The Sacred and the Profane: A Preservation Plan for Pine Grove Cemetery

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The Site: Established in 1742, Pine Grove Cemetery is one of the few remaining links to the earliest history of its community in Leominster, Massachusetts. As an example of a vernacular landscape the Cemetery has evolved over the past 260 years, accruing a rich palette of monuments and vegetation from the 18th, 19th as well as 20th century styles. As a place of history, pine Grove contains the grave sites of town founders, over 100 Revolutionary War veterans, and other notable citizens such as authors and historians. As a place of art and horticulture the Cemetery contains a fine collection of carved headstones and mature vegetation.

The Problem: Since the Cemetery closed to burials in 1937, little money has been available for its upkeep and maintenance. Many gravestones are broken or heavily eroded, while others tilt or sink into the earth. “Volunteer” vegetation, contributing to an unkempt appearance, is now taking over parts of the Cemetery. Most importantly, the
community seems to have lost the appreciation it once had for this Cemetery as a “sacred place,” or place invested with enormous local significance (Hester, 1985). Many Leominster residents today are unaware of the historic significance of Pine Grove. In some instances residents are not aware of its existence, which sadly translates into little appreciation and even less use of this once-treasured resource.

The Plan: A plan for the preservation of this site consists of three parts: an historic overview of pine Grove, an analysis of existing conditions, and a series of preservation recommendations that address both the physical and community use issues as outlined above.

By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself.
Sacred structure would be those places—buildings, outdoor spaces, and landscapes—that exemplify, typify, reinforce, and perhaps even extol the everyday life patterns and special rituals of community life.

Randy Hester from “Subconscious Landscapes of the Heart,” (1985)
The Story of Pine Grove Cemetery

1742
Pine Grove Cemetery established within the yard of Leominster's first meetinghouse

1774
Second meetinghouse constructed 1/2 mile south of the first; Pine Grove remained Leominster's only municipal burial ground

1800s
Pine Grove Cemetery expanded; municipal hearse house erected on grounds; granite tombs and enclosing walls built

1840
A second municipal burial place, Evergreen Cemetery, established because further expansion not possible at Pine Grove Cemetery

1896
Town removed hearse house and sold hearse; granite tombs abandoned by this time because of leaking roofs

1935-1938
Leominster citizens and the DAR organize a revitalization of Pine Grove Cemetery which is funded by a grant from the WPA

1937
Pine Grove closed to burial because of budget cut to Cemetery Department; entered a period of slow but steady decline
Existing Conditions at Pine Grove Cemetery

The site contains mature pines, oaks, and several flowering shrubs. The grass is in poor condition, and volunteer growth occurs in and around the Cemetery edges.

Attractive steps built into wall

Circulation at this point of entry is unclear

The gate at this entry is padlocked at all times, and is damaged

The chain-link fencing along this fourth edge is old and rusted

Approximately half of the 900 monuments and markers on the site are in need of repair

Mortared field stone walls in good condition line three edges of the Cemetery

Surrounding land uses are residential and commercial

The gate at this important entry is welded closed

Carter Park
Preservation Recommendations
for Pine Grove

- Form a “Friends of Pine Grove Cemetery” non-profit organization to raise awareness about and funding for preservation efforts on the site.
- Complete a written and photographic survey of the monuments and markers present on the site, and hire a professional stone conservator to undertake necessary stone work.
- Nominate the Cemetery to the National Register of Historic Places.
- Open all three Cemetery entrances during the daytime to encourage use of the site.
- Establish a series of creative programs that use the Cemetery appropriately, for example as a place of community history, education, and passive recreation.
- Add interpretative, regulatory and directional signage at all the entrances, and request that the local police patrol the grounds to enforce these rules. For example, no gravestone rubbing or night use of the site may be two rules.
- Prune overgrown and diseased trees and shrubs within the Cemetery.
- Repair the Tremaine Street Gateway.
- Replace the chain-link fencing with wooden fencing characteristic of the 1800’s.