

What's Been Buried, Doesn't Always Stay Buried

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As a student of both German and Social Studies, I often end up making observations in a circular fashion during my education. For example, I chose a cemetery as the area for my case study, and this reminded me that cemetery in German is Friedhof. Fried is the stem of the word freidlich, meaning peaceful, and Hof is the German word for courtyard, so the literal translation of the word Friedhof is peaceful courtyard. This is a very apt description of the area, which encompasses a zone removed from the city center and the noise that accompanies it. The graveyard has green grass stretching from the road it is on to the forest that borders it, and the graveyard itself has tall old trees mixed with younger freshly planted trees dotting its fields of grass and stone. The historic Lake Forest Cemetery is well kept up and continues to create new gravesites within the area, but the older outskirts of the graveyard are noticeably being overtaken by nature with some older pathways and gravestones being destroyed by nature and erosion. This case study's primary focus will be on the historical, geographical, and environmental impacts and issues of the Lake Forest Cemetery area and other cemeteries.

The village of Grand Haven was founded in 1834<sup>1</sup> and the Lake Forest Cemetery was founded in 1867. So there is a gap given between the founding of the village and cemetery, but this does not indicate a lack of deaths in the vicinity for thirty years. Rather instead there was an alternate cemetery that had been created in 1835 by Rix Robinson<sup>2</sup>, one of the founders of Grand Haven, and this cemetery was near the middle of town<sup>3</sup>. This other cemetery, referred to by most

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<sup>1</sup> Kit Lane, Edito., *Ottawa County Historical Atlas and Gazetteer* (Douglass: Pavilion Press, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> David H. Seibold, *In The Path Of Destiny*, edito, Dorthe Welch Seibold (Grand Haven, Grand Haven Historical Museum, 2007), 154.

<sup>3</sup> Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn fire insurance maps* (Pelham: Sanborn Map Company, 1884-1951) reel 20.

as the “old cemetery”, had been set up on the original border of the village, and as such, as city limits grew, the “old cemetery” was quickly surrounded by development and was for a time a part of the city center. People began to feel uneasy about having a graveyard so close to the city center, primarily out of a fear for having death feel so close by. It was during this time that one of the other founding fathers of Grand Haven, Reverend William Montague Ferry bought the “old cemetery” lands.<sup>4</sup>

The Ferry family had a tremendous influence in the Grand Haven area from the town’s conception in 1834 to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The family was involved in the exploration of the area around Grand Haven, the business of the city, and the education of the city, which eventually led to the founding of Ferry Elementary School in Grand Haven<sup>5</sup>. The Ferry family was quite wealthy at the time, and had purchased many plots of land in Grand Haven, including the “old cemetery.” In the 1860’s thoughts on what should be done about the cemetery in the dead center of town<sup>6</sup> started with the death of Noah Ferry during the Battle of Gettysburg in the Civil War. Noah Ferry’s body was returned to Grand Haven in 1863, and the Ferry family opted to bury the body outside of the town on a plot of land in the dunes. The practice of creating graveyards outside of the town’s center was a trending practice of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the City Council of Grand Haven agreed with it. By 1867 Grand Haven has become a city, and the Ferry family ceded the lands of the “old cemetery” to the city for \$1 on the promise that the land would become a park. The City Council had to find an alternate area for a graveyard, and the same year

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<sup>4</sup> David H. Seibold, *In The Path Of Destiny*, edito, Dorthe Welch Seibold (Grand Haven, Grand Haven Historical Museum, 2007), 154.

<sup>5</sup> Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn fire insurance maps* (Pelham: Sanborn Map Company, 1884-1951) reel 20.

<sup>6</sup> Get it? It’s a pun!

as Grand Haven's transition from village to city, voted to buy the land adjacent to the Ferry plot where Noah Ferry had been buried. The City Council could not raise the money until 1872, wherein they paid 1,000\$ for the land now known as the Lake Forest Cemetery.<sup>7</sup>

No roads connected the graveyard to the city until 1873, demonstrating remoteness from the people. In 1884 as well as several other times Grand Haven purchased more dune land and beach for the cemetery until it reached the city limits. After the dedication of the land for the Lake Forest Cemetery, the City Council mandated that all families with deceased relatives in the "old cemetery" must be moved to the Lake Forest Cemetery. People were slow to comply with this order, and though the City Council called the "old cemetery" central park by 1889, some gravesites still remained in the park when it was opened.<sup>8</sup> A century went by and the Lake Forest Cemetery gained monuments for the Ferry family plot, which came to be under the dominion of the Lake Forest Cemetery, and also monuments for those who fought in major wars such as the Civil War and World War II. The cemetery gained a chapel in 1966<sup>9</sup>, more defined pathways, and mausoleums for more wealthy patrons to be buried in. By 2002 the graveyard was designated one of the historic districts of Grand Haven<sup>10</sup>.

Looking over the data on the Lake Forest Cemetery history in summary, at Grand Haven's founding there was an alternate graveyard, which for social reasons was reclaimed as a park and

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<sup>7</sup> David H. Seibold, *In The Path Of Destiny*, edito, Dorthe Welch Seibold (Grand Haven, Grand Haven Historical Museum, 2007), 186.

<sup>8</sup> David H. Seibold, *In The Path Of Destiny*, edito, Dorthe Welch Seibold (Grand Haven, Grand Haven Historical Museum, 2007), 154.

<sup>9</sup> Lake Forest Cemetery, *Rules & Regulations*, (Grand Haven, Ottawa County Geographic Information System, 2004)

<sup>10</sup> David H. Seibold, *In The Path Of Destiny*, edito, Dorthe Welch Seibold (Grand Haven, Grand Haven Historical Museum, 2007), 545.

the bodies moved to the new graveyard, Lake Forest Cemetery. The Ferry family was instrumental in assisting the town with this by selling the land of the previous cemetery for 1\$ so that the town would have the power to mandate people to move. The theme of war is brought in when one of the first burials in the Lake Forest Cemetery was Noah Ferry, who was killed in the historic Battle of Gettysburg. The final chapter of the cemetery's history was gaining land, monuments, and recognition as a historic area. People as recently as 2012 go on tours of the cemetery to learn about the veterans buried there, and to go up the overgrown staircase to the Ferry family plot to discuss Noah and William Ferry and their impacts on Grand Haven's history<sup>11</sup>. I myself remember doing this when I was in elementary school in Grand Haven. At the time I remember wondering what was so important. In a strange way, I'm relearning about the past and very important events in my hometown's history, which is why this case study has meaning to me.

Geographically, Lake Forest Cemetery is located in between two other forest parks of Duncan's Woods and Mulligan's Hollow, so traffic in the area is very light<sup>12</sup>. This could be seen as accomplishing one of the original goals of setting up Lake Forest Cemetery, which was to remove it from the center of Grand Haven and remove the thought of death from the townspeople. One thing immediately noticeable about the cemetery area compared with the rest of Grand Haven is the reduced number of roads and how much greener it is. The area of and surrounding the graveyard is very nature oriented. The Lake Forest Cemetery also has a map presence of being empty land on a lot of plat and geological maps starting from the 1890's and

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Brooky, "A Walk Into History," *Grand Haven Tribune*, April 26, 2012, <http://www.grandhaventribune.com/article/193331>.

<sup>12</sup> Google, "Lake Forest Cemetery, Grand Haven, MI 49417, USA," *Google Earth and USDA Farm Service Agency*. June 21, 2011.

onward<sup>13</sup>. Some other earlier maps tend to not even have details extending to the range of the Lake Forest Cemetery from the town center<sup>14</sup>, perhaps reflecting the lack of importance of the land around the cemetery in terms of commercial and residential expansion. The usefulness of the cemetery land was definitely in question at its beginning, with people classifying the land as dune land with no infrastructure to maintain heat or move along roads<sup>15</sup>. This problem made the choice to use this land as a graveyard easy to make, as no one would be living on the land, no rapid transportation was needed to it, and digging holes constituted the only infrastructure needed.

A unique world aspect of many American graveyards is the ability to keep expanding. Lake Forest Cemetery is no exception to this American rule, and has the ability to keep expanding and taking around 120 gravesites more per year<sup>16</sup>. The United States as a whole is a larger country than most others in the world, so it has a smaller population density<sup>17</sup>. With this smaller population density, there is more land available for graveyards. The Lake Forest Cemetery still has some room left to expand and it is unlikely to fill up within the next few decades. The rest of the world is not near as lucky, with high land demand in the UK as an example. An article came

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<sup>13</sup> David H. Seibold, *In The Path Of Destiny*, edito, Dorthe Welch Seibold (Grand Haven, Grand Haven Historical Museum, 2007), 133, 405.

Kit Lane, Edito., *Ottawa County Historical Atlas and Gazetteer* (Douglass: Pavilion Press, 1999), 78.

Rockford Map Publishers, *Land atlas & plat book, Ottawa County, Michigan*. (Rockford: Rockford Map Publishers, 1995), 13.

Google, "Lake Forest Cemetery, Grand Haven, MI 49417, USA," *Google Earth and USDA Farm Service Agency*. May 3, 1997, August 19, 2006, June 21, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn fire insurance maps* (Pelham: Sanborn Map Company, 1884-1951) reel 20.

<sup>15</sup> David H. Seibold, *In The Path Of Destiny*, edito, Dorthe Welch Seibold (Grand Haven, Grand Haven Historical Museum, 2007), 498.

<sup>16</sup> David H. Seibold, *In The Path Of Destiny*, edito, Dorthe Welch Seibold (Grand Haven, Grand Haven Historical Museum, 2007), 186.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph J. Hobbs, *Fundamentals of World Regional Geography* (Brooks, Cole, 2009.)

out a year ago saying that the UK only had three month's worth of gravesites left for people. Several solutions were suggested including digging up the dead and reburying them further underground to make space, or dig up the dead and cremate the remains opening up gravesites for more people<sup>18</sup>. This practice is widely used in Germany and other parts of the world where space is limited and population density is high, but there is a concept in the United States that is foreign to the rest of the world. The idea of "...a perpetual right to a burial plot..."<sup>19</sup> This means that once a burial plot is bought and the deceased are buried, that this burial plot will forever be for that deceased person as a lasting memorial. This is once again the case of the United States having a lot of land for few people. Some countries wait a mere 20-30 years after a burial to dig up the remains, and either burn them or put them in a smaller box to be buried nearby. Still the issue of running out of space in a graveyard has not become an issue in the United States, nor will it likely become an issue for years to come. It is inevitably going to happen, however, if the United States continues the trend of perpetual burial plots. This is especially true considering the fact the world's population is constantly expanding, and therefore always will need greater amounts of living space and food, which translates as more required farmland.

Environmentally, cemeteries do slightly degrade the natural quality of the land, but to a far smaller degree than that of other land uses such as cropland or cities. Land for cemeteries must first obviously be clear-cut for space and for creating roads and paths through the cemetery. After this initial process, caretakers of graveyards tend to seed grass throughout the zone while also planting a few trees and flowers around the graveyard to improve the aesthetics for the cemetery.

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<sup>18</sup> BBC, "Where could I be buried if graveyards run out of space?," *BBC News Magazine*, August 25, 2011, accessed December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14647010>.

<sup>19</sup> "Do cemetery plots have expiration dates?," last accessed December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012, <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/2248/do-cemetery-plots-have-expiration-dates>.

This does create a balance issue of trees vs. grass, as trees need a lot of nutrients and water from the soil to survive, and if grass is planted all around, trees tend to suffer in the long run. If only grass is planted in a cemetery, it must be well maintained, because once erosion starts on either the count of poor tree roots or grass roots, the problem can become acute and difficult to solve<sup>20</sup>. When I visited the Lake Forest Cemetery I did notice some taller graves were tilted and some other graves near completely covered by dirt and grass. Erosion and runoff also have potential to be more of a threat to graveyards in a place like Michigan which receives a lot of annual rainfall due to the proximity of the Great Lakes.

A second and perhaps more pressing issue with cemeteries is the problem of groundwater contamination. The seriousness of groundwater contamination has to do with the fact that once groundwater is polluted, it can take hundreds if not thousands of years to fix itself. A study by the World Health Organization in 1998 talked about the problem of decaying human bodies releasing dangerous bacteria and chemicals that could leach into a porous soil into groundwater supplies. The impact of damage done is also reliant on what type of coffin is used and distance away from the water table and reliance on groundwater<sup>21</sup>. Relating this to the Lake Forest Cemetery, using Google Earth's mapping kit, the average elevation of the cemetery is 643 feet above sea level, while Lake Michigan is 560 feet above sea level<sup>22</sup>. So the water table can be surmised to be less

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<sup>20</sup> "General Recommendations Pertaining To Municipal Historic Burial Ground And Cemetery Components," accessed December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012, [http://www.mass.gov/dcr/stewardship/histland/cemeteries\\_2-gen\\_recommendations.pdf](http://www.mass.gov/dcr/stewardship/histland/cemeteries_2-gen_recommendations.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Ahmet S. Üçisik & Philip Rushbrook, "THE IMPACT OF CEMETERIES ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC HEALTH" (paper presented at World Health Organization Regional Office For Europe, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1998). Accessed December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012, [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html).

<sup>22</sup> Google, "Lake Forest Cemetery, Grand Haven, MI 49417, USA," *Google Earth and USDA Farm Service Agency*, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

than 100 feet below the Lake Forest Cemetery, which could pose a risk to the ground water supply.

The Lake Forest Cemetery is a perfect place to find solace and peace, but also an interesting history. Graveyards already play a similar role as parks, as recreational areas where nature dominates the area, but also graveyards serve a greater human use than parks. From its beginnings as the “old cemetery” in downtown Grand Haven, Lake Forest Cemetery has seen a lot of history as a war veteran’s cemetery, a founding father of Grand Haven’s cemetery, and countless others who all had an effect on what Grand Haven became today. Geographically the graveyard is somewhat removed from the town in its own area of nature, while also continually expanding. Environmentally the land was pristine dune land before it was converted to a graveyard, but as more and more land is used up for commercial and residential purposes, a graveyard might be one of the better options for preserving nature and preventing erosion.

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