in American Protestantism facilitated the spread of the rural cemetery movement, the role of the cemetery as a repository for middle-class religious sentiments and values has yet to be explored. Stanley French explicitly states that in Mount Auburn "symbols of Christianity were infrequently used,"^9 although crosses, once confined to Catholic cemeteries, increasingly became popular. Admittedly, non-Christian symbols gathered from the ancient cultures of Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Asia generally became available to funerary designers via reference volumes such as J.N.B. Durand's *Recueil et parallèle des édifices de tout genre, anciens et modernes* (1800). In addition, American cemeteries, especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century, shared with European cemeteries a fascination with the exotic and a preference for the eclectic. The proliferation of non-Christian symbols in American cemeteries, however, did not represent a total rejection of conventional Christian symbolism; rather, it revealed how a variegated urban population chose a variety of symbols. What French and other scholars of the rural cemetery movement overlook among the obelisks and funeral urns is the persistent use of traditionally Christian themes and symbols. In the rush to define the cemetery as a secularized space free from Protestant denominational control, historians neglect to take into account the fundamentally religious outlook of middle-class Americans during the nineteenth century.

An examination of the iconography of Laurel Hill Cemetery from its founding to 1890 illustrates how lay Philadelphians sought to elicit, control, and display their religious experience. The lack of substantial primary documentation limits the reconstruction of the

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^8 French, "The Cemetery as Cultural Institution," 91.
^9 Ibid., 82.
cemetery's social history, but Laurel Hill can function as a key to deciphering the religious spirit of the middle class. During the nineteenth century the owners and managers of the cemetery, the authors of guidebooks to Laurel Hill, and the families who purchased funeral sculpture asserted the inherent sacredness of Laurel Hill. By using traditional Christian symbols and theology as well as mythological themes, Philadelphians created an urban Christianity that transcended denominational boundaries. The reverential atmosphere of the cemetery, its placement in a timeless, sacred environment, and the creation of family shrines to the dead were aspects of a middle-class piety which flourished alongside Philadelphia's Protestant denominations and amid the city's religious pluralism. By excluding the clergy from controlling Laurel Hill, John Jay Smith and the other founders opened the cemetery to freer expressions of the meaning of death, not by the theologically educated but by the growing middle class.

Laurel Hill was not the first cemetery in Philadelphia free from clerical control. As early as 1825, private citizens ran six cemeteries in the city. Ronaldson's Cemetery, an elegantly landscaped downtown cemetery founded in 1827, served for many years as the model burial place of the city. Its symmetry and parallel lines of graves reflected the popular fascination with classical architecture and design. Prominent Philadelphia churches like Christ Church could not offer much more to their parishioners. They, too, needed to buy land away from the church in order to bury the dead of their congregation. The owners and managers of private cemeteries assumed that Philadelphians preferred to be buried not with their fellow Episcopalians, Presbyterians, or Quakers, but with others of similar social and philosophical outlook.

Rather than separating religious experience from the worlds of money, art, science, or even entertainment, middle-class Philadelphians linked together these diverse strains of nineteenth-century life. The unification of entertainment, leisure, sentiment, and piety available in rural cemeteries such as Laurel Hill no doubt contributed much to their appeal. As urban living became more specialized and fragmented, Philadelphians sought the reassurance of physical environments where an apparent harmony existed between science, art, religion, social status, and business. The everyday merged with the extraordinary—with the everyday raised to a higher, more significant level and the extraordinary brought down into the realm of the human.
It was this essentially integrative nature of popular piety which made it “popular.” That John Jay Smith—horticulturist, entrepreneur, and Quaker—moved easily between seeing Laurel Hill as an experiment in landscape gardening, a profit-making endeavor, and a sentimental and religious outlet underscored the integrative nature of popular piety.\(^{10}\)

Laurel Hill’s sacred character depended heavily on its physical environment. Four miles out of town, it was not always easy to get to the cemetery during the nineteenth century. Some clergy complained that “the time for attendance [at Laurel Hill funerals] was too long to suit their other duties.”\(^{11}\) Even with the establishment by 1865 of a road along the river, the building of Fairmount Park adjacent to the cemetery, and its eventual access by the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad, Laurel Hill remained, according to the guidebooks, “peculiarly and perfectly protected from encroachments by its surroundings.”\(^{12}\) It took between an hour and a half and two hours to reach Laurel Hill by water from Philadelphia. For the pilgrim, however, this distance increased the cemetery’s appeal. Pilgrims who boarded the steamboat traveling up the Schuylkill River to Laurel Hill participated in the journey of the soul to its resting place. Like a river excursion, death was a journey full of perils. The ferry of Christianity steered the soul across the currents and eddies to a safe arrival at the other shore—the haven of heaven. Once safely on the shore, the pilgrim looked back on the now-conquered river: “Through the green vista see the tranquil river,” mused one Philadelphia observer in 1844, “Bathed in the rosy sunset’s richest glow! / The

\(^{10}\) Smith, the main force behind the founding of Laurel Hill, was part of the Quaker elite who combined an interest in the arts and sciences with an astute business acumen. He was the director of the Library Company for over twenty years, an editor of Downing’s *The Horticulturist*, a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences, treasurer of the Athenian Institute, and secretary of a company that organized Conestoga wagon trains from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh and called the meeting which resulted in the formation of the Girard Life Insurance Company. The creation and management of Laurel Hill Cemetery allowed Smith to combine his interests in horticulture and the arts, develop a sound financial investment, and cope with the death of three of his seven children. On Smith, see Scharf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, 2:1184.


General View of Laurel Hill Cemetery (Guide to Laurel Hill Cemetery, Near Philadelphia. with Numerous Illustrations [Philadelphia, 1844]).
Landing at Laurel Hill (Smith's Illustrated Guide to and Through Laurel Hill Cemetery [Philadelphia, 1852]).
sparkling waves lift up their voices ever, / And murmur music in
their onward flow!"\textsuperscript{13}

The owners and managers of Laurel Hill consciously tried to
establish a reverential atmosphere at the cemetery. "Let no man tread
with levity or profaneness the mazes of the cemetery grounds," ex-
plained an 1844 guide, for the cemetery "is the Christian's com-
mentary on the truths and hopes he holds most sacred."\textsuperscript{14} To prevent
"the proximity of taverns, or objectionable buildings" from impinging
on the sacred space of Laurel Hill, the owners purchased the land
in front of the cemetery.\textsuperscript{15} Beginning with the 1837 rules and reg-
ulations, and continuing throughout the nineteenth century, the man-
agers restricted families to burying only "white persons." They
excluded blacks and the poor entirely, and isolated single people from
the family plot sections. To encourage the proper respectful attitude,
the managers prohibited dogs, saddle horses, and picnics on the
grounds. Even visitors were restricted. On Sunday, the day most
Philadelphians had free from work, the cemetery was open only to
"funerals, and the relations and friends accompanying them; or to
lot-holders on foot with their tickets, (which are in no case trans-
ferable) with members of their families, or friends in company."\textsuperscript{16}
Visitors on other days had to secure tickets from John Jay Smith or

\textsuperscript{13} Mrs. Z. Barton Stout, "Thoughts in Laurel Hill Cemetery," in \textit{Guide to Laurel Hill Cemetery, Near Philadelphia. with Numerous Illustrations} (Philadelphia, 1844), 153.

This poem comes from the first edition of a popular guidebook sold by the cemetery company. This large book was artistically designed and contained illustrations. Smaller, less elaborate guides which contained the same text were published in 1846, 1847, 1851, 1853, and 1854. The last edition was published in 1858. In 1865 the \textit{Rules and Regulations of Laurel Hill Cemetery} included the text of the \textit{Guide} with only minor changes. The 1872 \textit{Rules and Regulations} contained the \textit{Guide} text, but with no illustrations. The \textit{Rules and Regulations} from 1879, 1885, and 1892 only have a very abbreviated description of Laurel Hill.

To simplify documentation, I cite pages only from the 1846 \textit{Guide}, although the same text can be found in the other editions and in the \textit{Rules and Regulations}.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Guide}, 18.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 42-43. Smith must not have initially expected picnickers because the stipulation, "No refreshments, and no party carrying refreshments, will be permitted to come within the grounds of Laurel Hill," was not in the first rules and regulation book: \textit{Regulations of the Laurel Hill Cemetery} (Philadelphia, 1837).
one of his associates so as "to prevent the admission of improper persons."\(^\text{17}\)

In spite of these restrictions, people flocked to the cemetery. John Jay Smith estimated that in 1860 alone 140,000 people entered the cemetery.\(^\text{18}\) What they found, according to *Godey's Lady's Book*, "was something in the atmosphere of the place which comes over the spirit like echoed music or remembered affection, soothing even the most worldly minded into religious awe and the desire of a happy immortality."\(^\text{19}\) Laurel Hill encouraged visitors to experience the cemetery as a sacred place where it was appropriate for them to express their feelings. Unlike a church or at a revival meeting where the

\(^{17}\) R.A. Smith, *Smith's Illustrated Guide to and Through Laurel Hill Cemetery* (Philadelphia, 1852), 38. The need to obtain tickets from the company for weekday admission occurred sometime between 1844 and 1852.


\(^{19}\) "Laurel Hill," 107.
clergy elicited religious response through manipulating verbal images, the laity created Laurel Hill’s sacred environment.

In the mid-1830s when Smith and his company purchased the land of Laurel Hill, the area was rural and unpopulated. By the 1850s, however, industrial Philadelphia had intruded on the bucolic. “The occasional sound of the boatman’s horn, borne from the passing canal boat on the opposite side of the river,” explained an 1852 guidebook, “or the whistle of locomotives, which ever and anon are seen whirling their immense trains across the distant bridge, comes wafted on the breeze.” It quickly concluded: “they interrupt not . . . but rather enhance, by contrast, the repose of the scene.”

The same book took great pride in noting the commerical buildings one could see on a trip to Laurel Hill: the Merchants’ Exchange, the Jayne Building, and even the 984-foot long Reading Railroad bridge which brought the “shrill whistle and tumultuous noise” into the cemetery. Illustrations of the vistas seen from Laurel Hill frankly depicted factories and smokestacks nestled in the landscape.

As a lay-created religious environment, the cemetery helped Philadelphians order and give meaning to a significant change in the fabric of city life—industrialization. When viewed from the sacred groves of the cemetery, the outside world looked ordered and harmonious. In popular Christianity, which Laurel Hill visually represented, industrialization did not need to be condemned and avoided. Commercial life would not require the rejection of religion. From the perspective of the guidebooks, the factories and trains were non-threatening and situated in a balanced landscape. Laurel Hill served not as a retreat from industrialization but as a place to view the factories, railroads, and commercial buildings while not feeling overwhelmed by them. The cemetery, both physically and metaphorically, gave Philadelphians distance from the city while encouraging them to reflect upon the “contrasts” of this vision.

Industrial Philadelphia could be controlled because from the sacred grounds of Laurel Hill visitors saw the city through the filter of a cultivated nature. The proprietors of Laurel Hill hoped to combine the best of landscape gardening with the wild beauty of a hilly river.

20 Smith’s Illustrated Guide, 66.
21 Ibid., 35.
front. Andrew Jackson Downing remarked that Laurel Hill was especially rich in rare trees and that “it is a better arboretum than can easily be found elsewhere in the country.”

John Jay Smith, an amateur botanist, oversaw that the names of the trees planted in the cemetery were all listed in the guidebooks. These books also hailed the rugged beauty of the cemetery. “Every mind capable of appreciating the beautiful in nature,” a guidebook asserted, “must admire its gentle declivities, its expansive lawns, its hill beetling over the picturesque stream, its rugged ascents, its flowery dells, its rocky ravines, and its river-washed borders.”

Planted and wild nature, according to the literature provided by the cemetery company, never conflicted with one another but rather existed to help the pilgrims evoke, purify, and preserve their sentiments for the dead.

The unpredictability of death challenges the orderliness of everyday existence and forces one to face a sense of chaos and alienation. If, however, mid-nineteenth-century Philadelphians perceived death, and by extension the cemetery, as merely natural, then they would have made little effort to develop an elaborate burial cult. “Nature,” reflected Downing, “far more heartstirring, impressive, and universal, in her eloquence, pleads for the sacredness of man’s remains—for the sanctity of the tomb.” The tomb served to integrate nature and culture. “Oh! lay me not within the grave / That bricks and stones enclose,” explained one poet, “Oh! lay me ’neath some ancient tree, That spreads its shade afar; / Where my lone grave may smiled on be / By many a silent star.”

Philadelphians preferred the cemetery to be a garden with both planted flora and carved ivy, flowers, and tree trunks on their gravestones. Laurel Hill symbolically provided a cultivated natural environment which allowed the visitor to experience death as a part of a meaningful natural order.

That meaningful natural order did not assume that death heralded the final event in life. Laurel Hill Cemetery utilized a constellation of symbols to assure Philadelphians of immortality. Visitors faced this

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24 A.J. Downing quoted in ibid., 158.
25 Anthrax, “From the Public Ledger,” quoted in ibid., 155.
assurance immediately upon entering the cemetery. In 1836 a young Scot, John Notman, won the design competition for the construction of Laurel Hill. His Doric Grecian design for the entrance gateway was chosen over two more daring Egyptian revival designs by architects William Strickland and T.U. Walters. Although Egyptian revival architecture evoked the memory of immortal pharaohs buried beneath massive pyramids and was used for the gateway at Boston’s famous Mount Auburn Cemetery, Greek revival seemed more in keeping with Philadelphia’s architectural outlook. In 1836 the three major buildings in Philadelphia—the United States Bank, the United States Mint, and the Merchants’ Exchange—all were designed in some variety of Greek revival architecture which, in the words of one critic commenting on the Doric design of the U.S. Bank, was a “defiance to the elements and to time itself.”26 The stability, dura-

bility, and eternal quality of Greek designs eminently suited a cemetery whose owners and users assumed the immortality of the soul.

Just as Greek architecture was timeless and eternal, so the grounds of Laurel Hill reflected that eternity. The cemetery’s guidebook confidently predicted that Laurel Hill’s “dry soil” and “undulating surface” would not be transformed into mud and washed away like the clay earth of the city. Unlike the graveyard of Philadelphia’s First Presbyterian Church, “the site of which is now occupied by extensive storehouses,” Laurel Hill’s managers guaranteed to plot owners perpetual maintenance of the grounds. Laurel Hill, according to the guidebooks, was not a city cemetery soon forgotten, nor was it a family-farm burial ground where, as in one case, “the new occupants ceased to reverence the graves of the family, and a cart-lane was opened over the spot.” The dead of Laurel Hill would never be forgotten.

To erase the feeling of time from the cemetery, Laurel Hill’s owners and managers encouraged plot owners to use materials which resisted the aging process. The 1844 guidebook encouraged plot owners to use granite for monuments since marble, although beautiful at first, too soon wore away. Iron railings, subject to rust, were condemned. Hedges of holly should be planted because of “its slowness of growth, patience of the shears, and length of life.” Practical, economic, and stylistic considerations also dictated the choice of those materials, but to overlook their symbolic importance denies the full impact of Laurel Hill. The cemetery stood as a monument to memory, and any sign of decay weakened its ability to assure Philadelphians of their immortality. There was, in effect, no real death.

After entering through the Doric gateway, the visitor faced a group of sculptures in an “ornamental temple” which acted as the cemetery’s chief shrine and main symbol. James Thorn’s sculptured group, “Old Mortality, his Pony, and Sir Walter Scott,” aptly summarized the popular view of immortality promoted by Laurel Hill. The statue

29 Guide, 22.
30 Ibid., 40-41.
31 Smith’s Illustrated Guide, 39.
tells the tale, retold by Sir Walter Scott, of an old man in Scotland who traveled across the land with his pony restoring the graves of martyred Presbyterians by rechiseling their gravestone epitaphs. The old man, whom Scott called a “religious itinerant,” was known as “Old Mortality.”

Old Mortality, a timeless character, brought the dead back to life by enabling the memories of their righteousness to survive. The owners of Laurel Hill frequently recalled how the statue group itself had been broken and through its purchase and display at the cemetery brought back to life. “As Old Mortality loved to repair defaced tombstones,” the guidebook explained, “so the originators of the plan of the Cemetery hope it may be the study of their successors to keep the place in perpetual repair, and to transmit it undefaced to a distant date.”

The resurrection motif thus appeared in four layers: Old Mortality brought the memory of the righteous back to life, the noted Walter Scott revived the story of the forgotten

32 Ibid., 41.
33 Guide, 68.
religious itinerant, the owners of the cemetery reassembled the broken statue, and the future caretakers assured the eternal continuation at Laurel Hill.

Inside of the cemetery, families constructed shrines that also emphasized timelessness and eternity. Confronted with the traditional Reformed Protestant suspicion of images, Philadelphians initially faced the problem of how to assemble a set of symbols that spoke to their Christian belief in everlasting life. In the early years of the cemetery gravestone carvers remedied this problem by appealing to neo-classical designs that symbolized the durable character of republican virtues. By the 1850s, however, Philadelphians had experienced both the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening and the spread of Romanticism. Presbyterian and Episcopal churches in the city began adding Gothic revival spires to their classically designed buildings. In 1852 a Laurel Hill guidebook condemned the “dial of a clock and the goddess of Liberty” assembled west of the grave of “Little Willie” as being “in exceeding bad taste” and for “intruding . . . anachronisms and mythology into such sacred places as Christian cemeteries.” R.A. Smith, the author of the guide, even pointed out the Christian meaning of a carved fountain and broken pitcher by quoting a biblical passage referring to death as a pitcher “broken at the fountain” (Ecc. 11:6-7). Smith apparently felt compelled to distinguish between the “intelligible” Christian symbols of Laurel Hill and the “sealed language” of republican allegory too often found in the cemetery.34

During the second half of the nineteenth century, three major Christian symbols were employed in the cemetery: the cross, the book, and the angel. Because of its direct connection with the Resurrection, the cross was the most widespread Christian symbol. Just as Christ died on the cross and gloriously resurrected, so Christians would live after their death. Philadelphians were well acquainted with the title if not the text of William Penn’s popular book, *No Cross, No Crown*, which connected suffering in this life with happiness in the next. Leaves and flowers were often sculpted on the cross. The cross became the new Tree of Life, replacing the tree in the Garden of Eden. The

34 Smith’s Illustrated Guide, 100-101.
Eden tree, although made of living matter, served only to condemn humankind to suffering and death. The cross, although made of dead wood, enabled the Christian to live eternally. From apparent death sprang forth life.

The Bible, as both the Christian story and the plan for achieving eternal life, was portrayed in stone on many graves at Laurel Hill. Nineteenth-century Philadelphians both held biblical sentiments as sacred and treated the Bible itself as a holy object. Modifying the longstanding Protestant preference for the power of religious words, they revitalized and exploited the iconic aspect of the Bible. Not only were biblical verses included on their gravestones, but so, too, was the book itself. On the grave of Moses Reed, for example, the Bible sits in a Middle Eastern-style niche where a Catholic might have placed a statue of the Sacred Heart. On other graves the Bible joins the cross and the wreath. The wreath, a variation of the crown and a symbolic reference to the crown of thorns, also symbolized the victory of life over death.

As with all symbols, the symbol of the open book is multivocal.
The open book referred not only to the Bible but also to the book of life. "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life," warned the biblical Book of Revelation, "was cast into the lake of fire" (KJV Rev. 20:15). The book of life acted as a record of the deeds of the righteous, and those names omitted from this book could not enter the kingdom of heaven. The family of Margaret Smith (d. 1865) inscribed, "At home with Jesus," on the marble book placed at her grave. The open book and text on Smith’s grave convey an optimistic feeling: the deceased’s name must surely be written in the book of life.

Though it might seem somewhat surprising that Philadelphia Presbyterians or Quakers placed crosses or open books on tombstones, both objects were certainly used in Protestant worship. What is more surprising is the frequency with which statues of angels appeared at family graves. In early Christian and medieval art, artists used angels to suggest the Resurrection: an angel told the women that Christ was not in the tomb but had risen (Matt. 28:1-7), and angels carried the dead Lazarus to rest in Abraham’s bosom (Lk. 16:22). Genesis men-
tions that God stationed angels outside of Eden (Gen. 3:24), and, therefore, future theologians have believed angels guard the gates of heaven. Philadelphians wealthy enough to commission the sculpturing of an angel seemingly acknowledged the belief that one of these holy helpers assisted their soul in its journey to heaven. With finger pointed upwards, the angels of Laurel Hill, like the angels at Christ’s tomb, asked rhetorically, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” (Lk. 24:5).

In the nineteenth century the belief that women were angels and angels were women was quite common. The female angel gently guided the soul to heaven. Significantly, one of the most striking angels in Laurel Hill is a very masculine angel who presides over the grave of Lawrence S. Pepper (d. 1886). Designed by J. Lacmer, the sculpture recalls the archangel Michael who defeated Satan, casting him out of heaven (Rev. 12:7). The masculine angel in medieval folklore was a warrior who fought for the souls of the dead against equally aggressive devils. The weapons of Lacmer’s angel—the cross and the book—reminded the viewer of the inevitable crown of
victory of eternal life. To emphasize the point, Lacmer included the motto: "No Cross, No Crown."

Philadelphians may have preferred the three symbols of the cross, the book, and the angel because they were familiar images in pious homes. During the nineteenth century, families learned from preaching, ladies' magazines, and popular advice books that the home was the true focus of Christian nurture. In order to promote Christian nurture, advice literature encouraged women to decorate their houses with religious articles. Middle-class Protestants expressed their well-developed iconic piety by filling their homes with religious pictures, shrines, and statues. Women's handicraft books presented instructions on how to construct wax crosses very similar in design to the cross on gravestones. The letters IHS (the first letters of the Greek name for Jesus) appeared both on embroidery patterns and grave markers. Family Bibles functioned not only in home worship and instruction, but they communicated non-verbally the social and religious character of the family. Just as God would record the Christian's deeds in the book of life, so each family would register its history in its Bible. Placed on delicately-carved wall-brackets, parlor lecterns, or specially-designed tables, the sacred quality of the book itself was stressed. Even statues of angels could be made and displayed by the pious family. Philadelphia families did not merely duplicate images found in their churches. Domestic piety, also a lay expression of religious sentiments, was an important source of nineteenth-century cemetery art.

The burial plots at Laurel Hill were shrines to the sacredness of the family. The managers sold plots to families. Single interments, "either for strangers or others," were separated from the family plots. Family ties, and not denominational commitments, determined where someone would be buried. John Jay Smith perceived a "great change in public sentiment" once religious people such as Quakers, who "had a greater horror of mixing with others, and especially in the grave, . . . by request to me, have a burying-spot in South Laurel

\[\text{For a discussion of domestic Christianity during this period and a fuller analysis of Protestant religious articles, see Colleen McDannell, The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900 (Bloomington, 1986), 20-51, 77-107.}\]

\[\text{Guide, 47.}\]
Embroidery Pattern for Cross (Mrs. C.S. Jones and Henry T. Williams, *Ladies' Fancy Work: Hints and Helps to Home Taste and Recreations* [New York, 1876]).

Cross and Gothic Window, and Cross Bracket (Mrs. C.S. Jones and Henry T. Williams, *Household Elegancies: Suggestions in Household Art and Tasteful Home Decorations* [New York, 1875]).
Statue of Angel (Henry T. Williams and Mrs. C.S. Jones, Beautiful Homes. Or, Hints in Home Furnishing [New York, 1878]).

Hill, and are distributed throughout the whole grounds." Social custom dictated that families maintain their shrines with flowers, iron fencing, and tender sentiments—or to see to it that the cemetery provided such care. The author of an 1852 guidebook recalled "with melancholy pleasure, the visitors to these and kindred spots trimming the shrubbery and flowers that sprout up from the graves of their kindred, and, as they handled the yielding branches, we also imagined that the dead stretched forth their leafy arms from the earth, to embrace once more those whom they had so fondly loved." The living family thus cultivated ties with the dead family. Laurel Hill

37 Recollections, 268. It is impossible to determine how many Quakers were "distributed throughout the whole grounds." The only other denomination that had purchased land for their congregation was St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church. From the impression given by Smith's Illustrated Guide (1852), I infer that the land was for older graves removed from the church burial ground.

38 Smith's Illustrated Guide, 52.
was constructed to allow the living to control their communications with the dead.

In 1840 the Revolutionary War general Hugh Mercer's body was removed from the Episcopalian Christ Church burial ground by the St. Andrew's Thistle Societies, eulogized at the Presbyterian Church on Washington Square, and re-interred at Laurel Hill. William B. Reed, who delivered the eulogy, remarked that when the first funeral rite was performed "over the body of Mercer, with its death-wounds fresh and bloody, [it] taught to a struggling people the lesson of patriotic martyrdom. When we, their children, assemble for these new obsequies, the blood which has poured from those wounds has long since mingled with the earth—the blessings which it earned have been enjoyed by generation after generation." Mercer's removal to Laurel Hill exemplified pious middle-class Philadelphians' efforts

to claim and to create sacred characters, in this case, by recognizing the merits of a dead war hero.

The dead of Laurel Hill were heroes and martyrs as well as family members. The largest sections of the guidebooks commented on both the public and private virtues of the people buried in the cemetery. Such Philadelphia notables as Commodore Isaac Hull and Commodore Alexander Murray, both originally buried at the First Presbyterian Church, were re-interred in Laurel Hill. The guidebooks always included the names of interred clergy at the front of the list of plot-holders, and one late-nineteenth-century history of the city included all the names of clergy from the Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and Baptist churches buried in Laurel Hill. The guidebooks assumed that visitors should admire the achievements of these sacred characters. Protestants, who did not have a formal cult of the saints, developed the equivalent through their popular piety. These sacred characters, more than moral guides, were mythical ancestors who through their presence at Laurel Hill helped maintain the sanctity of the site.

By the end of the century small family plots had been transformed into “dynasty” plots comprised of one central monument and many smaller grave markers. Grandiose statements of power and prestige replaced the symbols of intimate family life which early Philadelphians memorialized. The Egyptian mausoleums and towering obelisks dwarfed the Christian icons and biblical texts popular between 1850 and 1890. While the Laurel Hill Cemetery Company continued to publish its Rules and Regulations until 1900, it no longer reissued the guidebooks. In 1892 the Rules and Regulations replaced the lyrical, impressionistic engravings of the cemetery with realistic photographs. Sometime after the Civil War, the number of visitors to the cemetery declined, and the managers no longer required tickets of weekday visitors. Fairmount Park, which abutted the cemetery, had become the city’s major park. Museums, organized sports, and other pastimes increasingly occupied the leisure hours of middle-class Philadelphians. Laurel Hill expanded across the Schuylkill, but other rural cemeteries successfully competed to house the city’s dead. Laurel Hill had become just another cemetery.

From its founding in 1836 until the end of the nineteenth century, Laurel Hill served as a sanctuary where “the heart can forget the cares and sorrows of busy life, and muse upon the future with calmness, looking up to heaven for happiness and consolation.”

Controlled by entrepreneurs, architects, artists, and prosperous Philadelphians, the cemetery reflected the concerns of a people sure of their salvation. “The shorter life the longer immortality,” reflected Lewis Copper’s (d. 1874) epitaph, “The less of this brief world the more of heaven.” Whether they believed that they would sleep until the Last Judgment or soar immediately into heaven, Philadelphians buried in Laurel Hill, through their grave markings, monuments, and arrangements, bore witness to the fundamental goodness of their lives and their future eternal happiness.

The epitaphs found in Laurel Hill echoed an uncomplicated theology of heaven. Heaven meant rest and reunion. Although grave

41 Smith’s Illustrated Guide, 76.
texts stated that families would be reunited, there is no indication in the epitaphs or funeral sculpture that Philadelphians imagined heaven as the “celestial retirement village” portrayed by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps in her best-selling novel Gates Ajar.\textsuperscript{42} Heaven was, however, not populated by the individual churchgoer saved by denominationally determined beliefs, but by pious families made up of “sincere souls” (Elizabeth Shuttlewood, d. 1850) and “honest men” (William Miller, d. 1864) who could exclaim, “Simply to Thy cross I cling” (John Horn, d. 1870). Most middle-class Philadelphians built their popular piety neither on sophisticated theological speculation nor the musings of fiction writers. They grounded their beliefs instead on traditional Christian hopes for eternal life colored by the Victorian preoccupation with family life.

Middle-class lay control over the cemetery permitted the expression of deep-seated religious impulses. While theologians insisted on the abstract nature of faith and values, nineteenth-century Philadelphians embodied religious sentiments in the material world. Laurel Hill functioned as a pilgrimage place where Protestants set their own standards of behavior and created their own religious art. Professionals, such as architect John Notman and founder John Jay Smith, replaced the clergy as the experts on how to house and commemorate the dead properly. They, and not religious authorities, created and promoted the sacred environment of Laurel Hill.

The families who expressed their religious sentiments in the cemetery refused to separate piety from leisure or belief from display of social position. Laurel Hill held meaning for them precisely because they simultaneously experienced religious satisfaction and aesthetic uplift. By using multivocal symbols, families reflected the connection between religion at home and in the public space of the cemetery. Laurel Hill allowed for symbolic control of disorienting conditions. It is not the case, as historian Kenneth Ames asserts, that the “secularization of a once religious universe and the erosion of faith made

death a phenomenon that could not be understood or confronted in traditional terms.”43 The continued use of traditional Christian icons within the cemetery during the period prior to 1890 speaks for the desire of middle-class Protestant Philadelphians to assert their religious world view in their own terms. Although those beliefs might appear shallow or self-righteous, they centered on the longstanding Christian guarantee of immortality for the chosen. Laurel Hill survives as the physical manifestation of a middle-class piety which freely combined facets of Christianity, domesticity, and social prestige.

In their search for the eternal and the enduring in Christian thought, many middle-class Protestant Philadelphians ignored denominational differences which tended to fragment and relativize those beliefs. Crosses, broken pitchers, open Bibles, angels, wreaths, upside-down torches—all were symbols accepted by Quakers, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians. The pious memories and biblical sayings of the epitaphs at Laurel Hill voiced the common sentiments of the day. “The rural and ornate cemetery,” one guidebook author observed, “is the common ground upon which all parties can meet in forgiveness and harmony; it is the lap of the common mother which receives at last, in no unkind embrace, all her children, however widely sundered in their lives by the jarring controversies of their day.”44 By discovering the natural, eternal, and harmonious qualities of the cemetery, Philadelphians could experience a sense of spiritual wholeness increasingly difficult to achieve in a growing industrial and urban center.

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