Heaven on Stone

Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Ideas about Life after Death as Reflected in American Cemeteries

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> Those who no longer go to church still go to the cemetery.
> (Philippe Ariès)

While changing attitudes toward death and dying have been extensively studied by recent scholarship, ideas concerning life after death remain a neglected field of research. This paper argues that between 1740 and 1850 a dramatic change occurred in the way many American Christians, especially mainstream Protestants, saw their eternal fate in heaven. While the church-centered Puritan view of heaven featured bodily resurrection and an eternity of divine worship, liberal nineteenth-century theologians redefined both the quality and the activities of paradise. They ignored the concept of bodily resurrection and transformed heaven into a place where married partners and families met, never again to part. At the same time, the spacious and scenic rural cemetery replaced the narrow urban churchyard. Since the corpse was no longer seen as the property of God and its earthly representatives, the funeral soon became a family affair with a privately owned grave.

It is particularly in cemeteries that we can see how the new ideas of life after death emerged. Accordingly, the sources considered in this paper include symbols on gravestones, sentimental epitaphs, and the location of cemeteries. Popular literature on life beyond the grave supplements and elucidates what can be seen visually. Thus material and intellectual culture receive equal attention.

I. Puritan Heaven

In early eighteenth-century Puritan New England the funeral was much more than just a family affair.[1] Upon death of a family member the head of

[1] *David E.Stannard,* The Puritan Way of Death, New York 1977; *Gordon E.Geddes,* Welcome Joy. Death in Puritan New England, Ann Arbor/Mich. 1981.

a household would inform relatives, friends, and the local minister. All of them assembled in the house of the deceased and silently led the corpse to the cemetery, usually a churchyard or a fenced place close to the meeting-house. Although there was some pomposity and display of wealth in the giving of gloves and rings to all the invited or all who attended, Puritans kept the actual burial ceremony as simple as possible, avoiding the Catholic ritualism their divines so uncompromisingly disavowed.

At the grave the minister said a prayer and sometimes gave an address that extolled the known, or not-so-known, virtues of the passed member of his flock. More frequently, the funeral sermon was delivered at the next regular Thursday or Sunday service. In his address the minister might recall what the catechism of the New England Primer taught about the body's and soul's fates after death. »The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness«, wrote the Primer, »and do immediately pass into glory, and their bodies being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.«[2] Death involved the separation of body and soul; the former would stay in the grave, while the latter might pass either into heavenly glory or into the torment of hell, whichever was deserved.

Generally the minister would not dare to assert which was applicable, heaven or hell, for a stern Puritan doctrine emphasized human ignorance on such matters. This caution did not prevent the preacher to expatiate on a general resurrection which would reunite bodies and souls, thus making the restored elect »perfectly blessed in full enjoying of God, to all eternity«[3]. Until this resurrection, which was vaguely thought of as an event in the distant future, the glorified souls »go on in their white robes to do the parts of priests before him«, that is, before God himself. The souls' primary heavenly activity was the continuous worship of God as described in the New Testament. The less fortunate, of course, would have to go to a »place of torment«. »In that place«, explained Cotton Mather in a funeral sermon of 1717, »they are with horror expecting the greater torment that will at the Day of Judgement be inflicted upon them.«[4]

If they could afford to do so, the relatives marked the grave with a simple headstone that indicated the name of the dead, the date of death, the age, and occasionally some more information about the life of the interred person. The opening line of the epitaph usually read, »Here lies the body of . . .« or,

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[2] The New England Primer 1727, ed. by *Paul L. Floyd*, New York 1899, without pagination.
[3] The New England Primer 1727.
[4] The Puritan Sermon in America 1630-1750, vol. 4, ed. by *Ronald E. Bosco*, Delmar N.Y. 1978, 110 and 116.

»Here lie the remains of ...«[5] Sometimes the personal data were followed by a lyrical epitaph adressed to the reader, reminding him or her of the inevitability of death, as well as the Christian duty to be well-prepared. A typical epitaph reads:

»Come mortal man
and cast an eye
come read thy doom
prepare to die.«
(1740, Newburyport, Mass.)[6]

There were of course simpler epitaphs such as »Reserved for a glorious resurrection« or, »Gone, but not lost« — two epitaphs Cotton Mather recommended for the gravestones of children who died in infancy.[7] More effusive texts praised the moral and religious qualities of the deceased, but rarely referred to private virtues. One epitaph dating from 1709 which called a pastor not only »a fruitful Christian«, but also »a tender husband, and a parent kind, a faithful friend« (Wakefield, Mass.)[8] is the exception rather than the rule. On early eighteenth-century gravestones a stern and icy tone prevailed.

The unsentimental attitude of Puritans was reflected in the art with which they almost uniformly decorated their gravestones. While the sides of most stones were embellished with simple floral and geometric motifs, the top of the stone was decorated with a symmetrical, winged skull. Not unlike a printed letterhead it dominated and determined the message written onto the stone. Like the bones, hourglasses, coffins, and palls that were sometimes added, the skull is a powerful and realistic symbol of death. It represents the actual dead person, thus reminding the onlooker that putrefaction was a grim, inescapable reality. The wings, on the other hand, symbolize the soul's journey to another world, be it heaven or hell. The motif seems to have been inspired by Ps 90, 10:

»The days of our years are threescore years and ten;
and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years,
yet is their strength labor and sorrow;
for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.«

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[5] *Michel Vovelle*, A Century and One-Half of American Epitaphs 1660-1813: Comparative Studies in Society and History 22 (1980) 534-547, at 541.

[6] *Dickran and Ann Tashjihan*, Memorials for Children of Change. The Art of Early New England Stonecarving, Middleton/Conn. 1974, 279.

[7] *Edmund S. Morgan*, The Puritan Family, New York 1966, 184.

[8] *David H. Watters*, »With Bodilie Eyes«. Eschatological Themes in Puritan Literature and Gravestone Art, Ann Arbor/Mich. 1981, 110.

The winged skull is a short, condensed statement of Puritan doctrine of death and afterline. It survives as one of the very few symbols permitted to the artist who worked in a culture essentially hostile to iconic representation.

The sometimes individually designed headstone, the personal epitaph, and the prominent role of the family in the funeral procedure should not mislead us. Puritan death, and life after death, was not a family matter that belongs to the realm of the private. A closer look at some of the ideas and practices involved in the funerary complex reveals that Puritan death was an eminently public event. Consequently, it had to be dealt with by the community rather than by the bereaved family alone. By giving such mourning paraphernalia as gloves, rings, and scarves, the bereaved family tried to attract a large crowd to the funeral and involve as many people as possible in the ritual. Thus, communal solidarity was symbolically reenacted and affirmed.

In 1742 a New England legislation tried to limit this extravagant and costly gift-giving by transforming it into a payment given to the minister and the bearers of the coffin.[9] Yet, the communal character of the funeral remained. Legislation underscored, if implicitely, the official role of the minister. Even though Puritan theology held that the minister attended the funeral as a private individual, a participant among other participants, he must still be viewed as a representative of a religious body for whose values he stands and whose ideas he explains in public prayer and address. Only in theory was there a difference between a minister's merely participating and truly officiating roles. »Although centered in the family, the funeral was a communal affair«, asserts one historian; »the community gathered, ate and drank, marched in procession, and met the need of closing its own ranks at the loss of a member.«[10]

The practice of burying the dead in the churchyard or in a burial ground situated in the town commons at the edge of the settlement provides another important clue to understanding the public nature of Puritan death. The public character of the town commons is evident, and so is the communal quality of the churchyard. Its very location defines the churchyard as an extension of the church itself. Being buried at the place of public worship the dead still belong to the worshiping community of which they mystically form a part. This is the time-honored Christian idea of the »communion of the saints«, the idea that the living and the dead members of the church belong together and form one community. The public character of the cemetery is further enhanced by its actual appearance. Cluttered with virtually identical,

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[9] *Geddes*, Welcome Joy 144.

[10] Ebd. 153.

indistinguishable gravestones it reminds us of the Puritan congregation whose identically dressed members met in their simple church. In the graveyard the dead Christians form a silent, petrified congregation. It replicates the living church members who worship their God in the meetinghouse, and the departed souls standing around the divine throne in heaven. In the cemetery as a public place the bodies silently await one final event that will concern all of them without discrimination: the general resurrection from the dead.

The corpse, therefore, does not belong to the family of the deceased, but to the community. It is public property. Even more than during life, when a man or woman could be excluded from the church or resign from membership, he or she is the inalienable property of all. One could also say that the corpse belongs to God and, therefore, to the church as his earthly representative. Both explanations amount to the same, to saying that the dead are lost to their relatives, but not to the community as a whole.

It is in keeping with this that in the eighteenth century the bier and the pall that covered the coffin during the procession were usually either the property of churches, and under their management, or belonged to the civic community and were in the hands of the civil authorities. More importantly, this was true of New England cemeteries which were typically owned by the town.[11]

In spite of the fact that many New England burial grounds are adjacent to the sites of old meetinghouses and churches, they were legally unrelated. While the church would receive only its members, the civic graveyard would eventually accomodate everyone — saint and sinner, Christian and atheist, and cover the deceased's coffin with its communal pall. In either case the cemetery and the interred bodies belong to the realm of the communal and public rather than that of the family.

II. The Transformation of Puritan Heaven

Uncertainty about the soul's ultimate fate, aptly expressed by the winged skull that could fly either to hell or heaven, and the funeral as a public, communal affair were the hallmark of Puritan dealings with death. Within the six decades following 1740, however, things changed rapidly.[12]

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[11] *Allen I. Ludwig*, Graven Images. New England Stonecarving and its Symbols 1650-1815, Middleton/Conn. 1966, 54; *Geddes*, Welcome Joy 133. 145-147.

[12] *Edwin Dethlefsen/James Deetz*, Death's Heads, Cherubs and Willow Trees. Experimental Archaeology in Colonial Cemeteries: American Antiquity 31 (1965/66) 502-510; *Id.*, Death's

Figure 1: Succesion of gravestone designs in Stoneham cemetery, Massachusetts.

Head, Cherub, Urn and Willow: Natural History 76 (March 1967) 28-37; *James Robert Armstrong,* Trends in American Eschatology, (Diss. Boston College) Chesnut Hill/Mass. 1976; *Peter Benes,* The Masks of Orthodoxy. Folk Gravestone Carving in Plymouth County/Mass. 1689-1805, Amherst 1977; *Vovelle,* A Century.

The first ten years of this period are known as the the »Great Awakening«, a religious revival that suddenly involved most of American Protestantism. By stirring up religious sentiments it brought a re-orientation of religious life and thought. This movement, whose best-known representative is Jonathan Edwards, propagated a new religious ideal. Pre-revival Puritanism had believed in predestination. God had either elected the individual as a future member of the heavenly kingdom, or rejected him or her, thus providing hell with another denizen. Since only God could save a soul from the torments of hell, as well as from temporal misfortunes, passive obedience to God's commandments was the only thing one could do. Instead of passive obedience the revivalists preached repentance, humiliation, and the creation of a burning faith in the redemptive power of Christ. These were conditions within the control of »sinners« and not of God. Grace no longer was restricted to those already »elected«. Salvation, therefore, was more tangible and closer at hand than ever before. Popular expectations of salvation — going to heaven after death — increased considerably.

This new trend visibly manifested itself in the design of gravestones. While the overall structure — a rectangular plate for ornaments and text remained identical, the design at the top changed between 1760 and 1780 (see figures 1 and 2).

Figure 2:
Typical eighteenth-century designs of gravestone heads: Death's Head (a) and Cherub (b).

The winged skull was replaced by a winged human head, now generally termed a »cherub« or an »angel«. Just like the winged skull it refers to the soul's migration to the other world. While the skull-soul may go either to heaven or hell, the cherub betrays the new assurance of salvation; God's world rather than the devil's would be its ultimate destination. The soul would join the angelic choirs.

The same trend can be discerned in the epitaphs whose references to the body and bodily resurrection become a rare feature. Beginning in 1780 the image of direct transition to the other world notably prevails over that of a delay. At the same time allusions to the final judgment and resurrection become less frequent and more discrete. People came to believe in »instant salvation« after death rather than in the complex and seemingly contradictory dogma of an instant personal and a distant universal judgment. Now people died in the hope, and indeed in anticipation of, the joy and glory that was their due by virtue of both their merits and the blood of Christ. The ruler of the paradise to which they gained access was described more often as Redeemer than as Almighty King (with three times more references to savior than to almighty, according to Vovelle). The new heaven flooded with divine light was the abode of angels whose presence and whose choirs were equally cited. Taking a seat among angels implied that the deceased themselves became angels. Dwelling with the just, the saints, and sometimes with the patriarchs, angels populated that »happy mansion« where God had prepared a place for the blessed eternity of the newcomer.

The new sense that the soul has taken its definitive and eternal place in heaven is also visible in the epitaph's opening phrase (figure 3).

While the old Puritan gravestone marked the burial place of *the body* or *the remains* of the deceased (»here lies the body of . . .«), its late eighteenth-century successor was a *monument* (»this monument is erected to the memory of . . .«). The tomb was first viewed as a place where the body was placed to await resurrection. Later this idea was no longer pressed with the same force. The tombstone stood for the memory of the deceased whose soul had passed into the other world. Without necessarily having this precise implication, the new key formula helped to bypass the traditional doctrine of bodily resurrection. It was politely ignored or simply forgotten.

Another feature as important and striking as the »instant heaven« is the new emphasis on the nuclear family as an emotional, if not sentimental, unit. Eighteenth-century epitaphs increasingly stress the domestic virtues of the deceased. It was the tender father, the affectionate, irreplaceable, and unforgettable wife and mother who was mourned.

	17th cent.	1700—40	1740—60	1760—80	1780—00	1800—13
1. »here lies the body / lie the remains«	100	90	80	43	17	19%
2. »monument to the memory of«	—	10	18	53	82	80%
3. professional life	56	29	12	25	7	14%
4. misfortunes	—	—	5	16	16	23%
5. religious qualities	30	80	52	57	34	49%
6. family qualities	18	28	30	29	22	37%
7. expression of regrets	12	4	15	11	28	31%
8. assertion of familial group	6	—	—	11	17	20%

Figure 3: Major Themes in American Epitaphs

Toward the end of the century, the right to shed tears is recognized. Lamentation is not hidden, but engraved in stone, and often the misfortunes of the deceased, shared by the family, are tearfully chronicled. When one member of the family suffers from illness or bad luck, the whole group is emotionally involved. The family group, at times enlarged to include friends or fellow-citizens, made its entry into the epitaph. It affirmed the affection felt or recognition of those who erected and dedicated the monument. With the emergence and appreciation of the deceased as »private man« the »public man«, whose professional career many Puritan epitaphs had dutifully chronicled, faded away.

III. The Birth of Victorian Heaven

Around 1800, New Englanders abandoned the cherub design of headstones and replaced it with the urn-and-willow motif which became characteristic of Victorian cemeteries.[13]

The new decoration was adopted as a fitting expression of the grief, mourning, and regret families experienced at the death of one of their members. The urn suggested the idea of a Greek-style monument, while the weeping willow with its hanging boughs is a conventional emblem of mourning. (The urn was not a container of cremation ashes. Cremation was introduced only in late nineteenth-century America.) Like contemporary architecture and fashion modelled on Greco-Roman prototypes, it foreshadows the conspicuous display of mourning in the Victorian celebration of death, as well as the wish to give the tomb a picturesque setting in an elegant, well-kept park. A mournful symbol of sentiment has taken the place of an image of hope.

This is not to say, however, that the hope of an afterlife had declined or even vanished. The hope, and indeed the certainty of heavenly bliss were openly and frequently expressed in lyrical epitaphs. As heaven had already become a place to which one would ascend immediately, it could be easily assimilated to this world, and made conform to its predominately domestic values. A place as close as heaven could not be essentially different from earth, or more precisely from home. Heaven, the transcendent home, must be a place where one would find and rejoin one's beloved. This new idea emerged shortly before 1800, and soon gained currency as expressed by grieving spouses and despairing parents. The innovation can be found on several gravestones of 1797.[14] The rector of the Swedish churches in Pennsylvania, for instance, dedicated an inscription to his deceased wife. »He

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[13] *Dethlefsen/Deetz,* Death's Heads, Cherubs, and Willow Trees; *Id.*, Death's Head, Cherub, Urn and Willow; *Blanche M.G.Linden,* The Willow Tree and Urn Motif. Changing Ideas about Death and Nature: Markers 1, Worcester/Mass. 1979/80, 149-155.

[14] *Timothy Alden,* A Collection of American Epitaphs and Inscriptions, 5 vols., New York 1814, nos. 104. 671. 974.

I cannot verify the date »around 1760« suggested by *Vovelle,* A Century 544. There must be similar epitaphs dating from before 1797. One example, unfortunately undated (later than 1739), is from the Warner Hall Farm near Naxera/Va.: »Here sleeps the body of Isabella Clayton, while her soul is gone in triumph to meet the best of husbands and never more to be divorced by him« (Epitaphs of Gloucester and Mathews Counties in Tidewater Virginia through 1865, Richmond/Va. 1959, 96). Numerous nineteenth-century examples can be found in *William B.Moore/ Stephen C.Davis,* Rosa is an Angel Now. Epitaphs from Crawford County/Pennsylvania: The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine 58 (1975) 1-51. 185-253. 327-394.

erected«, it says, »this monumental record of her piety, kindness, economy, neatness; her faithful affection to him in many trying scenes; of his grief, which shall not cease *until they meet in the land of the living*« (1797, Philadelphia).[15]

Another stone, dedicated to a widow who died soon after her husband, celebrates her day of passing as the time when »she commenced her inseparable union with her much beloved consort« (1800, Plymouth, Mass.).[16]

To the readers of *Emanuel Swedenborg's* »Delights of Wisdom concerning Conjugal Love« (Philadelphia 1796) and »A Treatise concerning Heaven and Hell« (Baltimore 1812) these ideas sounded thoroughly familiar. The »Christian Examiner« of 1824 refers to the expectation of meeting friends in the other world as a matter of fact (»On the Future Life«, 1824). Starting in 1833 America's bookstores were flooded with popular and semi-popular books on the social aspects and joys of life after death.[17] Typical titles were *Richard Mant,* The Happiness of the Blessed (Philadelphia 1833), *Benjamin Dorr,* The Recognition of Friends in Another World (Philadelphia 1838), and *Henry Harbaugh,* The Heavenly Home (Philadelphia 1853). In the forty years between 1833 and 1873, more than forty such titles were published, and many of them went through numerous editions. The authors were Reformed or Evangelical clergymen, Episcoplians, Unitarians, Moravians, Swedenborgians, and Spiritualists. A Catholic version was »In Heaven We Know Our Own« (New York 1863), originally written in French by the Jesuit *François-René Blot.*

There are differences among these authors. Unitarians do not distinguish between God and Jesus as the focus of heavenly existence, and they believe in eternal spiritual activity and progress rather than rest. Catholics have their purgatory as a place of the soul's preparation before its eventual admission to paradise. Swedenborgians repeat, with great rhetorical skill, their master's assertion that married life in heaven will include carnal joys.

Despite such peculiarities, nineteenth-century popular literature on heaven conveys the impression of a vague yet perceptible consensus. There was more assurance of salvation than among the Puritans whose strict doctrine did not allow for any knowledge about our election or reprobation, i.e. our going to heaven or hell. Most Christians agreed that after death the soul goes immediately to heaven in order to be rewarded by God and enjoy eternal bliss. There was a corresponding decline of belief in hell.[18] The doctrine of even-

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[15] *Alden,* A Collection, no. 974.

[16] Ebd. no. 618.

[17] The authors include Richard Mant (bishop of the Church of England), Henry Harbaugh (German Reformed pastor), Augustus Charles Thompson (Moravian), George Cheever (Congregationalist), Edmund Hamilton Sears (Unitarian), William Henry Holcombe and Benjamin F.Barrett (Swedenborgians), Robert Dale Owen (Spiritualist), and many other, chiefly Protestant writers. For an evaluation of their books see *Ann Douglas,* Heaven Our Home. Consolation Literature in the Northern United States 1830-1880: Death in America, ed. by *David E.Stannard,* Philadelphia 1975, 49-68, *Marie Caskey,* Chariot of Fire. Religion and the Beecher Family, New Haven 1978, 294-302.

[18] *James J.Farrell,* Inventing the American Way of Death 1830-1920, Philadelphia 1980, 82-85.

tual resurrection of the body and its reunion with the soul became less important. Hell and resurrection were often ignored. Both theological and popular authors emphasized the social enjoyments of heaven as well as its domestic nature: friends and relatives would be reunited, mothers would find their lost children, wives their husbands, etc. Some of the more daring authors, including the Anglican bishop Richard Mant and the French Jesuit Blot, suggested that the marriage bond would continue beyond the grave.

One also gets the impression that the divine center of traditional Puritan heaven became modified if not less important. In his Easter sermon of 1834 noted Unitarian William Channing told his Boston congregation that in heaven, Jesus would joyfully welcome any newcomer not from »a real and elevated throne«, but like the humble carpenter and preacher he was on earth.[19] Jesus is just one of the numerous friends Christians want to and indeed will meet in the other life. In the final analysis, people were less interested in meeting God or Jesus than in being reunited with their lost parents, children or spouses. »As you know to me Heaven is where Father and Mother and Aunt Esther are«, mused James Beecher in a letter, »rather than or I should say, more than were God is. For God is here, they are not« (before 1874).[20] Heaven has become thoroughly anthropocentric — man-centered rather than God-centered, and thus as un-Puritan as conceivable.

Another, even more striking un-Puritan idea is that of marriage in heaven. In Cotton Mather's view this would be impossible, because »there will be no different sexes in the Holy City (...) They will so put on Christ that there will be neither male nor female, nor any more difference between them.« Heavenly man is modelled on Adam as he was before the creation of Eve, that is, he is an asexual male. Women will be translated into this form so that »the name woman is to be heard no more« (Mather).[21]

Consequently, a heavenly marriage relationship does not make sense in a Puritan context. The Puritan view even discourages to consider any other form of human relationship in the next world. Samuel Willard's 1726 explanation of the catechism refers only to the negative side of heavenly society. »The saints shall lay aside all their jealousies and animosities, and with one heart love one another entirely, and join with the most entire unity in the Heavenly Consort (i.e. Christ).« In other words: he excludes the possessiveness that might arise in the individual's love of the deity. The saint will

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[19] *William E.Channing*, The Future Life. Discourse Preached on Easter Sunday 1834: The Works of William E.Channing, Boston 1880, 361.

[20] *Caskey*, Chariot of Fire 290-291.

[21] Quoted in *Watters*, With Bodilie Eyes 115-116.

enjoy Christ's »tender embraces« which were by some mystics experienced even here, »when Christ took them into his chambers, and spread over them his banner of love; when his left hand was under their head, and his right arm embraced them.«[22] Such intimacy is a possible source of discord and jealousy among the saints and leaves no room for true social relationships among them.

The new attitudes toward mourning and life after death also affected the layout of cemeteries. In the nineteenth century, the rapid growth of the population necessitated the establishment of new and considerably bigger burial grounds.[23] Between 1790 and 1830, for instance, Boston's population grew from 18.000 to some 61.000 inhabitants. The churchyards and the urban burial ground of the eighteenth century were overcrowded and seemed not only too small and unsightly, but also offended the growing sense of hygiene. People felt that they were a menace to public health.

The solution suggested by Senator James Hillhouse of New Haven, Connecticut, was to create a private cemetery sponsored by well-to-do citizens. Although New Haven's six-acre New Burial Ground established in 1796 attracted much attention and was highly praised,[24] one generation had to elapse before it was imitated. Boston, Massachusetts, was the first city to follow the example of New Haven. Some citizens of Boston acquired a large parcel of suburban land for a cemetery. The seventy-two acres that were subsequently doubled were situated four miles west of Boston in an area that belonged to Cambridge, seat of the famous Harvard University. From the soft, woody slopes of the new »rural« cemetery one could get a glimpse both of the college and the city. One could also overlook a fine sweep of the Charles River. Several ponds as well as numerous shrubs and imposing trees contributed to the romantic beauty of the spot. The idea was to cultivate a garden or park of beautiful trees into which a cemetery could be integrated in a way that would not damage, but perhaps even enhance its natural beauty. Boston's Mount Auburn cemetery was opened in 1831 and soon became the model of a »rural cemetery« that every decent American town or city should have. In 1836, Philadelphia established its Laurel Hill cemetery, and Brooklyn's Greenwood followed in 1838. By 1861 there were at least sixty-six

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[22] *Samuel Willard*, A Compleat Body of Divinity, Boston 1726, 533-534.

[23] *Farrell*, Inventing the American Way of Death 99-113; *Thomas Bender*, The »Rural« Cemetery Movement. Urban Travail and the Appeal of Nature: The New England Quarterly 47 (1974) 196-211; *Ann Douglas*, The Feminization of American Culture, New York 1977, 211-213.

[24] *Stanley French*, The Cemetery as Cultural Institution. The Establishment of Mount Auburn and the »Rural Cemetery« Movement: *Stannard (Ed.)*, Death in America 69-91, at 75-76.

garden cemeteries in the United States, all of them modelled on Mount Auburn's example.

Rural cemeteries imply a significant modification of the eighteenth-century idea and practise of burial. While the Puritan grave belonged to the community, and was typically near the meetinghouse in town, the Victorian American's grave was owned by the family. Dead bodies, too, were owned by families and were legally treated as the property of the surviving spouse and the next of kin.[25] The grave was situated in a suburban area considered ideal for living. Just like the ideal home, the ideal grave should be outside of the busy, noisy, and often industrial city. In the wake of the industrialization Americans began not only to romanticize nature, but also claimed it as the proper location of homes for the living as well as the dead.[26]

Rural cemeteries did not belong to churches or towns, but were owned and operated by non-denominational, private companies. These sold individual lots of about 300 square feet that were neatly marked off as private property, often by fences. Within their lots, people would build subterranean vaults, a stylish house-vault above the ground, a little mausoleum, or just inter their relatives in individual graves. The character of the cemetery as an assemblage of individually or family owned memorial places was enhanced by the extreme variety of decorative art which was unknown before. »In the office at the cemetery will be found a large selection of photographs of burial monuments in the modern cemeteries of Italy, recently collected«, say the »Regulations« of Philadelphia's West Laurel Hill Cemetery; »from which new

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[25] Thus the Supreme Court of the State of New York in 1856, approving a report written by Samuel B.Ruggles. This lawyer had argued that the next of kin rather than ecclesiastical authorities hold property rights over a corpse: *Samuel B.Ruggles,* The Law of Burial: *Alexander W.Bradford,* Reports of Cases Argued and Determind in the Surrogate's Court of the County of New York 4, Albany 1857, 503-532. The author of a textbook on »The Law of Cadaver« repeats the argument, summarizing the earlier view as follows: »The church took the body to itself. It held that a corpse was appropiated by it, by divine service and consecrated burial. The spirit departed to the realms of the supernatural; the body was held by the divine agent to await resurrection.« (*Perceval E.Jackson,* The Law of Cadavers and of Burial and Burial Places, New York 1936, 116).

[26] The study of nineteenth-century names is revealing. On the basis of the high frequency of such names as Evergreen, Oak Grove, and Lake View, Zelinsky concluded that »the nineteenth-century cemetery was emphatically bosky, with the terms woods, grove, evergreen, forest, and sylvan accounting for 86 percent of the references to general plant coverage.« Like nineteenth-century novelists and their readers he identifies such a landscape with that of heaven which is thought of as »a monochromatic, evergreen, featuristic land of perpetual spring morning or evening lying under a cloudless, windless, sunny sky, but where brooks and fountains flow nontheless, and trees, flowering shrubs, and grassy lawns thrive in a park-like ensemble.« (*Wilbur Zelinsky,* Unerthly Delights. Cemetery Names and the Map of the Changing American Afterworld: Geographies of the Mind, ed. by *David Lowenthal et al.*, New York 1976, 171-195).

designs can be selected. It is very desirable to avoid, as far as possible, duplicating styles of monuments already in the grounds.«[27] A visit of the still-existing rural cemeteries conveys an impressive contrast with the older churchyards: Puritan uniformity and simplicity now gives way to varied and elaborate, if not excessively luxuriant monuments. The place of Puritan meditation on the vanity of life is exchanged for a place of Victorian pomposity and display of monumental vanities. It is not surprising, then, that rural cemeteries became open-air museums that attracted numerous visitors.

The private character of the cemetery, however, was secured and protected in the bylaws: »Sundays. Admittance can be granted on this day of the week to funerals, and to the relations and friends accompanying them; or to lot-holders on foot with their tickets, (which are in no case transferable) with members of their families, or friends in company.«[28]

Like the burial ground, the corpse of the dead had moved from communal into family property. Consequently, the cemetery should be a place »where the smitten heart might pour out grief over the grave of the cherished one, secure from the idle gaze of heartless passengers.«[29]

Even inside the cemetery itself people with »a cultivated and refined taste« preferred a secluded spot for their burials to one that was too visible. »Seclusion«, explained one cemetery guide, »is more in unison with the feelings of many friends of the dead than publicity, glare, and notoriety.«[30] It should be clear, however, that the new privacy of the grave and of mourning is not just a random matter of refined taste; it reveals a whole new set of ideas.

IV. Puritan and Victorian Ideas Compared

The principle themes we have considered — cemeteries, gravestones, epitaphs, and doctrines of life after death — can now conveniently recapitulated as in the table below (figure 4).

It is not easy to reconstruct the feelings with which a Puritan entered a graveyard. The winged skulls as well as the »prepare to die« epitaphs no

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[27] West Laurel Hill Cemetery/Philadelphia. Description and Regulations, 11th ed., ed. by the Office of the West Laurel Hill Cemetery Company, Philadelphia 1887, 17.

[28] Guide to Laurel Hill Cemetery Near Philadelphia, Philadelphia 1851, 43-44.

[29] Guide to Laurel Hill Cemetery 15-16.

[30] *Adolphus Strauch*, Spring Grove Cemetery, Cincinnati 1869, 9.

	Puritan Heaven — church-oriented (early 18th century)	Victorian Heaven — family-oriented (19th century)
cemetery	churchyard: place of ecclesiastical worship; corpse belongs to God and community	rural cemetery: place of private, family worship: corpse belongs to family like plot in cemetery
gravestone	all gravestones uniform, decorated with winged skull (»death's head«) as symbol of religious belief	monuments diverse, decorated with urn-and-willow tree as symbol of mourning
epitaph	short, »prepare to die« message	long, verbose; the surviving members of the family expect to meet the deceased in the other world
doctrine	uncertainty whether the bodiless soul flies to heaven or hell; heaven is God-centered place of eternal worship; saints are asexual	certainty about transition to heaven which is understood as a place where spouses, families, friends reunite; marriage continues

Figure 4

doubt reminded him or her of the uncertainty about salvation, and inspired the fear of eternal damnation in hell. The rural burial grounds of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, were much more sentimental places, designed for unmolested and private mourning in natural surroundings. For the Puritans, nature had meant wilderness, wasteland, hostile environment, evil, and was seen even as a place of lawlessness and sin.[31] By the end of

[31] *Peter N.Carroll*, Puritanism and the Wilderness, New York 1969; *Linden*, The Willow Tree and Urn Motif.

the eighteenth century, nature had become something not to be feared, but to be admired, a place that elevates the soul, a source of consolation. Consequently, the rural cemeteries were viewed »as first schools in the preparation of the heart for a higher culture, as nurseries for an everlasting home«, as one author in »The Christian Examiner« explained.[32] The lofty thoughts to be inspired by »a well-ordered and beautiful cemetery, like our Mount Auburn« were completely individual, personal, and private; the quiet loneliness of the grave would »strengthen those anticipations which look to a recognition and reunion with departed friends in a future state of existence.«[33]

The private grave situated in a private cemetery is the place where heaven and earth meet. A private piece of land rather than the community of saints is the mystical door to a heaven of friends, relatives, and spouses.[34]

Illustration credits

Fig. 1: *James Deetz*, Im Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life, Garden City/N.Y. 1977, 70.

Fig. 2: Ebd. 74.

Fig. 3: *Vovelle*, A Century and One-Half of American Epitaphs (see note 5), abridged from p.541 and 545.

The motto is from *Philippe Ariès*, Western Attitudes toward Death, Baltimore 1974, 73.
The author gratefully acknowledges the help received from Dr. Colleen McDannell.

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[32] *J.B.*, Burial of the Dead: The Christian Examiner 31 (1842) 137-164. 281-307, at 151.

[33] *J.B.*, Burial of the Dead 153. 150.

[34] The really public cemeteries are now the national ones, after 1862 established by the United States Government for honorable veterans and soldiers who died on duty. By implication, the bodies of dead soldiers belong to the United States, just as the burial ground which is federal property. The headstones used are of uniform design and size: 13 inches wide, 4 inches thick, and 42 inches high of which 24 are above ground. The inscription regularly indicates the military rank of the deceased as well as his branch of service. National cemeteries present »endless vistas of marble headstones, stretching out in unbroken lines like the silent army of the dead standing in review before the succeeding generation of the living.« (*Karl Decker/Angus McSween*, Historic Arlington, Washington D.C. 1898, 86).