

Natural History

by Kay Holbo

It is clear that an old cemetery holds memories of human life. But can the land itself in this same old cemetery also hold memories of its natural history? We believe so.

By all accounts, pioneers arriving in the 1840s found a land that was rich in lakes, rivers, forests and grasses — more than a million acres of grasses in western Oregon alone. The Masonic Cemetery in 1859 was a grassy knoll with a few oak trees and dozens of wildflowers. Within the next several generations, Douglas firs gained a toehold in the cemetery, as did other oaks, maples, madrone and ponderosa

pine. Settlers brought plants to the cemetery — holly, lilacs, ivy, vinca and roses that had crossed the plains with them. Uninvited guests such as blackberry, scotch broom and sweet cherry arrived.

Through neglect and over time, the cemetery became a jungle so dense in places that at one time a junked car was found buried in the underbrush. During the 1970s, a thicket of blackberries was cleared away, uncovering a neatly tended patch of marijuana.

As part of the cemetery's restoration in the 1990s, two important things have been accomplished. One was to carefully inventory the more than 100 species of native plants on site, a task that revealed the cemetery as an oasis of native plants —

the beneficiaries of generations of neglect. The second — and ongoing — task has been to remove masses of unwanted invasive plants such as blackberry, ivy and scotch broom, thus revealing a valuable antique landscape obscured through the years.

It would be impossible to recapture the landscape of the cemetery as it existed in 1859. But it is possible, and important, to interpret and to manage the landscape as an historic cemetery with a unique asset — the native plants that have survived on site through the generations since 1859. These grasses, flowers and trees are a memory of pioneer times, mixing now with the traditional cemetery plants added by settlers.



*Left: Summer grasses.
Center: November fog.
Right: January Snowdrops.*



“The creek-meadow in season was full of flowers — wild daisies, lamb-tongues, cat-ears, big patches of camas lilies as blue as the ocean with a cloud shadowing it, and big stands of wild iris and wild lilac and buttercups and St. John’s wort. It was watered — too blamed well in the muddy season — and around the springs were thickets of whistle-willow and wild crabapple; and there were long swales of alder and sweetbrier and wild blackberry clumped out so rank and heavy that, in all the years the valley had been settled, nobody had ever explored them all.”

— H.L. Davis, *Honey in the Horn*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935). This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel described the homesteading period in Oregon before 1910. Many of the plants mentioned by Davis were probably found in the Masonic Cemetery during the 1850s, and can still be found there today.



Left: Two-color Lupine.
Top right: Camas field and meadow.
Bottom right: Western Buttercup.

“I can’t hope to explain to you how happy we all were. Father and Mother and all eight children had crossed the plains in good health. We children were particularly happy, for, instead of having to strike out each morning and walk barefooted in the dust, where we stubbed our toes, stepped on cactus and watched that we didn’t step on any rattlesnakes, we were in a country where the grass was belly-deep for the cattle and when the sea breeze made it wave it looked like waves of changeable green silk. We didn’t have to worry about the Indians running off our stock. No longer did we have to eat bacon, beans, and camp bread, and not get as much of them as we wanted, for here we had found a country of beauty, where we could have all the vegetables we wanted, where the hills were full of deer, and the streams full of trout, where, when we looked to the westward, instead of seeing nothing but a long winding train of prairie schooners with a cloud of dust hanging over all, we saw waving grass and vividly green fir trees.”

— Catherine Thomas Morris, *Conversations with Pioneer Women*, by Fred Lockley, compiled and edited by Mike Helm (Eugene, Oregon: Rainy Day Press, 1981).

Top right: Public square.
Bottom right: Oregon Saxifrage.



The Masonic Cemetery and the Rural Cemetery Movement

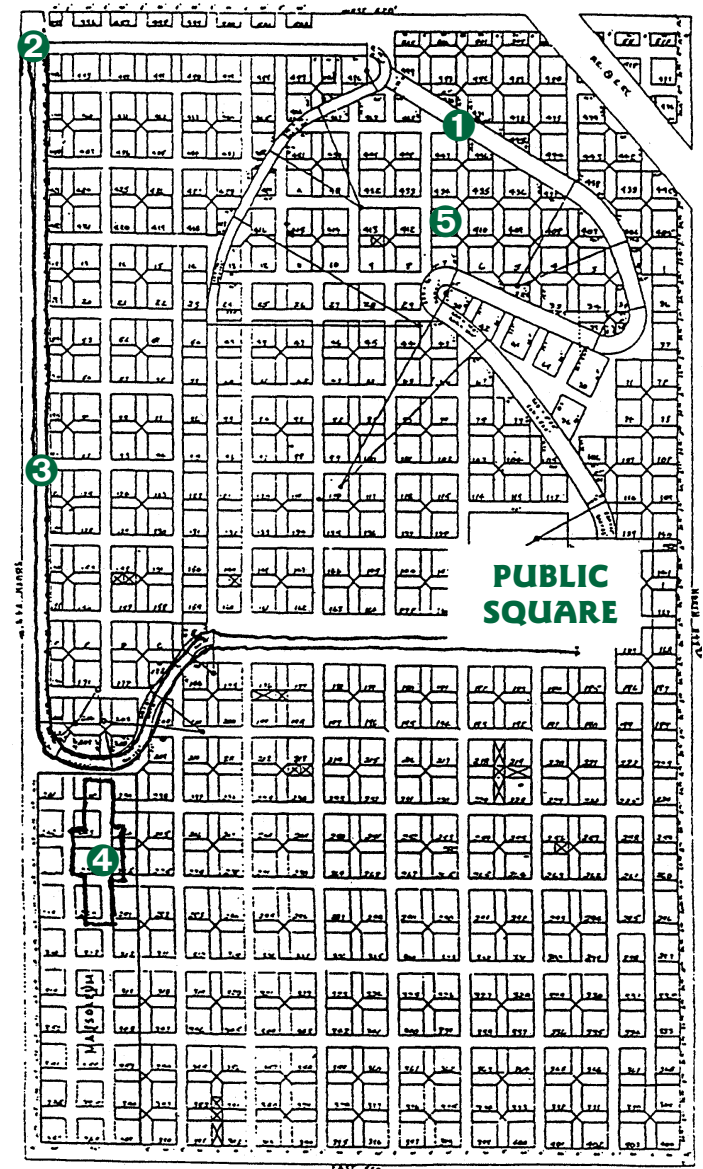
Several aspects of the Masonic Cemetery are indicative of the Rural Cemetery Movement. This nineteenth-century trend was a reaction to the overcrowding, abandonment, and vandalism in the urban churchyards that had functioned as burial grounds in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century America.

The Rural Cemetery Movement promoted the idea of establishing new cemeteries at the edges of towns in beautiful, unspoiled settings — providing leisurely enjoyment of nature as well as a fitting memorial for the dead. In the East, and with active management, many of these cemeteries assumed park-like qualities. In Oregon, and

generally without such active management, the Rural Cemetery Movement produced country cemeteries, many of which are now in need of rescue and restoration.

The grid plan and public square shown at right illustrate the style of the Rural Cemetery Movement. The carriage road was added in 1905.

The map below shows four distinct native environments specific to the Willamette Valley: fir forest (wet and dry), oak savannah, and wetlands.



Map of Cemetery

- ① Old Carriage Road
- ② Gate
- ③ Gravel Road
- ④ Hope Abbey Mausoleum
- ⑤ Overlook/Scatter Garden (as shown on back cover)

