

Mortuary Practices and Sustainability: The Rise of Natural Burials in the United States

by
Madison Collins

A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation
from the University Honors College

Spring 2022

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Will Leggett, Thesis Director

Dr. Philip Phillips, Thesis Committee Chair

Mortuary Practices and Sustainability: The Rise of Natural Burials in the United States

by

Madison Collins

APPROVED:

Will Leggett, Thesis Director
Associate Professor, Anthropology

Philip Phillips, Thesis Committee Chair
Associate Dean, University Honors College

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Environmental Issues.....	6
Other Countries.....	10
Emotional Implications.....	12
Economic Impediments.....	16
Green Burial Facilities in the South.....	17
Ethnocentrism.....	18
Conclusion.....	19
References.....	21

Mortuary Practices and Sustainability: The Rise of Natural Burials in the United States

Natural burials, also referred to as green burials, typically involve digging a hole in the earth, placing the deceased in the hole, and covering the body with the previously removed soil. The process may also include wrapping the deceased in a cloth shroud or another simple wrapping (Green Burial Council 2021). Natural burials are practiced in many cultures around the globe and have been an occurrence since the time of Neanderthals, 50,000 - 130,000 years ago, or even earlier (Culotta 2019). Over time, multiple variations of burial concepts and rituals provided cultural communities a process to deal with losing a loved one or family member.

Although there are multiple variations for how cultures and communities may practice burial rituals, I will be focusing on the American-style funeral in the southern United States and the transition to natural burials. My thesis investigates the rise of natural burials in the southern United States. My investigation into the growth of natural burials explores environmental issues, emotional implications, and economic impediments that contribute to the recent expansion of this novel mortuary practice.

The American-style funeral, which includes the embalming, beautification, elaborate caskets, and viewing of the deceased, was not normal practice in the South until near the end of the 19th century. According to Dr. Charles Wilson, the American funeral industry was a northern invention. "It emerged among the northeastern middle classes in the Gilded Age and since then has transformed the way most Americans respond to death" (Wilson 1983: 50). Before embalming was commonplace, home funerals were the normal funerary practice throughout the majority of the United States. Home funerals

consisted of family, friends, and others close to the deceased all contributing to taking care of the deceased's body. The involvement of the community for a funeral was typical of rural populations. "In most small towns and rural communities, neighbors and family members assumed responsibility for washing the body of the deceased and preparing it for burial (Wilson 1983: 50). Family members would clean and care for the deceased, while neighbors would help build the coffin or wound the shroud. The preparations for a funeral could take place over several days, so the family would use natural elements to try and slow the decay of the body. "In the days before embalming, they might have placed salt on the abdomen, an ammonia-soaked cloth on the face, and quarters on the eyelids to keep them closed" (Wilson 1983: 50). These actions would have slightly delayed the body's natural physiological response to death.

It was during the Civil War that the use of embalming techniques became a more frequent practice so as to better transport the dead back to their families (Bruni 2014). However, the embalming method was thought of as a Northern mortuary technique and went against the religious ideology of the South. "Embalming did not catch on as quickly, however, in the small towns and rural areas that were typical of the South for so long. The undertaker had trouble convincing many tradition-bound southerners to allow this tampering with the earthly remains of the temple of God" (Wilson 1983: 51). It was not until the 20th century that undertakers were able to convince larger populations of the South to have embalming as part of the burial process. "Embalming was a service that, when southerners accepted it, added status to any undertaker who could perform what seemed like a surgical technique" (Wilson 1983: 52). This led to an increase in "funeral homes", as well as the evolution of Southern funeral directors "Between 1910 and 1930

southern undertakers thus improved their facilities and moved from simple undertaking parlors into larger quarters, usually remodeled houses referred to from then on as ‘funeral homes’” (Wilson 1983: 53). The use and acceptance of embalming in the South helped in establishing the route from southern undertaker to southern funeral director.

Prior to mass-marketed caskets, members of the decedent’s family would either build their own coffins, purchase them from carpenters and cabinet makers, or have the southern undertaker bring a cheap pine coffin with him. “The coffin might be homemade or purchased from the furniture store or the country store” (Wilson 1983: 51). The southern undertaker, if called upon, did not serve as a vital position in the funerary process since many Southerners would have already cleaned and prepped the body for burial. “He would have dinner with the family, help dig the grave, organize the services, and return home late at night” (Wilson 1983: 51). The funeral service would have been conducted by the minister and would be reflective of the South’s predominately evangelical Protestant folk religion. This religious connection, paired with a lack of knowledge, hindered the progression and acceptance of embalming techniques in the South (Wilson 1983). However, the preservation of the dead in the South gradually became accepted. “Embalming was increasingly accepted in the South after 1900, due to increased publicity of it by national funeral organizations and periodicals, improvements in embalming fluids, and increased concern for sanitation” (Wilson 1983: 52). Undertakers who were knowledgeable in embalming practices became highly sought after the South’s acceptance of bodily preservation. Pressured by southern state associations, state legislators eventually created laws for the standardized practice of Southern funeral homes and cemeteries, leading to education-based careers as Southern

morticians and funeral directors. The laws tried to “eliminate unethical practices and faulty embalming, upgrade educational requirements, and raise the status of undertakers” (Wilson 1983: 58). As a way to ensure the protection of funerary service workers, these laws required for funerary service members to be educated in the practice, and for funeral homes to be licensed.

In 1993, Britain’s first designated natural burial ground opened at Carlisle cemetery, and by 2010, 207 natural burial sites were in operation (Rumble 2010: 2). In the United States, the first designated natural burial site, Ramsey Creek Preserve, was opened in 1998 (Conservation Burial Alliance 2021). According to the Conservation Burial Alliance (2021), the founders of Ramsey Creek Preserve, Dr. Billy Campbell and Kimberley Campbell, initially used the site as a laboratory for the development of green interment. “The preserve was formed to harness the funeral industry for land protection and restoration, to fund non-profits, education, the arts and scientific research, and to provide a less expensive and more meaningful burial option” (Memorial Ecosystems 2020). Dr. Campbell used the site as a way to initiate and establish standards for conservation burials. (Conservation Burial Alliance 2021). These standards were then used by Joe Sehee, founder of the Green Burial Council, to create burial standards and a certification program. “Joe went on to found the Green Burial Council that used and extended Billy’s standards as the basis for its conservation burial standards and certification program” (Conservation Burial Alliance 2021). The standards for natural burials include the waiving of embalming fluids and generally how deep to bury the body. “As a general rule, the ideal burial depth for optimal decomposition conditions is 3.5 – 4 feet from the bottom of the grave to the soil horizon” (Green Burial Council

2021). The standard measurement for burial depth ensures that there is a smell barrier for both humans and animals.

The current 2019 revision of the standards also distinguishes varying types of natural burials that the Green Burial Council will certify. The three types of cemeteries that the Green Burial Council certifies are hybrid cemeteries, natural burial grounds, and conservation burial grounds. According to New Hampshire Funeral Resources, Education & Advocacy (2022), as of 2022 there are 348 certified green burial cemeteries in the United States and Canada. The majority of these cemeteries are hybrid at 268; with natural counting in at 60, and conservation at 20.

The differences among the three of these mainly have to do with the ownership, purpose, and site conditions of the land in use, but each of them requires that the burial plot does not come into contact with toxins and other non-sustainable essential aspects. “Accept for burial only decedents that have not been embalmed or those embalmed only with GBC-approved, nontoxic chemicals” (Green Burial Council 2019). The waving of embalming is the third standard on the *Green Burial Council Cemetery Standards 2020* list, which applies to all hybrid, natural, and conservation burials. Another standard introduced on the list includes an assessment of the property. “Conduct an *Ecological Impact Assessment*, starting with a property baseline document that includes existing ecological conditions and sensitive area analysis. Update periodically to assess future property/habitat conditions and plant inventory” (Green Burial Council 2019). Property assessment is standard eight, however it only applies to natural and conservation burials. Conservation burials must adhere to all of the cemetery standards, and uphold several of their own unique requirements. “Operate in conjunction with a government agency or a

nonprofit conservation organization that had legally binding responsibility for perpetual monitoring and enforcement of the easement” (Green Burial Council 2019). Perpetual monitoring is standard thirteen, which specifically addresses conservation burials and what is required of them to be certified. The Campbells’ intention of starting Ramsey Creek Preserve was to bury people and help to conserve land. ““When you bury the first body it changes the feel of the land. Connecting people to the land was always at the core”” (Conservation Burial Alliance 2021). The standards on the 2019 list provide a guide in better understanding the impact of natural burials on the land, as well as the impact on the people.

Environmental Issues

In the United States, the most frequently named contributors to the rise in natural burials are environmental issues, emotional implications, and economic impediments. “For environmentally concerned individuals, a green funeral is an option—no embalming, no toxic chemicals, a biodegradable coffin made from willow, wicker, or bamboo, and no vaults, just whole bodies or ashes” (Dickinson 2012: 145). A natural burial presents itself as one of the best eco-friendly, end-of-life options to those who make a daily conscious effort to be more environmentally friendly or to those wishing for a more natural end-of-life option. Green burials are also typically associated with a cheaper price-tag: “A green funeral in itself is not only for saving the planet and for one’s conscience, it typically is overall less expensive than a traditional funeral. The whole package for a green funeral ranges between \$2,500 and \$4,000 [2009-2010]” (Dickinson 2012: 145). Along with an eco-friendly mindset and the lower cost, many who choose natural burials as their end-of-life option often associate more positive emotions with the

process. For example, while conducting her research of a UK-based natural burial site, Barton Glebe, Dr. Hannah Rumble interviewed several people who were already pre-registered for a burial plot, meaning that these persons have personally and legally committed themselves to be buried at Barton Glebe when their time has come. “I think it’s easier for people to *grieve* in that sort of context [natural burial] than in a crematorium...I think it makes death a much more natural thing, you know part of the natural process (A pre-registered woman)” (Rumble 2010: 106). These factors, based on my conclusions, seem to be the most common factors in the preparation and decision making of one’s afterlife care determinations today.

According to the Green Burial Council, [traditional] burials in the U.S. use approximately 4.3 million gallons of embalming fluid, 20 million board feet of hardwoods, 1.6 million tons of concrete, 17,000 tons of copper and bronze, 64,500 tons of steel, along with caskets and vaults that leach iron, copper, lead, zinc, and cobalt (2021). Individually, each of these products contribute to human created issues that are harmful to the planet, as well as humans. We can also see other sources of cemetery pollutions which could be contributed to the leaching of chemicals used in the embalming process and from the preservation of wood coffins.

For example, the use of Chromated Cooper Arsenate (CCA) as wood preservatives may influence anthropogenic input of copper, chromium and arsenic into the soil environment of cemeteries as coffins sprayed with such chemicals compounds degrade under burial conditions (Amuno & Oluwajana 2014: 66). The preservatives used in hardwoods for caskets are typically made up of chromated arsenicals, which, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, can

cause harm to aquatic life and plants, as well as contribute cancerous and non-cancerous harm to humans. Since the process of traditional open-casket burials is extensive, it entails a large carbon footprint. This process includes the manufacturing, production, and shipping of building materials for caskets, the transportation of the materials and/or caskets, the production of headstones, the lining of the burial plot, etc. “The funeral service unit of the Paris Municipal Government pointed out in 2017 that the total greenhouse gas emissions of standard burial coffins and tombstones are equivalent to the carbon footprint of a car traveling more than 4000 km [2485.485 miles]” (Lee et. al. 2022). The statistics of carbon emissions of traditional, open-casket funerals is not helped by mass-market production and shipment of items such as caskets that can be purchased from multinational retail corporations like Walmart and Amazon that already contribute significant levels of carbon emissions yearly.

Another consequence of traditional open-casket funerals is the harmful effects of embalming chemicals, such as formaldehyde, on the living. “An NCI case-control study among funeral industry workers that characterized exposure to formaldehyde also found an association between increasing formaldehyde exposure and mortality from myeloid leukemia” (National Cancer Institute 2011). The studies conducted by the National Cancer Institute argue that there is a strong link between those who have prolonged exposure to formaldehyde and those who are diagnosed with myeloid leukemia. Not only does formaldehyde affect humans, but it can greatly affect the health and continuation of animals. “When animals are exposed to formaldehyde it can make them sick, affect their ability to breed, and reduce their life spans. It can also change their behaviour and appearance” (Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts 2009).

Although formaldehyde is inescapable as it occurs naturally in the atmosphere at low levels, the consistent use and contact of it for practices such as open-casket burials can tamper with the health and wellbeing of humans and animals. People who consider and commit to natural burials often have the intention of doing better for the planet in some way. During her ethnographic research, Hannah Rumble conducted interviews with people whose intentions were to be buried at Barton Glebe. Rumble also conducted interviews with civil celebrants, or those who conducted non-religious funeral services at the site.

‘...I just think that more and more, people just think it’s the right way to go. It’s the right thing to do, because of course all the time we’re being told what’s good for the environment, what’s eco-friendly and people have just become more conscious of it I think, so they make those decisions [for natural burial] thinking that it’s *their* contribution’ (A civil celebrant). (Rumble 2010: 51).

Although the phrasing this individual uses considers natural burials “the right thing to do” that might not be necessarily true for all communities. For example, white advocates of natural burial may unconsciously consume information that disregards large parts of the narrative of marginalized people. “Activists often fall into the trap of broader character judgements like, “embalming is morally wrong” (Elicone 2020).

Acknowledging that natural burials may not be “the right thing to do” for everyone is important to address so as not to do further harm to those particular marginalized communities.

Another related issue is carbon emissions. Many people of older generations, such as Baby Boomers, are choosing cremation over traditional casket burials as their environmentally friendly end-of-life option.

By 2040, according to the report, the cremation rate in the U.S. is projected to be 78.7% while the burial rate is predicted to be just 15.7%, signifying that cremation is no fading trend – it is the new norm, set in motion by Baby Boomers’ evolving end-of-life preferences” (National Funeral Directors Association 2019).

Although their intention may mean well, the execution may not be so clean-cut, at least in the United States. Since all cremations in the U.S. occur indoors, they require major amounts of fuel. According to a National Geographic article by Becky Little, it is estimated that cremations in the U.S. account for roughly 360,000 metric tons of CO₂ emissions each year (2019). Cremations in the United States also exhaust major amounts of harmful emissions. “The main emissions from crematoriums during the cremation of human bodies and coffins are nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, particulate matter, mercury, other heavy metals, and persistent organic pollutants (POPs), which cause serious harm to humans and the environment” (Lee, K.-H., et. al. 2022). These pollutants rain back down and coat the surrounding environment in potentially toxic substances. Although the popularity of cremations is rising, I believe that the potential harmful effects may lead to their ultimate decline.

Other Countries

Natural burials in the United States reached a peak in the mid-19th century, but are slowly making a return from their few centuries hiatus. The modern natural burials we

see are influenced by the resurrection of natural funerary practices performed in the United Kingdom (Conservation Burial Alliance 2021). “They [United Kingdom] promoted green burial in order to save lands for development as well as to protect the environment” (Lau, C.S.Y., et. al. 2020: 2). As I mentioned earlier, Britain’s first designated natural burial ground opened at Carlisle cemetery in 1993. Since then, there have been hundreds of natural burial sites open throughout the UK. “In 2010, 207 natural burial sites are in operation across the United Kingdom (UK) and a further 35 are at the planning or proposal stage” (Rumble 2010: 2). I believe that the openings and operations of so many natural burial plots throughout the UK shows the significance of natural burials on the future of contemporary mortuary ritual.

However, in places like Hong Kong and Singapore, we get a different take on what a green burial may be. In Hong Kong, a green burial typically refers to scattering the ashes of the recently deceased. “There are two types of green burial services provided in Hong Kong, including scattering the ashes at the twelve GoR [Gardens of Remembrance] or into the sea” (Lau, C.S.Y., et. al. 2020: 2). In order to perform either of these ceremonies, family members must apply and receive permits that will allow the scattering of ashes in one of those locations. In Singapore, the latest green burial method, introduced in 2007, is called the Crypt Burial System. “It is an improved version of traditional soil burial where burial places are made by a crypt without a base and lay out in grids...They put the ashes of deceased into a biodegradable urn and then place underground or scatter the ashes directly to the ground” (Lau, C.S.Y., et. al. 2020: 4). This method utilizes the land more effectively and prevents grave shifting from erosion.

Emotional Implications

Since the turn of the 19th century, Americans have feared the corpse (Emerick 2000: 43). They see the corpse as contagious, disgusting, and the ultimate failure of prolonging life (Emerick 2000) This ideal comes from the thought and feeling that modern medicine has ultimately failed in its quest of immortality. “Medicine then is, for Westerners and Americans, both a tangible and psychological means for harnessing death. It is a reasonable way to combat the philosophical fears of immortality, while simultaneously fixing the physical imperfections of the declining body and the corpse” (Emerick 2000: 35). Along with this perception of immortality is the idea of cleanliness and sanitation. “...The American avoidance of death has enabled an entire funeral industry to be built by distancing oneself from the death of a loved one and handing off to the specialists...and not getting our hands too dirty” (Scott 2020: 21). In this search for immortality, we find that the memorialization of our loved ones becomes a key part of the burial service.

Memorialization in traditional open-casket funerals is typically depicted by grave markers or headstones that include the name, date of birth and death, and description of the decedent, or a quote that is thought to be representative of them. “Culturally, bereaved individuals are used to materially expressing their grief through memorial objects...” (Balonier, A. K., Parsons, E. & Patterson, A. 2019: 224). Grave markers and headstones can last centuries with proper care and maintenance, so it seems that their use for memorialization does seemingly reflect on the immortalization of the deceased.

The memorialization of loved ones is joined by space in which one is comfortable or “allowed” to perceive the totality of death. Balonier, A. K., Parsons, E. & Patterson, A.

(2019: 222) argue that the space perceived in or around maintained cemeteries is purposeful and designates, physically and psychologically, the separation of life and death. Throughout their article, “The unnaturalness of natural burials: dispossessing the dispossessed” the authors vehemently disparage the “naturalness” of natural burials and contend that natural burials take away from one’s legacy in life.

A traditional cemetery is linked to history and ancestry, memorializing the deceased’s life, giving them their space for a peaceful rest while acknowledging their former presence among the living by marking their individual plot. In contrast, natural burial grounds are integrated into existing public forests, the plots of which are not marked individually, leaving their exact location unidentified” (Balonier, A. K., Parsons, E. & Patterson, A. 2019: 222).

In natural burials, the use of grave markers is typically passed in lieu of a more natural or environmentally friendly marker. More environmentally friendly options, such as flowers, can also create a unique and therapeutic experience for the bereaved.

I was planting wildflowers and things on his grave—most of which don’t survive—but that was quite therapeutic...and sometimes I cut the grass down a bit if it’s smothering things and sometimes I plant a few new ones if they’re not doing very well. And I used to cut Victor’s hair, so I sometimes think it’s like cutting his hair (Rumble 2010: 115).

The excerpt above is from an interview Dr. Rumble conducted with a widow whose husband is buried at Barton Glebe. The interview shows how more eco-friendly memorialization options, such as planting flowers, can create an almost “living” space for bereavement.

Planting wildflowers gives the bereaved an opportunity to generate a relationship with a grave and helps to validate the decision for a natural burial by creating continuity between 'home' and the site of natural burial. "Planting therefore keeps memories and the deceased's identity alive, quite literally symbolized by the life of the flowers" (Rumble 2010: 117). This could be a specific indigenous wildflower or many, it could be the planting of a specific tree, the use of a smaller wooden grave marker, or even the use of GPS location to help living friends and family determine the site of the decedent's burial plot. No matter the marker of the burial plot, the personalization and symbolic immortalization through reciprocity can lead grieving loved ones to better understand and find comfort in the disposal efforts.

These two ideas of burial space reflect the inanimate and animate views of death. Cemeteries with stone or marble markers can seem distant and impersonal, while natural burials can offer a space of continual growth and intimate. "For some interviewees, cemeteries and crematoria occupy inanimate earth, whilst natural burial grounds exemplify an animate earth" (Rumble 2010: 227). On one hand you have the stiff and rigid depiction of death and the afterlife. On the other, in natural burials, one sees the function of death as a new way to promote and give back to life. This dichotomy is important to highlight as it can affect the decision that one makes for an end-of-life option. Some may feel compelled or obliged to appease their family or to meet their religious or spiritual guidelines, so they stick to a traditional open-casket burial. Others, however, may opt for natural burials because the image of reciprocity and the thought of an immortal mutuality gives them an eternal purpose. The poem, 'Woodland Burial' by

Pam Ayers expresses how one can relate to the perception of natural burials and their frequent depiction of being a lush and nourishing reciprocal environment:

Don't lay me in some gloomy churchyard shaded by a wall,
Where the dust of ancient bones has spread a dryness over all,
Lay me in some leafy loam where, sheltered from the cold,
Little seeds investigate, and tender leaves unfold,
There, kindly and affectionately plant a native tree,
To grow resplendent before God and hold some part of me,
The roots will not disturb me as they wend their peaceful way,
To build the fine and bountiful from closure and decay,
To seek their small requirements so that when their work is done
I'll be tall and standing strongly in the beauty of the sun.

Hannah Rumble, a British social anthropologist who has examined the transition and role of natural burials in the UK, argues that the role of natural burials can play a pivotal role in the decisions of the living and highlights standards and values that affect them and their loved ones even after they have moved on from their earthly bodies. After interviewing several attendees of natural burials, Rumble discussed that many recited having felt more comfortable and less constrained versus their experience at a cemetery or crematoria: "Repeated suggestions that people *stay longer* or *linger* at the graveside in a woodland burial ground suggests a relaxed atmosphere and more positive mood than is customarily expected at a funeral" (Rumble 2010: 107). The positive feedback given to Rumble by loved ones attending the natural burial or revisiting the plot substantiates its therapeutic benefits for the bereaved.

Economic Impediments

A person's financial standing is almost always a factor in decision making. Green burials are presented as a cheaper alternative to traditional open-casket funerals, which provides another option when considering end-of-life arrangements. With more Baby Boomers planning end-of-life arrangements, they may be seeking more affordable and eco-friendly options in lieu of an open-casket funeral. "Thus, land preserved for the dead can protect the land from urban sprawl and allow the dead to make a statement from their graves" (Dickinson 2012: 145). The most popular option is cremation, although, that is not as environmentally friendly as the average person may believe it to be. Nonetheless, the increased interest in cremation has steered many away from the "traditional" funeral and burial method. "With cremation rates rising from 10% in the 1970s to over 30% in 2010, a gradual rejection of traditional burial practices is on the horizon" (Dickinson 2012: 142). According to the National Funeral Directors Association, the "national median cost of a funeral with viewing and burial for calendar year 2019 was \$7,640" (2021). Natural burials tend to cost half or less than that of the median average for a traditional funeral. "A green funeral in itself is not only for saving the planet and for one's conscience, it typically is overall less expensive than a traditional funeral" (Dickinson 2012: 145). For example, the average cost of burial at Larkspur Conservation, a natural burial cemetery in Sumner County, TN, ranges from about \$2,000 to \$5,000 (Larkspur 2020).

Although natural burials present the most viable option all around for most Americans, they are just now becoming mainstream information. Therefore, they are often not the first, or even the second, option presented to those preparing for end-of-life

arrangements. In some states, funeral and burial laws create obstacles that push for mortuary status-quo and can prevent or hinder the creation of natural burial cemeteries. In these states, ready-to-embalm laws help sustain the traditional open-casket burial method. “Ready-to-embalm laws are designed to preserve the status-quo in funeral markets, thereby protecting currently licensed funeral directors from the ravages of competition” (Harrington 2007: 215). The funerary industry controls death and the disposing of bodies and is a for-profit capitalistic enterprise.

Ready-to-embalm laws and the economic presence of funerals in the United States illustrates just how powerful the funeral industry is and how difficult it is to relinquish that power. Many of the states that have active ready-to-embalm laws are met with restrictions on who can operate mortuaries, sell caskets, and make it extremely difficult for anyone other than a licensed funeral director to own or conduct a funeral home. However, Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, and seven other states do not have ready-to-embalm laws. This makes the opening and operation of green burial facilities easier for those states.

Green Burial Facilities in the South

Earlier I mentioned the South’s rough transition to what is now the American-traditional open-casket funeral. It comes as no surprise that the effort to make natural burials more readily available in the South has caught on quite well. There are over 20 natural burial sites in the Southern United States with most being hybrid facilities and a few being conservation burial sites. Of course, the original natural burial site, Ramsey Creek Preserve, was established in 1998 in South Carolina. “Today Ramsey Creek Preserve has 71 acres with room for 1500 burial sites” (Hoffner 2018). Of course, there

are other natural burial facilities in South Carolina, such as Dust to Dust Cemetery; however, Ramsey Creek was the first in the nation to be certified by the Green Burial Council as a conservation burial ground (Conservation Burial Alliance 2021). Further south in the state of Georgia, one option is Milton Fields. Created by Jim Bell and located in Atlanta, Milton Fields has been approved as a perpetual care cemetery by the Georgia Secretary of State which ensures that the facility will be maintained in perpetuity (Milton Fields 2018).

Finally, circling back up to Tennessee, we have Larkspur Conservation in Nashville, which officially opened in 2018 and became the first nature preserve for natural burial in Tennessee (Larkspur Conservation 2020). East Tennessee is also home to Narrow Ridge Earth Literacy Center, which protects more than 500 acres of mountain land. They provide several different sustainability opportunities and adventures. They do offer natural burials at no cost, however donations to the site are highly encouraged (Narrow Ridge 2022).

Ethnocentrism

With all that has been presented so far, I would like to address some of the overarching issues with the Green Burial Movement and how the approach of something as delicate as death should be addressed. Much of the “movement” behind the transition to natural burials has been pushed forward and initiated by White Christian Europeans or Americans. Identities that are not often associated with marginalization or prejudices “When ethnic violence and genocide is not a collectively shared part of one’s history it is easier to overlook the importance of postmortem restorative procedures in the death customs of cultures who do have that tragic shared history” (Elicone 2020). Those who

do not fit into marginalized communities, including myself, typically do not fully understand the position of those outside of those boundaries. We may also not be fully aware of how damaging our interpretations or advocations are on those who have been historically marginalized. Such is the way for Black Americans, Native Americans, Jewish families, and other communities who have faced great prejudices. For example, those in the Green Burial Movement strongly advocate that grave markers are not a necessity and that they should be replaced with other natural items.

To Green Burial activists, gravestone memorialization often goes against the whole premise of Green Burial— leaving no trace upon the Earth. But just repeating that line does nothing to reckon with the anxieties held by those who carry the burden of a cultural history where they were denied material expressions of legacy like gravestones (Elicone 2020).

Although natural burial may be easier to sell nowadays, we still must acknowledge the delicate nature of death and grief. “Calculations of figures like carbon footprints, chemical half-lives, and decomposition timelines have led us down the exhilarating road of divine right through scientific discovery, but what we fail to rectify when we sell our plots is the deeply personal, existential, and relational choices of those who have already discovered this path” (Elicone 2020). It is essential to the progression of natural burials, and other environmentally conscious efforts, that we respect and give credit to those who have already established these actions.

Conclusion

As the world looks to innovate and integrate more environmentally friendly options for everyday life, they must also turn to more environmentally conscious end-of-

life arrangements. With the increase of many environmentally and economically conscious Baby Boomers, preparation for end-of-life arrangements has already led to an increase in cremations. This choice of cremation, although good in intentions, harms the environment by releasing toxic pollutants into the air as well as contributing greatly to carbon emissions. Natural burials, however, offer a more eco-friendly route in the path to end-of-life care. They forgo the use of embalming techniques, which allows for a natural decay of the body. This natural decay provides nourishment to the surrounding environment. The idea that natural burials are symbolic for the reciprocity of life can also provide a sense of peace to grieving loved ones. Natural burials are also a more economically friendly choice. They allow a place for bereavement without adding the stress of cost to those grieving. In the South, the path to a more eco-friendly death had been previously laid well before the turn of the 19th century. By recent efforts, we find that we are turning back to our roots in an effort to bring modernity to more natural methods of disposal. I believe that the careful spread of knowledge of the harmful effects of both open-casket burials and cremations will lead others to seek out natural burial as their preferred end-of-life arrangement.

References

- Amuno, S. A., & Oluwajana, A. O. (2014). Comparative assessment of trace metals in soils associated with casket burials: Towards implementing green burials. *Eurasian Journal of Soil Science*, 3, 65-76.
- Australian Government. (2009). *Formaldehyde: What does the National Pollutant Inventory do?* Retrieved from Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage, and the Arts.: <http://www.npi.gov.au/resource/formaldehyde>
- Balonier, A. K., Parsons, E., & Patterson, A. (2019). The unnaturalness of natural burials: dispossessing the dispossessed. *Mortality*, 24(2), 212-230.
- Bruni, C. (2014). *Green burial and the north-south divide*. Retrieved from JSTOR Daily: <https://daily.jstor.org/green-burial-and-the-north-south-divide>
- Conservation Burial Alliance. (2021). *The Ramsey Creek Preserve Story*. Retrieved from https://www.conservationburialalliance.org/ramsey_creek_preserve.html
- Culotta, E. (2019). New remains discovered at the site of famous Naenderthal 'flower burial'. *Science*. doi:10.1126/science.aaw7586
- Dickinson, G. E. (2012). Diversity in death: Body disposition and memorialization. *Illness, Crisis, & Loss*, 20(2), 141-158.
- Dust to Dust Cemetery. (2022). *Dust to dust green burial/nature reserve cemetery*. Retrieved from <https://dusttodustcemetery.com/>
- Elicone, C. (2020, November 11). *Whose green burial is it anyway?* Retrieved from The Order of the Good Death: <https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/article/whose-green-burial-is-it-anyway/>

- Emerick, E. J. (2000). Death and the corpse: An analysis of the treatment of death and dead bodies in contemporary American society. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 11(1-2), 34-48.
- Green Burial Council. (2019). *Green Burial Council Cemetery Standards*. Retrieved from https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/uploads/1/2/4/2/124231485/green_burial_council_cemetery_standards_article.pdf
- Green Burial Council. (2021). *History of the GBC*. Retrieved from <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/>
- Green Burial Council. (2021). *Natural Burial FAQ*. Retrieved from <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/>
- Harrington, D. E. (2007). Markets: Preserving funeral markets with ready-to-embalm laws. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 21(4), 201-216.
- Hoffner, A. (2018, February 5). *Ramsey Creek Preserve, America's first modern natural burial cemetery*. Retrieved from <https://www.greenburialnaturally.org/blog/2018/1/23/ramsey-creek-americas-first-modern-natural-burial-cemetery>
- Larkspur Conservation. (2020). *Cemetery Cost*. Retrieved from <https://larkspurconservation.org/cemetery-cost>
- Lau, C. Y., Yee, H. L., Ng, T. C., & Fong, B. F. (2020). Green burial in Hong Kong. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health Management*, 15(2), j393.
doi:10.24083/apjhm.v15i2.393

- Lee, K. H., Huang, C. C., Chuang, S., Huang, C. T., Tsai, W. H., & Hsieh, C. L. (2022). Energy saving and carbon neutrality in the funeral industry. *Energies* 2022, 15, 1457. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3390/en15041457>
- Little, B. (2019). *The environmental toll of cremating the dead*. Retrieved from National Geographic: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/is-cremation-environmentally-friendly-heres-the-science>
- Memorial Ecosystems. (2020). *Meet Kimberley and Billy Campbell, MD*. Retrieved from https://www.memorialecosystems.com/ramsey_creek_preserve_history.html
- Milton Fields. (2018). *About us*. Retrieved from <https://miltonfieldsgeorgia.com/about/>
- Narrow Ridge. (2022). *Natural Burial Preserve*. Retrieved from Narrow Ridge Earth Literacy Center: <https://narrowridge.org/about/natural-burial-preserve/>
- National Cancer Institute. (2011). *Formaldehyde and Cancer Risk*. Retrieved from <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causesprevention/risk/substances/formaldehyde/formaldehyde-fact-sheet>
- National Funeral Directors Association . (2019, July 15). *Cremation is here to stay: Aging baby boomers proved catalyst in shift beyond traditional burial*. Retrieved from <https://nfda.org/news/media-center/nfda-news-releases/id/4395/cremation-is-here-to-stay-aging-baby-boomers-proved-catalyst-in-shift-beyond-traditional-burial>
- National Funeral Directors Association. (2021). *Statistics*. Retrieved from <https://nfda.org/news/statistics>

- New Hampshire Funeral Resources, Education & Advocacy. (2022, March 12). *Green burial cemeteries in the U. S. and Canada*. Retrieved from <https://www.nhfuneral.org/green-burial-cemeteries-in-the-us-and-canada.html>
- Rumble, H. J. (2010). "Giving something back": A case study of woodland burial and human experience at Barton Glebe. *Durham Theses*, 1-296.
- Rumble, H. J., Troyer, J., Walter, T., & Woodthorpe, K. (2014). Disposal or dispersal? Environmentalism and final treatment of the British dead. *Mortality*, 19(3), 243-260. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2014.920315>
- Scott, M. (2020). Green burial: The last footprint. *Mater's dissertation, Glasgow Caledonian New York College*. Green Burial Council.
- United States Environmental Protection Agency. (2022). *Chromated Arsenicals (CCA)*. Retrieved from <https://www.epa.gov/ingredients-used-pesticide-products/chromated-arsenicals-cca>
- Wilson, C. R. (1983). The southern funeral director: Managing death in the new south. *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 67(1), 49-69. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40581011>