

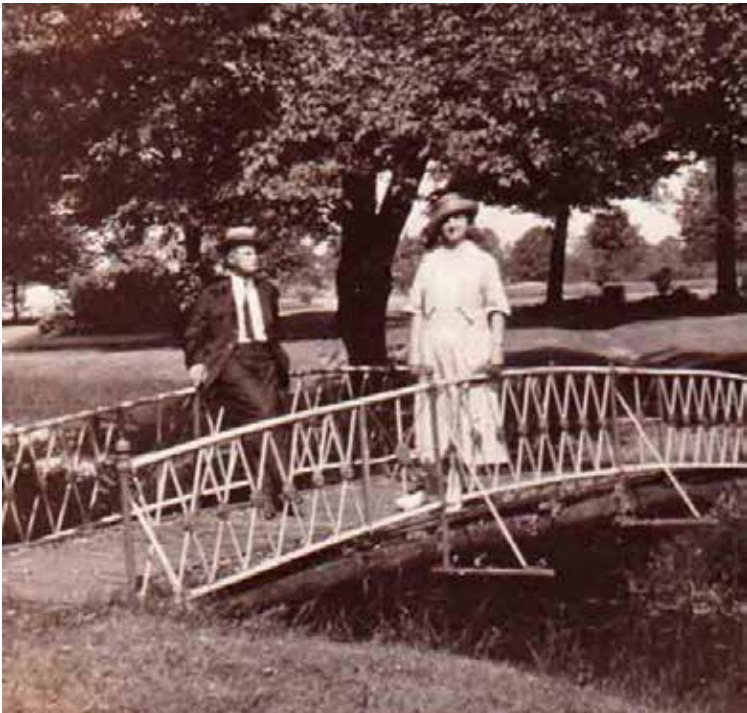
Picturesque Maple Grove Cemetery Is Museum of Ravenna History

By ROBERT BRUEGMANN
AND JACK SCHAFER

Although most Ravennans probably don't think very often about Maple Grove Cemetery, it is a really fine example of a uniquely American landscape type. Unfortunately, like many cemeteries across the country, its character and beauty are threatened.

Maple Grove is surprisingly old. Its origins date back to 1813, making it one of the oldest continuously used public places in the Western Reserve. There had been an earlier cemetery at the southeast corner of Sycamore Street and Riddle Avenue laid out by Benjamin Tappan in 1808, but it soon became apparent that the growing town needed a larger burial ground. Also, despite the fact that medical science knew little about how most diseases were transmitted, there was enough evidence to know that locating burial places at a distance from residences was a good idea.

The earliest portion of Maple Grove, originally a private burial ground called Evergreen Cemetery, was a one-and-a-half acre parcel in the southernmost part of the current acreage in



what are now blocks 1 and 2. It is likely that it was laid out something like a traditional church graveyard or town burial ground with a grid of paths giving access to closely spaced tombstones. Ravenna Township took over ownership in 1821.

Perhaps the most important date in the history of the cemetery was 1880, when the Ladies' Cemetery Association was founded. The group's purpose was to help maintain and beautify the grounds which many people at the time considered unkempt and unattractive. For at least 50 years they provided much of the leadership and the funds necessary to expand and transform the appearance of the cemetery. One of the Association's first acts was to raise money to expand the cemetery and to plant hundreds of the maple trees that prompted a name change from Evergreen to Maple Grove and gave the cemetery much of its current character.

It was undoubtedly at this time that there was a distinct shift in the appearance of the place. On the new land, curving paths and water features were laid out in a style that had been pioneered earlier in the century

by the creators of the "rural cemetery movement." Starting in the 1830s with Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, near Boston, these designers aimed at creating an artfully constructed rural landscape where nature became the dominant element and the tombstones secondary features within the overall composition. Wide sweeps of mowed lawn, clumps of trees, rivers and ponds created an idyllic setting for gravestones and mausoleums.

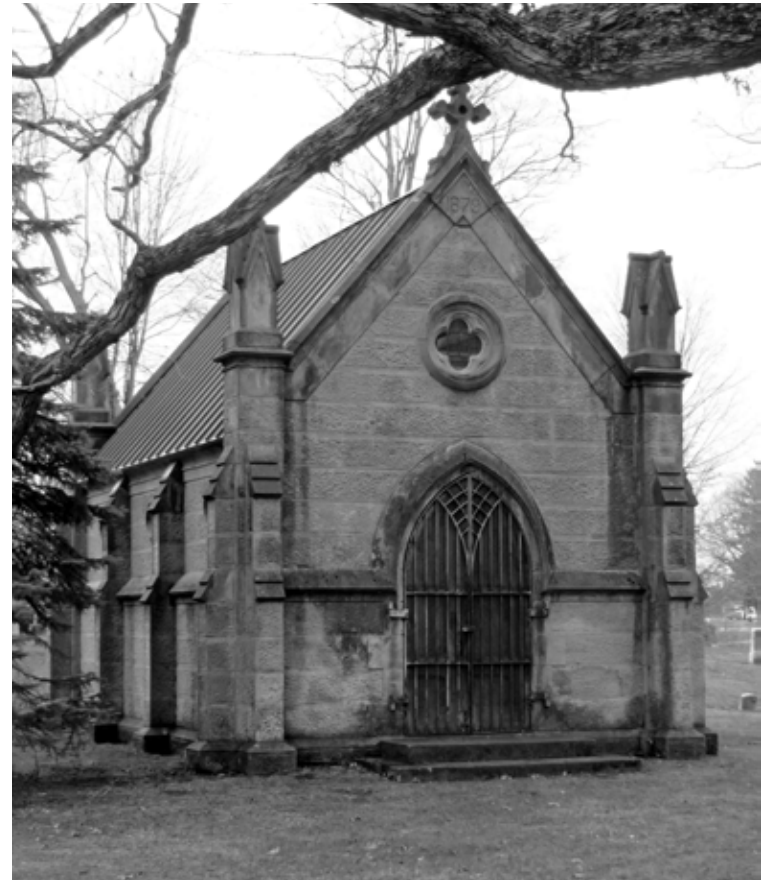
Once this pattern was established it spread quickly across the North American continent. Following Mount Auburn came some of the most prominent cemeteries in the country: Green-Wood in Brooklyn, Mount Laurel in Philadelphia, Forest Park in Cleveland, Spring Grove in Cincinnati, and countless others all the way to the West Coast. Akron's Glendale Cemetery is a particularly fine example for a smaller city.

And so is Ravenna's Maple Grove for an even smaller town. The Ladies' Cemetery Association worked diligently to make it a showplace. About 1900 the cemetery expanded yet again with the purchase of the Hart

Farm on the north side of the property. It was laid out in a more formal pattern of squares, circles and hemicycles recalling City Beautiful planning concepts of that era. In 1902, the present yellow-brick chapel was built by local builder P.L. Frank, and in 1911 a new stone entrance gate designed by local architect J.A. Green, later destroyed in the widening of Chestnut Street in the 1970s. In 1913, Superintendent R.E. Gifford completed two memorial mounds for local chapters of fraternal organizations, one for the Foresters of America and one for the Knights of Pythias.

Something of the pride citizens felt for the cemetery is apparent in the florid descriptions of the day -- for example, this quote from the Ravenna Democrat Press in June 1893:

"While much has been said and written concerning Maple Grove Cemetery, its beauties of trees, lawns and flowers, we think it was never so beautiful as this summer. Surely if the bereaved hearts of mourning friends can be brightened and cheered by the smiles of Nature, they will find a solace in Maple Grove. With its stately trees, smooth mown surface, lovely lakes and beautiful drives, it



modifies the grief of the afflicted and soothes the weary heart with suggestions of peace and happiness."

The activities of the Ladies' Cemetery Association are a reminder that during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, cemeteries, along with death and dying generally, played a much larger place in everyday life than they do today. Not only were graves visited and tended frequently by family and friends and numerous ceremonies performed, but also the cemetery served many functions that we currently associate with parks, for example strolling and picnicking. They were not the isolated, even scary, places that they later became. In 1997, the cemetery came to be jointly owned by the township and city of Ravenna.

Today much of the physical fabric of Maple Grove survives. Despite the decrease in funding for upkeep, a great deal of deferred maintenance on buildings and monuments, and a diminished ability to maintain and enhance the landscape, it remains one of the most historic and attractive places in Northeastern Ohio. No other cemetery in Portage County can surpass the picturesque design of Maple Grove.

It is, first of all, a superb landscape with its 69 acres of broad, rolling lawn punctuated by five small lakes, a roadway system, hundreds of trees and bushes, mostly rhododendrons, hydrangeas and azaleas, that provide a splash of color in the spring. Maple Grove is also a splendid outdoor public sculpture gallery with monuments from every pe-

riod since the mid-19th Century, mostly in stone but a few in cast iron. In one place a rustic tree in concrete stands inside a plot edged in concrete logs. In another a small angel peers out from a bank of ferns. Imposing stone mausoleums rise from the top of a hill where, in death as in life, its owners look down on the less affluent below. Visible off in the distance are clusters of soaring obelisks. In addition, there are two major examples of Victorian Gothic architecture, the 1902 brick chapel and the 1879 stone receiving vault. With its landscape, sculpture and architecture, Maple Grove is a miniature version of the grandest 19th Century cemeteries in America. It is also a museum of Ravenna history, a kind of vast biographical index recorded in stone.

However, like many cemeteries all across the country, Maple Grove is an endangered landscape. Cut off from most daily activity, out of sight and out of mind for most citizens, without a powerful advocacy group like the Ladies' Cemetery Association, its beauty and historical integrity are threatened. This is one of Ravenna's most significant historical assets. And like the recently restored flagpole, one that serves both city and township. It will require some hard thinking and advocacy to bring it back into the everyday orbit of most citizens and to assure the attention and funding necessary to maintain it for the next 200 years.

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