

# The Final Stop for Land Trusts

www.ltanet.org  
GREEN BURIAL go

by Stephen F. Christy, Jr.

## It's time for land trusts to enter the land of the dead.

**W**e're already doing it. Think about our daily work. Our newsletters overflow with successful land preservations, the enjoyment so many folks are having on these lands, and conservation developments where people can live and enjoy the open space at the same time. These are all activities that occupy us in the present.

Yet we are also occupied with the future. The land trust community is no stranger to this future world. We are constantly extolling our work for the benefit of coming generations. This sentence alone carries the unspoken assumption of "after we are gone." So much of our daily work deals with issues over which death hangs. Before me is a newsletter from a prominent regional land trust. Right above my name and address is a picture of two folks only slightly older than I am, smiling at me. The accompanying article urges me to give my life insurance policy to the land trust. The message is clear: "When you're dead, remember us."

You name the topic, and our land trust community is already digging into it: bequests and wills, charitable trusts, life estates. Yet there's one place we're not digging at all yet: in the ground, literally, as in digging graves.

### How We Deal with Death Today

Thousands of people die every day in the United States. Yet where do all their bodies go? The options traditionally have been few. Be cremated and sit on the mantle for a few decades. Be buried in a suit and placed in a bed-like coffin as though preserved for all eternity. Your fancy duds and your highly polished, luxurious coffin, once lowered into the ground, are capped by an expensive concrete vault to save

you for all eternity—and to save the cemetery future costs of putting more soil on your grave, since the coffin alone would eventually collapse and the ground above it subside.

Lately new options for moving on have arisen as well. Join Star Trek's creator Gene Roddenberry and take that final ride into space. Or you can have part of your cremated remains introduced into a coral reef, or your body super-frozen and pulverized.

But all these options can be expensive, and also use a lot of energy. Remember when you were alive how you were so



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**FRIENDS AND FAMILY** gather at a "green burial," where the body's ecological "footprint" on the Earth will be gentle.

careful to keep the thermostat down at home? Nothing like going out in a fiery blast that uses 30 gallons of propane to get you down to a cup or so of ashes. This also causes greenhouse gas emissions and mercury pollution. And how much energy went into the fancy linens, woods, metals and concrete that go with you to the hereafter?

But there is another option: green burial or, for land trusts, conservation burial.

### A Brief History of American Death

Until the twentieth century, death was omnipresent and very much a part of American life. Grandma would be propped up in the corner of the parlor for a day or two while folks came and said goodbye. Every town had a "graveyard," as they were then called—a daily reminder of your next stop. The pleasant inscriptions on the gravestones were even more specific in jogging your memory:

Traveler pause as you pass by  
As you are now, so once was I;  
As I am now, so you shall be  
Prepare for Death, and follow me.

Your passing was quick for largely sanitary reasons. Yet with the advent of the Civil War a new problem arose: If Johnny couldn't come marching home, how still to get him

back to his loved ones without making everyone sick? When the brilliant naval surgeon Dr. William Beatty, Lord Nelson's personal physician at his death at Trafalgar, decided to pickle Nelson in brandy for the trip home, the art of embalming began its modern run into the present day. From there it was only a few small steps to giving you a hairdo, great makeup, and lots of injections to make your face look as though you were not exactly dead, but only napping in that comfortable box.

This idea of just sleeping was greatly enhanced by medical advances, modern hospitals, and an emerging funeral industry that helped separate death from life and make it a far cleaner, sanitized event. But it also started costing a lot more. Grandma was just napping, but in an expensive outfit, bed, and flower-filled surroundings. The Victorian age further sentimentalized death and drove up the cost with expensive monuments, statues, and family mausoleums—ironically, many of which are considered historical landmarks today.

And what happened to those graveyards? They grew up too and distanced themselves from death, becoming cemeteries and then, today, “memorial parks.”

### An Option for People and Land Trusts Too

Yet the current situation is not for everyone. The couple mentioned in the introduction may be very happy to leave their life insurance policy to your land trust. While they're alive, they may love the organization so much that they give lots of money and even their land. But how can they help when they actually die?

They may not want to be pumped up with two gallons of formaldehyde, a probable carcinogen by EPA standards and something to worry about as the body decays and the preservative leaches into the ground. And they may not want to be enshrouded in steel, wood and concrete, or waste six hours of the natural gas jets on super-high to reduce them to soot. In short, they may want their final act to be as much in tune with their conservation philosophy as were the decisions they made when alive.

Across America, and particularly as Baby Boomers age, there is increasing interest in the concept of “green” or “conservation burial.” Green burial means no embalming, no conventional marker, no metal caskets. Conservation burial, which

was introduced by the Green Burial Council at the Land Trust Alliance Rally in 2005, is green burial used to further a legitimate conservation purpose. The Green Burial Council has standards for both at [www.greenburialcouncil.org](http://www.greenburialcouncil.org).

Briefly, both of these options are a return to funeral and burial practices largely prevalent in America until the last century. Embalming is never allowed in green burial. You may choose to have folks pay their respects at a funeral home—or at your own home, as was done for centuries. And most importantly, you may choose to be buried in a simple

wooden box, cardboard box, or even a shroud, with no concrete vault between you and the earth. You can be remembered by a tombstone, a tree, or be part of a larger natural landscape, not a manicured lawn consuming gallons of gasoline and water to keep it looking good all season.

The bottom line is to leave the Earth as gently as possible—eco-friendly death. In doing so, however, you can also be part of a land trust's mission. Consider the ancient sentiment:

We are of the earth.  
We emerged from the earth.  
We replenish the earth.  
We grow old.  
We return to the earth.  
—Edmund J. Ladd,  
Zuni pueblo

### The Numbers

The dead can literally buy land for the living. By their very nature, cemeteries are a form of land trust in that they preserve large tracts of open space. Some cemeteries even hold not-for-profit status similar to land trusts. In fact, cemeteries preceded public parks as the “destination of choice” for early open-space lovers. Boston's Mt. Auburn Cemetery, founded in 1831, drew thousands of weekend visitors to its finely-landscaped grounds. Its success was a direct inspiration for New York City's Central Park, designed by the famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted in 1858 as America's first true urban open space.

#### **A READING** over a newly prepared green gravesite.

The public today perceives cemeteries to be open space and vigorously defends them as such. In recent years plans to develop part of Chicago's 350-acre Rosehill Cemetery, founded in 1859, have met with strong public opposition.

The mortuary and cemetery business is currently a \$20 billion-a-year industry. The National Funeral Directors Asso-



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ciation quoted an average conventional funeral and burial cost of \$6,500 in 2004. The Funeral Consumer Alliance estimates these costs at closer to \$10,000. So if just 10 percent of the public sought a more environmentally friendly exit, this would be a \$2 billion market.

You do the numbers. Green burials usually project up to 100 bodies per acre. (Traditional cemeteries usually house up to 1,000 bodies per acre.) An average green burial fee ranges from \$2,000 to \$5,000 for a simple wooden casket, the grave, and some “perpetual care.” About 50 percent of this cost is set aside for the preservation of additional land. That’s an income stream of \$100,000 to \$250,000 an acre. Actually it can be much more with memorial gifting and additional contributions made to the participating land trust—enough money to consider following the route already well-proven in the land trust community: conservation development.

A conservation development seeks to preserve a large amount of open space by improving and marketing only part of it, usually for homes. Land purchase and development budgets are created using standard marketing practices, the tract acquired, the improvements made, and the debt taken down by the sale of the developed portion, generally about 10-30 percent of the land. This takedown also pays for the 70 percent + land kept as permanent open space. A subsequent real estate transfer fee also generates sufficient income to fund the ongoing maintenance of the preserved open space.

A “conservation cemetery” is no different. If anything, the “market”—all of us—is more stable than the changing

demographics and tastes of living homebuyers. A large tract of land having scenic and/or natural resource qualities (and soils suitable for burial) is identified and purchased. The property is then designed by a landscape architect or other professional to combine the scenic and land restoration benefits with the practical layout of burial places. The aim, as in classic American cemeteries such as Mt. Auburn, is to provide the visitor with a peaceful and meditative experience, but in this case within a nature preserve. Mom and Dad loved land and nature when they were alive. Now they are buried here, and thanks to them their efforts are still saving land and preserving nature in their memory. You can even say that, as they decompose, they will be literally nurturing this land.

### Some Examples

A site plan posted on LTAnet.org (search “Green Burial”) shows a typical interpretation of the conservation cemetery concept. In this case the client in southern Wisconsin sought a Christian aspect for a green cemetery proposal for his 200 acres of restored prairie, wetlands and savanna. The simple design identifies scenic overlooks and vistas united by walking trails, with burial areas interspersed. A single ancient shagbark hickory standing alone in fields being converted to prairie forms the centerpiece of a giant cross.

This cross, created of alleés of bur oaks, also brings order to the landscape for those who appreciate symmetry, ties various views together, and adds the obvious symbolic touch desired by the client. Secular and non-Christian themes can

**REMEMBER  
WHAT IT WAS  
LIKE TO  
EXPLORE  
A NEW PLACE?**

**America consumes land so quickly that exploring the outdoors near your home may soon be a distant memory.**

If we can permanently change conservation tax incentives this year, more places in your community will be saved. Your financial support will help ensure that all future generations have the chance to know natural places.

**Join the Land Trust Alliance today!**

A reply envelope has been provided.

Roaring Fork Conservancy

be just as easily incorporated into site plans as well.

Proceeds from the green burials pay for the property and are also set aside in an endowment fund to restore and permanently maintain the entire parcel as a nature preserve. In this way the inevitable—and completely natural—fact of death can become a powerful engine for the acquisition and restoration of natural lands. An additional important benefit to land trusts' ethical thinking is that these lands also become sacred places and landscapes of memory.

Joe Sehee, president of the Green Burial Council, probably sums it up best: "I've spoken to a couple of thousand people interested in green burial. It's fascinating that so many of them have a sparkle in their eye and excitement in their voice when talking about this subject. When green burial furthers a conservation purpose, it connects people to something much bigger than themselves, just as religion does. Making one's last act on Earth an opportunity for healing and a contribution to the greater good cannot be overestimated."

One land trust has, in fact, already entered this market: the Commonweal Conservancy in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Ted Harrison, formerly head of the southwest office for The Trust for Public Land, had begun considering the concept while still at TPL. The Commonweal Conservancy is establishing a 10-acre burial site, the revenues from which will go to preserving an adjacent 1,000 acres.

A donation to Commonweal will have embedded in it a burial right: \$4,000 for whole body burial and \$1,500 for cremation burial. Half the money taken in will go toward the development, operation and upkeep of the burial ground. The other half will go into an escrow account overseen by Commonweal. The IRS considers this portion a charitable gift since it is above the market rate for green burial in Santa Fe. These funds will be used to purchase the additional 1,000 acres, which Commonweal will place under conservation easement.

Other land trusts are following suit. "Green burial is such a creative and effective tool to finance the restoration and protection of land, and Ramsey Creek has set the stage for future projects across the country," says Jacqueline Oliver, land protection specialist at Upstate Forever, an eight-year-old land trust that has protected more than 7,000 acres in South Carolina. "We are honored to play a role in such an important and exciting endeavor."

## Conclusion

In the mid-1980s (the time of this author's entrance into the land trust profession), the idea of conservation development was largely untested, with the land trust community carefully scrutinizing a few pioneering efforts by Massachu-

setts's Lincoln Land Conservation Trust. In Illinois, conservation easement laws had been on the books only a few years, and barely used. Little thought had been given to the effects of charitable trusts or estate planning.

All this has changed and matured. Land trusts now help clients with complicated estate planning and multi-generational land deals. They are raising more money and gaining more conservation easements than ever before, all to preserve land. Yet it is the resource itself—land—that remains the scarcest of all. Population and development pressure force



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land prices ever higher, and many times the family property that was once an incidental part of the generational transfer of wealth is now often the major component. And lastly, the natural resources and scenic areas are dwindling too.

Doesn't it behoove the land trust community to look at death as, in Hanna Arendt's words, "the final stage of growth?" In the past we have never been shy of emerging markets to further our aim of land protection. The "other half of life" deserves a closer look for both our conservation goals and for the emerging trends of a steady and permanent market—death.

Cast a cold Eye  
On Life, on Death  
Horseman pass by.

—W.B. Yeats' tombstone

Land trusts may be the ones to define what that future horseman sees as he passes by. 🌿

**THE FINAL MOUND** of a conservation burial, showing minimal impact on the land. The soil will settle over time.

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