

PEACE



EARTH

Kenyon's land trust turns a golf course into a public nature preserve—including space for environmentally friendly burials that bring the past into the future.

BY ROBIN DAVIS

THE SIXTH PRESIDENT OF KENYON

contracted typhoid fever while serving in the Civil War and returned to Gambier to recover. Lorin Andrews succumbed on September 19, 1861, at the age of 42. The next day, after services at Rosse Chapel, a procession of family, friends, colleagues, and students carried his casket to College Cemetery where it was lowered into the ground. →

WE'RE BORN and we're going to die and decay, but in a way be reborn. That's what green burial provides.



In the spring of 1998, Kenyon developed plans for a new music building adjacent to Rosse Hall, which would require moving Andrews' grave. When the tomb was carefully excavated, all that remained were the brass buttons from his military uniform, the handles from his wooden casket, and a few bone fragments. They were reinterred in a box made from a fallen tree on campus and solemnly marched to a new spot in the cemetery.

"It was such a moving experience for people to see that the body was returned to the dust," said Royal Rhodes, The Donald L. Rogan Professor of Religious Studies.

Kenyon, like many colleges, has had a cemetery on its campus almost since the day it was founded. Along with Andrews, it contains the remains of several notable alumni and benefactors. But the College recently took an additional step into the cemetery business, one that is consistent with its mission and also puts it on the cutting edge of a growing trend to return to simpler times in burial.

Last year, Philander Chase Corporation (PCC), a nonprofit land trust associated with the College, purchased Tomahawk Golf Course, a 51-acre course in Knox County, as part of its quest to preserve land from development adjacent to Kenyon. In February, the Kenyon College Board of Trustees approved turning a portion of the property into Kokosing Nature Preserve, one of only three nature conservancy cemeteries in Ohio and forty-two exclusive "green burial" cemeteries in the country. The move makes Kenyon the first college or university to combine green burial and land conservancy, while also providing PCC with a revenue stream for the ongoing work of the land trust.

"Our primary goal in purchasing the property was to protect it from development," said Lisa Schott '80, managing director of the land trust. "It is a scenic property with beautiful views, and we did not want it subdivided and sold as separate parcels."

That it fulfilled the desire to create a place for green burial—burials done without the use of harsh chemicals and non-biodegradable materials—in central Ohio was an added bonus.

APPEARING LIFELIKE

The current landscape of funerals and burials in this country was born around the time of Andrews' death. Throughout the Civil War, families longed for one last view of the bodies of their soldier kin who had been killed in action. Embalming began to be used to preserve these bodies for the journey home. (Andrews died at home, making embalming unnecessary.) Over time, the embalming practice, which until then had been reserved for cadavers meant for research, became commonplace and the cornerstone for the burgeoning funeral industry.

"We do the embalming for three reasons: disinfection, preservation, cosmetics," said Jeff Spear '78, owner and funeral director of Hansen-Spear Funeral Home, a third-generation funeral home in Quincy, Illinois.

Today, conventional burial usually consists of embalming the dead with chemicals such as formaldehyde along with dyes to make them appear lifelike, as though they have just drifted off to sleep. The dead are then laid to rest in polished caskets of metal or wood that are, in turn, placed in reinforced concrete vaults entombed in neat rows at manicured cemeteries. The process leaves surviving loved ones with a "memory picture" of the

deceased that some believe helps them acknowledge the death and begin grieving.

Others aren't so sure. "The idea that you're preserving the body in perpetuity is linked to the idea of conquering death," said Rhodes, who teaches a class on death and has worked with

Hospice of Knox County for many years. "I think the dark side of that is the denial of death."

Many also believe that modern burial practices come at a huge cost to the environment by using materials that are not biodegradable and interfere with the natural process of decay and regeneration. The cost can be exorbitant, too: A modern funeral, including plot and headstone, averages \$10,000.

"Families often go overboard just out of the sense of guilt or that this is what they should be doing," Rhodes said. "The whole development of the funeral industry and the ornamentation and the costs and the removal of any kind of natural sequence of things, I think, is unfortunate."

ERASING THE CARBON FOOTPRINT

Green burial resumes the practices of old, removing the environmental barriers of conventional burial practices and allowing the dead to "return to the dust," as Andrews did. Formaldehyde, a carcinogen, is forbidden in green burial, as are concrete burial vaults and lids, which are not biodegradable. In addition, caskets must be made of plant-based materials.

"We're born and we're going to die and decay, but in a way be reborn. That's what green burial provides," said Joe Sehee, founder of the Green Burial Council, a nonprofit agency working to encourage environmentally friendly death care.

Definitive statistics of people interested in green burial are scarce, but interest in more ecologically friendly burial services is clearly growing. In 2007, the Funeral and Burial Planners Survey conducted by the American Association of Retired Persons reported that 21 percent of respondents would be interested in more natural burial services that did not involve embalming. People between the ages of fifty and seventy—baby boomers—are even more receptive.

Green burial is also in line with most major religious beliefs, Rhodes said. In fact, some practices associated with modern burial, such as embalming, are contrary to the tenets of certain religious systems, such as Orthodox Judaism and branches of Islam.

Many established funeral homes are on board with green burial options, recognizing them as an expanding business opportunity. Spear is considering offering green burial choices to his current service list. More than half of the caskets he sells today are already made of wood, a huge increase from just the five he provided when he entered the family business thirty years ago. "The idea of a green burial to me is so cool," he said. "The type of person embracing it is actually immersing themselves in the



process.” But he acknowledges that his funeral home is “pretty forward thinking.”

The land trust anticipated some resistance to Kokosing Nature Preserve from the surrounding community or perhaps from alumni. “It’s a very personal decision,” Schott said, stressing that the College simply wanted to provide an environmentally friendly option to burial for those who are interested.

Yet, opposition to the cemetery has been virtually nonexistent. The College Township Zoning Board of Appeals unanimously approved the application for conditional use as a nature cemetery in March, and Snyder Funeral Homes in nearby Mount Vernon quickly engaged in offering full green burial services.

“Traditional services are going by the wayside because of things like cremation,” said Jeff Briggs, funeral director and embalmer at Snyder Funeral Homes. “People are interested in burial that does not leave a carbon footprint behind. This gives folks another option.” He has received calls from those interested in green burial services since running an ad in the *Mount Vernon News* in April, but has not heard a single negative comment.

But misconceptions about death care as a whole remain prevalent, said Schee of the Green Burial Council. Many people mistakenly believe caskets and burial vaults are legally required; they’re not, though some cemeteries require them because they make grounds keeping easier. Embalming is also not mandated by law, nor is it necessary for those who want a viewing. Refrigeration can preserve a body for a few days in order to hold a visitation.

Ashes to Ashes

Cremation has long been an alternative to ground burial, but is it green?

Greenburialcouncil.org states that cremation uses fewer natural resources than many other forms of burial but still potentially poses an environmental impact. Cremation requires a substantial amount of energy, uses fossil fuels, and produces carbon emissions. The Green Burial Council feels cremation falls outside the organization’s main objectives, so they do not have a certification program for it.

However, the Kokosing Nature Preserve will accept cremains for burial in a purchased plot, as long as the containers in which they are buried are made of biodegradable materials. The cemetery will also have a designated space for scattering cremains.

“Cremation allows remains to be returned to the earth in a simple, dignified, and natural way,” said Amy Henricksen, Kokosing Nature Preserve steward and Philander Chase Corporation project coordinator. “Burying or scattering them at a natural preservation property like Kokosing helps improve the health of our environment.”