

West Virginia's Cemeteries and the National Register of Historic Places

by Lora Lamarre

cem.e.ter.y n. (pl. *-ies*) a burial ground; a graveyard. Origin: late Middle English: via late Latin from Greek *koimeterion* 'dormitory,' from *koiman* 'to put to sleep.'

As Europeans colonized the New World, they carried with them vestiges of their cultures and traditions, including ideas about the proper way to bury their dead. West Virginia's cemeteries, like those in the rest of the United States, developed out of these customs. In Colonial English settlements, burials ideally were oriented toward the east and placed in consecrated ground within close proximity to a church. In addition, cemeteries typically were located within town boundaries. In rural and rugged western Virginia, however, where settlers ventured to the Appalachian Mountains and beyond before churches and cemeteries could be established, necessity often precluded interment within a churchyard. Even after small communities began to appear, West Virginia's mountainous landscape made it impractical for many people to be buried in town near a church. People made do by burying their loved ones where they could, often in a nearby hilltop or in ground that someone in the community had donated. Old Fields Cemetery in Hardy County and Sutton Cemetery in Braxton County are but two examples of the hundreds of burial grounds in West Virginia that have such humble beginnings.

By the 1830s, a "rural" cemetery movement was emerging in the United States. Partly inspired by romantic perceptions of nature, art, and the melancholy theme of death, the movement also attempted to address the sense of the great outdoors that was missing in America's expanding towns and cities. An innovative type of cemetery developed out of this movement, one that was carefully planned and designed to take advantage of the natural topography of an area and to provide city residents with a park-like atmosphere. Typically, cemeteries were established on elevated hills on the outskirts of American cities and often incorporated landscaped gardens, lawns, walkways and ponds. These new rural or garden cemeteries, as they were called, emanated out of conceptions of burial ground design in France and England. In West Virginia, the rural cemetery movement resulted in the creation of a number of cemeteries, including Woodlawn Cemetery in Marion County, Spring Hill Cemetery in Kanawha County and Riverview Cemetery in Wood County. Eventually the garden type of cemetery became less popular as modern perpetual-care lawn cemeteries or memorial parks of the 20th century came into existence.

While West Virginia encompasses thousands of cemeteries, the total number is unknown. They exist as church graveyards, small family plots, and community cemeteries, as well as memorial parks and gardens. Cemeteries are a part of West Virginia's heritage. Not only are they the final resting places of our family and friends, but many also are associated with historic events and persons, include significant examples of funerary architecture, and contain important information about the past. As such, cemeteries can be considered for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places under one of the four main Criteria.

The four main Criteria that are used to evaluate cemeteries for the National Register of Historic Places are the same as those used to assess all types of cultural resources. Criterion A states that

a property can be eligible for the National Register if it is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history. This can apply to a cemetery that is associated with an important event or that represents a broader pattern of history. Although not yet listed in the National Register, Sutton Cemetery in Braxton County, for example, is considered to be eligible because it is associated with the settlement and development of the area and contains the graves of some of the region's first settlers. Criterion B is used when a property is associated with an important historic figure. Woodlawn Cemetery in Marion County, for example, is eligible for the National Register, in part, because of the number of historical figures that are interred there such as Francis H. Pierpont, "the Father of West Virginia," former Governor A. Brooks Fleming, and coal magnate James Otis Watson. If a cemetery is significant for its funerary architecture, then it may be eligible for the National Register under Criterion C. Spring Hill Cemetery in Kanawha County is listed, in part, because of the remarkable and striking architectural elements of the Moorish mausoleum and many of the tombstones. A cemetery may also be considered important for the information it contains. If so, then it is considered eligible under Criterion D. This is used primarily for archaeological sites and American Indian burials. However, it can apply to historic cemeteries as well. Criel Mound in Kanawha County, which contains Native American burials, is significant for the information that it can tell us about the lives of some of West Virginia's earlier inhabitants.

A cemetery that meets any one of these criteria need not meet any additional criteria if it is going to be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in association with another eligible property such as an historic district or as part of a farmstead. Those cemeteries that are eligible under Criteria A, B or C and will be listed individually in the National Register, however, must meet additional standards. This is because cemeteries can elicit emotional responses from us and potentially cloud our judgement. As such, the National Park Service considers them to be a special category of resources and requires them to pass an additional set of standards, referred to as Criteria Considerations, before they can be listed in the National Register. While there are seven Criteria Considerations, only two specifically apply to grave sites or cemeteries. They are Criteria Considerations C and D.

Criteria Consideration C states that the birthplace or grave of an historical figure is eligible if the person is of outstanding importance and if there is no other appropriate site or building directly associated with his or her productive life. The second part of the criterion is critical. Even if a cemetery contains the grave of an important historical figure, if there is another building or structure that can be associated with that person, then the cemetery cannot be considered eligible. For example, the Hatfield Cemeteries in Logan and Mingo Counties, which are listed in the National Register as the grave sites of the Hatfield clan, are the only extant cultural resources that can be associated with the family members who became famous as participants in the legendary Hatfield-McCoy feud of the late 19th century.

Criteria Consideration D states that a cemetery is eligible for the National Register if it derives its primary significance from graves of persons of transcendent importance, from age, from distinctive design features, or from association with historic events. Initially, these seem like the same standards set forth in the first three main criteria. However, this is the National Park Service's way of emphasizing the level of importance that a cemetery must have before it can be listed in the National Register. It's not enough that a cemetery date to early days of a region's

settlement, or contain the burials of prominent citizens, or have beautiful funerary architecture. In order to meet this criteria consideration a cemetery should, for example, encompass the graves of a number of people of outstanding importance that have made major contributions to events in national, state or local history, or possess significant historic associations that reflect important aspects of a community's history and development, or illustrate the principles of an aesthetic movement or tradition of design through its overall plan and landscape design or its tombstones and other funerary architecture.

Once a cemetery has been determined to meet one of the four main criteria and to meet one of the criteria considerations, it must next pass the integrity test. For purposes of the National Register, integrity can be thought of as the authenticity of an historic property as evidenced by the survival of physical characteristics that existed during the property's historic or prehistoric period (NR Bulletin 16A, p. 4). What this means is that the key features of a cemetery—those aspects that make it historically significant—need to be intact. Begin by taking a look at the features typically found in a cemetery - the grave sites, gravestones, walkways, fences, gateways and other boundary markers, road systems, natural and planted vegetation, buildings, and the association that these attributes have to each other - and then, keeping in mind the span of years for which a cemetery is considered to be important, determine whether these things look as they did for that period.

The National Park Service uses seven factors to help assess whether a resource and its defining characteristics retain historic integrity. First, a cemetery and its individual features should be in their original locations and setting. The cemetery should not have been moved for any reason and its features should be in the locations where they were originally placed. As well, the overall setting or environment of a cemetery should appear much as it did during the period for which it is being nominated. Second, a cemetery should retain elements of its original materials, design and workmanship. Characteristics of the cemetery such as tombstones, mausoleums, and fences should still be of the same materials in which they were constructed. For example, marble grave markers that have been replaced with replicas made out of sandstone constitutes a loss of integrity. In addition, the overall design and layout of a cemetery as well as the artistic workmanship of individual features such as fences and carved tombstones should still be readily evident. Finally, it may also be important for a cemetery to retain its historic feeling and association. Feeling indicates the degree that a cemetery conveys its historic character. If a person from the period of significance were able to view the cemetery today, they should be able to readily recognize it. Association refers to the direct link between an important historic event or person and an historic property. If a cemetery is in its original location and setting, and possesses to a large degree its original materials, design and workmanship, it will more than likely retain its historic feeling and association. While important to consider, these last two factors are a bit subjective and may not affect a cemetery's overall integrity. Keep in mind that historic integrity can be very difficult to assess. Each cemetery, with its unique history and combination of features, will require that integrity be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Many of the cemeteries included in this calendar are already listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Others are eligible and simply await a dedicated individual to start the nomination process. As you wend your way through the year, we hope the cemeteries in this calendar inspire you to take a look at the burial places in your community and at the history they

contain. Perhaps around the next corner lies a piece of your heritage in need of some loving care. Take steps to preserve your history. Investigate the cemeteries in your community and contact staff of the State Historic Preservation Office. We're here to help preserve, protect and nominate to the National Register of Historic Places all of West Virginia's precious historic resources, cemeteries included.

Resources

Linden-Ward, Blanche 1992 "Strange but Genteel Pleasure Grounds: Tourist and Leisure Uses of Nineteenth-Century Rural Cemeteries," In *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers, Voices of American Culture*. Utah State University Press, Logan, Utah, pp.293-328.

Meyer, Richard E. (editor) 1992 *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers, Voices of American Culture*. Utah State University Press, Logan, Utah.

Potter, Elizabeth Walton and Beth M. Boland 1992 National Register Bulletin 41, Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Cemeteries and Burial Places. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Available online at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb41/>

US Department of the Interior, National Park Service 1991; revised 1997 National Register Bulletin 15, How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation. US Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Available online at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb15/>

US Department of the Interior, National Park Service 1991; revised 1997 National Register Bulletin 16A, How to Complete the National Register Registration Form. US Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Available online at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb16a/>