Picturesque Maple Grove Cemetery
Is Museum of Ravenna History

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Although most Ravennans probably don’t think very often about Maple Grove Cemetery, it is a really fine example of a uniquely American landscape type. Unfortunately, like many cemeteries across the country, its character and beauty are threatened.

Maple Grove is surprising-ly old. Its origins date back to 1813, making it one of the oldest continuously used public places in the Western Reserve. There had been an earlier cemetery at the southeast corner of Strea-more Street and Riddle Avenue laid out by Benjamin Tappan in 1808, but it soon became apparent that the growing town need-ed a larger burial ground. Also, despite the fact that medical science knew little about how most people were connected, there was enough evidence to know that locating burial plac-es at a distance from residences was a good idea.

The earliest portion of Map-ple Grove, originally a private burial ground called Evergreen Cemetery, was a one-and-a-half acre parcel on the southeast part of the current acreage in what are now blocks 1 and 2. It is likely that it was laid out something like a traditional church graveyard or town buri-al ground with a grid of paths giving access to closely spaced tombstones. Ravenna Township took over ownership in 1831.

Perhaps the most important date in the history of the cem-etery was 1880, when the Ladies’ Cemetery Association was founded. The group’s purpose was to help maintain and beautify the grounds which many people at the time considered unkempt and unattractive. For at least 50 years they provided much of the leadership and the funds necessary to expand and transform the appearance of the cemetery. One of the Associa-tion’s first acts was to raise mon-ey to expand the cemetery and to plant hundreds of the maple trees that prompted a name change from Evergreen to Ma-ple Grove and gave the cemetery much of its current character. It was undoubtedly at this time that there was a significant shift in the appearance of the place. On the new land, curving paths and water features were laid out in a style that had been pioneered earlier in the century by the creators of the “rural cem-e-tery movement.” Starting in the 1830s with Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, near Boston, these designers aimed to create an artfully constructed rural landscape where nature became the dominant element and the tombstones secondary features within the overall com-position. Wide sweeps of mowed lawn, clumps of trees, rivers and ponds created an idyllic setting for gravestones and mausoleums.

Once this pattern was estab-lished it spread quickly across the North American continent. Following Mount Auburn came some of the most prominent cemeteries in the country: Green-Wood in Brooklyn, Mount Laurel in Philadelphia, Forest Park in Cleveland, Spring Grove in Cincinnati, and countless oth-ers all the way to the West Coast. Akron’s Glendale Cemetery is a particularly fine example for a smaller city.

And so is Ravenna’s Maple Grove for an even smaller town. The Ladies’ Cemetery Associa-tion worked diligently to make it a showplace. About 1860 the cemetery expanded yet again with the purchase of the Hart

Farm on the north side of the property. It was laid out in a more formal pattern of squares, circles and hemicycles recall-ing the City Beautiful planning concepts of that era. In 1902, the present yellow-brick chapel was built by local builder P.L. Frank, and in 1911 a new stone entrance gate designed by lo-cal architect J.A. Green, later destroyed in the widening of Chestnut Street in the 1970s. In 1913, Superintendent R.E. Gifford completed two memorial mounds for local chapters of fra-ternal organizations, one for the Foresters of America and one for the Knights of Pythias.

Something of the pride citi-zens felt for the cemetery is ap-parent in the florid descriptions of the day — for example, this quote from the Ravenna Demo-crat Press in June 1905.

“While much has been said and written concerning Maple Grove Cemetery, its beauties of trees, lawns and flowers, we think it never was so beautiful as this summer. Surely if the bereaed hearts of mourning friends can be brightened and cheered by the smiles of Nature, they will find a solace in Maple Grove. With its stately trees, smooth mown surface, lovely lakes and beautiful driveways, it modifies the grief of the afflicted ones who visit its silent retreats and soothes the weary heart with suggestions of peace and happiness.”

The activities of the Ladies’ Cemetery Association are a reminder that during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, cemeteries, along with death and dying generally, played a much larger place in everyday life than they do today. Not only were graves visited and tended frequently by family and friends and numerous ceremonies per-formed, but also the cemetery served many functions that we currently associate with parks, for example strolling and pic-nicking. They were not the iso-lated, even scary places that they later became. In 1997, the cemetery came to be jointly owned by the township and city of Ravenna.

Today much of the physical fabric of Maple Grove survives. Despite the decrease in fund- ing for upkeep, a great deal of deferred maintenance on build-ings and monuments, and a diminished ability to maintain and enhance the landscape, it remains one of the most historic and attractive places in North-eastern Ohio. No other cemetery in Portage County can surpass the picturesque design of Maple Grove.

It is, first of all, a superb land-scape with its 69 acres of broad, rolling lawn punctuated by five small lakes, a roadway system, hundreds of trees and bushes, mostly rhododendrons, hydran-gaeas and azaleas, that provide a splash of color in the spring. Maple Grove is also a splendid outdoor public sculpture gallery with monuments from every pe-