

OCONEE HILL CEMETERY:  
ENVISIONING A LIVING LANDSCAPE

by

JUDSON SHEPPARD ABBOTT

(Under the Direction of Eric MacDonald)

ABSTRACT

Oconee Hill Cemetery is an important historic landscape in the city of Athens, Georgia. However, management issues during the past decades have decreased its relevance to the local community. This thesis seeks to discover appropriate strategies to improve the current management approach at the cemetery. In order to do this, the thesis explores important background information such as the landscape's historical context, its current management structure, and current management issues. It also studies the opinions and values of current managers and cemetery visitors. Finally, it reviews successful management models that other cemetery management teams have adopted. By overlaying these threads of information, the thesis isolates a number of appropriate and feasible strategies for Oconee Hill's future management. Included in these recommendations are changes to the cemetery's current management structure, an increased focus on public outreach, and the adoption of a master plan.

INDEX WORDS: Oconee Hill Cemetery, Rural Cemetery Movement, Cemetery Management, Public Access, Cemetery Preservation, Public Outreach

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The overarching goal of this thesis is to discover appropriate strategies to improve the current management approach at Oconee Hill Cemetery in Athens, Georgia. In order to do this, it must consider the cemetery's history, current management problems at Oconee Hill, and the opinions and values of the cemetery's managers and visitors. The management team is facing a range of issues, including problems with public perception, value conflicts, and financial constraints. Taking ideas from members of the management team itself, as well as from strategies that other cemetery management teams have adopted, the thesis argues that the best way for Oconee Hill to address these problems is to increase the landscape's relevance to the local community. Specifically, the thesis recommends changes to Oconee Hill's current management structure, improvements in its community outreach programs, and an adoption of a master plan.

#### **Background**

Oconee Hill Cemetery is a historic landscape set on hilly terrain overlooking the Oconee River. Established in 1856, it quickly became a treasured landscape for many Athenians, who admired both its beauty and the tranquility that its shaded grounds afforded. In recent years, however, a number of factors contributed to removing the landscape from the hearts and minds of many people in the local community. Compelled by ongoing financial difficulties,

vandalism, and other setbacks, cemetery managers took protective measures that they felt were in the cemetery's best interest, but which had the unfortunate consequence of alienating a large part of the local community from the landscape. Now at a critical crossroads, cemetery managers acknowledge the need for increasing community care and involvement, but they are unsure about what management strategies could best meet this need while simultaneously protecting the interests of the families with loved ones memorialized at the cemetery.

Because landscape management decisions inevitably are set against a backdrop of complex physical and social realities, finding solutions to landscape problems can present significant challenges to managers. This situation is perhaps especially true in a setting like a city cemetery, where intersecting belief systems and conflicting views about how the landscape should serve the needs of a changing public can easily lead to misunderstanding and differences in opinion. However, the unique role that these landscapes continue to play in our culture, and the profound significance they hold for many individuals, entails an added urgency to finding solutions to such value conflicts among cemetery users and managers.

Against this backdrop, the intention of this thesis, in part, is to examine Oconee Hill's history and the issues that have led to current management difficulties such as financial constraints and lack of public interest. In addition, however, it seeks to identify strategies that could help the management team overcome these challenges and improve this active cemetery's status in the community. At the same time, acknowledging that any such strategies should meet the approval of cemetery managers as well as current visitors, the thesis explores the views and needs of these groups. After taking the needs and values of these groups into account, the thesis makes a number of specific recommendations for management at Oconee Hill, including

changes to the current management structure, improvements in community outreach and the adoption of a cemetery master plan.

## **State of Current Research**

Literature relevant to this thesis's theme rests largely within three different subject areas: (1) material related to the rise of the nineteenth-century Rural Cemetery Movement; (2) sources describing problems that managers of historic cemeteries have faced as the role these landscapes play in our culture has changed, as well as sources that document these managers' responses to the problems; (3) material related to the history and management of Oconee Hill Cemetery itself. The following brief literature review sets the context of the thesis by describing some of this relevant source material and the stances the authors take.

### The Nineteenth-Century Rural Cemetery Movement.

The subject of the Rural Cemetery Movement, the movement to which Oconee Hill's design owes its inspiration (Marshall 1997, 34), has been the topic of extensive scholarship. Architectural historian James Curl was among the first scholars to write about the movement's manifestations in England and elsewhere in Europe. In his *Victorian Celebration of Death* (1972), which addressed nineteenth-century funerary traditions and architecture, he pointed out that changing attitudes toward death in society led individuals to adopt a more tender sentiment in their treatment and memorialization of the dead. Echoing this idea, Stanley French (1974) wrote that the Rural Cemetery Movement in America was a product of cultural conservatism that expressed a similar wish to find a more decent way to memorialize the dead. Whereas Curl wrote about a variety of cemeteries in Europe, French focused his analysis of the movement largely on Mt. Auburn Cemetery, outside of Boston, Massachusetts.

More than a decade after Curl and French wrote about the Rural Cemetery Movement, a number of other authors re-examined the topic during the late 1980s. Harold Mytum, an English archaeologist, was the first of these writers. His article, “Public Health and Private Sentiment” (1989), emphasized the impact that public health issues had on burial traditions in Europe and the United States during the nineteenth century. Historian Blanche Linden-Ward also made a large contribution to the body knowledge surrounding the Rural Cemetery Movement with the 1989 publication of her book, *Silent City on a Hill*. This work documented the creation of Mt. Auburn Cemetery and the impact of its design on the spread of the movement through the rest of the United States. Linden-Ward argued that the landscape at Mt. Auburn was essentially designed “to be a prototype of design and a definition of community” (1989b, 339).

Two years later, Professor David Sloane, an expert on cultural attitudes toward death, also wrote about the Rural Cemetery Movement in his book, *The Last Great Necessity* (1991). However, Sloane focused chiefly on the movement’s place in the larger context of changing American cultural and aesthetic values. These changing values, he wrote, eventually spelled an end to the Rural Cemetery Movement and the aesthetic preference for “natural” landscapes that it espoused. More than a decade later, Ken Worpole, an authority on urban public policy, also adopted Sloane’s approach of analyzing the Rural Cemetery Movement within a broad context of cemetery history. Whereas Sloane dedicated his work primarily to American cemeteries, Worpole’s book, *Last Landscapes* (2003), chiefly analyzed European cemeteries. This work is relevant to this thesis because it emphasized the importance of European influences on the American Rural Cemetery Movement, notably the writings of nineteenth-century landscape architect, John Claudius Loudon.

### The Changing Role of Cemeteries.

Sloane (1991) wrote that the effects of the Civil War, the rising popularity of city parks, and changing attitudes towards death compelled the American relationship with rural cemeteries to change (1991, 121). Linden-Ward (1989a) asserted that this change was, at first, characterized chiefly by a shift in public preferences in cemetery design that sought the more open character exemplified by Adolph Strauch's "landscape lawn plan." However, she argued that by the beginning of the twentieth century, the shift away from the rural cemetery model had become economically entrenched by the rising interest in economizing and professionalizing cemetery design and management (Linden-Ward 1989a).

History and urban planning professor Kenneth Jackson argued that Dr. Hubert Eaton's 1917 plans for Forest Lawn Cemetery outside of Los Angeles came to epitomize this shift in cemetery design. Jackson asserted that Eaton's model changed American cemeteries by unifying all "death-care" services, from undertaking to interment, in one business operation (Jackson 1989). The trend of operating cemeteries as business ventures modeled on Forest Lawn came under fire throughout the twentieth century, perhaps most notably voiced in investigative journalist Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* (1963). Citing the fabulous profits that cemetery entrepreneurs amassed, Mitford offered a stark critique of what she saw as the funeral service industry's increased focus on salesmanship, with entrepreneurs holding monetary returns as the primary goal at the expense of bereaved families. Business economist Ronald Smith pointed out, however, that Mitford's critique did not challenge the basic "memorial impulse" that lay behind Americans' choice to establish a permanent resting place for the dead. This impulse he asserted, placed in the context of an American culture that increasingly valued logic and efficiency, is key to understanding why Americans chose to

employ the services of cemeteries like Forest Lawn. Efficient cemeteries like Forest Lawn, he explained, simply “represented the evolved state of the cemetery in America (Smith 1996, 197).

Regardless of why Americans increasingly chose what Jackson (1989) called the “chain-store model” of cemetery memorialization, Sloane pointed out that competition from these newer cemeteries had drastic consequences for older “monumented” cemeteries created during the Rural Cemetery Movement. Because designs of lawn cemeteries did away with vertical monuments and placed memorial plaques at ground level, maintenance crews could efficiently employ mechanized techniques to maintain flat, open lawns. At the same time, rural cemetery managers were forced to continue using the same expensive labor-intensive techniques (Sloane 1991). The rise of new cemeteries, Sloane claimed, inevitably meant a fall in income from lot sales at older cemeteries.

Sloane asserted as well that the cultural significance that the cemetery landscape once had for Americans diminished with the rise of newer efficient cemeteries. Professor Catherine Howett (1977) agreed that cemeteries lost their relevance to our culture, but suggested that this loss was the result of a tendency to perpetuate customs from the past that had lost their meaning in a modern context. She argued for a fundamental change in the way our society conceived of its relationship with cemeteries, and asserted that designers of new cemeteries and managers of historic cemeteries should adopt new methods for final disposition of human remains and encourage the use of these landscapes for public recreation. Howett suggested that such a human presence in the landscape could even help reduce the occurrence of vandalism, although she admitted that some cemetery managers disagree about the potential effectiveness of this strategy (Howett 1977). However, scholarship focused on public spaces lends credence to the idea that human presence can reduce the likelihood of vandalism by demonstrating that



landscapes that exhibit human care tend to be respected by both users and nonusers alike (Carr 1992; Nassauer 1997).

Preservation literature supports this notion as well by pointing out that a healthy level of public access to cemeteries is a vital precondition to ensuring their protection (Strangstad 1995; Georgia Genealogical Society 1989). Preservationist Lynette Strangstad notes, for example, that an increase in pedestrian traffic is likely to minimize the opportunity for vandals to strike unobserved. A publication by the Georgia Genealogical Society joins Strangstad in encouraging those interested in cemetery preservation to organize activities in the cemetery involving local community members in order to engender a sense of care and responsibility for these landscapes.

Other preservation literature also has recognized that cemeteries require unique management considerations. For example, preservationist Shary Berg (1992) noted the unique nature of cemeteries as outdoor art collections. The National Park Service also recognized the special qualities that cemeteries exhibit by publishing a bulletin with guidelines for evaluating and registering historic cemeteries (Potter, 1992). The bulletin points out that distinct spatial and visual qualities, unique features like iconography and funerary art, and a high potential to yield important information in the future, all contribute to the need for special management considerations for historic cemeteries.

Since Howett made her argument for re-creating cemeteries as more relevant, multi-use landscapes in 1977, many cemeteries in the United States and beyond have done exactly that. During the past few years, researchers and practitioners have begun to recognize and document the various strategies that different historic cemeteries have adopted to attract public attention and use. Some cemetery managers, like those at Mountain View Cemetery in Vancouver, have

initiated extensive redesign projects aimed at increasing both profitability and public access (Hammatt, 2001). Other managers, like those at Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia, and Wyuka Cemetery in Lincoln, Nebraska, have adopted strategies as diverse as staging theatrical performances and Halloween programs to attract public engagement (Harnik & Merolli, 2010). More common, however, is an approach that aims simply to encourage passive use of cemetery grounds for activities such as walking, jogging or picnicking (Odland, 2010). In Great Britain, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) even issued a report in 2007 that encouraged all local authorities to include cemeteries in their public green-space strategies (Jackman 2008).

#### History and Management at Oconee Hill Cemetery.

Literature related to Oconee Hill, as with many other lesser-known southern rural cemeteries, is more sparse than material related to many of its northeastern counterparts like Mount Auburn. Historian Charlotte Marshall has written the only published works directly related to the cemetery's history, including a 1997 article in *Athens Historian* that chronicles the cemetery's early history, and a book, *Oconee Hill Cemetery* (2009), which documents many of the individuals and families interred at Oconee Hill. These sources have been fundamental in establishing a timeline of events related to the cemetery's history. The information they provide about historic issues of public use and perception are, however, limited. Historic newspaper accounts of the cemetery's early years have proven to be richer sources of information related to these types of issues. Therefore, such historic newspaper accounts have served as important primary source material for this thesis.

Reports produced by classes at the University of Georgia have provided additional information that is vital to this research project. Reports from the College of Environment and

Design completed in 2001 and 2011, which focus respectively on landscape management and preservation advocacy, have pointed out the need for improving public perceptions of Oconee Hill in the Athens community (Firth 2001; Reap 2011). An additional study, conducted in the fall of 2010 by students in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, provides important information for the thesis. This survey of Athens community members demonstrated that a majority of Athenians were unfamiliar with Oconee Hill and that many thought it was closed to the public or unwelcoming (Andrews 2010).

All of these UGA studies recognized the problem of negative community perceptions of Oconee Hill and provided recommendations for improving these perceptions. However, none of the studies took steps to evaluate the appropriateness of these recommendations to Oconee Hill's particular circumstances. In short, they did not study the particular views, values and needs of current cemetery managers or visitors to find what these groups would demand of any challenging and potentially controversial future management ideas. This study takes this extra step while building on the knowledge base that others have established.

## **Research Questions**

This thesis builds upon the variety of sources covered above. It reviews historical research already conducted on Oconee Hill, previously documented attitudes toward Oconee Hill in the greater Athens community, and previous management recommendations for the cemetery. It builds on this information by studying the attitudes and opinions of current cemetery managers and visitors to determine what management strategies might be appropriate for Oconee Hill's future. In this way it seeks to answer the following question: In what ways could Oconee Hill Cemetery's management team improve public perceptions and accommodate

increased levels of public access in a way that is appropriate to the cemetery's historical character, the needs of current cemetery visitors, the views and preferences of cemetery managers, and the issues they are currently facing? In order to answer this overarching question, the thesis seeks to answer the following sub-questions:

- What is Oconee Hill Cemetery's historical significance?
- What roles has Oconee Hill played in the Athens community in the past, and how are Athenians using the cemetery today?
- What is the current management structure at Oconee Hill, and what major issues are managers facing today?
- How is the management team addressing public use and perception?
- Are there any *appropriate* alternative management strategies being tested at other historic cemeteries that could serve as a model at Oconee Hill?

## **Research Limitations and Delimitations**

This thesis is an exploration of improvements to the current management approach at Oconee Hill Cemetery. It is not intended to be a complete management plan, nor does it strive to conduct the kind of rigorous landscape analysis typical of a Cultural Landscape Inventory or a Cultural Landscape Report. The types of analysis that one would expect to find in such documents therefore have been omitted. Instead, the thesis relies upon literature and case studies, as well as interview and survey responses, to suggest policy alternatives for the management of Oconee Hill.

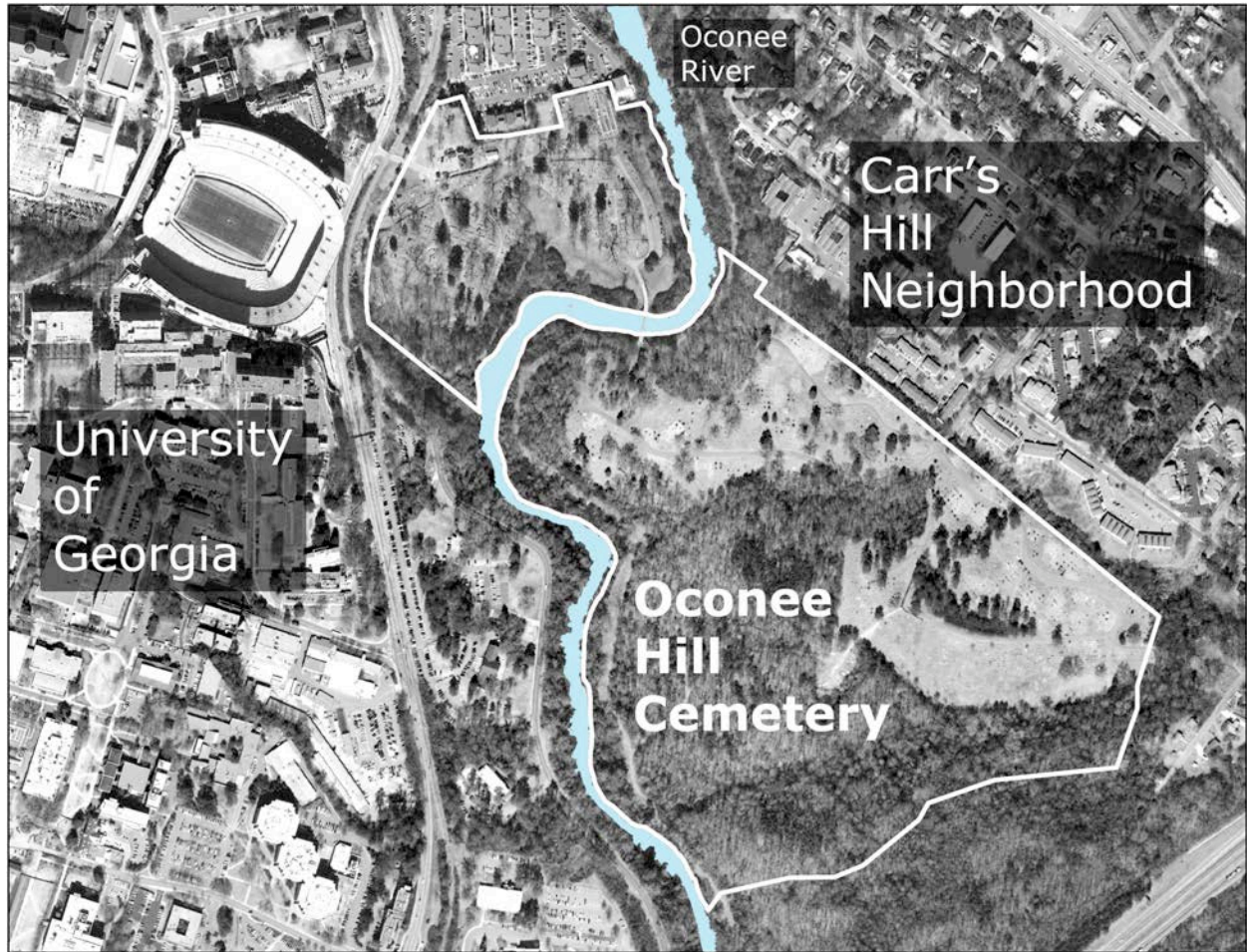


Figure 1.1. Study boundaries with UGA campus to the west and Carr's Hill to the east

The research focus for this thesis is largely limited to the parcel boundaries of the cemetery itself (Figure 1.1). However, consideration also is given to the neighborhoods surrounding the cemetery, including the UGA campus, in order to convey a clear picture of the landscapes' urban context. Understanding this context is vital to establishing the need for improved cemetery access.

## **Research Methods**

Mark Francis's work in developing models for case studies in landscape architecture has guided the basic direction of this study of management issues at Oconee Hill Cemetery (1999; 2003). Francis recognizes that researchers can carry out case studies in the field of landscape architecture in many different ways, and he suggests that a researcher should adopt methods that match the project's scope and aims. To provide a framework for studies in different levels of detail and purpose, Francis outlines three levels of detail that different case studies can produce: abstract/fact sheet, full case study, and in-depth analysis (1999). This thesis most closely follows Francis's description of an in-depth analysis of a designed landscape, with a focus on management issues and community engagement. A few of the methods that Francis suggests for this type of case study, and the way this thesis uses them to answer the proposed research question, are outlined below.

### Interpretive Historical Research.

For the portion of the thesis dealing with past perceptions of Oconee Hill and its place within the Rural Cemetery Movement, I have primarily used an interpretive historical research approach. This section relies upon a combination of primary and secondary source material accessed in local archives at the University of Georgia library.

### Questionnaire Survey.

In order to document current public uses and perceptions of the cemetery, I have carried out a survey of cemetery visitors. These questionnaires included a combination of pre-coded and open-ended questions. Questions were designed in part to collect visitors' basic demographic information, such as age and city residency status. The survey also asked visitors how

frequently they visited cemetery grounds and what activities they typically engaged in while at Oconee Hill. Finally, some questions were designed to gauge what qualities and features visitors valued in the landscape at Oconee Hill, and what kinds of activities visitors would deem appropriate on cemetery grounds. The questionnaire is included in this thesis as “Appendix A.”

The questionnaires were distributed to cemetery visitors as they either entered or exited the cemetery gates. A total of 54 questionnaires were collected during approximately 13 hours spent on cemetery grounds during the unseasonably warm month of January, 2012. Collection times were distributed over eight days, including four weekday and four weekend visits. Due to the winter season and information from the sexton that afternoons were the most common time for cemetery visits, sunny, warm afternoons were chosen for collection times.

#### Semi-structured Interviews.

To understand current issues and strategies guiding Oconee Hill’s current management, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven key stakeholders involved in cemetery operations, including three members of the Oconee Hill Board of Trustees and the six officers in the non-profit group, The Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery. In addition, to supplement this knowledge base and gain a broader perspective on management issues at the cemetery, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two other individuals in the Athens community who have special knowledge of the cemetery’s history and other factors affecting its management. Lindlof and Taylor’s (2011) framework for qualitative research methods guided this process. This portion of the thesis used a “semi-structured” interview format. Following this method, I first devised an “interview guide,” or a standard list of questions, to steer interviews with the eleven stakeholders. During the interview process, I followed this guide, but, as the method

prescribed, respondents were allowed to elaborate on topics that they felt were important, even if the responses deviated from the immediate question. This interview approach was chosen in order to offer a more accurate representation of the topics that cemetery stakeholders themselves identified as important.

#### Issue-Based Case Studies.

Finally, in order to identify possible future management strategies for Oconee Hill, I have used a case study approach to examine how other cemetery management teams are adapting their management tactics to evolve with the needs of their communities. As previously noted, the thesis as a whole has been guided by Francis's (1999) methods for conducting an *in-depth analysis* case study. This section of the thesis also has been guided by Francis's work, but uses his *issue-based* case study approach (2003), which focuses on identifying successful patterns and themes among different landscapes. The issue-based model is designed to identify commonalities and differences across multiple landscapes regarding some chosen issue, while the in-depth analysis approach focuses on a single landscape. Also, as the name implies, in-depth analyses are more rigorous in their research and analysis.

The issue-based model used in this portion of the thesis restricts its research methods to a survey of secondary source material related to two different cemeteries, Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia, and Davis Cemetery District in Davis, California. An initial search of journals and internet sources revealed around ten to fifteen different cemeteries that researchers or journalists had identified for their effective or innovative management approaches. This thesis selected Oakland and Davis from among this group based on commonalities they share with Oconee Hill. For example, Oakland is another southern rural cemetery that has addressed many of the same types of issues as Oconee Hill, such as vandalism. It also has a similar management



structure. At both Oakland and Oconee Hill, a main body with regulatory authority shares management responsibilities with a non-profit partner organization. Davis Cemetery was chosen based largely on similarities between the cities of Davis and Athens. Both are medium-sized university cities that may place similar demands and challenges on their urban cemeteries. Also, like Oconee Hill, Davis Cemetery remains an active burial ground.

## **Thesis Structure**

This thesis has been divided into chapters that address the major question and sub-questions in an organized and structured manner. After this introductory chapter, Chapter Two explores the historical significance of Oconee Hill Cemetery by tracing the history and design principles of the nineteenth-century Rural Cemetery Movement, the movement after which Oconee Hill's designer modeled the cemetery. Chapter Three analyzes the history of Oconee Hill itself, with a focus on how early Athenians viewed and used the cemetery.

Chapter Four introduces and studies the different groups and individuals currently influencing cemetery management. Drawing information largely from survey results, Chapter Five documents how cemetery visitors perceive Oconee Hill today, and analyzes what this information could entail for the future management of the cemetery.

By analyzing data gathered in focused interviews with cemetery stakeholders, Chapter Six identifies the views that these groups and individuals have in common as well as the points on which they differ. This analysis aims to identify appropriate and feasible strategies that could improve Oconee Hill's relationship with the Athens community.

In order to supplement the ideas identified in the previous chapter, Chapter Seven explores recent efforts by other cemetery management teams to increase community engagement

in the cemetery landscape. A case-study examination of Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia, and Davis Cemetery in Davis, California, identifies strategies that have been successful in these historic cemeteries that could serve as a model for Oconee Hill.

Finally, the thesis concludes with Chapter Eight, which evaluates much of the information gathered from the preceding segments of the study. This chapter assesses the desirability of different future management strategies in light of the cemetery's history, the opinions of current cemetery visitors, the views and preferences of cemetery managers and the issues they are currently facing. It recommends changes to the current management structure, improved community outreach and the adoption of a formal management plan. The research suggests that these recommendations could help to guide future development at Oconee Hill in a way that makes a positive impact on the Athens community.

This thesis suggests a framework for enriching Athens's cultural legacy in a way that provides tangible benefits for community members. Oconee Hill Cemetery is truly one of Athens's finest treasures. It is a beautiful green space and a priceless cultural artifact that would better serve the community if it were more open to visitors. Oconee Hill already has a recognized place in America's cemetery history, but this historical significance does not have to be preserved by management tactics that seek to freeze the landscape in time. The proposed recommendations could help Oconee Hill's management strategies evolve in line with innovative practices that management teams are implementing in other historic cemeteries that seek to serve the current needs and interests of their respective communities. In this way, the management team could help restore Oconee Hill's relevance to the community by making what is essentially a "museum landscape" into a place where history and living, evolving culture meet.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

### THE RURAL CEMETERY MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand the importance of management strategies for the cemetery landscape at Oconee Hill, it is important to first form an understanding of the cemetery's historical context. This context has become widely known as the Rural Cemetery Movement, or Garden Cemetery Movement, a nineteenth-century trend that represented a fundamental shift in the way European and American designers conceived and constructed burial grounds. This chapter gives an historical overview of this unique aspect of American history, and identifies some of the important persons, places, and landscape characteristics associated with the movement. Although the works of many different English writers and landscape gardeners, including Francis Bacon, John Milton, Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, William Kent, and Charles Bridgeman served as inspiration for rural cemetery design (Linden-Ward 1989), this chapter places special attention on the landscape architect John Claudius Loudon. It does this because of the widely acknowledged critical role that he played in the movement through the dispersal of his ideas through writing, a trend that made his ideas available to a broad audience (Curl 1775; Worpole 2003). His 1843 book, *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of*

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<sup>1</sup> A portion of the material for this chapter has been borrowed from an earlier work, *Bonaventure Cemetery of Savannah, Georgia and St. Roch Cemetery of New Orleans, Louisiana: An Historical Overview and Comparison Study* (Abbott 2010). The material has been updated and modified here to more closely fit the context of this work.

*Cemeteries*, a text specifically dedicated to garden cemetery design, is a unique source on nineteenth-century attitudes toward landscapes of the dead.

### **J. C. Loudon and the Rural Cemetery Movement**

John Claudius Loudon was a Scotsman and an influential landscape architect in Great Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century. An avid gardener and journalist before turning his attention to landscape design, his ideas about the appropriate disposition of cemeteries were disseminated widely by the time the Rural Cemetery Movement swept over the United States starting in the 1830s (Worpole 2003, 135). In 1843, the year of his death, Loudon condensed these ideas in a book that is widely acknowledged as a literary cornerstone of the Rural Cemetery Movement (Curl 1975; Darnall 1983; French 1974). This book, *On The Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries*, published in 1843, first came into circulation *after* rural cemeteries began to appear in America and Europe, but *before* they were commonplace (French 1974, 56). This fact implies that the book was both a response to a trend that had already begun, and an impetus to its continuance. Because Loudon's ideas served as a theoretical basis for the design of many American Rural Cemeteries, his writings deserve examination.

Loudon was, above all, practical in his attitudes toward cemetery planning, a fact he revealed in his book's opening statement:

The *main objective* of a burial-ground is, the disposal of the remains of the dead in such a manner as that their decomposition, and return to the earth from which they sprung, shall not prove injurious to the living; either by affecting their health,

or shocking their feelings, opinions, or prejudices. A *secondary objective* is, or ought to be, the improvement of the moral sentiments and general taste of all classes, and more especially of the great masses of society (Loudon 1843, 1).

The sanitary disposition of a burial ground was, in other words, Loudon's chief concern. But his belief in the cemetery's "secondary objective," to uplift a society's morals, perhaps just as greatly affected his vision of the physical form a cemetery.

### **Sanitation Issues**

Loudon's concern with sanitation was not groundless. Unsanitary conditions were the single greatest impetus behind the trend towards rural cemeteries (French 1974; Mytum 1989; Curl 1975). For hundreds of years prior to the publication of Loudon's book, Europeans and Americans had performed so-called intramural burials, whereby corpses were buried within the boundaries of a city, often in a church yard, but also to a lesser extent on town commons (French 1974, 42-43). This practice was deemed sustainable until rapid urbanization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to explosive population growth in cities. Mytum (1989, 286) relates that as space became scarce in the old burial grounds, people began to reuse graves, a practice that was not problematic until the cycle of reuse became so rapid that corpses were not given time to decompose fully before their graves were needed for new burials. This problem was exacerbated by epidemics, which were frequent in eighteenth and nineteenth century cities (Mytum 1989, 284). Cholera and yellow fever, among other diseases, caused many deaths during a short period of time, a situation that called for mass burials. Such conditions placed ever increasing strain on

intramural cemetery capacity and caused serious health risks for cemetery workers, citizens living nearby, and the population at large whose drinking water risked contamination (Mytum 1989, 286).

Far from being places that could strengthen the moral constitution of the urban masses, as Loudon desired, these intramural burial grounds were places that city dwellers avoided rather than uplifting places of refuge (Mytum 1989, 288). Loudon recognized that the first step to achieving his vision of cemeteries that improved moral sentiment and taste was to improve their sanitation, and to this end he proposed certain practical solutions such as always leaving at least six feet of space between interred bodies, vertically as well as horizontally, even if this meant digging graves 18 or 24 feet deep in order to stack three to four corpses below ground (Loudon 1843, 2). But as Mytum (1989, 283) points out, cemetery attendants never adopted many of the inventive solutions that rural cemetery advocates proposed. While they may never have interred bodies 24 feet deep, they did follow some of Loudon's other recommendations, such as constructing cemeteries outside of cities.

### **Cemetery Placement Outside of Cities**

A major unifying element within the Rural Cemetery Movement, as the name implies, was the placement of cemeteries outside urban centers. One of the early European examples of this practice, which scholars recognize as an important forerunner of the Rural Cemetery Movement in America, was Père Lachaise outside of Paris (Darnall 1983, 252). Although the cemetery's establishment was essentially a direct response to health concerns, it was in part the innovative use of the site's hilly terrain and the fact that the cemetery was located on what was

then the outskirts of the city that caused it to leave its mark on the history of cemetery design (Mytum 1989, 289). Of course Père Lachaise was not the first cemetery to be chosen for its exceptional topographical qualities. As Semple (2008, 416) illustrates, the archaeological record attests to the fact that burial sites at earlier points in human history were chosen for distinctive rolling topography or proximity to ancient remains.

Placing cemeteries outside of cities led to an improvement in sanitary conditions, but according to Loudon, it was not the proximity of these cemeteries to population centers that posed the chief sanitation problem. He suggested that the real problem was the unregulated means by which cemetery attendants performed burials. In fact, he wrote that if attendants followed his guidelines for spacing interments at six-foot intervals, then “in general, the nearer the town, the more desirable (the cemetery) would be, both as a burial-ground and a promenade (Loudon 1843, 14).” Despite his position, practically all new cemeteries of the period were placed outside of cities, and often at great distances from the city: Mt. Auburn Cemetery, the first of the American rural cemeteries, was placed three miles outside Boston’s urban center (French 1974); Bonaventure Cemetery was established three miles from Savannah, Georgia (Wilson and Johnson 1998); Brookwood, an English cemetery in the rural tradition created to serve London’s population, was placed 25 miles outside the city (Herman 2010)!

If there was no simple explanation based on sanitary concerns for cemeteries to be placed so far from the city and the people, why then did rural cemeteries become the norm? Mytum points to a major social factor at work that may help to account for the phenomenon: attitudes toward death and toward the role that the cemetery should play in society were rapidly changing

in the nineteenth century (Mytum 1989). Because this factor is vital to an understanding of the Rural Cemetery Movement, it should be examined more closely.

### **Changing Attitudes toward Death**

J.C. Loudon, ever the consolidating voice of the Rural Cemetery Movement, pointed to ancient history as a means for explaining trends in his own time. Citing the superiority of ancient “enlightened” thought, he claimed, “the ancients (...) contemplated death without terror” (Loudon 1843, 11). Loudon placed this premise in opposition to what he thought had gone awry in his own society’s treatment of death and cemeteries. Such negative trends he blamed on, “the monkish artifice of associating man’s latter end with all that was disgusting and horrible, and of inspiring the world with the idea that, to gain heaven, it was not necessary to exist rationally on earth” (Loudon 1843, 12).

While perhaps grossly generalizing “ancient” attitudes toward death, Loudon’s perception of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought on the subject has found support among modern researchers. Indeed, French (1974, 40) pointed to the prevalence of the elegiac form in American and English literature during the time leading up to the Rural Cemetery Movement as evidence of a focus on the morbid and melancholy. Employing this form, writers like Philip Freneau and Edward Young painted dreary and morbid, yet romanticized images of death. At the same time, tombstone inscriptions and imagery adopted in many American burial grounds during the late eighteenth century, like the physical state of the cemeteries themselves, seemed intended to warn visitors of death’s horrors rather than convey any positive message of hope or renewal (Mytum 1989, 295).



With the advent of the Rural Cemetery Movement, these morbid funerary images, which had become the norm throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, began to give way to attitudes espousing a gentler view of death. Loudon cites early nineteenth-century writers like Samuel Coleridge and Washington Irving who began to question the tradition of morose imagery in the cemetery. Instead, Coleridge wrote, “the soothing influences of nature” (Loudon 1843, 8) should be the cemetery’s model. A rural repose, likened to falling asleep in a “natural” landscape, emphasized this new mode of thought and became the common response to criticisms of the old style. Scholars have pointed out that this change also mirrored the development of intellectual thought outside the realm of the cemetery debate. It was after all not long before the Rural Cemetery Movement that the tenets of Enlightenment thought, epitomized by landscapes like Versailles as the authoritarian “hand of man” (Darnall 1983, 250), began to give way to the Romantic and American Transcendentalist Movements, which embraced a kind of “back to nature” philosophy (French 1974, 58-59). The Rural Cemetery Movement, it would seem, was a response to the trends of the time in more than just practical questions of sanitation; it was also an answer to changing cultural needs.

### **The Cemetery as Cultural Institution**

According to rural cemetery founders, the creation of rural cemeteries would have yet another benefit for the American continent: it would serve as a much needed cultural institution (French 1974, 44-46). As French indicates, European visitors to America during the nineteenth century often held the opinion that the United States, due to its dearth of historically significant buildings and other obvious ties to an illustrious past, was culturally undeveloped (French 1974,

57). Europe, on the other hand, had not only centuries' worth of architectural treasures, but was even seeing the beginnings of the creation of public parks as exemplified by Haussmann's mid-nineteenth century park system in Paris. Scholars now recognize that rural cemeteries, by virtue of the fact that they were among the first public and semi-public green spaces in American cities, became a vital part of the United States' answer to its need for cultural improvement (Darnall 1983, 249).

But in what concrete ways can a cemetery be culturally enriching? Aside from their pure recreational value, Loudon thought they could serve as a kind of library for the poor. He wrote that the "country churchyard" had long been the common laborers' only access to historical documentation, thereby providing them with a sense of historical identity (Loudon 1843, 13). Supporters thought that rural cemeteries, by invigorating an awareness of history and by providing fine settings for burial of loved ones, would inspire sentiments of patriotism in local populations, sentiments which rural cemetery proponents even tied to improved morals (French 1974, 48-49).

The idea of inspiring botanical curiosity in visitors was another scheme that proponents used to gain support for the movement, again by tying cultural improvement to burial grounds. At Mount Auburn Cemetery, outside of Boston, the purchase of grounds was a joint venture between citizens who wanted to establish a cemetery, and members of a local horticultural society who wanted to create an arboretum (French 1974, 44-45). While a true arboretum never materialized at Mount Auburn, the concept of combining botanical garden and cemetery was carried out in London at Abney Park Cemetery in 1840 where all trees and shrubbery were labeled with a name plate for the "edification of the working classes" (Curl 1975, 29).

In addition to fostering a sense of belonging based on historical roots, Loudon (1843, 13) thought that a properly executed rural cemetery could provide ordinary citizens with access to the arts by providing samples of architecture and sculpture. The typical rural cemetery did come to be filled with a diverse collection of styles ranging from Egyptian obelisks to Italian Renaissance sculpture. According to preservationist Shary Berg (1992, 53), during the early years of the Rural Cemetery Movement, (ca. 1831-52) a monumental classical style dominated the scene, while later years (ca. 1853-73) saw an influx of elaborate, sentimental statues. Darnall writes that this all-inclusive range of styles, and the apparently sincere enthusiasm with which they were adopted in rural cemeteries, amounted to an uncritical acceptance of classical architecture on the part of Americans (1983, 254). Monuments of this sort were, however, only one type of feature that gave rural cemeteries their characteristic appearance.

### **The Use of Vegetation in Rural Cemeteries**

A distinctive use of vegetation was one last important defining characteristic of the Rural Cemetery Movement that highlighted its departure from intramural cemetery norms. Rural Cemeteries, which contemporaries also referred to as *garden cemeteries* (Loudon 1843, 11), came to exhibit a lush, park-like character. Often chosen for their mature vegetation, as at Mount Auburn, these cemeteries stood in stark contrast to city cemeteries marked by overuse and contaminated soil (French 1974, 44). The character of this “natural” environment as a unique setting in which visitors could mourn the dead was a hallmark of the style that designers guarded jealously. While the landscapes of some European cemeteries like Père Lachaise grew ever more

dense with mortuary structures, American rural cemeteries like Mount Auburn tended to retain much of their “pastoral character” (Linded-Ward 1989b).

Contemporary proponents of the rural cemetery style thought vegetation would sooth mourning visitors. Loudon quoted John Strang, author of a work describing a garden cemetery at Glasgow, as saying:

Does it not become the duty of every well wisher to his species, to pour into the tomb the light of religion and philosophy, and thereby to dissipate the vain phantoms which the false gloom of the grave has tended to call forth? The decoration of the cemetery is a mean peculiarly calculated to produce these effects. Beneath the shade of a spreading tree, amid the fragrance of the balmy flower, surrounded on every hand with the noble works of art, the imagination is robbed of its gloomy horrors, the wildest fancy is freed from its debasing fears (Loudon 1843, 12).

Burial in a “natural” landscape was to be the crowning element of the movement, but the arrangement of vegetation, according to Loudon, could not be carried out in just any way. Again, Loudon placed practical considerations above all other priorities, and in the case of vegetation this meant that its placement could not interfere with proper air circulation in the cemetery, a property which, he asserted, led to improving decomposition of bodies. Following this thought, he recommended never placing trees or bushes in large groups as this would inhibit wind-flow (Loudon 1843, 69). Instead, he suggested that vegetation should be evenly spaced between

graves to maximize the “natural” experience of the burial ground and the amount of land available for interments while minimizing stagnation of air flow (Loudon 1843, 20).

### **Rural Cemeteries as “Pleasure Grounds”**

Loudon's recommended planting designs (Loudon 1843, 20, 69) had yet another intention: that the cemetery should not come to resemble a “pleasure ground,” which was something he considered “highly objectionable” (Loudon 1843, 69). Although American rural cemeteries seem largely to have followed Loudon's advice about planting design, these landscapes certainly did not stifle social activity. Instead, rural cemeteries often became the *chief* “pleasure ground” in American cities, serving as a setting for country walks, carriage rides and picnics (French 1974, 37-38; D'Alonzo 1999, 17). Perhaps these uses became common because the new cemeteries were, in some cases, the first major green spaces in American cities that were open to the public. When Mount Auburn opened, for example, it was the only major green space in Boston aside from the mall on the Common (Linden-Ward 1989b, 296). However, as Sloane points out, not all were pleased with the new public nature of these cemeteries. The growing popularity of these landscapes as “pleasure grounds” led quickly to conflicts between lot owners who desired a peaceful setting in which to mourn their loved ones and cemetery visitors who came in droves to admire the unique settings. Lot owners complained of the noise and distraction that pleasure-seeking visitors created. Despite drafting rules to address these issues and, in some cases, commissioning their own police forces, rural cemetery managers never completely resolved the conflicts between private and public use (Sloane 1991, 60).

## **Southern Rural Cemeteries**

Southern cemeteries built in the Rural Cemetery style during the mid-nineteenth century have much in common with their counterparts in the northeastern United States, but they also have a few important differences. One such difference is that many Southern garden cemeteries are around two decades younger than those in the Northeast. Like many other national trends, the Rural Cemetery Style began in the Northeast with the opening of Mt. Auburn in Boston in 1831 and trickled southward and inland with the establishment of cemeteries based on similar design principles in Philadelphia in 1836, Richmond, Virginia in 1849, Charleston, South Carolina in 1850, and Athens, Georgia in 1856.

Cities in the South saw population booms during the middle years of the nineteenth century similar to those seen in the North with a concomitant shortage of spaces for burial. Yalom (2008, 112-14) has pointed out, however, that space shortages in existing southern cemeteries tended to be even more dramatic than those in the North due to the devastating consequences of epidemics in the South's warm climate. This fact led authorities to bury hundreds of bodies in very short periods of time, creating an urgent need for the new garden cemeteries. This same warm climate is also responsible in part for the unique vegetation in southern rural cemeteries, especially those along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts that are characterized by spreading live oak trees covered in Spanish moss.

Also unique to Southern cemeteries are the graves of fallen Confederate soldiers. Several rural cemeteries in the South, like Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, contain extensive sections for Confederate soldiers along with a monument to the war dead (Mitchell 1985). Sections consisting of orderly rows of simple headstones are striking in the midst of the cemeteries'

typical wooded tracts filled with elaborate Victorian statues and monuments. In memory of Confederate soldiers killed in battle, many Southern rural cemeteries also stage large Memorial Day celebrations on cemetery grounds. This is an event that, in many Southern towns, has merged with an unofficial holiday known as *Decoration Day* on which families and other community members gather to clear away a year of neglect from cemetery plots and leave flowers on graves (Jabbour & Jabbour 2010, 116-17).

Yalom points out that one additional legacy of Southern rural cemeteries is racial segregation in burial. Garden cemeteries tended to be institutions populated primarily by middle to upper-class white citizens, while populations of both free and enslaved blacks were buried either in informal, improvised burial grounds or in separate churchyards. Blacks were occasionally buried within the grounds of the large rural cemeteries, but in these cases, they were segregated into separate sections occupying less valuable ground (Yalom 2008, 115).

This chapter has provided an overview of many of the defining characteristics of rural cemeteries to serve as a backdrop for discussion of Oconee Hill Cemetery. Oconee Hill, as the thesis will demonstrate, was a product of many of the same forces as other nineteenth century rural cemeteries and exhibits many of the same types of features that were typical of these landscapes. Having established the general historical context in which the cemetery was created, the thesis will now proceed with a closer examination of the history of Oconee Hill itself.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **PAST AND PRESENT USES AND PERCEPTIONS OF OCONEE HILL CEMETERY**

##### **The Creation and First Years of Oconee Hill Cemetery: 1854-1857**

Oconee Hill's initial period of establishment took place over a number of years during the mid-1850s. The first section of this chapter chronicles this brief but important time in Oconee Hill's history. Subsequent sections address the range of public views and uses of Oconee Hill as they developed and shifted through different periods in the cemetery's history up to the present.

Charlotte Thomas Marshall, an Athens historian who has written extensively on Oconee Hill Cemetery, relates that "Old Athens Cemetery," today known as Jackson Street Cemetery, was Athens's primary burial ground throughout the city's early history. She relates that by 1849 it had become overcrowded, with bodies being interred in close proximity to the homes of university faculty (2009, 33). One citizen wrote a letter published in a local newspaper that described the state of the old Athens cemetery as, "wild, unsightly, indecent, wicked confusion (Southern Banner, May 22, 1856)." Because this matter constituted a clearly untenable situation, city council members appointed a committee on January 10, 1854, to seek out a new site on which to establish a cemetery to serve the Athens community. By early the following year, the council had identified a 17-acre property along the western bank of the Oconee River,



and on March 1, 1855, the City of Athens purchased the land from Pamela Hopping for \$1,000 (Marshall 1997, 33).

After purchasing the Hopping Estate, the Athens Town Council appointed a new committee consisting of E. P. Lumpkin, John Nicholson, and B. M. Hill to inspect the newly purchased grounds and to report about the most efficacious way to develop the new cemetery. The members responded with a report on March 15, 1856, which stated that the grounds were, “well adapted, with moderate appropriations, to be made a handsome cemetery, as well as an ornament to the town (Gerdine, May 22, 1856).” In addition, the men suggested that the council establish a new committee to select and lay off appropriate burial plots on three acres of the purchased property. In compliance with this recommendation, the town council appointed a new committee of six members, including Dr. James Camak and Dr. R. D. Moore, to carry out the suggested work (Gerdine, May 22, 1856).

Two men proposed plans for the original design of Oconee Hill. Initially favored was the plan of Dr. R. D. Moore, but later the council chose Dr. James Camak’s plan as more appropriate for the site (Ingram 2002). Unfortunately, because neither of these original plans survives today, researchers can only speculate about what merits Moore’s plan lacked. According to Camak’s plan, the new “Oconee Cemetery” was to consist initially of two main sections, West Hill and East Hill, with a valley section between them that workers would develop at a later time (Marshall 1997, 34). Oconee Hill’s website assigns inspirational credit for Camak’s plan to his visits to other unspecified Victorian-era garden cemeteries. The evidence of this inspiration lies in the specifications of Camak’s plan which, like other rural cemeteries, emphasized the landscape’s rolling terrain, mature vegetation and views over the Oconee River

(Oconee Hill Cemetery) (Fig. 3.3). Indeed, Camak's winding patterns of circulation and his placement of the prime burial plots on wooded hilltops clearly strive to capitalize on the terrain's natural qualities (Fig. 3.1).

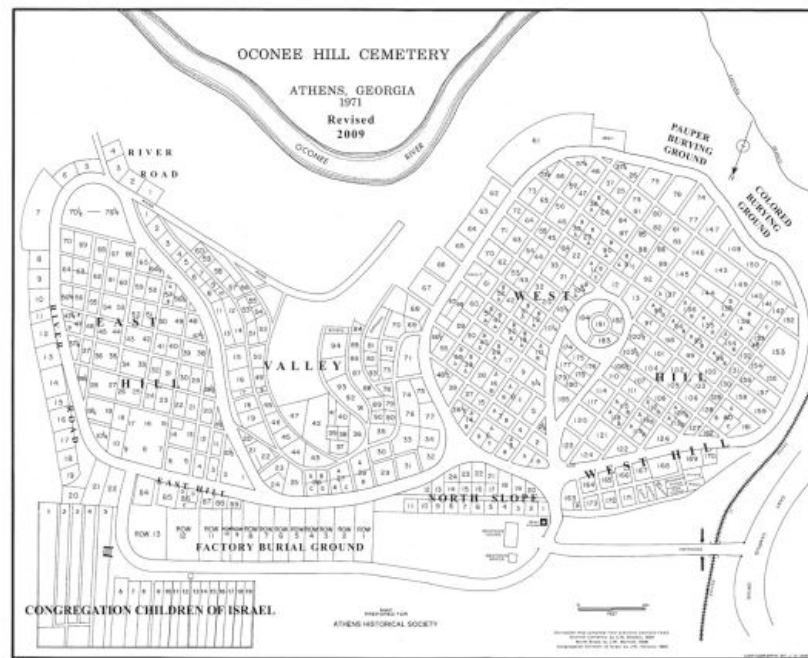


Figure 3.1. Original cemetery property including East and West Hill. Reprinted from Charlotte Marshall, *Oconee Hill Cemetery of Athens, Georgia*. Athens, Ga.: Athens Historical Society, 2009.

According to Marshall, the town council contracted a surveyor named Mr. McDowell to lay out the individual burial plots following Camak's landscape plan on May 9, 1856 (2009, 467), a task which he apparently carried out during the course of the summer. At a meeting held on September 6 of the same year, the Athens Town Council placed the burial plots of the two main cemetery hills into three different categories. The most desirable first class plots cost \$50, with second and third class plots costing \$25 and \$10 respectively. At the same meeting, the

council passed a resolution declaring that no more burials would be allowed in the Jackson Street Cemetery. In addition, the council commended Dr. Camak for “the taste he displayed and the valuable service he rendered the town in laying out and ornamenting the new cemetery.” For his services the council offered him his choice of burial plots in the new cemetery (Gerdine, September 11, 1856).

The first opportunity to purchase lots in Oconee Hill Cemetery was at an auction held on September 20, 1856, at 10 a.m. (Gerdine, September 11, 1856). Shortly thereafter, the Athens Town Council resolved to create a self-perpetuating board of trustees to hold and manage payments made on cemetery lots, stipulating that the funds would be put toward managing the grounds “as a public Cemetery, for the benefit of the town of Athens,” and that all money would be “expended in proper improvement upon said Cemetery (Hill 1856).” These trustees, in turn, elected to designate a “sexton” to take care of the daily tasks at the cemetery, such as preparation of graves and coordination of improvement and maintenance of the grounds. Council records show that the trustees appointed the first such sexton for the year 1857, the same year that new rules and regulations penned by the trustees came into effect (Hull 1857).

These rules were comparable to those at other rural cemeteries. An examination of the rules adopted at the creation of other such cemeteries shows a relatively uniform approach to regulatory measures. At two other major rural cemeteries, Belfontaine in St. Louis, Missouri, and Bonaventure in Savannah, Georgia, rules included proper procedures for interments, guidelines for owners’ use of cemetery lots, comments on the rights of cemetery managers over individual lots, and measures to be taken against trespassers and vandals (Rural Cemetery Association 1850; Evergreen Cemetery 1870). Oconee Hill’s list of regulations, while less

thorough than these other cemeteries, conformed in large part with their management norms. For example, Oconee Cemetery's rules stipulated that the cemetery would be open at all times during weekdays and on certain hours on Sundays, but that anyone entering the grounds other than through the gate or anyone "interfering therewith" would be guilty of trespassing (Hull 1857).

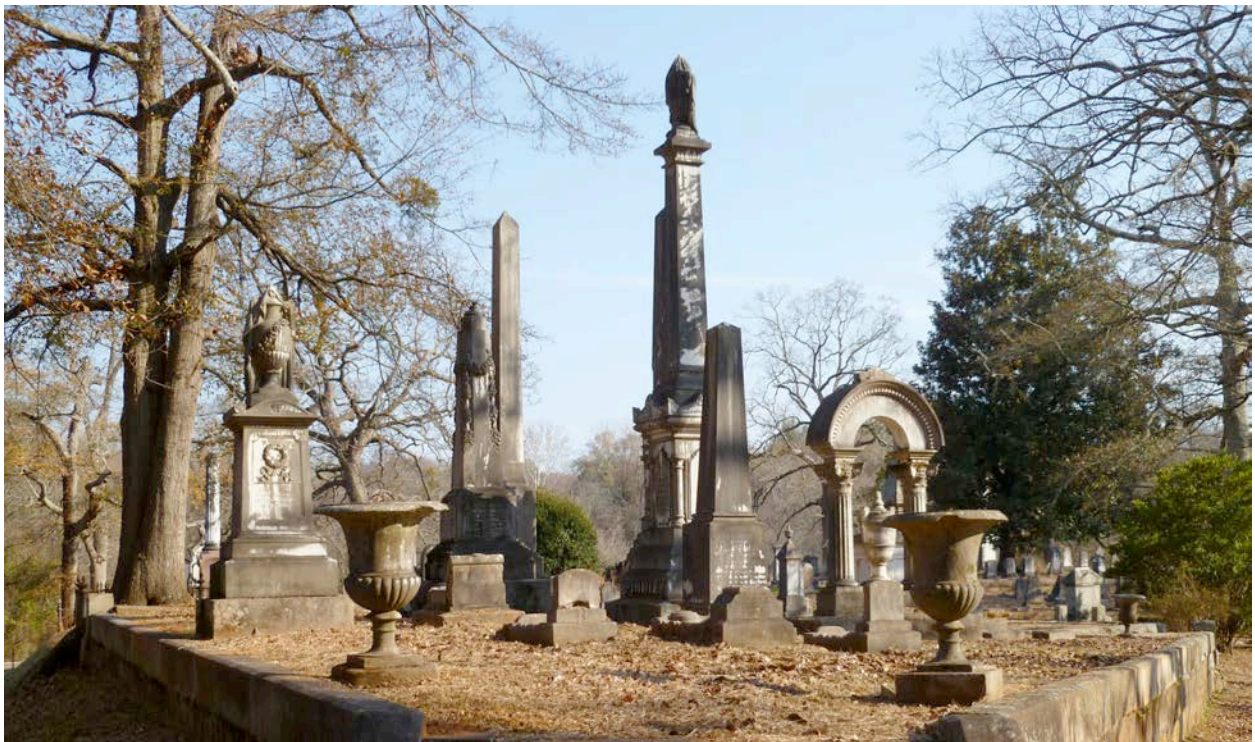


Fig. 3.2. Monuments in family plot on East Hill. *Photo by author*

The trustees included one passage in their list of measures regulating cemetery use that addressed the role of Athens residents in cemetery maintenance. According to this specification, lot holders were free to improve their own lots as long as such improvements did not interfere with the "general plans of the trustees (Hull 1857)." This stipulation gave them the freedom to

erect elaborate works of mortuary art while simultaneously prohibiting them from interfering with the overall landscape plan (Fig. 3.2). This specification was consistent with rules adopted for other garden cemeteries. It was in part this combination of regulation and freedom of artistic expression that gave rural cemeteries like Oconee Hill their characteristic appearance (Linden-Ward 1989b, 215-255).

### **Positive Public Responses and Attitudes toward Oconee Hill: 1858-1897**

During its early development, Oconee Cemetery's design, and the management structure governing its maintenance, was typical of the Rural Cemetery Movement in the United States, but what did the existence of this new green space mean in the day-to-day lives of Athenians? How did they react to its creation and how did they use its grounds?

Newspaper articles from the decades immediately following Oconee Hill's initial establishment help to demonstrate that their early responses were largely positive. Indeed, the cemetery received much early praise from local residents owing to its design and the beauty of the natural vegetation and topography. An article from *Southern Watchman* in April 1859 spoke poetically about the peaceful beauty of Oconee Hill and encouraged friends and relatives of the recently deceased to place "enduring monuments" over their graves to "so beautify the solemn resting places of the dead as in some degree to divest the grave of its repulsiveness (Southern Watchman 1859)." The same writer conjectured that, "As many advantages as Athens can boast, the time is not distant when the Oconee Cemetery will be the chief attraction of the town."



Fig. 3.3. Image of Oconee River, 1919. *Image courtesy of Vanishing Georgia Photo Archive*

More than 30 years after this initial positive response to Oconee Hill's design and character, Athenians remained proud of their city's new public cemetery. The *Athens Banner* newspaper carried evidence of this continued admiration in an editorial of November 1891 that suggested Oconee Hill was superior in natural beauty to better-known garden cemeteries in Savannah and Augusta, Georgia. The author further addressed the significance of the site to city

dwellers by recognizing that the cemetery provided Athenians with, “a lovely retreat (Athens Banner 1891).”

In addition to telling us what nineteenth-century Athenians thought about Oconee Hill Cemetery, early accounts of the cemetery also provide insight about how Athenians used the grounds. Of course, one major activity taking place in the new park-like landscape was the burial of the dead. References to Oconee Hill in historic newspaper archives appear predominantly in obituaries, and other references tend to emphasize the mortuary features of the landscape rather than the land’s recreational value. Enough burials were taking place that the city was forced to purchase 81.8 additional acres on the other side of the Oconee River in 1898 to expand Oconee Hill’s size (Marshall 2009, 470). This is not to say that Athenians were not using the grounds for other types of activities, but the newsworthy nature of death in a small community perhaps contributed to the predominance of this type of reference to the new rural cemetery.

Although many rural cemeteries in the United States famously functioned as much as “pleasure grounds” as they did burial grounds, the limited evidence from Athens’s cemetery suggests that the kinds of high-society pleasure activities that dominated cemeteries like Mount Auburn did not as clearly leave their mark on Oconee Hill. References to the cemetery tend to focus on its quiet, peaceful nature and suggest that it was more a place for reflection than for larger group outings or Sunday afternoon carriage rides. This may owe to the fact that Athens was still a small and fairly rural town during the nineteenth century, without the concentration of wealthy families that tended to frequent the larger rural cemeteries of America’s Northeastern



cities. Or, perhaps the cemetery's relatively small size, (only 17 acres before 1898), was not as attractive as the North's larger rural cemeteries for extended leisurely outings (Fig. 3.4).



Fig. 3.4. Part of 1874 map of Athens, Georgia showing Oconee Cemetery to city's south. *Image courtesy of University of Georgia Libraries.*

Although Oconee Hill Cemetery apparently did not support the same kinds of high-traffic, recreational uses as some other garden cemeteries, newspaper references do indicate that it was open without restriction to the public during its daily hours of operation and that Athenians used it as a place for strolling (Hull 1857; Athens Banner 1891). In addition, Athenians also engaged in other kinds of interesting and illegal activities at Oconee Hill. Bathing



in the Oconee River along the cemetery's shores was apparently a problem, because in 1897, the trustees asked the Athens City Council to pass an ordinance prohibiting this activity on cemetery property and to confer police powers on the sexton (Athens Banner 1897).

### **Shifting Public Perceptions of Oconee Hill: 1898-1909**

Forty or fifty years after Oconee Hill's establishment in 1856, references in Athens newspapers began to suggest a change in public perceptions of Oconee Hill. Whereas Athenians mostly had expressed admiration for the cemetery during the years leading up to the 1890s, during the later part of this decade and the first years of the twentieth century, the tone and content of references in the press expressed a growing disapproval of cemetery management. This section addresses this brief period of changing public views of Oconee Hill beginning with references to crime on cemetery grounds.

The town council obliged when Oconee Hill's trustees requested that they confer police powers on the sexton in 1857, and although it is unclear what these powers entailed, references to crimes taking place in the cemetery indicate that the powers may have been useful. Reports of theft of graveside articles, including flowers and other uprooted vegetation (Fig. 3.5), appeared in newspaper articles during the early years of the twentieth century, "despite the watchfulness of the sexton and the officers who frequent Oconee Cemetery (Lingle 1911)." In 1909, the cemetery was even the site of a sensational murder in which a man was robbed, killed with an ax, and thrown into the Oconee River from the cemetery bridge (The Banner 1909). Considering that the perpetrator of this crime drove a wagon into the cemetery in the middle of the night, locked gates were apparently not a nighttime security feature at Oconee Hill at this time.



Fig. 3.5. Image from 1924 showing a wreath on a grave at Oconee Hill.  
*Image Courtesy of Vanishing Georgia Photo Archive*

Although such crimes were certainly exceptional, they may have contributed to Athenians' growing disapproval of cemetery management. Evidence of this shift in public attitudes appears first in June, 1898, when a private citizen published an appeal to the Athens City Council in the *Athens Daily Banner* that requested the city pay the sexton, Mr. J. H. Bisson, a salary "to keep the cemetery in order and carry on the improvements commenced there" (*Athens Daily Banner* 1898). The writer was not filing a complaint about the sexton's

work at Oconee Hill. On the contrary, the author commended Bisson's work and stated that he thought Bisson had helped improve the grounds "a hundred percent" since taking charge. The author instead attributed the problem to a temporary lull in the number of deaths and interments in Athens, a circumstance that directly affected the sexton's ability to earn a decent living wage, and also prevented him from carrying out planned maintenance and improvements.

A decade later the maintenance situation at the cemetery apparently had worsened. A private citizen, Miss Laura Speer, wrote a letter to the *Athens Banner* in November 1908 in which she heartily condemned the appearance of Oconee Hill: "One has but to walk along the neglected drives in our cemetery, has but to view the falling walls and fences, has but to note the lots overgrown with weeds, dying broom sedge and brambles, to learn how lamentably we are forsaking a sacred trust" (Athens Banner 1908). Claiming to have no personal knowledge of the cemetery's board of trustees or of the nature of the financial constraints affecting the cemetery's management, she made her appeal for intervention expressly as an independent, concerned citizen.

The shortcomings in Oconee Hill's upkeep during this turn of the century period of shifting public views may have owed in part to the cumulative effects of the long-term diversion of community resources that was a legacy of the Civil War on the city's economy (Marshall 2012). However, these shortcomings pointed also in part to uncertainties over the cemetery's organizational structure. While the board of trustees was charged with overseeing the cemetery's daily management, including regular lot sales and grounds maintenance, the trustees and city council were uncertain about which group ultimately was responsible for Oconee Hill's more substantial financial outlays. A proposed expansion of the cemetery in 1897, for which the

trustees requested funds from the city to purchase additional land, highlighted this uncertainty in the relationship between the city government and the trustees. A newspaper article from February of that year stated: “Judge Howell Cobb, one of the Trustees, stated that the city bought the present cemetery, and while the cemetery is in the hands of the Trustees, it really belongs to the city (Athens Banner 1897).” The city, on the other hand, apparently determined that it had no further obligation to procure land on behalf of the trustees. It was, therefore, the trustees themselves who purchased the 81.8 acres on the east side of the Oconee River from Thomas Bailey in August 1899 (Marshall 2009, 470).

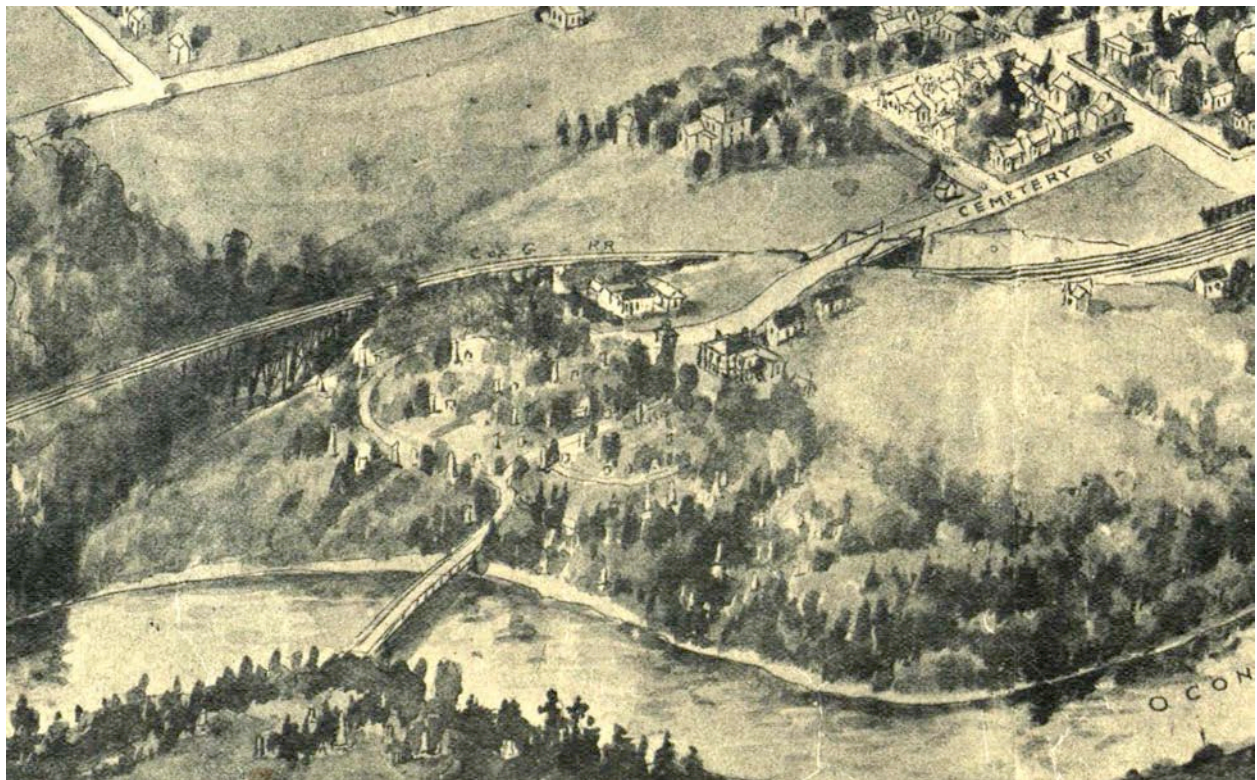


Fig. 3.6. Part of 1909 bird's-eye-view image of Athens, Georgia showing Oconee Hill with bridge to new property east of Oconee River. *Image courtesy of University of Georgia Libraries*

Although the city government had purchased the original cemetery land (Fig. 3.6), it was unwilling to purchase additional new property for the public cemetery in later years. It also was hesitant to extend its financial obligations to assisting with ongoing cemetery maintenance. Demonstrating this unwillingness to fund daily cemetery management, the city council apparently never granted the request to provide Sexton Bisson with a salary. During the years following the first appeal for the city to become involved in cemetery maintenance in 1898, the idea grew among some Athens residents that Oconee Hill Cemetery should come entirely under city management and become a city department. The *Athens Banner*, which saw a transition to city control as the best assurance that cemetery maintenance would be properly funded in the long-term, endorsed this idea. However, the city government put the matter aside owing to financial constraints (Athens Banner 1908). Although the city never actually created a funded department to care for Oconee Hill, one legacy of this period of public discontent was a special act that made the city mayor an ex-officio member of the cemetery Board of Trustees, a provision to which the board still adheres today (Hodgson 2012).

### **Growing Management Challenges: 1909-Present**

While nineteenth-century Athenians valued Oconee Hill for its beauty and peaceful qualities, their counterparts in the twentieth century became increasingly indifferent toward the landscape. Although the reasons for this decline in public interest are not entirely clear, a few different factors may explain the shift. First, according to one interview source, the aforementioned lack of resources during the early years of the twentieth century led to a growing public discontent with the level of cemetery maintenance. Later, around mid-century, Oconee

Hill began to face stiff competition when the new Evergreen Memorial Cemetery opened on the Atlanta Highway in 1952. Offering a more contemporary landscape style and lower prices for burial lots than Oconee Hill, this lawn cemetery attracted much of the business upon which Oconee Hill had always relied (Gibson 2012). Cemetery records reveal that Evergreen Cemetery's appeal to Athenians was so great that many families even had their loved ones disinterred from Oconee Hill and moved to the new suburban cemetery (Marshall 2012).

In addition to the new competition from Evergreen Cemetery, the growing resources of the City Parks and Recreation Department throughout the twentieth century began to provide Athenians with recreational alternatives to the grounds at Oconee Hill. The nearby Dudley Park on the Oconee River, which opened in 1953, is one example of this growth that may have attracted a number of individuals who might otherwise have visited Oconee Hill. It was, perhaps, in part this growing palette of recreational opportunities that helped remove Oconee Hill from its centrality to the lives of Athenians.

Also during the twentieth century, the city of Athens continued to grow around Oconee Hill. The student population of the University of Georgia continued growing, and, as a result, the campus to the west of Oconee Hill became denser and grew southward. At the same time, to the cemetery's east, developers constructed student apartments in the Carr's Hill Neighborhood during the 1960s and 1970s (Figs. 3.7 - 3.10). This growth put increasing pressure on Oconee Hill in the form of automobile and pedestrian traffic that was unrelated to the cemetery's traditional uses.





Fig. 3.7. 1938 aerial photo with Oconee Hill's boundaries.  
*Image courtesy of Digital Library of Georgia.*



Fig. 3.8. 1951 aerial photo with Oconee Hill's boundaries.  
*Image courtesy of Digital Library of Georgia.*



Fig. 3.9. 1967 aerial photo with Oconee Hill's boundaries.  
*Image courtesy of Digital Library of Georgia*

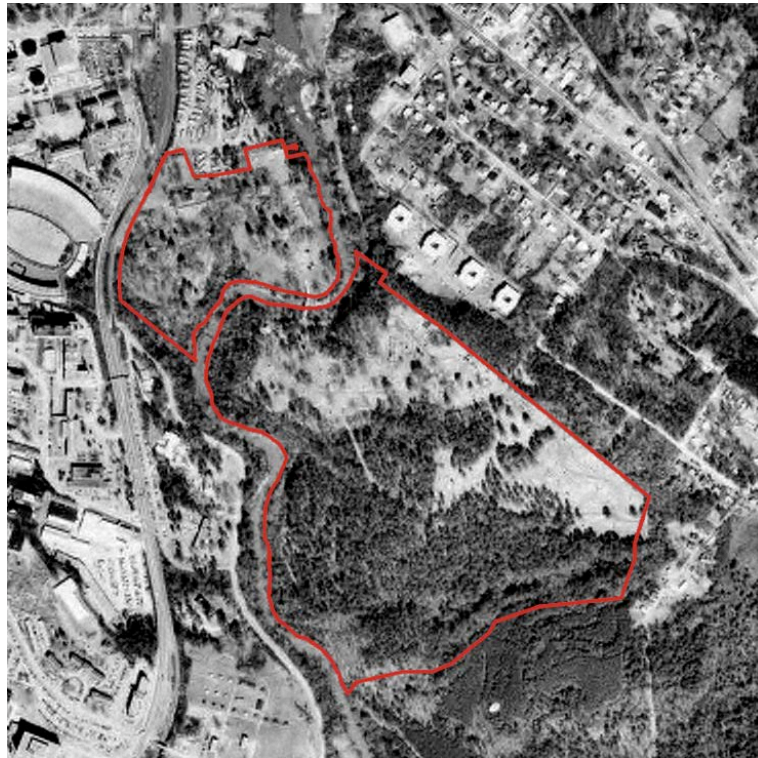


Fig. 3.10. 1973 aerial photo with Oconee Hill's boundaries.  
*Image courtesy of Digital Library of Georgia.*



A final circumstance that helped diminish the ties between Oconee Hill and the Athens community developed during the first decade of the twenty-first century. During this time, Oconee Hill acquired the reputation of being a closed, unwelcoming place to visit. This reputation seems to have resulted largely from an unofficial management policy whereby the cemetery sexton asked, in no uncertain terms, for visitors to leave the grounds. A string of newspaper and online blog postings indicate that this was a major problem between 2000-2008, with dozens of individuals remarking that they had been rudely asked to leave the cemetery, often with the explanation that it was private property (Athens Banner-Herald 2000, 2001; Athens World 2006; Flagpole 2006). Various studies carried out as part of coursework at the University of Georgia confirm that this practice had serious consequences for public perceptions of the cemetery. A 2001 landscape management study from the College of Environment and Design acknowledged the problem, saying, “The perception that Oconee Hill Cemetery is an isolated property that shuns visitors is not a healthy one (Firth, 2001).” In Fall 2011 another UGA/CED class study identified the issue of public perception and access as a major barrier to Oconee Hill having “a successful future as part of the Athens community (Reap 2011).”

Negative reports about Oconee Hill from community members stopped appearing in local media sources in 2009, a shift that was tied to a change of policy on the part of the cemetery management team. At this time, after a pointed complaint from a citizen, the trustees acknowledged the public perception problems that gradually had developed from the management team’s restrictive policies. Most importantly, the cemetery sexton largely ceased asking visitors to leave. In addition, to help alleviate the problem of negative public perception, the trustees posted a sign at the cemetery gates which they hoped would clarify the cemetery’s

status within the community (Costantino, M. 2012). The sign lists cemetery rules and the activities that are permitted on the grounds. It also prominently states, “Visitors are Welcome at Oconee Hill Cemetery.”

Unfortunately, despite the recent clarifications, the years of restrictive policies seem to have left a lasting impression on Athens community members. This fact is borne out by a study produced by students in the University of Georgia’s Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication that surveyed 507 Athens residents, both students and non-students via various group listservs. The results of this survey found that only 40% of respondents were familiar with Oconee Hill. Of these, 35% thought the cemetery was closed to the public, and only 41% thought that it was a “welcoming place” (Andrews 2010). These figures clearly suggest that Oconee Hill is not a highly valued landscape to most Athenians today. The results did not conclusively determine whether the management team’s restrictive policies caused the low level of familiarity with the cemetery. However, one might speculate that these policies may have contributed to the problem since they prevented many potential visitors from entering the landscape over the course of several years. Indeed, at the end of 2010, nearly two years after the trustees had shifted their management policies in early 2009 to allow a greater level of public access, more than one third of respondents still thought the cemetery was closed to the public, and less than half thought it was a welcoming place.

These figures suggest that a mere change of on-site rules is not enough to turn the tide of public sentiment in Oconee Hill’s favor, at least not in the short-term. The 2011 UGA/CED preservation advocacy study tacitly acknowledged that this hands-off strategy was not sufficient to re-acquaint Athenians with Oconee Hill when it outlined a series of active additional

measures that the management team should take to attract more visitors. Included in this list were several strategies that students thought the management team should adopt, including increasing public access, actively engaging visitors, initiation of electronic social media services, and creating an electronic database for cemetery records (Reap 2011).

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has outlined a brief history of Oconee Hill Cemetery, focusing chiefly on public uses of and attitudes toward the landscape through the years. It also has placed the cemetery within the greater historical context of the Rural Cemetery movement by identifying a number of important characteristics that the landscape has in common with this movement. The chapter explored the roles that the cemetery landscape played for Athenians in the past and demonstrated how changing circumstances led Athenians in the twentieth century to develop a growing indifference to the cemetery. In this way, it identified a major issue that later chapters will explore in more depth. First, however, in order to frame this public indifference and other issues within Oconee Hill's modern management context, the thesis will turn to a chapter that introduces the various groups and individuals involved in managing the cemetery today.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **OCONEE HILL CEMETERY'S MANAGEMENT TEAM**

An important precursor to understanding current management issues at Oconee Hill Cemetery is forming a working knowledge of the groups and individuals responsible for cemetery management. For this reason, this brief chapter gives an account of the primary groups and individuals responsible for managing Oconee Hill, including the board of trustees, The Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery, and the cemetery sexton and grounds crew. While each of these groups holds specific responsibilities, all ultimately share in the collective and multi-faceted task of managing Oconee Hill. For this reason, when speaking of these groups collectively, the thesis uses the term “management team,” or simply “managers.”

#### **The Oconee Hill Cemetery Board of Trustees**

On October 13, 1856, the Athens City Council, which had previously purchased and developed the initial 17 acres of Oconee Hill Cemetery, transferred “the cemetery and cemetery fund” to a group of five men. Accompanying this action the council specified that the grounds:

be held and managed in trust as a public cemetery for the benefit of the Town of Athens, granting power to said trustees to fill all vacancies and other necessary powers to carry into full effect the trust reposed with the understanding that all funds hereinafter arising as well as those already raised from the sale of lots be expended in the proper improvement upon said cemetery (Gibson 1982).

Four years later, on December 7, 1860, the General Assembly of Georgia approved an act that officially incorporated this group as “The Trustees of Oconee Hill Cemetery.” The act declared that the title to the land “be confirmed in” the trustees and gave the group power to hold and sell real and personal estate as well as to perform “other acts necessary to carry out the purposes of the corporation.” Significantly, the act also established the board as a self-perpetuating entity. This requirement meant that members of the board were responsible for independently choosing new members to fill vacancies resulting from resignation or death (Gibson 1982).

Today the Board of Trustees still plays the pivotal role in determining Oconee Hill Cemetery’s management policies. However, there has been a great deal of confusion among members of the Athens community regarding the board’s right to do so, as well as uncertainty regarding the cemetery’s ownership status, despite the fact that the trustees hold the title to the cemetery. Interview responses from different members of the management team reveal that the majority of this group believes that the trustees own the cemetery, but that they do not know exactly what this ownership should actually entail in light of the fact that the grounds are considered a “public cemetery.” One trustee stated that although he believed the trustees legally own the cemetery, this is an ownership right that the group shares with the community because private families own burial rights to individual plots (Costantino, M. 2012). A common response among other members of the management team when questioned about who owned the cemetery was that the subject was a “grey area.”

Much of the confusion about who owns the cemetery may be linked to a common misunderstanding about the differences between private and public cemeteries. A Georgia

Genealogical Society publication on cemetery preservation explains that private cemeteries are created when an individual or family simply sets aside a small section of land on private property for family burials and does not dedicate this land for public use. Public cemeteries, on the other hand, are created when land is officially dedicated for public use, which was the case with Oconee Hill Cemetery. This designation as a public cemetery, however, merely entails that the lots are available for sale to the general public and does not have any bearing on who holds title to the land or on how the owners address day-to-day management (Georgia Genealogical Society 1989). In other words, a public cemetery does not have to be controlled by a public authority; instead it can be privately owned and managed. In such public cemeteries, issues like the level of public access are therefore addressed not by public authorities, but by the private owner and title-holder, which at Oconee Hill is the board of trustees. This means that managers may place restrictions on public access rights at their discretion.

Today, the board of trustees remains the group with primary responsibility for the cemetery's wellbeing. There are five primary board members plus the Mayor of Athens, who serves as an ex-officio board member. Only the current mayor and her immediate predecessor have regularly attended meetings. The group's responsibilities include managing a perpetual care trust fund and all primary budget issues, overseeing cemetery workers, including hiring and firing of cemetery staff, and determining the rules that apply to visitors on cemetery grounds. The group also bears the ultimate responsibility for cemetery maintenance and for any legal issues arising from cemetery affairs (Costantino, M. 2012; Hodgson 2012).

The trustees address these tasks and responsibilities at monthly board meetings at which a majority rule vote of all five primary board members is the typical governing principle in all

major decisions (Gibson 2012). However, most of the trustees' work with Oconee Hill goes toward making more routine business decisions, as they strive to assure the cemetery's continued financial viability. Trustees carry out their work without pay. Because they spend a good deal of their time solving various management problems and deal with complaints, some trustees have characterized the responsibility as somewhat of a "thankless job," but one they retain because they care about the cemetery (Costantino, M. 2012).

As a self-perpetuating group, when a position on the board becomes available due to resignation or death of a trustee, the remaining trustees select a new member to fill the position. As part of this process, the trustees discuss among themselves different factors that they consider to be important in a prospective trustee, such as what skills different candidates could bring to the board (Hodgson 2012). After the group makes a decision and a candidate accepts their invitation to become a trustee, the appointment is generally a lifetime commitment. Because trustees typically do not resign, this appointment structure has led in the past to a relatively high average age of board members. However, an age shift recently has occurred on the board, with several new trustees having joined in the last few years. Today, most board members are younger than in the past, with the average member being between 60-70 years old. Partly because of this recent shift, trustee Mark Costantino, a trustee since 2006, considers the board's current composition and relationship to the Athens community to be the best that it has been, although he recognizes the need for the board to continue becoming "more aggressive moving forward" in terms of community engagement (Costantino, M. 2012). Fortunately, the trustees have help from an outside group in organizing such engagement.

## The Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery

The non-profit charitable organization, The Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery, (FOHC), has been a major force in recent changes at Oconee Hill. Community members with a passionate interest in Oconee Hill established this group in 1999 as a long-term venture to improve the cemetery grounds and its relationship with the community. The group consists of around 300 members and is led by a Board of Directors that includes five officer positions that rotate on two-year terms. During the first few years, FOHC focused its efforts on creating a sound working group structure, a process that included incorporating the group and writing bi-laws. When they finished this process, they immediately began their first major project, the renovation of the Sexton's House (Fig. 4.1). As a new group, these initial years were a time for setting precedents and establishing FOHC's future role at the cemetery and in the community (Begnaud 2012).



Fig. 4.1. The Sexton's House. *Photo by author*



“Enhancing” the cemetery eventually became FOHC’s major role in cemetery management. This role entailed identifying and spearheading projects or other larger interventions that the trustees’ working budget could not cover (Costantino, M. 2012). After they completed the renovation of the long-neglected Sexton’s House, FOHC gradually identified more projects that they could lead, including creating a memorial plaza at the cemetery’s entrance, planting new trees, restoring various historic landscape features (Fig. 4.2), initiating an adopt-a-lot project, analyzing broken water pipes, painting the cemetery bridge, and initiating the process to nominate Oconee Hill for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. The group also has begun arranging and hosting some community events like a Veterans Day ceremony and cemetery cleanup days (Wilfong 2012).



Fig. 4.2. Damaged retaining wall on West Hill. *Photo by Author*

To facilitate such projects, fund-raising is a major focus of FOHC. Although each member of the board has a specific area of focus, all board members work together on fund-raising campaigns like the recent “Saving the Bridge” campaign, which involved the creation and distribution of a promotional booklet to members of the community and to members of FOHC (Begnaud 2012). In addition to focused campaigns such as this one, FOHC board members also try to maintain good relationships with other individuals and groups in the community. The group views this kind of networking as a way to ensure increased community interest in the cemetery as well as a way to encourage funding for important cemetery projects. An additional source of funding for the group comes from membership dues (Costantino, H. 2012).

An understanding of FOHC’s relationship with the cemetery trustees is vital to understanding the group’s work. Because the trustees are the final authority for activities taking place on cemetery grounds, FOHC must receive approval from the trustees before they proceed with any project (Field 2012). When FOHC identifies a project it would like to complete, the group’s sitting president, who as of recently attends the monthly trustee meetings, usually presents the idea to the trustees who discuss the idea’s merit in regard to three general criteria: (1) is the idea appropriate to the cemetery’s character?; (2) can the trustees’ budget cover the costs of maintaining the project’s outputs?, and (3) are there any legal complications that the project could entail for the property? Generally, the trustees find no problems with the ideas that FOHC suggests, and the projects are approved unanimously by the board, which views most of FOHC’s proposals as long overdue grounds improvements. One trustee characterized FOHC as the trustees’ “best friends” (Costantino, M. 2012), and all interview respondents characterized the relationship between FOHC and the trustees as positive, if still evolving.

Situations do occasionally arise, however, that bring into question the nature of the relationship between the two groups. An example of this type of dilemma arose when FOHC renovated the Sexton's House. The group paid for the renovation and was to take the proceeds from renting the structure to families for receptions after funerals. However, the agreement between the trustees and FOHC did not stipulate who would pay for recurring charges like the increase in insurance rates that the renovation incurred. This issue reflected a common management problem for landscapes like Oconee Hill, in which donors typically are more willing to contribute to a project that promises tangible results than they are to fund ongoing maintenance (Costantino, M. 2012).

### **The Sexton and Grounds Crew**

The cemetery sexton is the person hired by the board of trustees to oversee the day-to-day operations of the cemetery. Sextons at Oconee Hill have generally tended to either inherit their positions through familial ties or rise to the post after an older sexton leaves. The Bisson family illustrated this pattern, with three successive Bissons holding the sexton position for nearly 90 years, between 1897-1983 (Marshall 2009, 466). Members of the same family have not otherwise held the position, and after the Bisson period, those filling the position have typically been trusted individuals already working under the sexton at Oconee Hill. Indeed, Trustee President Robert Gibson expressed hope that the current sexton would “produce a successor when the time comes” (Gibson 2012).

The sexton's duties include selling burial lots, preparing deeds and sending them to be recorded, collecting burial fees from families via the funeral director, overseeing interments and

the erection of monuments, and maintaining the grounds. Maintenance is the most time-consuming of these tasks, and to help with this duty, the sexton hires and pays his own crew with funds supplied by the trustees. The crew assists with activities like grass-cutting, leaf pick-up and grave-digging (Gibson 2012; Hodgson 2012). Comments by multiple respondents to the survey conducted as part of this thesis suggest that the grounds crew often does not perform these duties to the full satisfaction of all cemetery visitors. However, the fact that the sexton does not receive sufficient funding to hire crew members explains part of the problem. In my time conducting the visitor survey during several January days on the grounds, the sexton typically had only one or two helpers for the entire 100-acre cemetery. While this number rises during the summer months, the work force is still usually insufficient to complete a full range of landscaping duties (Adler 2012).

The sexton answers to, and receives duties from, the board of trustees. However, while officially an employee of the entire board of trustees, the current sexton typically receives instructions from, and has most contact with, the longest-serving board member, Trustee President Robert Gibson. Because the sexton does not attend trustee board meetings, his contact with other board members is typically limited to occasions when the board members happen to see him at the cemetery (Costantino, M. 2012; Gibson 2012).

In carrying out his duties, the sexton's key role is to enforce the Board of Trustees' policies. The board's top priority, in turn, is the management and protection of the family burial plots that families have placed in their trust (Hodgson 2012). The trustees' mandate in this regard leads logically to one final duty that the sexton is expected to fulfill: to be a kind of overseer or unofficial security guard for the cemetery grounds. In the past, before the trustees



posted rules to guide visitors' use and behavior at Oconee Hill, the sexton seems simply to have strictly enforced the rules that the Trustee President passed on to him. Today, however, he is guided by the general rules posted at the cemetery gates (Fig. 4.3), rules that the trustees allow him to enforce at his own discretion (Boatright 2012).

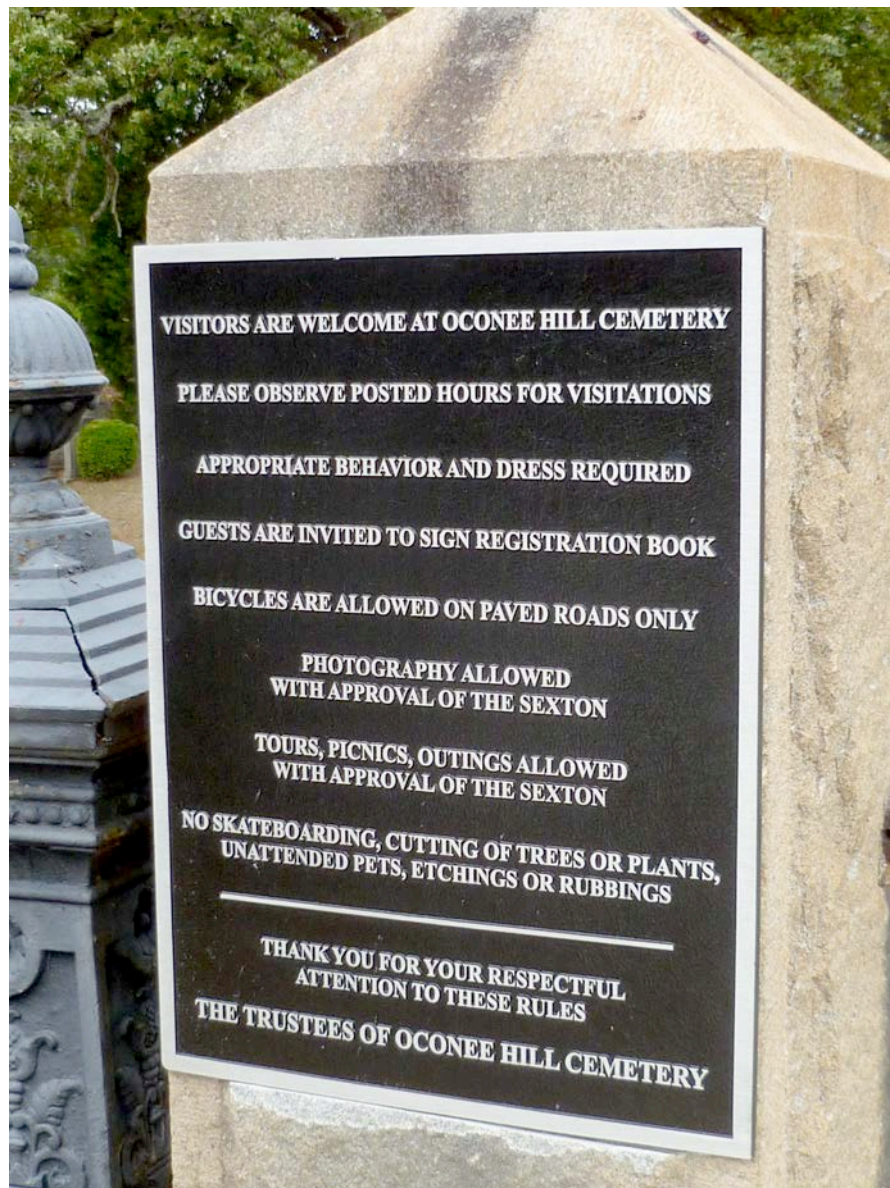


Fig. 4.3. Cemetery rules posted by trustees. *Photo by author*

Multiple interview respondents characterized the sexton's past performance of his grounds surveillance duty as somewhat "over-zealous," a quality that may have been the source of many complaints from Athens community members in the past. However, the trustees point out that on many occasions the sexton was treated poorly by cemetery visitors or others passing through the grounds (Costantino, M. 2012; Hodgson 2012). Historical newspaper references to the sexton position indicated that the city council gave him "police powers." Whatever these powers entailed in the past, they are no longer in force today. Instead, the trustees have instructed the sexton not to put himself in harm's way, but to call the police if something dangerous or illegal is happening on the grounds (Hodgson 2012).

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has outlined the basic management structure at Oconee Hill, a structure that notably includes the Board of Trustees, the "Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery," and the sexton and grounds crew. It has shown that while the Board of Trustees has the ultimate management responsibility for the cemetery, FOHC also plays a significant management role, in part by spearheading projects that are beyond the scope of the trustee's resources. Finally, the sexton and grounds crew play perhaps the most tangible management role through their daily contact with the landscape and with the public. Having established this base of knowledge, the thesis is in a better position to explore current issues at Oconee Hill in later chapters. First, however, having explored Oconee Hill's management structure, the thesis turns to a study of current cemetery visitors in order to identify the group these managers are serving.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **STUDY OF CURRENT VISITORS TO OCONEE HILL CEMETERY**

Although a previous study (Andrews 2010) measured the greater Athens community's general level of knowledge about Oconee Hill, researchers have not yet focused on understanding why people visit the cemetery in the first place. To answer this question, this thesis gathered information directly from 54 current cemetery visitors regarding their age and city residency, their cemetery use patterns, and their opinions about the cemetery's management and its openness to the public. It also aimed to discover what qualities and features they valued in the cemetery landscape, and their thoughts and feelings about the appropriateness of future cemetery uses. (The complete questionnaire is included in this thesis as "Appendix A." Also, a more thorough description of the survey methodology is provided in the introductory chapter.) By gathering such information, the thesis sought to provide guidance for future management decisions at Oconee Hill based on the views of those who actually visit and use the landscape. Below is a summary of survey results.

#### **Age and Residency of Survey Respondents**

The largest numbers of cemetery visitors were in the age groups of 11 - 20 and 21 - 30 (Fig. 5.1). Forty-two percent of all visitors were between the ages of 18-24. Taken together

with the fact that only one respondent in this age group was not residing in Athens, this figure suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, a strong student presence among cemetery visitors.

Measuring age distributions at ten-year intervals, the four age groups between the ages of 31 and 70 each accounted for around 9% of total cemetery visitors. Three visitors, or 5% of total visitors, were above age 70.

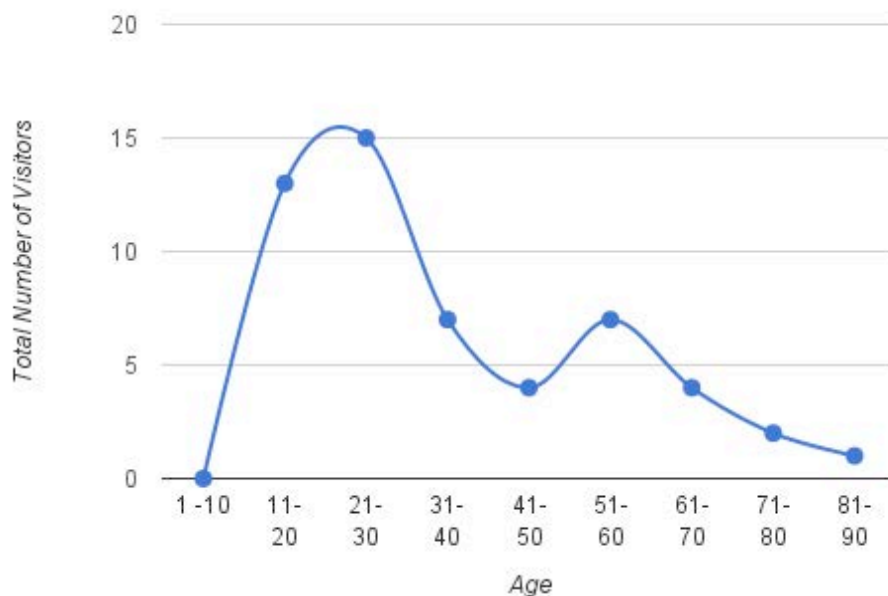


Fig. 5.1. Age distribution of cemetery visitors. (n = 54)

About one-third (31%) of Oconee Hill visitors were from out of town. Of those residing in Athens, 66.5% had been living in the city for five years or less and the remaining 33.5% were long-time residents having lived in Athens for more than five years (Fig. 5.2). Again, these figures suggest a high student visitation rate, with students being more likely to be short-term rather than long-term residents, a supposition that is supported in this case by the typical overlap of respondents who had both lived in Athens for a short period of time and were between the ages of 18-27.



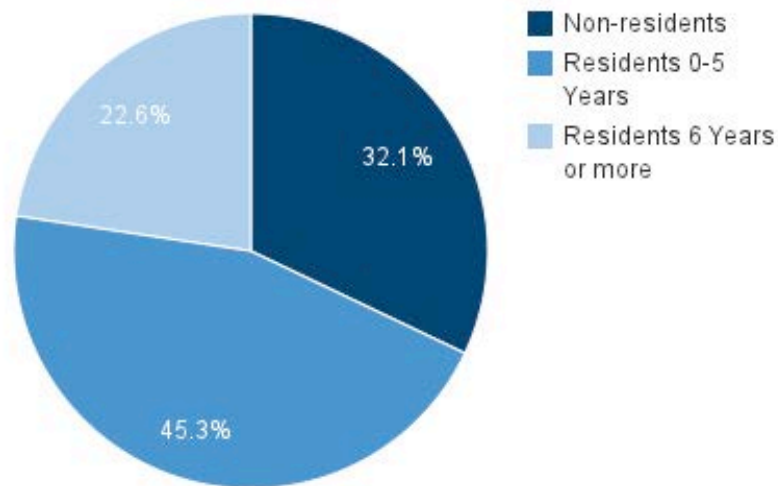


Fig. 5.2. Athens residency status of cemetery visitors. (n = 54)

Perhaps the most surprising fact revealed in the analysis of age and residency data is that 58% of visitors to Oconee Hill above the age of 30 are from out of town. Looking at the data another way, only 20% of the total number of survey respondents were mature adults who were residents of Athens. These figures suggest that older Athens residents are less frequent visitors than other age groups. On the other hand, three of the four individuals who reported membership in the *Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery*, and one respondent who formerly belonged to the group, were within this age and residency grouping. These data suggest that while perhaps a smaller percentage of mature adults use the cemetery, those who do visit tend to be more engaged in its upkeep. Another interesting interpretation of the Athens residency data is that the high rate of cemetery visitation from those living outside the Athens community could mean that Oconee Hill's draw as a tourist attraction is relatively strong. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that only 22% percent of survey respondents from out of town reported coming to visit the grave of a loved one.

## Visitors' Interests and Visitation Frequency

As a part of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate the nature of their interest in visiting Oconee Hill by marking one or more of a number of pre-formulated selections, including: (1) visiting a loved one's grave; (2) as a setting for walks or passive recreation; (3) historical or genealogical interest, and (4) other. While most respondents indicated only one area of interest, 33% marked multiple selections, indicating that their interest in Oconee Hill was multi-faceted. Of this group, the majority visited for the combined purposes of recreational and historical interest. Only 26% of visitors reported that visiting a loved one's grave was at least *part* of the reason they were there. Most of the remaining 74% of visitors came to the cemetery for the passive recreation opportunities it provides, or because of historical or genealogical interest (Fig. 5.3). These findings confirm that the historical use of Oconee Hill as a setting for walks and historical appreciation is still relevant today, a fact that managers might take into account in formulating management strategies in the future. Managers might note as well that these uses remain consistent with the values that J.C. Loudon and other rural cemetery leaders articulated.

The study also surveyed how often respondents visited Oconee Hill. Thirty-five percent reported that this was their first visit to the cemetery, and thirty-five percent said that they visited it once a year or less. In other words, 70% of respondents had either never visited Oconee Hill before, or were infrequent visitors. Another 20% of respondents said they visited on a monthly basis or several times a year, and the remaining 10% visited at least once a week. Furthermore, the data showed a strong correlation between visitation frequency and the nature of visitors' interest in Oconee Hill. The most frequent visitors were those visiting a loved one's grave, and the most infrequent visitors were those expressing historical or genealogical interest in

the cemetery (Fig. 5.4). Of the frequent visitors, (those who reported visiting Oconee Hill several times a year or more), 56% said they were there at least in part because a loved one was buried there. This reason was cited by only 13% of those who visited less frequently.

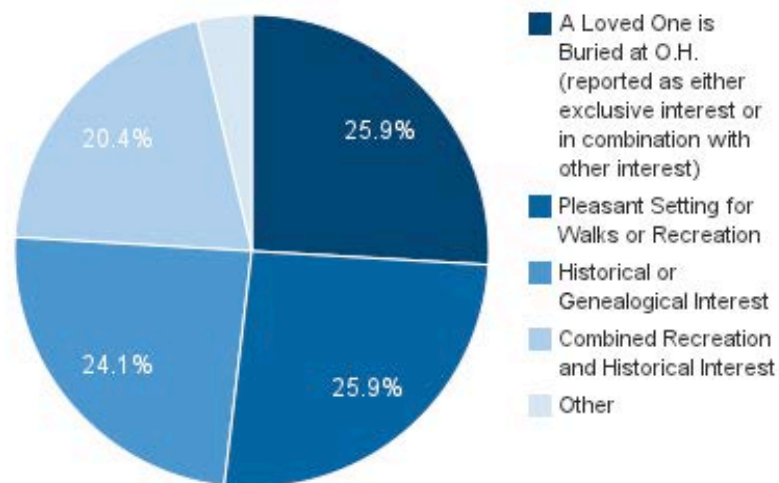


Fig. 5.3. Nature of visitor interest in Oconee Hill. (Illustrating respondents who marked a single interest category and those who marked multiple interest categories) (n = 54)

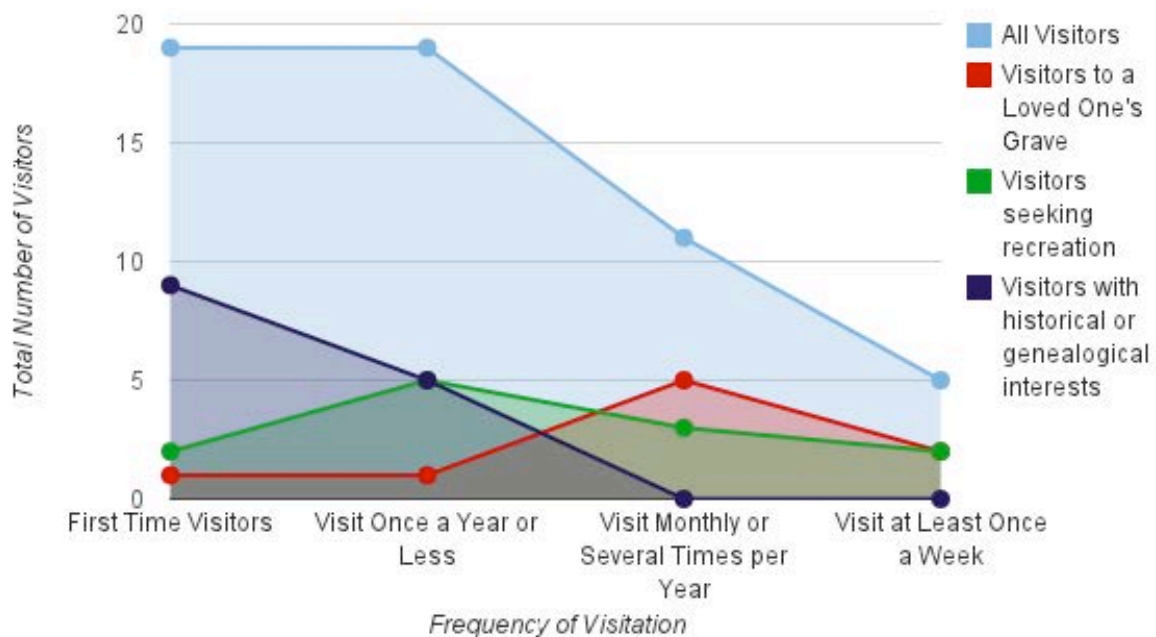


Fig. 5.4. Visitation frequency. (Illustrating visitation frequency of all respondents *and* of respondents marking a single interest category) (n = 54)

## **Visitors' Use of Oconee Hill**

A major factor in understanding how Athenians use the cemetery landscape is knowing how and when they arrive. Among survey respondents, 72% came to the cemetery by automobile. The true percentage of visitors to Oconee Hill arriving by car is, however, probably somewhat higher than this because the few visitors who chose not to participate in the survey tended to be visitors in cars. Oconee Hill's location along a relatively unattractive and pedestrian-unfriendly stretch of East Campus Road may be one factor in this high percentage of visits by car. Because the cemetery provides only a single point of entry and exit, another factor could be Oconee Hill's lack of connectivity with the rest of the community.

To learn what people do in the cemetery landscape, the questionnaire asked visitors how they used the cemetery during their visits. The question was presented in an open-ended format in order to allow respondents to answer in their own words. This question received a wide range of responses, with some visitors reporting that they typically came to visit a loved one's grave and others reporting historical research or photography as their main interest. One respondent even reported using the grounds as a short-cut to the Carr's Hill neighborhood despite there being no officially open gate on that side of the cemetery.

Although responses varied, at least one major dichotomy emerged. Around 24% of respondents pointed solely to interests such as research, photography or some type of recreation, while 65% of respondents indicated that they were there at least in part for reflection or meditative purposes, whether this was of a historical or a more personal nature. Responses also demonstrated that visitors' activities in Oconee Hill often are multifaceted and emotionally

complex, combining physical activity with some type of ritual mental process. Few respondents were there simply to sit beside a grave, for example. Most visitors to grave sites additionally reported coming to meditate or to “reconnect.” Such responses highlight the unique role that cemeteries play in our culture and emphasize the fact that places like Oconee Hill must be managed, at least in part, as settings that facilitate the types of ritual functions that no other landscapes in the community are specifically designed to serve.

### **What Visitors Like about Oconee Hill**

In another survey question designed for open-ended responses, participants were asked what they liked about Oconee Hill. This question also generated a wide variety of responses that were studied for similarities and then coded as a number of features and qualities. For example, the visitor-generated responses, “naturally attractive,” “the woods” and “the landscape” were placed into a single category, “Beauty/Landscape Setting” since they all refer to a positive aesthetic experience of topographical characteristics or biotic resources in the landscape. The categories, listed in order of the number of visitor comments, included: (1) Beauty/Landscape Setting (topographic or biotic landscape features); (2) Historical Value; (3) Peacefulness; (4) Cultural Features (gravestones, paths); (5) Location; (6) Cemetery Size; (7) Uniqueness/ Design; (8) Maintenance, and (9) Friendliness (Fig. 5.5).

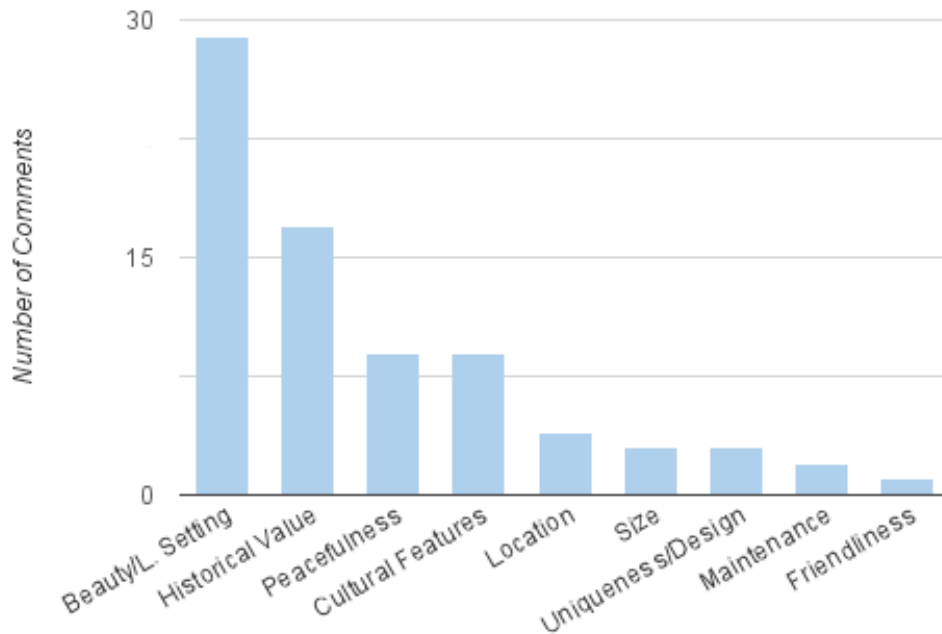


Fig. 5.5. What visitors like about Oconee Hill. (n = 54)

The most common type of visitor responses reflected appreciation of the beauty of Oconee Hill’s topographic or biotic landscape features. Other qualities that respondents valued highly were the cemetery’s historical value, its peacefulness, and the distinctly cultural features present in the landscape, like gravestones or fences. While not providing an exhaustive list of all qualities and features that visitors to Oconee Hill consider important, the list that participants identified in the survey may help the management team form a better understanding of user values, and prioritize different future management plans. For example, managers might take into account the fact that many respondents value Oconee Hill’s “natural” features (Fig. 5.13), since five individuals specifically mentioned trees or “the woods,” and one respondent noted that “a lot of trees makes it feel less like a wasteland.” Such comments may suggest the desirability of emphasizing tree health or tree-planting initiatives as a part of future management strategies.

## **User-Suggested Opportunities for Improvements**

To supplement information gathered regarding what visitors liked about Oconee Hill, the survey also prompted participants to identify, in their own words, any improvements they would like to see in cemetery management practices. While only 17% of participants provided answers to this question, these answers nevertheless are helpful. Five individuals pointed to maintenance deficiencies as a concern, a trend that is consistent with current issues that management team members themselves identified. Specific comments suggested an inconsistency in the level of maintenance provided for different grave sites and a disapproval of the practice of piling vegetative debris along the edges of forested tracts. Other visitors expressed a desire for managers to plant more trees in sections on the eastern side of the Oconee River and to improve paths and provide more visitor parking.

Other user-generated comments implied that managers were not sensitive enough to user needs. One visitor simply suggested that the management team needed to be friendlier to visitors, but did not provide specific details. Two respondents expressed a desire for management to extend the length of cemetery open hours. One of these individuals wrote that the grounds crew typically closes the gate half-way about half an hour before closing time, at which point visitors are no longer allowed in, a practice that may be problematic for visitors stopping to visit a loved one's grave after a work day. An additional comment by the same respondent suggested that the grounds crew should be more discrete about where they dispose of old flowers that visitors have left on graves.

## How Welcoming is Oconee Hill?

While information gathered in 2010 from the greater Athens community by journalism students indicated that most individuals who were familiar with Oconee Hill did not think of the cemetery as a welcoming place, no information was available to indicate what actual visitors to the cemetery felt with respect to this question. In order to provide an answer, the survey asked respondents to rank how welcoming they thought Oconee Hill was toward visitors on a scale of 1 – 10, with 1 being “very unwelcoming” and 10 being “very welcoming.” The results from this question showed definitively that a large majority of respondents thought of the cemetery as a welcoming place, with 37% marking the highest “welcoming” score of 10, and 83% marking a score of 7 or higher (Fig. 5.6).

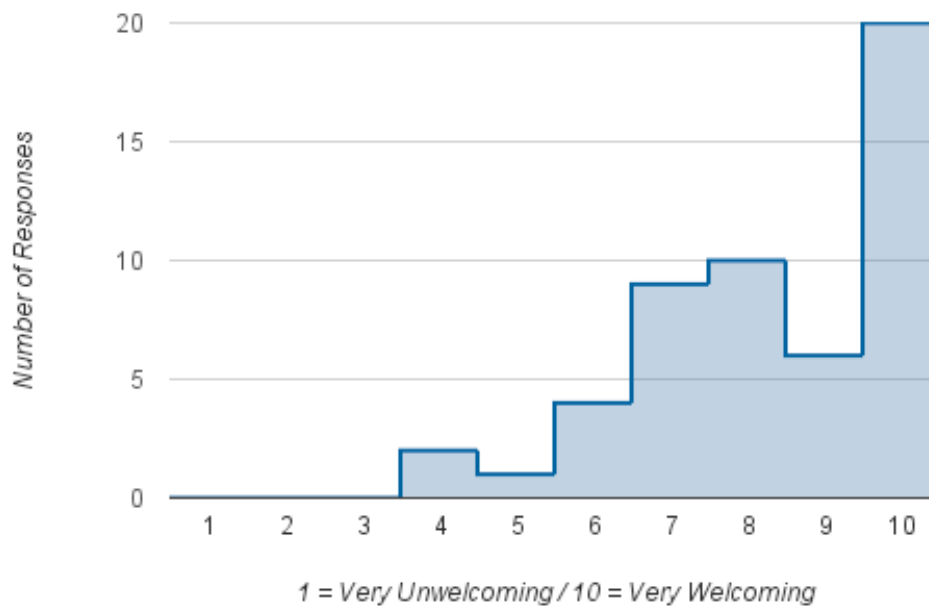


Fig. 5.6. How welcoming is Oconee Hill? (n = 54)



To supplement this data, the survey asked respondents a follow-up question concerning whether they thought Oconee Hill's quality of being a welcoming (or unwelcoming) place had changed during the time they had been visiting Oconee Hill. Forty-three percent answered "No," and thirty-seven percent answered "Not Sure," responses that probably partly reflect the high percentage of first-time visitors and visitors who are either not from Athens or have lived here only a short period of time. Indeed, five of the six respondents who indicated that they had noticed a change in the welcoming quality of the cemetery were long-time Athens residents. Three indicated that they thought conditions had improved and two commented that staff had added restrictive fencing and barbed wire. Among respondents who had not personally noticed any changes, two noted having heard that the cemetery manager was unfriendly. One of these respondents, who had never before visited Oconee Hill, marked a "welcoming" score of only 4.

The fact that a large majority of current visitors view the cemetery as a welcoming place seems to represent a dramatic turnaround from experiences that visitors reported in the press only a few years ago. The data about how impressions among cemetery visitors have changed through time were less conclusive. However, the fact that a few respondents had heard about or experienced poor visitor treatment indicates that managers still have some work to do in improving the landscape's reputation in the community.

### **Public Attitudes about Cemetery Access and Preservation**

In order to gain a more refined understanding of visitor attitudes about Oconee Hill, the survey sought to gauge visitors' views regarding the importance of making the landscape more open to the public and the preservation of the cemetery's features. While the results showed

that most visitors favored both of these actions, their passion for preserving cemetery features was clearly stronger than it was for making the landscape more open to the public (Figs. 5.7 and 5.8). Sixty-seven percent of respondents assigned a score of 10 in favor of preservation, while ninety-six percent ranked this value at 7 or higher. For the value of “public openness,” 30% of respondents assigned a score of 10, and 69% assigned a score of 7 or higher. Similarly divergent were the neutral score range of 5-6; only 4% of respondents were neutral about the issue of preservation, while 20% were neutral about “public openness.” Finally, about 11% of respondents indicated that making the cemetery more open to the public was not important, assigning this value a score of 4 or less. Five out of six of the visitors who were in this lowest range, interestingly, were between the ages of 17 and 24.

While visitors considered both public openness and preservation important, it is nonetheless interesting to note that respondents more strongly favored preservation than making Oconee Hill more open to the public. One explanation for this could lie in the fact that a large percentage of survey respondents reported already considering Oconee Hill a welcoming landscape. Since this was the case, many perhaps responded to the way the question was worded and saw no need for making the landscape *more* open to the public. Another explanation may be inferred from the qualities and features that respondents valued in the cemetery landscape. The qualities they valued most highly were beauty and the landscape setting, the cemetery’s historical value, its peacefulness and its cultural features. Since issues of public access were not mentioned in this list, it stands to reason that current visitors may take this right for granted. Indeed, they may simply value preservation more highly than public access because they do not feel their right to access is threatened. However, since the

questionnaire did not collect information about why respondents answered as they did, these remarks are merely speculation.

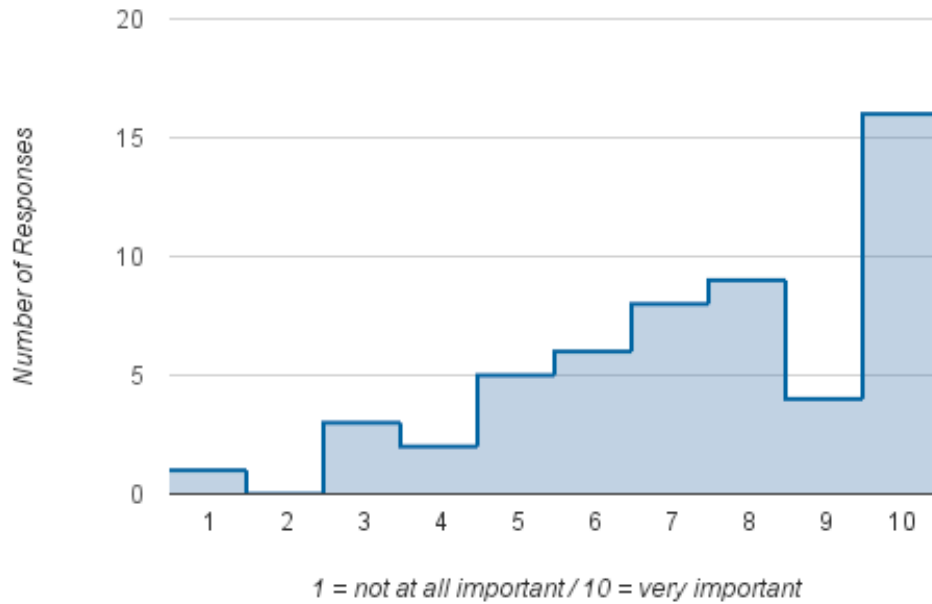


Fig. 5.7. How important is it to make Oconee Hill more open to the public? (n = 54)

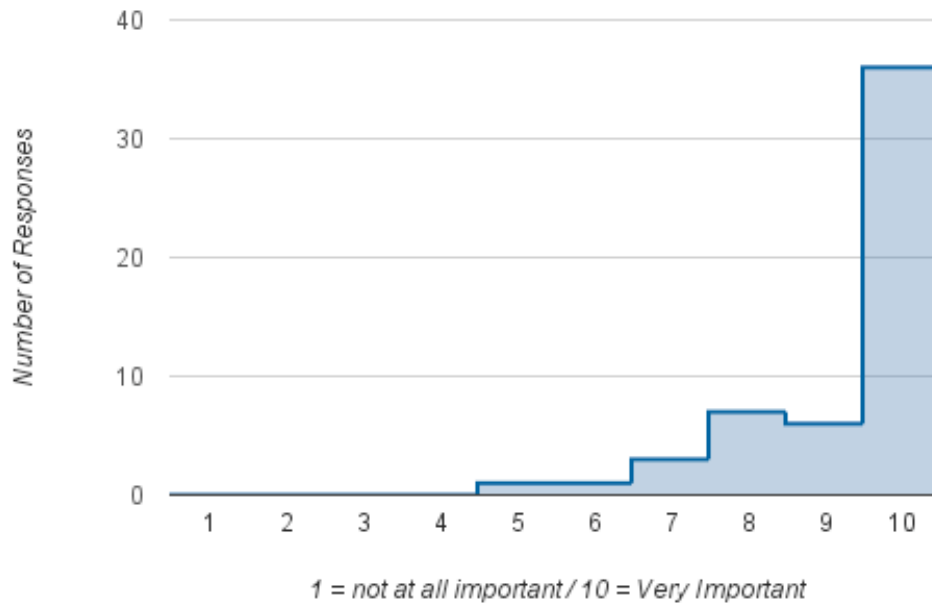


Fig. 5.8. How important is preserving Oconee Hill's features? (n = 54)

## **Levels of Appropriateness for Future Community Events**

To gauge visitor attitudes toward the cemetery landscape in more concrete terms, the survey asked respondents what level of appropriateness they would assign to three different types of community events taking place on cemetery grounds. Borrowing ideas from events held regularly in other historic cemeteries around the United States, the three activities included in the survey were: (1) an art exhibition; (2) a small musical performance, and (3) a small community festival. The survey included these events not only because other cemetery managers have tested them, but also because they represent levels of human activity of varying intensity. Clear trends in the results may have established a standard for judging the potential for success of future activities at Oconee Hill.

Unfortunately the results of this segment of the survey were not as conclusive as many other survey questions, but some patterns nevertheless were apparent. For all three event types, respondents indicated more skepticism than enthusiasm, although the margins differed between different events (Figs. 5.9; 5.10; 5.11; 5.12). The number of those who viewed art exhibitions and musical performances as inappropriate in the cemetery landscape were only slightly higher, at 46% and 37% respectively, than the 35% who viewed each of these events as appropriate. The idea of holding a small festival at Oconee Hill was decidedly less popular, with 52% disapproving and 28% approving. Although disapproval may have slightly outweighed approval for the ideas of an art exhibition and a musical performance, the margins were relatively small, and both had a significant number of enthusiastic supporters who assigned these ideas the score for the highest level of appropriateness, a trend not seen in the results for the idea of a small festival.

Survey respondents at Oconee Hill largely disapproved of cemetery managers staging the kinds of community events that have become popular in historic cemeteries elsewhere in the U.S. While the format of the question did not allow respondents to explain their choices, a few chose to elaborate in the margins. From these clarifications, it appears that the unpopularity of these events may stem from both the perceived intensity of the uses as well as the perception that the activities are irreverent. For example, one respondent noted concern “that events would overrun the place and do more harm than good.” Another thought that such events “go against the purpose of a cemetery unless [they are] tied to remembrance.” After expressing clear disapproval of the proposed activities, another respondent recommended that historic educational events would be an appropriate type of use. These comments suggest that responses may have been different if questions had specified the exact type of exhibition, performance or festival.

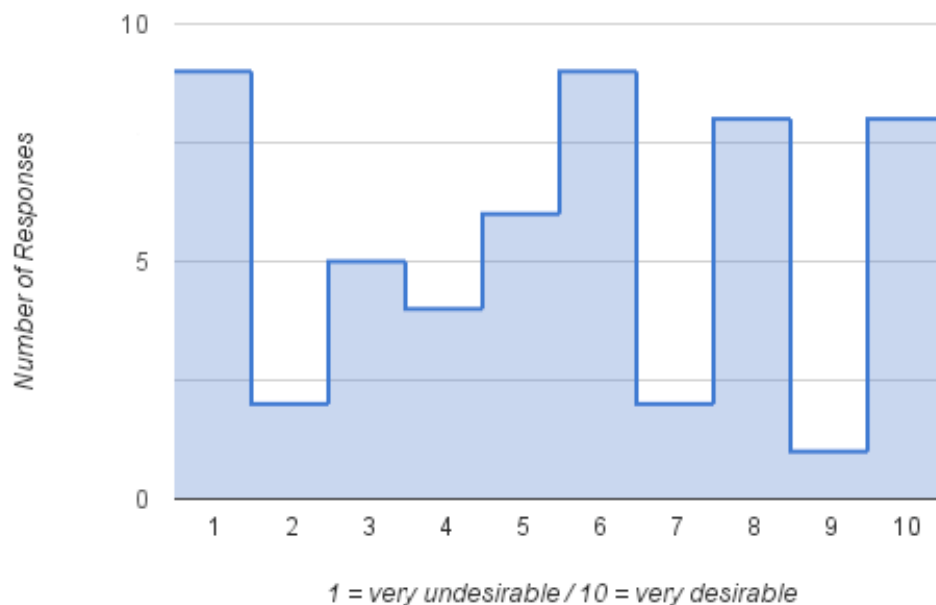


Fig. 5.9. Level of appropriateness of an art exhibition. (n = 54)

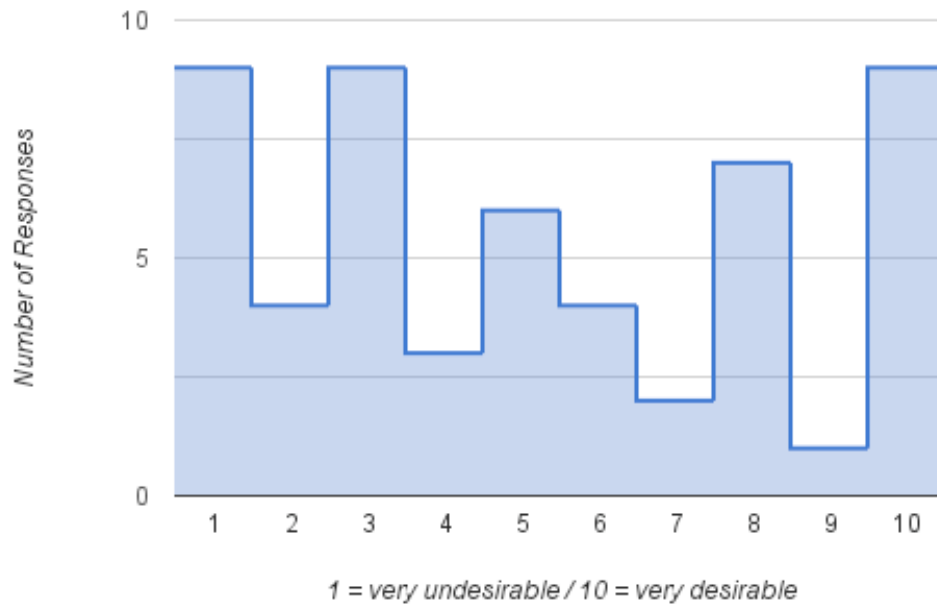


Fig. 5.10. Level of appropriateness of a small musical performance. (n = 54)

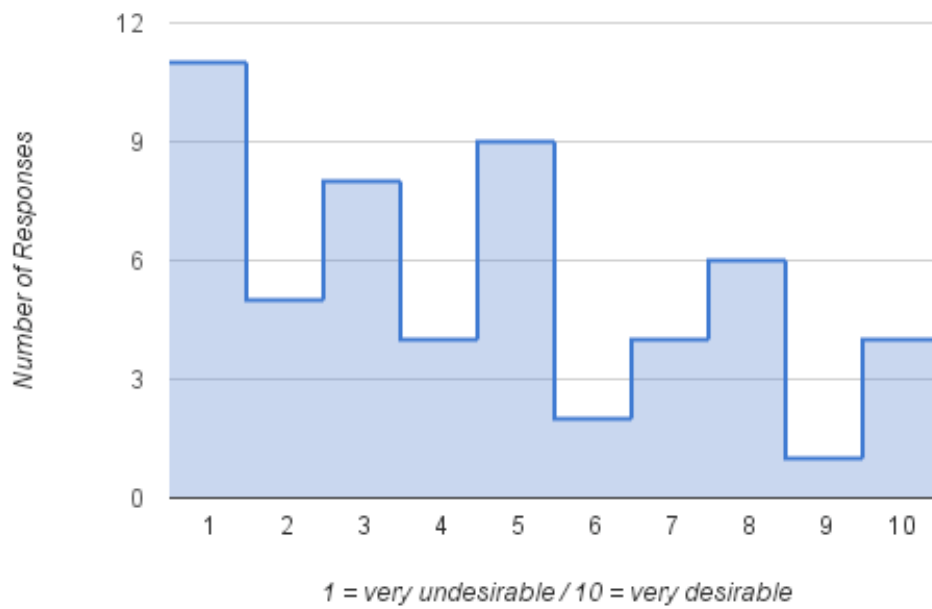


Fig. 5.11. Level of appropriateness of a small community festival. (n = 54)

	Low Level of Appropriateness (score of 1-4)	Medium Level of Appropriateness (score of 5-6)	High Level of Appropriateness (score of 7-10)
Art Exhibition	46%	19%	35%
Musical Performance	37%	28%	35%
Small Festival	52%	20%	28%

Fig. 5.12. Response ranges for questions regarding activity appropriateness. (n = 54)

## Concluding Remarks

The overarching goal of this thesis is to determine what strategies might be appropriate for future management at Oconee Hill Cemetery. Any such strategies should include a consideration of the views and values of current visitors to the cemetery. That is why this chapter has explored these views. In summary, the survey revealed a number of key findings: (1) young people between the ages of 18-24 make up around half of the cemetery's visitors; (2) about one-third of cemetery visitors are from out of town; (3) only around one-fourth of all visitors reported coming to visit a loved one's grave; (4) around 70% of visitors visit infrequently (once a year or less); (5) 65% of visitors reported engaging in some type of activity at Oconee Hill that implied a reflective or meditative quality; (6) visitors valued Oconee Hill's beauty and "natural" landscape, its historic value, its peaceful quality, and its cultural features; (7) most visitors considered the cemetery a "welcoming place;" (8) visitors valued both preservation and public "openness," but valued preservation more highly; (9) visitor rankings of

appropriateness of different events were not conclusive, but may imply that more intensive uses are less appropriate at Oconee Hill.

These results have been important for gauging the attitudes of current cemetery visitors. However, these visitors' views represent only one consideration of what future management strategies at Oconee Hill must take into account. Such strategies should, of course, also include a consideration of current issues at Oconee Hill from the managers' point of view. It will not only explore the issues that managers at Oconee Hill are currently facing, but also inquire into the managers' preferences for the future.



Fig. 5.13. Mature vegetation on West Hill. *Photo by author*



**CHAPTER 6**  
**CURRENT MANAGEMENT AT OCONEE HILL:**  
**KEY ISSUES**

In order to determine what types of strategies might be appropriate for the managers of Oconee Hill to adopt for the future, it is necessary to understand the key management issues this group is currently facing. This chapter reports on these issues as identified in a series of semi-structured interviews with three members of the Oconee Hill Board of Trustees, six board members of the “Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery,” and two Athens community members with special knowledge of cemetery history. The interviews used an “interview guide” to structure conversations (Lindlof & Taylor 2011). This guide was a list of pre-formulated questions that I followed loosely, while also prompting respondents to elaborate on topics they felt to be most important. The interview guide included questions about both current and past management issues. Topics included issues of cemetery ownership, management structure and duties, outreach and communication with the public, vandalism, and public access. Managers commented on these topics and added a number of their own themes to the discussion. These themes included cemetery finances, maintenance, and security issues. The complete interview guide is included in this thesis as “Appendix B.”

## **Vandalism at Oconee Hill**

Trustees and FOHC members indicated that the board of trustees' protective management policies and the sexton's "over-zealous" behavior have in large part been a reaction to acts of vandalism on cemetery property. Respondents indicated that while incidents on cemetery grounds once constituted little more than "silly behavior" or harmless fraternity pranks, they eventually evolved into instances of serious damage that most often occurred at night. The kinds of vandalism that current cemetery management and staff recall from the past two decades involve toppled or broken headstones, stolen funerary items like small statues or confederate cross grave markers, and one particularly egregious instance when a mausoleum was broken into and the bodily remains inside desecrated (Adler 2012; Costantino, M. 2012).

Some activities that take place in the cemetery are not necessarily directly damaging to historic cemetery features like headstones, but are nonetheless problematic for the management team. For example, valuable maintenance equipment that FOHC had purchased for the grounds crew was stolen recently from a utility shed on the eastern side of the river (Adler 2012; Bush 2012). Other activities carried out without malicious intent also inconvenience cemetery managers. An example of this involves members of the Athens homeless population who have long used the area just north of Oconee Hill as an encampment. Members of this group occasionally had camped in the cemetery in the past, and on one occasion a fire from such a camp caught the surrounding forest on fire, calling for a large operation on the part of local fire departments (Adler 2012).

"Partying" in the cemetery after closing time, and the litter that often accompanies this activity, has been another common problem. Individuals also have used the grounds on certain

occasions for sexual activities, sometimes during open hours. One final issue that has angered the trustees has involved people taking pictures or making “gothic themed” films on cemetery grounds that show family names on headstones. This, they feel, is a violation of the families’ “right to privacy” and of the trustees’ responsibility to care for and protect the families’ property that is in their trust (Hodgson 2012).

Issues such as these have posed a clear challenge to cemetery management because, as one trustee pointed out, vandalism is the kind of problem that can cause much irreparable damage in a very short period of time. For this reason, the trustees tend to err on the side of vigilance over tolerance (Costantino, M. 2012). Indeed, many interview respondents indicated that preventing such events from happening in the future is one of the management team’s most important responsibilities and should be a serious concern in determining management policies. However, respondents also pointed out that instances of trespassing and vandalism have become more infrequent in recent years, or that the problem is “getting better,” although no one can say for certain what has caused the improvement (Begnaud 2012; Hodgson 2012). Another common theme that respondents expressed was the idea that vandalism tends to beget more vandalism. These respondents feel that quickly fixing damage from prior vandalism, as well as upholding a generally high standard of grounds maintenance, tends to discourage vandals from targeting Oconee Hill. Respondents also considered the positive nature of FOHC’s projects to another possible explanation for the drop in vandalism rates. One respondent, for example, saw a possible connection between the falling rates and the renovation of the Sexton’s House at the cemetery’s entrance (Boatright 2012; Duncan 2012).

## **Public Access and Security**

Multiple interview respondents indicated that the issue of community access was one of the most important challenges facing Oconee Hill. A major question, however, is how to grant this physical access while taking into account past acts of vandalism on cemetery property as well as security concerns. This issue, they assert, is complicated, and brings into question what the Athens community actually is. Respondents pointed out that many different groups collectively make up the Athens community and that these groups often have very different ideas about what free public access to the cemetery should mean (Boatright 2012; Wilfong 2012). Some of the groups identified in interviews and in the questionnaire were individuals and families mourning the passing of a loved one, students, tourists, joggers, homeless people and those in search of passive recreation.

### Public Access and Security in the Past.

Many of the Trustees and FOHC members are eager to improve public perceptions of the cemetery, and they understand that many of the cemetery's problems in this respect are linked to its history of restricted public access (Costantino, M. 2012; Field 2012; Hodgson 2012). It is important, therefore to briefly review this history. During the cemetery's early history, as pointed out previously, access was largely uncontrolled and Athenians could walk the grounds freely. Beginning in 1892 however, the cemetery sexton began using the house at the cemetery gate as a residence. His presence there established some limited level of cemetery oversight because he could see anyone coming and going through the main cemetery gate (Marshall 2009, 469).

From this time through the middle years of the twentieth century, there were no formal restrictions or barriers to public cemetery access, perhaps because few serious incidents necessitated such action. One trustee pointed out, however, that access regulations must inevitably change over time. The use of jeeps and four-wheelers on cemetery grounds was one such issue that forced managers to rethink their policies (Hodgson 2012). Indeed, interviewees indicate that the kinds of problems seen at Oconee Hill began to change dramatically during the 1970s. Until this time, both automobile and pedestrian traffic had flowed freely through the cemetery, albeit on a limited scale, from the Carr's Hill neighborhood on Oconee Hill's eastern border, to the UGA campus and other parts of the Athens community on the cemetery's western boundary (Gibson 2012). The Oconee River constitutes a major barrier between Athens's east side and the UGA campus. From the 1970s to the present, the cemetery bridge was the only pedestrian-friendly crossing point south of the major city bridge on Oconee Street. For this reason, the route through the cemetery was a popular shortcut for students making their way to and from the university.

During the 1970s, however, the rate of vandalism increased and multiple women were assaulted on cemetery grounds. The worsening crime problem during this period, in addition to increasing wear and tear on the roads through the cemetery, led the trustees to permanently close the Carr's Hill entrance gate (Fig. 6.1). This action closed the grounds to automobile through-traffic (Gibson 2012; Wilfong 2012). It also seems to have marked a turning point in the trustees' access control policies. Whereas earlier trustees had relied largely on oversight by the sexton, access control after the 1970s began to focus increasingly on restriction by means of

gates and fences. Reinforcing this shift, the sexton ceased using the house at the cemetery's gate as a residence in the early 1980s.



Fig 6.1. Locked automobile and pedestrian gate to Carr's Hill Neighborhood. *Photo by author*

Persisting crime problems throughout the ensuing decade compelled the trustees to erect a barbed-wire fence along the cemetery's entire eastern border with Carr's Hill in 1989. This fence limited pedestrian access points to two gates, one beside the old automobile gate and one near the river (Adler 2012). Many students and others continued using the cemetery as a pedestrian route throughout the 1990s. However, during this time, the sexton became less accommodating toward visitors and began to chase students and non-students alike off cemetery

property. (Begnaud 2012; Duncan 2012). Finally, an incident in 2002 that involved nighttime vandalism of the pedestrian gate and locks near the river (Fig. 6.2) compelled the sexton to close the pedestrian entrances as well, thereby completely sealing off access to the cemetery from the west. To this day, these gates remain closed (Adler 2012).



Fig. 6.2. Locked pedestrian gate to Carr's Hill Neighborhood near Oconee River. *Photo by author*

The sexton continued to enforce these unwelcoming policies until 2009, when the trustees' policies toward visitors shifted again. Today the physical barriers to access remain in



place. The main gate serves as the only cemetery entry point, but visitors who are “properly” dressed, and are not in violation of the posted rules, are no longer asked to leave the property. As the Grady College of Journalism study pointed out, however (Andrews 2010), there remains some ambiguity in the rules. For example, the rules state that certain activities are permitted with the approval of the sexton, but suggest no course of action for visitors to follow if the sexton cannot be found, a situation which frequently occurs.

#### Public Access and Security Today.

Interviews with the management team revealed a great deal of misunderstanding and uncertainty on the part of cemetery managers regarding current access issues at Ocone Hill. For example, some trustees believed that the pedestrian gates to the Carr’s Hill neighborhood had always remained open during cemetery open hours despite the fact that they have been closed for an entire decade (Gibson 2012; Hodgson 2012). The trustees were comfortable, in principle, with the idea of students using the cemetery for pedestrian access to campus, but they, along with a FOHC member, expressed concern for what increased rates of pedestrian traffic might entail in terms of increased maintenance costs and heightened security problems. Both the trustees and FOHC recognized the potential alleviating effect that increased levels of surveillance could bring to these concerns (Boatright 2012; Costantino, M. 2012; Wilfong 2012). In this respect, their responses reflected once again the trustees’ view that their primary responsibility is the protection of the cemetery for the families who own lots there.

An additional issue that may significantly affect access to Ocone Hill is a proposed extension of the Ocone River Greenway. The greenway currently runs along the Ocone River from Sandy Creek Nature Center in the north to Dudley Park in the south. One of the proposals



for the future of this greenway project would extend the route of the multi-use recreational path from Dudley Park, along the river, through Oconee Hill Cemetery (Costantino, M. 2012).

Needless to say, the realization of this plan would be a major change to the cemetery landscape. Aside from introducing a concrete path along the river, it would introduce two new major points of access to Oconee Hill and would probably greatly increase the daytime flow of pedestrians and cyclists through the cemetery. In addition, the greenway, which has full 24-hour access, would be routed through a property that is only open during the day, begging the question of how the city and the trustees would manage the two conflicting access configurations.

FOHC is generally positive to the idea of the greenway extension, but sees its potential as both an asset and a liability. On the one hand, it could increase public awareness and interest in Oconee Hill, but on the other, it would intensify security concerns (Boatright 2012; Wilfong 2012). As with other decisions affecting cemetery access, the trustees' main concern with the greenway proposal is the effect that it would have on their ability to protect the interests of lot owners. They feel that the project would increase both security and maintenance needs, and the board currently lacks the funding to provide for such increases. However, the group agrees "in principle" with the proposal, but it has placed the burden on the greenway commission to clearly demonstrate how they intend to control access between the new amenity and the rest of the cemetery. Until the commission meets this demand to the trustees' satisfaction, the trustees will not allow the plans to move forward (Hodgson 2012).

## **Communication with the Public**

Interview respondents identified another major management problem: the set of misconceptions that the Athens community has about Oconee Hill. Reaffirming the results of the previously cited journalism school study, members of the management team recognized that many Athenians either do not know the cemetery exists or believe it to be filled to capacity. Some managers feel that these misconceptions, which also extend to confusion about ownership and public access rights, largely result from a lack of communication between managers and the general public (Hodgson 2012; Wilfong 2012). The board of trustees understands the importance of correcting this problem, and it is interested in improving its dialogue with the Athens community, but it is largely inhibited by funding shortages. Specifically, the board does not have funds to advertise their services to the community, and instead rely entirely on word-of-mouth advertising and occasional attention in local publications (Hodgson 2012).

Unfortunately however, a large percentage of references to Oconee Hill in the press and online in the recent past have been of a negative nature (Costantino, H. 2012), and consist largely of letters to the editor from visitors who complain about their experiences at the cemetery. This trend may reflect the lack of other satisfactory avenues for this kind of feedback to be channeled directly to cemetery managers. One FOHC member pointed out that while many complaints are about poor treatment at the hands of the sexton, it is he who is the main point of contact for such complaints (Wilfong 2012). The trustees tried collecting visitors' views by placing a comment book near the cemetery's entrance, but after the book was stolen on more than one occasion, the trustees discontinued this communication strategy (Hodgson 2012).

Other interviewees pointed out that visitors can direct feedback to cemetery management in other ways. Some feedback comes through direct contact with individual members of the board of trustees or FOHC (Duncan 2012), but this kind of communication obviously requires a person to either know these managers personally or seek out their contact information. Other interviewees pointed to the Oconee Hill website as a source of contact information through which the management team could be reached (Begnaud 2012; Bush 2012). However, while the website lists the names of the trustees and the FOHC Board of Directors, it does not provide the contact information for these individuals. The e-mail contacts that the website does provide are not clearly intended for general feedback, but rather for directing administrative questions such as lot purchase or genealogical inquiries (Oconee Hill Cemetery 2011).

### **Cemetery Finances and Grounds Maintenance**

Many interview respondents indicated that a lack of financial resources may be Oconee Hill's single greatest problem today. Trustees traditionally have three sources of funding at their disposal: (1) immediate proceeds from lot sales; (2) income from perpetual care fund investments, and (3) gifts and grants. About half of the proceeds from lot sales contribute directly to the year's budget while the other half is placed in a perpetual care trust fund to provide for future maintenance costs (Costantino, M. 2012). Today however, returns on perpetual care fund investments have slowed considerably with the nation's economy. This fact, coupled with a simultaneous slow-down in lot sales, has significantly decreased Oconee Hill's budget for the last few years (Wilfong 2012). One effect of this constrained resource pool

is that the trustees have not been able to offer cemetery staff health or retirement plans, which is something they have long wanted to do (Hodgson 2012).

Oconee Hill's financial position also is tied intimately to the level of maintenance that management and staff are able to provide for cemetery property. When low lot sales or poor market returns decrease the trustees' yearly budget, the sexton's ability to hire a sufficient grounds crew is negatively affected (Costantino, M. 2012; Wilfong 2012). In the past, difficult financial times have compelled the trustees to make overtures to the Athens City Council for help. The most significant of these overtures was a 1982 request by the trustees for the Athens Parks and Recreation Department to assume responsibility for cemetery maintenance, a move that inevitably would have transferred a significant amount of control to the city government. In a May 3, 1982, letter to the city council on behalf of the trustees, Trustee President Robert Gibson pleaded the case that the group's financial situation was such that they were unable to uphold an acceptable maintenance standard for the grounds or provide the sexton and other cemetery workers with an adequate salary or health benefits. The reason for the trustees' financial difficulties, he explained, lay largely in the fact that the perpetual care trust fund was not initiated until 1917, more than sixty years after the cemetery's creation. Indeed, Oconee Hill's establishment pre-dated the rise of perpetual care as a common funding structure for cemetery maintenance. Compounding this problem in the short term was the fact that the yields from Oconee Hill's perpetual care fund were particularly low in the slow economy of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Gibson 1982). The city declined the trustees' 1982 request, and the board was forced to carry on with its duties with a depleted level of resources. The apparent

reason for this denial was that the council felt that if it extended a helping hand to Oconee Hill, it would be obliged to do the same for other local cemeteries (Marshall 2012).

With the cemetery's annual budget once again constrained, stakeholders point to maintenance as one of their chief concerns for the future. A re-evaluation of the nature of the trustees' relationship with the Athens-Clarke County Unified Government could potentially be a source for increased maintenance help for cemetery grounds, but the trustees now are hesitant to request at least a full-scale maintenance takeover because of the perceived increase in government regulation that such a move would entail (Gibson 2012). Other interviewees also questioned the prudence of such a move in light of the fact that many view the city's care for Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery, the only local cemetery that it does control, as insufficient (Wilfong 2012).



Fig. 6.3. Steel plates provided by the city for bridge repair. *Photo by author*

The trustees do, however, maintain an open relationship with the city government and occasionally request other kinds of “favours” from the city, which are sometimes granted. For example, the city did agree to loan steel plates to the trustees in conjunction with a recent maintenance effort on the cemetery bridge (Fig. 6.1), but denied a request that they pay for the work outright (Hodgson 2012). Managers pointed out that continued support from the city in such small but meaningful ways was also in the city’s own interest as Oconee Hill is gaining regional popularity as a tourist destination (Begnaud 2012; Boatright 2012). Indeed, the cemetery is now featured in brochures for Civil War and music history driving tours of Athens.

While FOHC has focused mainly on funding large projects, it also has provided some assistance with cemetery maintenance in the form of purchasing new equipment for the grounds crew and organizing occasional clean-up days (Bush 2012). However, one major project FOHC is considering for the future would contribute significantly to improving cemetery maintenance. Because perpetual care contracts did not exist at Oconee Hill until the beginning of the twentieth century, many graves in the cemetery, especially in the older sections, are not covered by these agreements today. With work crews already challenged to maintain the graves that are covered by these contracts, those that are not covered generally are under-prioritized (Fig. 6.4). To address this situation and ensure that historic graves receive adequate care, FOHC hopes to raise money to place all of these graves under perpetual care agreements (Wilfong 2012). One FOHC board member suggested that such a major fund-raising initiative might be more successful if it was part of a larger strategic plan. Pointing out that donors typically scrutinize the impact that their gifts will make, the respondent felt that FOHC should create a strategic plan that catalogues and prioritizes future planned projects at Oconee Hill (Field 2012).





Fig. 6.4. Overgrown lots not covered by perpetual care contracts. *Photo by author*

### **Appropriate Future Activities**

Responding to past conflicts and management difficulties, managers at Oconee Hill uniformly recognize the need to develop their contacts with different segments of the Athens community, but the ways to go about this task are less clear. However, some new initiatives already have begun. The trustees' constrained budget, for example, has forced the group to form different types of partnerships within the community. One such partnership with the UGA Lettermen entailed the creation of a new section of the cemetery reserved for lettermen and their families. Called "Bulldog Haven," this area is set into a hillside and includes a small memorial plaza with seating shaped roughly in the form of a football stadium (Fig. 6.5). The partnership

also has allowed lettermen to tailgate just within the main cemetery gates in conjunction with football games (Hodgson 2012) (Fig. 6.6).



Fig. 6.5. “Bulldog Haven” plaza. *Photo by author*



Fig. 6.6. Lettermen tailgating near cemetery entrance. *Photo by author*



FOHC also has begun investigating the potential for tapping into resources available through the University of Georgia. Early results from this effort have included the studies produced through the journalism and environmental design schools. Some interviewees, however, want the relationship with the university community to go beyond the scope of such occasional, short-term studies and extend to more protracted study opportunities that take advantage of the cemetery's unique landscape and vegetation as well as its unique resources for art and social history research (Costantino, M. 2012; Duncan 2012). Indeed, engaging Athenians of diverse age groups was a common theme that stakeholders mentioned, acknowledging in particular the need to inspire appreciation for the cemetery among the area's youth (Boatright 2012; Costantino, H. 2012).

When asked about what kinds of specific activities or ideas they would consider to engage the Athens community, stakeholders gave a wide variety of responses. All interviewees carefully pointed out that they would only consider supporting activities "appropriate" to Oconee Hill's character, but, as with the current cemetery visitors surveyed, there was wide variation in what different individuals and groups considered "appropriate." Perhaps unsurprisingly, the board of trustees and FOHC members emphasized clearly different themes.

The themes and ideas that the trustees put forward tended to support their responsibility as caretakers and emphasized their role in assuring the financial viability of cemetery operations. They were quick to point out that any kind of future activity should conform to current grounds rules such as ensuring that visitors stay off family lots and that the sexton should be notified in advance of planned group activities like visits from university classes (Hodgson 2012). Security issues that could potentially be a consequence of increased

community presence at Oconee Hill were another concern of the trustees. One idea that interviewees acknowledged was the possibility of renting the Sexton's House for events other than funeral receptions. These types of events typically take place at a rate of around ten to twenty times per year, and are the only type of activity held of the main level of the building (Bush 2012). While several members of the management team were open to this idea, the difficulty of restricting access to the rest of cemetery property at potential night-time events was a major concern (Hodgson 2012; Wilfong 2012).

Other ideas that the trustees have for Oconee Hill are aimed at helping the cemetery remain competitive with other cemeteries. To this end, they are considering how best to offer Oconee Hill's customers new alternatives to traditional in-ground interment. National trends in final disposition of human remains continue to shift rapidly in favor of cremation, with a 6.5% increase in Georgia between 2005-2010 (NFDA 2012). Recognizing this shift, the trustees consider increasing options for those who choose cremation particularly important. There is currently only one formal area for ash dispersal in Oconee Hill, and this is a plot on the historic West Hill owned by Immanuel Episcopal Church for use by its members (Marshall 2012). To provide more options for the memorialization of cremated remains, the trustees have considered planning "natural landscaping" areas in the cemetery for ash dispersal. Such areas, they point out, could take advantage of ground that is otherwise unsuitable for in-ground interment because of shallow bedrock. Alternately, they have considered arranging ceremonies in which ash remains would be spread in the Oconee River (Gibson 2012). The trustees have also discussed the possibility of offering so-called "natural burials," in which the body is not embalmed and is buried with a biodegradable coffin (Hodgson 2012).

The trustees indicated that their fiduciary responsibility also would be a factor in determining what types of non-burial related activities they would be willing to allow at Oconee Hill. While qualifying that the trustees generally would like planned events to be in keeping with cemetery traditions embodied in events such as Veterans Day observances, one trustee acknowledged that profitability would be a factor in evaluating proposed events in the future: “If we could make good money at it, we’d figure out how to make it work” (Hodgson 2012). With such funds, the cemetery’s operations might be better equipped to keep up with the ever-changing demands of the funeral care industry.

When asked if there were any activities that they would like to see taking place at Oconee Hill that could help to raise awareness of the cemetery within the community, FOHC members offered a wide variety of ideas. On the other hand, one respondent was quick to point out that this question really should be for the public to decide (Boatright 2012). In contrast to the trustees, many FOHC members emphasized the cemetery’s history within the Rural Cemetery Movement and indicated that it might once again be used more like a park, if in a limited way. Supporting this principle, several, but not all, FOHC members supported the idea of the greenway becoming a part of the cemetery landscape (Wilfong 2012). Other FOHC members were more hesitant to the idea of Oconee Hill being used more like a park, suggesting that Athens had many other facilities and groups that could provide the community’s recreational needs. These respondents thought Oconee Hill’s managers should strive to retain the cemetery’s reverent atmosphere. Supporting this sentiment and in line with the trustees’ concerns, a number of respondents suggested that the continuation or possible expansion of the cemetery’s Veterans Day observances (Fig. 6.7) would be an appropriate use of cemetery grounds (Begnaud 2012). FOHC members offered other ideas that supported more passive

visitation uses as well. Such ideas included the provision of more informational material at the cemetery's gates and the facilitation of self-guided tours for visitors, as well as a digital archive that visitors could use to look up the location of individual graves (Boatright 2012; Duncan 2012; Field 2012).



Fig. 6.7. Veterans Day Ceremony at Oconee Hill. *Photo by author*

Respondents also thought that group activities might help engage community interest in Oconee Hill in the future. Many interviewees envisioned offering visitors a wider variety of tours. Charlotte Marshall, who has been guiding tours in Oconee Hill for decades, proposed a tour called “Voices from the Grave.” This type of tour seeks the involvement of descendents of historic figures buried in the cemetery, as well as others, who stand by particular graves and tell stories from the lives of the individuals buried there (Marshall 2012). Because tours are a great

way to share historical information about Oconee Hill, and because it can be difficult for visitors to know when tours are to take place, one interviewee suggested posting a schedule of upcoming tours at the cemetery gates (Duncan 2012).



Fig. 6.8. Members of FOHC at clean-up day, October 15, 2011. *Photo by author*

Other kinds of community events at Oconee Hill can be of a more practical nature. For example, FOHC hosts occasional cemetery clean-up days to supplement the work of the regular grounds crew, but up to this point, most of the participants in these events have been FOHC members (Fig 6.8). Interview respondents expressed a desire to expand the scope of these events and draw participation from the Athens community (Boatright 2012; Bush 2012). A variation on this theme was a suggestion that FOHC organize an annual “homecoming” event. For such an event, FOHC would invite the families of individuals buried at Oconee Hill to come

for an afternoon picnic to be followed by a few hours of maintenance and cleaning of family graves (Begnaud 2012). Other FOHC members suggested additional ideas for possible community activities, including arranging Halloween programs and even weddings. A respondent pointed out that the large valley section, which is free of burial lots due to its location in the flood plain of the Oconee River, could offer an open space large enough to host such events (Field 2012; Wilfong 2012).

### **Preservation Goals**

A consideration of cemetery stakeholders' ideas regarding preservation is, of course, important in any discussion of activities appropriate to a historic cemetery. Responses from interviewees indicate that all of the people involved in management have a clear sense of Oconee Hill's historical value. Many articulated their belief in this value by using expressions such as "historical treasure" (Wilfong 2012) and "a pocket in time" that should be saved (Costantino, H. 2012) to describe how they felt about cemetery. However, how this admiration is manifested in terms of actual preservation is worth investigating.

One respondent indicated that FOHC generally attempted to uphold the "look" and "theme" of a Victorian cemetery when considering which projects it should take on (Begnaud 2012). However, many other respondents felt that the group did not prioritize the issue of upholding historical integrity. One interviewee indicated that discussions of historical integrity are rarely considered in FOHC meetings because the group has so many projects that urgently require their attention. Many of these projects therefore are designed to merely maintain or stabilize structures for which such maintenance is long overdue. Such circumstances have caused some cemetery managers to adopt an "'if it looks nice, it's great' attitude" (Field 2012).

Interview responses indicated that this outlook may be driven by a lack of funding for more careful and calculated preservation initiatives. The renovation of the Sexton's House, for example, was motivated more by the income that FOHC thought it could generate than by a primary concern for preserving the structure's historical integrity (Begnaud 2012). FOHC has, however, taken a significant step toward building a greater understanding of historical integrity and preservation issues with their recent initiative to nominate Oconee Hill for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. This process will document the cemetery's historical significance in a structured way, and FOHC hopes that the process will lead to a greater appreciation of Oconee Hill's status as a valuable historic place, at least among certain segments of the population (Marshall 2012; Wilfong 2012).

### **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has explored current and past management issues at Oconee Hill Cemetery through a process of semi-structured interviews with members of the cemetery's management team and with two members of the Athens community with special knowledge of cemetery history. In the larger thesis framework of discovering appropriate management strategies for Oconee Hill's future, this chapter is useful because it demonstrates the views and values of current cemetery managers. One must certainly take this group's concerns into account in order to formulate feasible management recommendations.

The chapter found, for example, that both the trustees and FOHC thought that financial instability was probably the greatest threat facing Oconee Hill. Identifying strategies that could address this issue was, therefore, a clear goal of both groups. The chapter also found that protecting the interests of plot-owning families was a high priority for the trustees. As a result,

the group was concerned with issues of vandalism and security, but because they recognized that increasing public access may alleviate rather than aggravate these problems, they were open to considering policy changes or proposals from FOHC or the City of Athens.

Two of the overarching concerns of FOHC were enhancing the cemetery's features and engaging a greater community interest in the landscape. The group also was concerned about security issues in the cemetery, but many group members strongly believed that creating healthy ties between the landscape and the community was of primary concern. While interviewees suggested a number of good ideas to engage the public and attract new customers, it can be helpful to broaden the search for appropriate management ideas beyond Athens, Georgia. For this reason, the thesis will now explore some of the strategies that other cemetery management teams have used to help assure the viability of the landscapes they manage.



## **CHAPTER 7**

### **SEARCHING FOR A MODEL:**

#### **MANAGEMENT IDEAS FROM OTHER HISTORIC CEMETERIES**

Mark Francis (2003) has developed a framework for conducting issue-based case studies for the Landscape Architecture Foundation. He argues for their use in identifying successful patterns of design or management in different public spaces. This chapter uses a modified version of his issue-based case study model to examine the management strategies that managers have adopted at two different cemeteries: Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia and Davis Cemetery District in Davis, California. First, the thesis studies Atlanta's Oakland Cemetery, another piedmont landscape with many historical similarities to Oconee Hill. This cemetery has been chosen due to the frequent praise it receives in the press for its managers' community engagement. After this analysis, the thesis turns to Davis Cemetery in Davis, California, a historic cemetery in a town demonstrating demographic characteristics very similar to those in Athens in terms of student to long-term resident ratios. This cemetery was also chosen for the acclaim it has received for its innovative and effective landscape management approach.

Francis's issue-based case study model, sometimes used for analysis of newly completed landscape architecture projects, includes a number of analysis categories that are less relevant to this project or are beyond its scope, such as an analysis of past case studies and peer reviews. This thesis focuses, therefore, on Francis's suggested themes that are relevant to the aim of this

project and that can concisely convey the essential management approaches of Oakland and Davis Cemeteries: (1) Issue Background and History; (2) Maintenance and Management Approach; (3) Generalizable Features and Lessons;<sup>2</sup> (4) Future Issues and Plans, and (5) Limitations and Problems.

## **Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia**

### Issue Background and History.

Oakland Cemetery was established in 1850 when the city of Atlanta purchased six acres of land near the city from a local farmer (Sweeney 2009). Authorities had the tract laid out according to the rural cemetery tradition and used its various parts for burials of individuals from all economic classes. By the end of the century, the cemetery covered 48 acres and the grounds had become a popular destination for leisurely carriage rides among Atlanta's wealthier citizens.

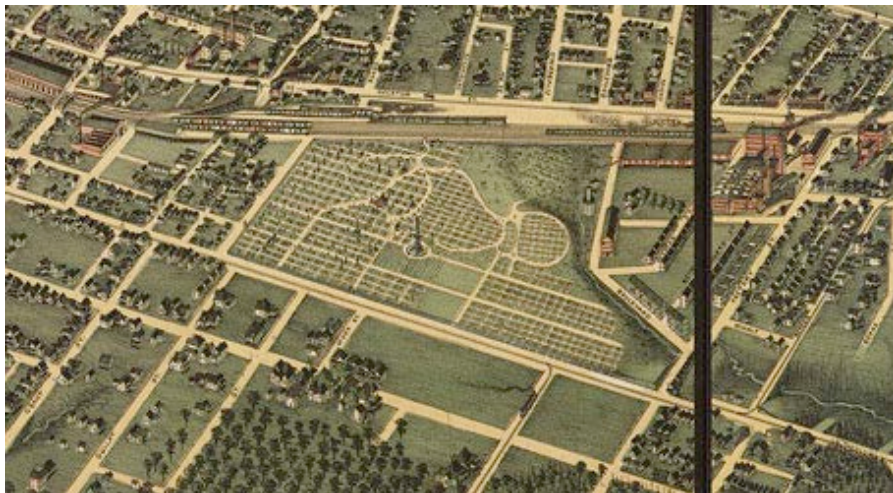


Fig. 7.1. Oakland Cemetery in nineteenth-century Atlanta. *Courtesy of HOF*

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<sup>2</sup> Francis adopts the term, “generalizable features and lessons,” to essentially mean “the key ingredients” of a successful or valued landscape.

As Atlanta was rebuilt during the decades following the Civil War, the city's urban fabric began to envelope Oakland (Fig. 7.1), with a major rail line and other roads constructed immediately bordering the landscape (Historic Oakland Foundation 2010).

By the first years of the twentieth century, the city had sold all available burial plots in Oakland, consequently losing the regular source of income that these sales had generated for the city. Perpetual care contracts were not included in the price of lot sales, and families therefore were expected to care for gravesites themselves (Sweeney 2009). However, many families moved away from the area through the course of the twentieth century, leaving behind their responsibility to care for these lots. An increasing rate of absentee ownership led to neglect of the grounds. As a consequence, Oakland fell into a state of disrepair by the middle of the century, succumbing regularly to crimes like vandalism (Lightsey 2008).

Stepping in to help arrest what they saw as a loss of an important part of Atlanta's cultural heritage, private citizens formed a non-profit group called the Historic Oakland Foundation (HOF) in 1976. This group partnered with the city of Atlanta and established as its primary goals the preservation, restoration and enhancement of Oakland as a cultural resource for Atlanta's citizens (Historic Oakland Foundation 2010).

#### Maintenance and Management Approaches.

Management at Oakland today is coordinated through a partnership between the Historic Oakland Foundation and the Atlanta Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs. The cemetery is owned and operated by the City of Atlanta, which is responsible for daily operations, while the non-profit foundation cultivates resources for its preservation, restoration and promotion. Although the City of Atlanta retains the ultimate authority to regulate all of the

HOF's decisions pertaining to the cemetery landscape, they allow the HOF a great deal of autonomy in shaping individual initiatives such as community events and preservation projects (Historic Oakland Foundation 2010). In this way, the relationship between the City of Atlanta and the HOF is similar to the relationship between the Board of Trustees and the FOHC at Oconee Hill.

The city's responsibilities at Oakland include basic grounds maintenance like opening and closing the gates each day and keeping the grass mowed and bushes trimmed, as well as tending to administrative and legal issues associated with the few burials that still take place in the cemetery (Historic Oakland Foundation 2010). Although plot-owning families still technically are responsible for maintaining their own burial parcels, only about one percent of total graves actually are maintained in this way (Lightsey 2008). To fill the remaining need, the city pays a sexton and three additional full-time staff members.

The Historic Oakland Foundation, on the other hand, manages community events and major capital projects, such as monument restorations, for which they typically hire outside professional firms (Oakland Herald 2008). As with FOHC, fundraising is another key facet of the HOF's work that makes such initiatives possible. There is inevitably some overlap in the duties of city employees and the HOF. The foundation, for example, supplies labor for monthly cemetery cleanup days, and for staffing a cemetery store and visitor's center, by recruiting and coordinating a large pool of volunteers (Sweeney 2009). Additionally, the coordination between the parks department and the HOF is critical in ensuring the success of Oakland's many public events (Oakland Herald 2008).

As a part of the city parks and recreation department, Oakland is managed much like any other city park. The cemetery has opening and closing hours, but during the time the gates are open, management actively encourages visitors to enter and spend time on cemetery grounds for any number of different recreational purposes (Oakland Herald 2009). Around ten to fifteen burials per year still take place at Oakland, but attracting and accommodating new business of this type is not a major management concern (Sweeney 2009). The relatively small number of burials means that fewer visitors are using the grounds for mourning than at many other cemeteries still in active use. Indeed, a survey of cemetery users showed that visitors to Oakland were overwhelmingly motivated by a desire to view the landscape's art and architecture (Lightley 2008).

A master plan guides management at Oakland, and preservation projects are prioritized according to a ten-phase restoration plan that managers adopted in 2002. Preservation is, accordingly, one of the Historic Oakland Foundation's main focuses, and they use the U.S. Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation to guide their landscape-based decisions (Historic Oakland Foundation 2010). The foundation's other major focus is promoting the cemetery to the public, because it views the use of cemetery grounds by community members as the best way to perpetuate Oakland's long-term care. The group believes that making the cemetery more attractive for visitors will support cemetery preservation goals by attracting volunteers and donations (Oakland Herald 2011).

#### Generalizable Features and Lessons.

One of the main ways that the Historic Oakland Foundation attracts visitors is through its frequent tour offerings. Volunteers, trained at Oakland on the second Saturday of every

month, conduct these tours and provide the enthusiasm that makes the events popular. The foundation offers tours year-round, and posts scheduled tour times on the cemetery's website. In the summer months the tours are conducted every Saturday and Sunday in the middle of the day and in early evening. The evening "twilight tours" (Fig. 7.2) focus on themes such as the Civil War, or "Dying in nineteenth-century Atlanta," topics that aim to attract groups with different historical interests (Historic Oakland Foundation 2010).



Fig. 7.2. "Voices from the Grave"-style tour at Oakland. *Courtesy of Historic Oakland Foundation*

The HOF also fosters other types of educational outreach programs to attract younger generations of Atlanta residents. The foundation invites various school classes to visit the grounds to study topics that are uniquely demonstrated in the cemetery landscape. Local high school chemistry classes, for example, regularly visit the grounds to study the effects of chemical weathering on gravestones (Pecore 2009). The HOF also has formed partnerships with programs at Georgia State University in the sculpture and historic preservation departments, the latter of which assisted in crafting the cemetery's master plan (Oakland Herald 2009; 2010). Oakland probably has received most attention in the press for the large community events that the HOF arranges. Its major annual events include "Sunday in the Park," a Victorian-themed festival with music, food, and crafts that has attracted as many as 4,000 visitors during a single weekend, a popular Halloween tour program, a 5K race beginning in the cemetery entitled "Run Like Hell" (Fig. 7.3), as well as a new music festival called "Tunes from the Tomb" (Oakland Herald 2009). The foundation stages these major events to increase the community's awareness of history and promote the cemetery as a recreational resource, as well as to raise funds to pay for ongoing restoration projects and attract new foundation members (Oakland Herald 2011). It raises additional money by renting the grounds for various types of private events. For example, couples occasionally arrange weddings at Oakland because of the picturesque setting, and the City Parks and Recreation Department recently allowed filming for a television show on the grounds (Lightsey 2008).





Fig. 7.3. “Run Like Hell” 5K race at Oakland. *Courtesy of Historic Oakland Foundation*

#### Future Issues and Plans.

A tornado struck downtown Atlanta in March of 2008, causing tremendous damage at Oakland Cemetery, including over 7,000 damaged monuments, statues or walls as well as 70 destroyed mature trees (Lightsey 2008). The event drastically changed the character of the cemetery, and the cleanup and restoration effort that followed in its wake consumed managers’ energy and resources for more than two years (Oakland Herald 2008; 2009). However, the storm also coalesced community support for Oakland, attracting a large outpouring of donations and volunteer labor that continues to this day (Sweeney 2009).



Dealing with the storm's consequences eclipsed many of the Historic Oakland Foundation's long-ranging goals during the initial cleanup period. However, the group is once again working toward implementing their ten-phase restoration plan, a plan that will occupy their efforts for many years to come (Historic Oakland Foundation 2010). They currently are carrying out the plan's third phase, a segment that entails landscape restoration of the cemetery's oldest six-acre parcel. Building community support for such projects will remain a challenge for the group in the future. One example of this challenge is the ongoing fundraising effort to match a \$200,000 grant that the HOF recently received from the National Park Service's "Save America's Treasures" program (Oakland Herald 2011).

#### Limitations and Problems.

Repairing damage from the 2008 tornado was problematic for the Historic Oakland Foundation because the effort entailed massive financial expenditures. Much of the work ultimately was covered by funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, but the agency made a large portion of these funds available only after repairs were completed. For the HOF, this situation reinforced the importance of fostering strong network of community support (Sweeney 2009). Also limiting the foundation's ability to properly respond to the disaster was the absence of a detailed survey of existing conditions. The Cultural Landscape Foundation indicates that this is a shortcoming the group still has not addressed. This work, the CLF says, should include commissioning a detailed topographical survey and site plan as well as producing measured drawings of all mausoleums and other major structures in the cemetery landscape (Cultural Landscape Foundation 2011).

In summary, managers at Oakland Cemetery have succeeded in a number of key tasks, including crafting a vibrant strategy for community engagement, adopting and adhering to a master plan, and maintaining a healthy cooperative relationship between the City of Atlanta and the Historic Oakland Foundation. Oakland's successful strategies may serve as an inspiration for Oconee Hill in the future. In order to gather ideas from yet another cemetery that has received attention for its innovative management approach, this thesis will now conduct a second cemetery case study from a city closer in size to Athens, Georgia.

### **Davis Cemetery District in Davis, California**

#### Issue Background and History.

Davis Cemetery District is the main burial ground of the City of Davis, California, located in California's Central Valley near Sacramento. According to Davis Cemetery's master plan, in 1850 a private citizen purchased five acres of land for the purpose of creating a public cemetery. Settlers in the area erected the first burial markers on the grounds in 1855, but the cemetery's development proceeded slowly due to the relatively small size of the rural community. A cemetery association was first formed in 1901, and incorporated officially in 1922 as the Davis Cemetery District (Indigo/Hammond & Playle 2005). The cemetery "district" was a designation of local government, independent from the City of Davis, that community members created specifically to satisfy the community's burial needs (Loving 2007).

During the 1960s, the district added twenty additional acres to the cemetery's holdings and hired their first superintendent. This worker oversaw restoration of the grounds and new infrastructure improvements. While the cemetery has had problems with vandalism in the past,

today its managers are chiefly concerned with restoring the cemetery's relevance to the local community. Managers point to a national trend of falling interest in cemetery landscapes. They hope their management strategies can ensure this fate does not befall their community's cemetery (Indigo/Hammond & Playle 2005).

#### Maintenance and Management Approaches.

Management at Davis Cemetery is the responsibility of the specially designated district entity, which is overseen by a five-member board of trustees. The trustees, who, like at Oconee Hill, serve as volunteers, set cemetery policies and bear the ultimate responsibility for the cemetery's care and its financial condition. The board employs four permanent staff members: a superintendent, a grounds foreman, a community outreach director and an office manager (Davis Cemetery District). The Davis Cemetery District is the City of Davis's main burial ground and it continues to accommodate regular interments. Half of the district's income comes from the fees that these interments generate, while the other half is provided by revenues collected from property taxes within the district (Loving 2007).

The board of trustees and cemetery staff are energetically pursuing a "green" management approach (YB News 2008). The staff views this approach, which entails adopting energy efficient and environmentally-friendly maintenance practices, as a way not only to conserve resources, but to attract interest from the local community. The environmental focus of Davis's management team is largely in keeping with community attitudes in Davis, which has a citizen base with a reputation for being very aware of ecological issues. Like at Oakland, managers see a strong connection between the level of community presence on cemetery grounds and the level

of care that the community will ultimately invest in the landscape. They believe, for example, that higher visitation rates will lead to prevention of crimes like vandalism (Loving 2007).

Management at Davis Cemetery is guided by a master plan that the board of trustees commissioned a professional architecture firm to carry out in 2005 (Indigo/Hammond & Playle 2005). Through the policies it endorses, the plan strives to respond to national trends in public interests, such as changing preferences for final disposition of human remains and a growing concern for protecting urban ecological systems. To fulfill the trustees' interest in pursuing "green" management practices, the master plan endorses a maintenance approach of "benign neglect," which seeks to cultivate an aesthetic of "picturesque disorder." This strategy, the management team hopes, will contribute to increased biodiversity as well increased community interest in wildlife viewing on cemetery grounds (Indigo/Hammond & Playle 2005).

#### Generalizable Features and Lessons.

In shifting to more ecologically responsible maintenance techniques, Davis's managers have focused largely on the choice and disposition of plant material. They have created the long-term goal of gradually replacing most of the ornamental species currently part of the cemetery landscape with more drought-tolerant native species of trees, shrubs and grasses (Indigo/Hammond & Playle 2005). They emphasize planting areas of native grasses that require only occasional maintenance, require little application of pesticides and attract native insects that are important food sources for local bird populations. At the same time, they have installed solar panels that generate the electricity needed to power the cemetery's office building as well as the landscape's irrigation system (YB News 2008).

Capitalizing on their efforts to improve the cemetery's ecological functions, the trustees applied for and received certification from the National Wildlife Federation under the category of "Backyard Habitat" (Wexler 2008). They viewed this distinction as an easy but conspicuous way to advertise their eagerness to attract not only wildlife, but a public interested in wildlife-related recreation. Certification costs only \$15 and requires criteria that many heavily vegetated cemeteries either already meet or could meet with minimal management changes. Because of the ease with which a landscape can receive this certification, cemetery staff recommend this step to other cemeteries wishing to reach out to the public (Loving 2007).

In another effort to pursue ecologically responsible tactics and to reach a broader public, the management team at Davis Cemetery has begun offering so-called "green" or "natural" burials (Fig. 7.4). This practice is a form of in-ground interment in which the body is not embalmed and is placed in the ground in a casket made of biodegradable material. Many in the Davis community view this as an attractive option for final disposition of human remains and such interments account for around 16% of the cemetery's total business (YB News 2008). To further attract new customers, the cemetery's master plan also calls for the construction of a small columbarium for those who would prefer to memorialize the cremated remains of a loved one in this way (Indigo/Hammond & Playle 2005).

Finally, the trustees encourage the public to visit Davis Cemetery for other kinds of community events. The staff regularly stages events like poetry readings and dance performances in their reception house. In addition, the house hosts art exhibits that rotate on a monthly basis to constantly renew public interest in making cemetery visits (Davis Cemetery

District). Also, to foster a greater public interest in the landscape, the master plan calls for the display of sculptures in the outdoor environment.

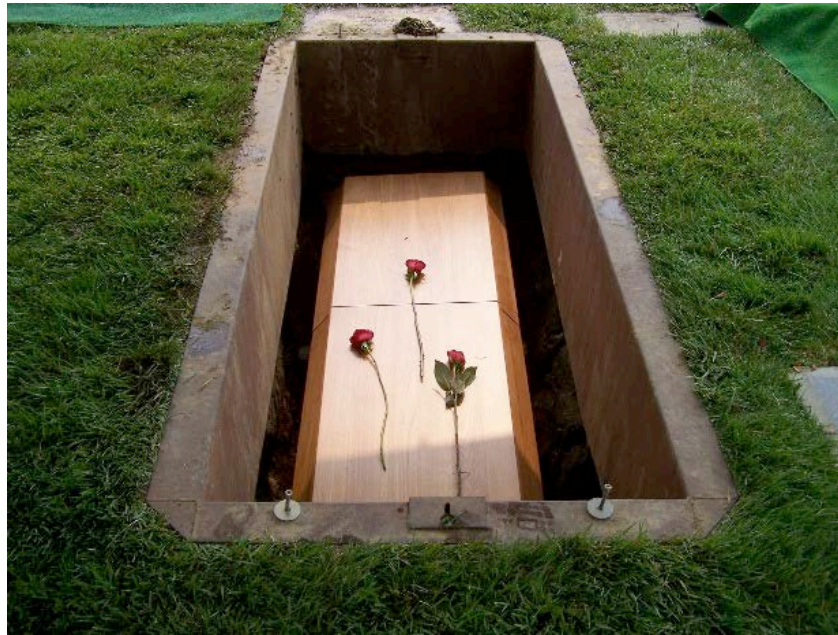


Fig. 7.4. “Green” burial at Davis Cemetery. *Courtesy of Davis Cemetery District*

#### Future Issues and Plans.

A challenge for future management at Davis Cemetery District lies in gradually implementing the cemetery’s master plan in full. Because the plan heavily focuses on vegetation and will involve a large-scale transition from non-native to native plantings, the timeframe of implementation is 50 years. The grounds crew will plant certain native trees, for example, only after the non-natives they are intended to replace become unhealthy (Loving 2007).

Of course, the fact that the cemetery has a master plan to follow in the first place is a major help for management staff. The plan presents a vision that is in keeping with the values of

Davis citizens, but the way these values are expressed in the historic landscape is one issue that the master plan perhaps does not address adequately. The plan posits that staff should implement the proposed changes in a way that harmonizes with the cemetery's historic sections (Indigo/Hammond & Playle 2005), but does not offer suggestions as to how this task should be accomplished.

#### Limitations and Problems.

According to cemetery staff, most visitors have reacted positively to the changes that have been made at the cemetery since the trustees approved the master plan. There have, however, been some conflicts between humans and the animal populations that the changes are intended to attract. For example, the addition of native grasses succeeded in attracting larger insect and bird populations, and while most visitors have enjoyed the presence of these birds, one person reported being chased out of the cemetery by wild turkeys (Fig. 7.5) that have taken up residence on the grounds since some native grasses were planted (Wexler 2008).



Fig. 7.5. Wild turkeys at Davis Cemetery. *Courtesy of The Davis Enterprise*

The cemetery staff also initially received a number of complaints about the unkempt nature of the grounds' appearance. Referring to new plantings of native grasses, visitors inquired as to why the grounds crew was allowing 'weeds' to proliferate (Loving 2007). Joan Nassauer (1997) has pointed out that such an initial public response is not uncommon when landscape designs exhibit characteristics that do not adhere to traditional aesthetic tastes. The management staff at Davis Cemetery responded by erecting signage that explained the improved ecological functions that the new plantings were expected to foster. After being informed that the landscape changes were intentional and would be beneficial to local wildlife, staff members assert that the public began to express approval of the new management techniques (Loving 2007).

### **Concluding Remarks**

The management approach of the board of trustees at Davis Cemetery District could serve as an inspiration for Oconee Hill's managers for several reasons. First, both cemeteries serve cities of similar size and population characteristics. Second, the trustees' adoption of a master plan has greatly helped guide their vision for the future. The "green" approach that this plan outlines is one that both attracts visitors and conserves natural and fiscal resources. Lastly, Oconee Hill and Davis both are governed by an unpaid board of trustees, with the key difference that Davis's trustees receive funding from tax revenues. This commonality only serves to highlight the advantages that can result from having access to a wider range of resources. Of course, there are limitations to how helpful the model of Davis Cemetery can be for Oconee Hill. For example, its landscape master plan does not adequately address how low-maintenance native



grass plantings might affect the historic character of the cemetery. Nevertheless, the innovative landscape strategies could at least serve as an inspiration for Oconee Hill's managers.

Oakland Cemetery also represents an interesting model for Oconee Hill for a number of reasons. First, the two landscapes have similar backgrounds as southern rural cemeteries that suffered from issues such as vandalism. Second, there are key similarities in the two landscapes' management structures. Management at both cemeteries is coordinated through a partnership between a main authority-holding body and a supporting non-profit group. However, the fact that a city department with a large pool of resources at its disposal has prime responsibility for Oakland's care, could emphasize for Oconee Hill's trustees the significance of appealing to secure such public assistance. A third interesting finding from the case study of Oakland is the high level of importance that its master plan and restoration plan have for management and fund-raising efforts. Finally, the centrality of community engagement to the HOF's efforts also suggests a possible path forward for management at Oconee Hill.

Of course, it is impossible to simply transpose a cohesive management model from one landscape to another. Indeed, strategies that work in one set of circumstances are not likely to succeed in another without modifications. However, analyzing successful management strategies within their appropriate context can nevertheless provide inspiration for other landscape managers to define their own unique set of strategies. The following concluding chapter will continue discussion of the management approaches that the case studies revealed, and will overlay these ideas with the unique set of issues and visitor concerns that earlier thesis chapters explored in order to identify specific recommendations for managers at Oconee Hill.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISCUSSION**

This thesis has explored the management structure of Oconee Hill Cemetery and the views of individual stakeholders by conducting semi-structured interviews with those individuals currently guiding the landscape's management. By surveying some of the values and opinions of current visitors to Oconee Hill, the thesis has also sought to identify what types of future management strategies these current users would deem appropriate. In addition, through conducting issue-based case studies, the thesis has explored some of the strategies that other cemetery management teams have adopted to attract and maintain the interest of their local communities. By overlapping and analyzing these various threads of information, the thesis sought to reveal issues and strategies that may be appropriately applied to the landscape at Oconee Hill. This final chapter identifies some of these overlapping issues and discusses strategies to address them. This chapter is structured around these strategies, which include: (1) changes to Oconee Hill's current management structure; (2) improvements in community outreach efforts, and (3) adoption of a cemetery master plan.

## **Changes to Management Structure**

### Cooperative Management with City Government.

The thesis has established that one of the Oconee Hill management team's major challenges is securing a level of resources that adequately meets the cemetery's basic operational needs. Visitors and members of the management team alike pointed to the poor level of grounds maintenance as the most obvious manifestation of this lack of resources. The lack of resources has other serious consequences as well, including an inability to extend benefits to employees or to promote the cemetery's services to the public. These are types of problems that managers at Oakland and Davis Cemeteries do not face, largely because of the nature of their respective management structures. The major structural difference between Oconee Hill and these two cemeteries is that the ultimate management responsibility for both of these landscapes rests with some division of local city government. At Oakland, management functions as a partnership between the city parks and recreation department and the Historic Oakland Foundation. At Davis, management is entirely in the hands of the "District" trustees who guide the staff members they employ. In both cases, basic management needs are met by public funds, an arrangement that helps to guard against periods of diminished revenue resulting from either economic slowdowns or temporary declines in community demand for cemetery services.

The examples of Oakland and Davis demonstrate the kind of financial security that can result from government entities holding some responsibility for landscape management at cemeteries. They suggest that forming a similar type of formal management relationship with the City of Athens may be an expedient course of action for Oconee Hill's trustees. However, the trustees have expressed some apprehension in response to this idea because of the increased

level of regulation and oversight they believe such a change would entail. They also have expressed concern about the level of care city maintenance crews would expend on Oconee Hill if the city were to take over management responsibility, pointing out that the city's care for Gospel Pilgrim Cemetery is not exemplary. These concerns suggest that placing Oconee Hill's management *entirely* in the hands of a city department may not be the most desirable management strategy. However, a cooperative arrangement with the city would not necessarily require an outright exchange of management control from one group to the other. It could instead entail an agreement in the style that the trustees contemplated in the 1980s, which transferred maintenance responsibilities to the city while reserving for the trustees the responsibilities of employing the sexton, managing interments and lot sales, and administering the proceeds of the trust fund. Indeed, the structure of any such cooperative arrangement would certainly be subject to discussion and agreement by both parties and touch upon issues that are important to each. Such an agreement could entail, for example, city assistance with grounds maintenance and security surveillance for increased public outreach and improved pedestrian amenities.

It is important to remember that the trustees' appeal for city support in the 1980s failed because of fiscal concerns on the part of the city. So why would the mayor and commission be any more interested in forming such an arrangement now? Although it is impossible to know the answer to this question without a renewed overture on the part of the trustees today, if the group could make a compelling argument that cooperative management were in the city's best interest, the commission might be more receptive. Oconee Hill's value as a tourist attraction could be one argument in favor of such a plan. Oconee Hill is certainly a unique landscape within the Athens community, and survey statistics show that one third of visitors to the

cemetery are from out of town, suggesting that the landscape is already a draw for some tourists. Moreover, the city currently promotes the cemetery to tourists by including Oconee Hill in various city tour pamphlets that invite visitors into the landscape. Managers must accommodate these visitors without receiving any tangible benefits, since most out-of-town visitors will never purchase lots at Oconee Hill.

An argument for city management assistance may be even more compelling in light of survey results that indicate that nearly three fourths of visitors to Oconee Hill reported visiting either for the purpose of passive recreation or for historical or genealogical interest. This figure suggests that visitors already use the landscape at Oconee Hill in some of the ways and for some of the same reasons they use public parks. If the public is using the landscape to meet needs generally associated with use of public parks, the idea that public funds should assist with landscape care at Oconee Hill is logical.

One final factor that may change the dynamic of a trustee appeal for assistance from city government is the existence of FOHC. Formed in 1999, this group was not involved in cemetery management during the 1980s when the city declined to lend support to Oconee Hill the first time. Today, FOHC fosters contacts with individuals and groups in the greater Athens community, and works to fund projects that are beyond the scope of day-to-day maintenance. Having the support of such a community-based group might remove for the city a perceived financial liability to take on such projects.

One possible opportunity for the trustees to broach the subject of public support for Oconee Hill with city government officials could be in the context of discussions over the Oconee River Greenway. The Greenway Commission would like to follow through with plans

to extend the trail through Oconee Hill's property, and the trustees may be able to use this wish as leverage to argue for public support. The commission would, of course, have to first assuage the trustees' security concerns related to the greenway project. Achieving this goal might necessitate physical barriers to access or increased surveillance of cemetery grounds. In addition, however, since the trustees would inevitably be sacrificing a certain level of access control as a result of the changes, the group may also be able to argue for compensation in the form of grounds maintenance provisions or an annual subsidy to their budget.

#### Structure of Board of Trustees.

The interviews conducted for this thesis indicated certain weaknesses in the internal structure of Oconee Hill's board of trustees. Under the current structure, board members are internally selected and effectively retain their positions for life. This arrangement typically has meant that the average age of board members is relatively high. While a high average age of board members does not necessarily have to be a disadvantage for management, interviewees saw a correlation between the average age of board members and the group's responsiveness to suggested initiatives. They pointed out that the board's current composition of younger members was a positive change from the norm because the new, younger members had brought new perspectives and ideas to the board's attention.

The structure of Davis Cemetery's board of trustees could represent a possible alternative to Oconee Hill's system. At Davis, an elected "county supervisor" appoints cemetery trustees who serve the cemetery for terms of four years. This system has the advantage of bringing a steady flow of new people and ideas to the board, a quality that some interviewees thought would be advantageous for Oconee Hill. While it is a county official who

appoints trustees at Davis, the same type of arrangement would not necessarily be required at Oconee Hill. Indeed, trustees at Oconee Hill thought that selecting new board members themselves was an advantage because it is current board members who are most intimately acquainted with the board's needed areas of expertise. Therefore, rather than adopting Davis's trustee selection model outright, trustees at Oconee Hill could retain the right to select new trustees, but adopt Davis's strategy of limiting new trustees' terms to four years. Additionally, as one interviewee suggested, the board could adopt a rotational structure, whereby no single individual sits in the position of Board President for more than a certain period of time. By bringing a more regular flow of new perspectives to the board's attention, such strategies could help to make the board more responsive to changing community values and needs.

#### Improved Communication within Management Team.

Interviews revealed that communication between the board of trustees and FOHC improved greatly within the past two years, with the FOHC president now regularly attending trustee meetings. The attendance of Athens' mayor at these meetings is also an encouraging sign that the relationship between Oconee Hill's managers and the city government is growing stronger.

The interviews also revealed, however, that the managers' communication with the sexton and grounds crew is usually channeled through a single board member, a situation that could inhibit the sexton from hearing the whole range of issues the board has discussed. While it may be easier from a maintenance perspective for the sexton to take orders from a single person, the demonstrated sensitivity of his grounds surveillance responsibilities emphasizes the need for the sexton's actions to reflect the will of the whole board. Because the sexton is the only face

that the visiting public typically ever sees of the management team, it is important that his actions are informed by a broad understanding of the issues the trustees are facing. Trustees could easily improve communication with the sexton in this respect by allowing him to attend monthly trustee meetings.

### **Improved Community Outreach**

The research conducted as part of this thesis conclusively demonstrates the importance of forming strong ties between the Athens community and the landscape at Oconee Hill. First, Oconee Hill's design in the rural cemetery tradition suggests that it was intended for broad public use, and historical accounts show the high esteem in which the community held the cemetery in the past. Today, according to the visitor survey, around two-thirds of visitors to Oconee Hill think the cemetery should be made more open to the public. Most members of the management team also indicate that they believe the landscape would benefit from becoming more open and welcoming of the public. Finally, the case studies of Oakland Cemetery and Davis Cemetery suggest that a strong community presence may also contribute management-related benefits to the cemetery landscape. Managers at these cemeteries point out that such benefits can include a raised level of income from lot sales and donations, an improved level of security from crimes like vandalism, and the intangible but nonetheless important benefit of improving the community's concern for and knowledge of its collective past as embodied by the cemetery landscape.



### Channels of Communication between Visitors and Management Staff.

As this thesis has illustrated, communication between visitors and management staff at Oconee Hill have not always been optimal. One illustration of this fact is the divergence of terms that dissatisfied visitors and trustees use to express the sexton's security-related activities. While visitors who have had negative experiences in the cemetery might characterize their treatment as having been "rudely thrown out," cemetery managers, on the other hand, tend to term the actions as "protecting the cemetery." In the future, freer dialogue between private citizens and cemetery managers about their respective rights and responsibilities could perhaps defuse some of the problems that past misunderstandings have engendered and begin to align the two groups' values.

The 2010 study produced by UGA's Grady College of Journalism showed that the Athens community knew very little about Oconee Hill. Many of those who were familiar with the landscape either had misconceptions about its status as an active burial ground or had an unfavorable view about how welcoming the management staff was toward visitors. Members of the management team point to the spread of negative portrayals of Oconee Hill in the form of letters to the editor as a leading cause of the public's negative views. While the management staff has begun to address the source of this problem by becoming friendlier toward visitors, they have not provided visitors with a clear and convenient means to provide feedback on their experiences at Oconee Hill. Such a feedback mechanism might have prevented visitors in the past from voicing their complaints in the press, thereby limiting the spread of negative views among Athenians.

The lack of such a mechanism, however, suggests an easy opportunity for managers to improve their relations with the public today. Although comment books have been stolen in the past, a permanently mounted comment box near the cemetery's entrance could provide visitors with an immediate and straight-forward way to voice any feedback, positive or negative. Additionally, managers should include an e-mail address on Oconee Hill's website specifically dedicated to visitor comments and let visitors know that this option is available by posting a sign to this effect.

Clarification of the visitation rules is one additional easy measure that has the potential to improve communication between visitors and staff members. One survey respondent expressed confusion about the posted rules. Supporting this comment, one member of the management team pointed out that while cemetery rules stipulate that visitors must contact the sexton for certain visitation purposes, the sexton is often difficult to locate. Another rule requests that visitors wear "appropriate attire." While a staff member explained that this rule essentially entails that visitors should not wear bathing suits or pass through the cemetery without a shirt, the ambiguity of the rule might lead the overwhelming majority of visitors who do meet these minimum requirements to hesitate to enter the grounds. Increasing the specificity of posted rules may help to prevent such confusion in the future.

#### Community Outreach Programs.

Cemetery managers acknowledge the need for increased community outreach, and the successful programs at Oakland and Davis Cemeteries can serve as a basis for discussing similar initiatives at Oconee Hill. Managers at Oakland and Davis offer a wide variety of outreach programs, but because each cemetery is the result of particular local circumstances and is subject

to the attitudes of different population groups, not all of these programs are appropriate in the context of Oconee Hill. For this reason, the survey of current visitors to Oconee Hill can provide a useful guide of what types of events might be appropriate at Oconee Hill. The survey results indicate, for example, that most current visitors to Oconee Hill are uncomfortable with the idea of large events like festivals on the cemetery grounds. Therefore activities like the races and music festivals that Oakland regularly stages probably would not be well-received by the public if they were staged in Oconee Hill in the near future.

However, both Oakland and Davis do provide examples of events that current visitors may find more appealing. The fact that many visitors value the idea of making the cemetery more open to the public and express admiration for the “naturalness” of the landscape setting, suggests that these visitors might view the Davis model of publicizing the cemetery as a wildlife refuge or botanical preserve as appropriate. Small groups of bird watchers and other individuals interested in wildlife viewing certainly would be less intrusive on current visitors than a festival. Publicizing Oconee Hill Cemetery’s wildlife value could also potentially attract new groups of visitors to support Oconee Hill’s management interests. Such groups could include the Oconee Rivers Audubon Society, local grade school classes, or UGA programs focusing on wildlife, ecology, landscape issues, or any other subject for which the cemetery provides a unique study resource.

HOF’s outreach to high school chemistry classes studying the effects of weathering is another example of such a program that fosters interest in Oakland Cemetery among Atlanta’s youth population. As further evidence that these types of activities are appropriate for Oconee Hill, survey respondents and management team members alike expressed a strong interest in

fostering new types of educational programs at Oconee Hill. Most popular was the idea of increasing the frequency and variety of educational tours, a recommendation that the 2011 study from the College of Environment and Design also endorsed. In this case, Historic Oakland Foundation's palette of tour offerings could serve as a model for similar programs at Oconee Hill in the future.

A community cleanup day is another type of outreach program in which Oconee Hill's management team has expressed interest in developing further. FOHC already arranges such events, but they have typically been poorly attended, possibly due to the irregularity of event scheduling as well as a lack of publicity. Following the example of the Historic Oakland Foundation, FOHC could train groups of volunteers and schedule clean-up events at regular intervals to help elicit more community participation. Additionally, as one interviewee suggested, FOHC could reach out to families who have loved ones buried at Oconee Hill to attract a public that is already invested in the landscape.

One additional type of activity that may be appropriate for Oconee Hill involves wider use of the Sexton's House. Some interviewees indicated that the house currently is not utilized to its full potential. They suggested that some types of events, such as fundraising events, might be appropriate for the space. Again, Davis Cemetery provides an example of how FOHC might use the Sexton's House to foster community interest in the cemetery. Davis's example suggests that arranging rotating art or photo exhibits in the house may be a way to attract new types of visitors to Oconee Hill. Although survey results show that many current visitors to Oconee Hill are skeptical of the idea of holding art exhibitions in the cemetery, this result might reflect an assumption by respondents that the proposed exhibition would take place within the

cemetery landscape itself. Respondents' views might have been different if they had been asked specifically about the appropriateness of such an event in the Sexton's House. Appropriate uses of the Sexton's House may, therefore, be an important topic for further research.

#### Expanded Options for Final Disposition of Human Remains.

Interviews and case studies revealed one final important way for managers at Oconee Hill to reach a broader public: through offering an expanded set of "final disposition" alternatives for its customers. In interviews, managers at Oconee Hill voiced concern about the ways in which the funeral industry is changing, with customers increasingly choosing a variety of alternatives to the practice of embalming human remains in preparation for in-ground interment. This is the model that the vast majority of interments at Oconee Hill follow, and may help to explain the cemetery's declining interment rates. To address this issue, trustees have considered expanding the list of interment options available for customers who chose cremation. New options they have considered include ash dispersal in "naturally landscaped" areas or dispersal from a platform into the Oconee River.

In addition to following through with these innovative ideas, the trustees might also look to the policies that other cemetery management teams have adopted. The growing popularity of "green burials" compelled managers at Davis Cemetery to diversify their interment options, a move that attracted many customers. Davis's managers also recognized the undisputed popularity of cremation and added a simple columbarium design to their master plan. While the construction of a columbarium may require considerable expense, many other options like green burials and ash dispersal can be carried out with little capital investment. This fact suggests that

Oconee Hill's management team should, perhaps, prioritize these strategies. The next section of this chapter addresses strategies for prioritizing different programs.

### **Adopting a Formal Plan for the Future**

In interviews conducted for this thesis, Oconee Hill's trustees identified a wide variety of issues that they are either currently facing or have faced in the past. Making no mention of a guiding strategy other than protecting the interests of lot owners, their accounts of management at Oconee Hill characterized an approach that simply addresses issues and challenges as they arise. FOHC has summarized its purpose in a vision statement, but this gesture provides little concrete guidance for prioritizing particular projects or for evaluating future opportunities for action. Because the provision of such guidelines could greatly assist the management team in their duties, this thesis recommends that the trustees and FOHC adopt a plan to define and direct future management strategies at Oconee Hill.

The case studies of Oakland and Davis Cemeteries can serve once again in this regard as an example for Oconee Hill. Management teams at both of these cemeteries commissioned landscape architecture or architecture firms to create landscape master plans, and the groups use these plans today as the foundation of their management strategies. By following these documents, managers ensure that the decisions they make are systematic, and help contribute to fulfilling a pre-defined vision for the landscape's future. Such plans can not only guide care for the landscape itself, but can also engage community support for various landscape initiatives, a need that Oconee Hill's managers clearly identified. One member of FOHC recognized the need for a "strategic plan" for the cemetery and pointed out that developing such a plan could lead to

increased investment from the community. The interviewee believed that if potential donors recognize that a proposed project is part of a cohesive master plan, they may be more willing to contribute funding to the project.

A cemetery master plan that includes a well-crafted set of management guidelines must be based on an intimate knowledge of landscape needs as well as the needs of the community of which the landscape is a part. Fortunately for Oconee Hill, various groups and individuals already have compiled a broad base of knowledge on which such a plan can be based. Charlotte Marshall's historical research on the cemetery provides one major part of this knowledge base. The studies that various University of Georgia classes have conducted on Oconee Hill embody another. The journalism school study contributes to the body of knowledge by helping to identify the management team's problems with engaging the Athens community (Andrews 2010). The 2011 Preservation Advocacy study identifies a number of resources that might help managers address many of these issues (Reap 2011). Landscape management coursework helps to define many of the cemetery's landscape-based assets and issues by identifying its unique characteristics in terms of boundaries and views, topography, circulation, vegetation and landscape structures (Firth 2001). In addition, the landscape documentation that certainly will comprise a major part of Oconee Hill's forthcoming national register nomination will provide valuable information on which a future management plan can be based. The emphasis that the nomination will likely place on Oconee Hill's historical features may even highlight the need for a dedicated cemetery preservation plan like the one Oakland's managers adopted, which endorses the Secretary of the Interior's standards for rehabilitation.

Finally, this thesis contributes to an understanding of management issues at Oconee Hill by collecting data regarding the attitudes and values of members of the management team and current visitors to the cemetery. It demonstrates, for example, the fact that visitors place a high value on both public access *and* preservation, as well as on the cemetery's "natural" features, its historical value and the peacefulness of the landscape. Such information is critical in helping professionals determine what to include and prioritize in crafting a vision for future management. Indeed, a plan that bases its recommendations on this type of information will have a greater chance of satisfying the needs of the Athens community because it reflects the attitudes and values of community members for whom Oconee Hill means the most.

## **Conclusion**

Oconee Hill Cemetery was a product of the nineteenth-century Rural Cemetery Movement, an innovative trend in cemetery design that emphasized natural landscape features in order to produce a more peaceful and soothing mortuary setting. During the first decades of Oconee Hill's existence, it not only met the interment needs of the Athens community, but also provided community members with a unique setting for peaceful walks and meditation. Historical references show that it was a source of great pride for the community, and through the years it came to be the final resting place of many important Athenians and Georgians.

Today Oconee Hill is managed through a cooperative effort between its Board of Trustees and a non-profit group, The Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery. The trustees determine cemetery policies and have fiduciary responsibility for the cemetery. They also oversee day-to-day operations like maintenance and security, tasks for which they hire a full-time sexton.



FOHC's role in management is in "enhancing" the cemetery. This role largely entails organizing fund-raising efforts to pay for expensive projects that the trustees' yearly budget cannot cover. The group also organizes occasional clean-up days and events such as a yearly Veterans Day memorial service.

Interviews with members of the management team revealed a number of current management issues at Oconee Hill. These issues included serious financial constraints, problems with vandalism and security, controversy over public access, and public perception problems. In addition to these problems, surveys also revealed a number of manager values and preferences. Trustees related that their top priorities were protecting the interests of families who own lots at Oconee Hill and assuring the cemetery's financial solvency. FOHC members also expressed concerns over the rights of lot-owning families, but expressed a great interest in increasing community involvement with the landscape at Oconee Hill.

The survey of visitors to Oconee Hill established who is using the cemetery, what they are doing in landscape, and what their preferences for the future are. The survey first found that many visitors were young, with about half of all respondents between the ages of 18 -24. It also explored visitation trends and found that about one-third of visitors were not from Athens and that about 70% of visitors had either never been to Oconee Hill before or were infrequent visitors. The survey also revealed why people were visiting the landscape. It found that many people were there for passive recreation or for historical or genealogical interest, and that only about one-fourth of all respondents were there to visit the grave of a loved one. In sharing what they liked about Oconee Hill, visitors revealed that the landscape qualities and features they valued most highly were the landscape's beauty and "natural" features, its historic value, the

peacefulness of the grounds, and landscape's cultural features such as monuments and iron fences. A large majority of visitors thought Oconee Hill was a "welcoming" place, and indicated that they valued both making the landscape more open to the public and preservation. Finally, respondents indicated their preferences for future activities in the cemetery by evaluating the appropriateness of different activities in the landscape. Although the results of this segment of the survey were less conclusive than other portions, generally speaking, respondents favored uses that were less intensive.

The case studies of Oakland Cemetery and Davis Cemetery suggested a number of possible management alternatives for Oconee Hill. First, because the management structure at both cemeteries relies partially on city resources, they do not have the same kinds of financial constraints that Oconee Hill's managers face. The success of this type of arrangement at these two cemeteries suggests that a similar model might be appropriate for Oconee Hill. The case studies also highlighted the centrality of community engagement programs at both Davis and Oakland. The benefits these programs have had for managers at these cemeteries suggest that a greater emphasis on such programs at Oconee Hill might alleviate some of its public perception problems. Lastly, the fact that management at both Oakland Cemetery and Davis Cemetery are guided by master plans could serve as an example for Oconee Hill to follow.

While this thesis offers a number of recommendations to help improve management at Oconee Hill, including improved community outreach and changes to the current management structure, it has been beyond the project's scope to craft a full management plan. However, the thesis's final recommendation that Oconee Hill's management team commission such a plan is crucial to ensuring that the landscape at Oconee Hill grows hand-in-hand with the Athens

community, respecting the values and needs of all parties with a stake in the landscape. This plan should offer concrete guidelines for managers to follow, and at the same time allow for shifts in economic realities, stakeholder values and other unforeseen circumstances that are the inevitable consequence of passing time. Such an adaptive management plan can help to ensure that Oconee Hill's future in the Athens community is as vibrant and valued as its past.

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**APPENDIX A:**

**QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY OF VISITORS TO OCONEE HILL CEMETERY**

**1)** What is the nature of your interest in Oconee Hill Cemetery? (circle all that apply)

- a. A loved one is buried in the cemetery
- b. A pleasant setting for walks or passive recreation
- c. Historical or genealogical interest
- d. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**2)** Are you a member of the group “Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery?” (circle one)

Yes / No

**3)** What is your age and how long have you lived in Athens?

**4)** How often do you visit the cemetery?

Daily / Once a Week / Once a Month / Once a Year / Other \_\_\_\_\_

**5)** Please rate on a scale of 1 to 10, how welcoming you see Oconee Hill as being for visitors? (1 is very unwelcoming and 10 is very welcoming)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

Has your perception of Oconee Hill’s openness towards visitors changed during the time you have been visiting? (circle one)

Yes / No

If yes, how has it changed?

6) How do you use the cemetery when you are here?

7) What do you like about Oconee Hill Cemetery?

Would you like to see any changes made? If so, what changes?

8) Please rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how important you feel preserving Oconee Hill's landscape and features to be. (1 is not at all important and 10 is very important.)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

9) Please rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how important you feel making Oconee Hill more open to the public to be. (1 is not at all important and 10 is very important.)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

10) Please rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how desirable you feel each of the following activities would be in Oconee Hill Cemetery. (1 is very undesirable and 10 is very desirable.)

A small performance (for example a musical performance)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

An art exhibition

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

A community event (for example a small festival)

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

**APPENDIX B:**  
**INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR MANAGEMENT TEAM INTERVIEWS**

- 1) How did you become involved with Oconee Hill Cemetery?
- 2) What do you know about the history of community access and use of Oconee Hill Cemetery?
- 3) Who owns the Cemetery? Has the ownership status ever been disputed?
- 4) Have there been problems with trespassing or vandalism on cemetery grounds? If so, what were the nature of the problems and how serious/frequent have they been?
- 5) What is the policy or consensus of “Friends of Oconee Hill” / the Board of Trustees in regards to public access to the cemetery? Has this changed through time?
- 6) Could you characterize the current relationship between Oconee Hill Cemetery and the Athens Community as you perceive it?
- 7) What is the current relationship between the Oconee Hill Board of Trustees, the “Friends of Oconee Hill Cemetery,” and the Unified Government of Athens/Clarke County? What channels of communication exist between them?
- 8) What are the Sexton’s duties and powers?
- 9) Right now explicitly permitted activities in the cemetery include photography, tours, picnics and outings with the approval of the sexton, as well as bicycling on paved paths. Are there any other uses you would like to see permitted in Oconee Hill?
- 10) What channels are available for Athens citizens to give feedback or input on the way the cemetery is managed?
- 11) If Athens and the UGA campus become increasingly urbanized, do you think the role of the cemetery’s relationship with the community should change? How?
- 12) Should cemetery grounds be used to provide additional pedestrian linkages and increase pedestrian connectivity in Athens?

13) Aside from its obvious role as an active burial ground, Oconee Hill is the subject of occasional public tours and cleanup days. Would you like to see other community events taking place on the grounds in order to raise awareness of the cemetery?

14) What do you view as the most serious issues facing Oconee Hill in the future?