

Green Burial: Celebrating Life

By Donna Larsen



Larsen family time at Steelman Town Cemetery, New Jersey.

My daughter skips down the woodland trail chasing a butterfly. My son runs in the open grassland making train noises. I wander among the natural cedar bogs, enjoying how soft and comforting the ground feels beneath my feet, soaking in the dappled light that finds its way between the massive cedar and pine trees. We're at the Steelman Town Cemetery open house in New Jersey, on a nice family outing.

When it's time to leave, my daughter asks for ten more minutes and heads back down the trail with my husband to photograph a purple mushroom. I have to laugh. Most young people would not plead for more time in a cemetery. Steelman Town, the first Green Burial Council (GBC) certified cemetery in New Jersey, has abundant space for the living. This historic site, just outside Cape May, dates back to the early 1700s. It began as a green burial ground, before anyone had coined the term "green burial."

Stelman Town's owner, Edward Bixby, has re-envisioned the cemetery's layout, built a chapel, and added a woodland burial ground, connecting the cemetery to hundreds of acres of the Belleplain State Forest. It differs radically from a conventional burial ground. "There is so much life in this cemetery," Bixby says. He welcomes hikers and dogs, allows Eagle Scouts in to work on projects, and leads nature tours.

Each year, Americans bury tons of metal, cement, and hardwoods, laying their loved-ones to rest in graves

that, on average, receive only two visits. Steelman Town, on this open house day, is a joyous, beautiful place, where we can begin to heal the fear of our mortality, and see ourselves in the cycle of life.

Native American death rituals honored the natural world. The early homesteaders created simple burial grounds on their property. Then, with the Civil War, the funeral industry began to take over what was a family affair. Led by the chemical companies that founded the first mortuary schools, our final rituals emphasized the consumption of funerary products.

In 1998, Billy and Kimberly Campbell opened Ramsey Creek Preserve in South Carolina, the first green burial ground in the US. The modern concept of natural burial grew in popularity in the early 1990s, in the UK. The Campbells expanded the natural burial concept, applying the principle of restoration ecology (protecting and reviving natural habitat) to Ramsey Creek. In 2006, in collaboration with the Upstate Forever Land Trust and the Green Burial Council, Ramsey Creek Preserve became the world's first certified conservation burial ground. Since then, the GBC has certified nearly 30 burial grounds in 20 states, with more lining up to join the network.

"Most young people would not plead for more time in a cemetery."

"...memorialization in a natural burial ground often involves the use of native trees or rocks."

in New Jersey and Greensprings Natural Cemetery in Newfield, New York are natural burial grounds.

A "conservation burial ground" is a cemetery that furthers a legitimate conservation effort. A prospective conservation burial ground must undergo biological, geological, and cultural resource surveys and adhere to protocols aimed at preventing ecological degradation through burial. It must also involve an established conservation partner, such as a land trust or park service agency, which can enforce a conservation easement on the property. Besides Ramsey Creek, Foxfield Preserve in Wilmot, Ohio, Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery in Gainesville, Florida, and Honey Creek Woodland, in Conyers, Georgia are all conservation burial grounds.

When is 'Green' really green?

From the movement's early days, Joe Sehee, executive director of the GBC, was concerned about the "greenwashing" of green burial. He realized how easily green burial could become a gimmick; merely a way to make a profit. That's why the GBC created standards to protect consumers looking for reassurance that cemeteries offering green options had true ecological goals. The GBC also began certifying funeral homes and products, as part of its mission to encourage environmentally-sustainable deathcare.

I came to appreciate the need for certification during the year I worked for a local funeral chain. I often spoke about home funerals and green burials with one of the head funeral directors. He seemed willing



Steelman Town Cemetery.

What makes a burial green?

Green burials avoid three things: embalming with toxic chemicals, cement vaults, and metal or non-biodegradable caskets. Green burial also protects workers' health, reduces carbon emissions, conserves natural resources, and preserves/restores habitat. Apart from establishing standards for burial products and funeral establishments, the Green Burial Council has created standards for three levels of green burial grounds. A "hybrid burial ground" is a conventional cemetery that allows for burial with any biodegradable burial container (including a shroud) anywhere on its grounds or within a specific section designated for this purpose. Riverview Cemetery in Portland, Oregon and Wooster Cemetery in Danbury, Connecticut fall into this category.

According to GBC criteria, a "natural burial ground" prohibits the use of markers that are not aesthetically natural, and has in place a legally enforceable instrument to prevent future operators from changing established policies. (Non-profit and municipal cemeteries already have the oversight of boards of directors and council officials to ensure they adhere to their stated mission and purpose.) A natural burial ground requires an ecological review by an independent entity to ensure that burial will never degrade the local eco-system. Along with communal markers, memorialization in a natural burial ground often involves the use of native trees or rocks. Steelman Town



to embrace this new concept until the day I spoke with him about my father's green burial plans. He told me that he didn't mind assisting my family with a green burial, but there was no way he would have "an unembalmed body stinking up his funeral home." I became aware that there were shades of green and deception in the funeral industry.

Another time, Sehee and I were touring a casket manufacturing facility. The plant manager showed us his new green caskets of simple pine, but refused to disclose the ingredients of the glue. Fumes from the paint and the finishes made our eyes and throats burn as we watched hundreds of caskets pass through the different production lines. Few of the workers wore any ventilation support, nevertheless the plant manager assured us that OSHA (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration) did not require that workers wear masks, only that the factory "make them available for their use." We did not certify his caskets.

As a home funeral guide, I support families caring for their own. To make green burial a viable option, all segments of the deathcare community must work together. Once a junior funeral director I knew knocked on my door, stood on my porch, looked sheepish, and said, "I love what you are doing. It makes so much sense. I want to help people have green burials, but I was only trained to embalm. I don't know any other way to care for a body." The GBC offers training to funeral directors, so they can help families with green options and learn natural ways to preserve the body.

"The beauty of the whole experience was allowed to unfold in its own time..."

A green burial

Each of the graves at Steelman Town Cemetery represents a story, a celebration of a life.

I stand before the grave of a woman who died suddenly in Jamaica Queens. Cemetery owner Bixby and funeral director Fertig share her story with me. When this woman died, her daughter was thousands of miles away in California. The daughter had never planned a funeral before, but knew she wanted as much control over it as possible. She found Steel-

mantown Cemetery on the GBC website, and could tell it adhered to strict ecological principles. She felt it would remain protected as a natural area, which would have meant a lot to her mother. Bixby connected her to GBC-certified funeral director, Bob Fertig. He says of his work, "When people ask me to take care of

their loved one, it is a sacred responsibility."

The daughter stayed near Steelman Town for several days, designing the stone marker for the grave and painting beautiful artwork on the casket. She watched Bixby dig the grave and held a vigil in the white clapboard chapel on the cemetery land. He left her in privacy when she first unwrapped the muslin covering her mother's face. She then helped to carry her mother outside, lower her into the grave and cover her with earth. The rest of the day, she and her husband walked around the property, deep in thought, collecting sticks and twigs to decorate the grave. "The beauty of the whole experience was allowed to unfold in its own time," the daughter said.

A Call to Action

If there is no green burial ground near you, speak to your local cemetery and let them know your wishes. Although not required by law, many cemeteries require that you use a vault (an enclosure for the casket in the grave, often made of high-strength concrete or plastic). Ask if they will waive this policy. Let them know you will take your business elsewhere if they won't. Starting an open dialogue with your local cemetery might encourage them to consider greener options in the future.

For more information about green burial, visit www.greenburialcouncil.org.

Donna Larsen is the Communications Director for the Green Burial Council (see sidebar). She is also a founding member of A Natural Undertaking, a Pennsylvania resource center for green burial and home funerals.

CycledLife™

Our Coffin Spa™ prepares human remains to be harmlessly returned to the earth. Those that go on living appreciate decedents for choosing this loving and caring final act.

Call for more information
(303) 459-4953 or

Visit us at
www.CycledLife.com

| ADVERTISEMENT |

GREEN BURIAL COUNCIL

OUR VISION

We want to see eco-friendly end-of-life rituals become a viable option for honoring the dead, healing the living, and inviting in the divine.

We want to protect the legitimate benefits of environmentally sustainable deathcare such as the reduction of carbon emissions, toxification, and waste.

We want to use burial as a means of acquiring, restoring, and stewarding natural areas.

We want to bring about a new ethic in the field of funeral service; one rooted in transparency, accountability, and ecological responsibility.

We want to make our deaths make a difference.

WHO WE ARE

The Green Burial Council is an independent, tax-exempt, nonprofit organization working to encourage environmentally sustainable deathcare and the use of burial as a new means of protecting natural areas.

Through a mix of evangelism, economic incentives, and solid science, our mostly volunteer organization has become the standard-bearer in this nascent field and the conduit for conservation at an intersection that's never been crossed.

The GBC has been stewarded wby individuals representing the environmental/conservation community, consumer organizations, academia, the deathcare industry, and such organizations and institutions as The Nature Conservancy, The Trust for Public Land, AARP, and the University of Colorado.

Funded by contributions from individuals, certification fees, honoraria, and a grant from the Roy M. Hunt Foundation, we are represented by 300 (and growing) "approved providers" operating throughout North America, with offices in the US and Canada.

WHAT WE DO

The GBC has adopted an integrative, four-pronged approach for making available more ecologically responsible deathcare.

First, we rely on certifiable standards for our approved providers; these standards are evolving as we come to better understand issues ranging from the science behind green burial to legal/compliance matters.

Second, we inform the public about the need for environmentally sustainable funeral/cemetery/cremation options, in part to help create economic incentives for the deathcare industry.

Third, we ensure that funeral directors, cemeterians, and product manufacturers are made aware of our most pressing environmental concerns and can competently serve families seeking greener options.

And finally, we provide new ways of bringing together conservation entities with representatives from the field of funeral service to create burial/scattering programs that aid in the restoration, acquisition and/or stewardship of natural areas.

Excerpt with permission from Green Burial Council, www.greenburialcouncil.org