



NEW YORK MARBLE CEMETERY: AGING IN PLACE

Could you be entitled to burial on lower Manhattan? If one of your ancestors was a successful merchant or professional in New York in the early 1830s, you may have a hereditary connection to the New York Marble Cemetery.

Caroline S. DuBois and Anne W. Brown, Trustees

MANY DESCENDANTS of the prominent ancestors who purchased family vaults have been contacted by the Cemetery. All of them recognized their ancestors' names, but most grew up never learning about their ownership rights in the Cemetery. Others have discovered it during their own genealogical research. The outreach efforts of an energetic new generation of descendant-owners, as well as protection and support from several government agencies, are helping to return the Cemetery to public aware-

ness, public access, and the prospect of active burials.

Visitors are now able to relax in a sunny half-acre garden. It is open frequently to the public in good weather - generally Sunday afternoons - for quiet enjoyment. Uniquely designed with no headstones, the grounds resemble a garden more than a cemetery. And they are available for rental for appropriate events. This is where renters have set up their own fairy-tale weddings or Victorian picnics complete with costumes and croquet. The Cemetery has been the location

of TV and movie shoots, Shakespeare plays, dance performances, charity fund raisers and birthday clambakes. Fashion shows and product launch parties are perpetual favorites. Recent examples include a fashion show by Stella McCartney (Paul's daughter); a wine tasting and product launch by Dreaming Tree Wines of California (owned by rock star Dave Matthews); a wedding featured on the cover of *Martha Stewart Weddings Magazine*; and a midnight charity hunt sponsored by Goldman Sachs Investment Bank that used the Cemetery as one of 20

ROB WILLIAMSON

clue locations that teams had to visit in order to move on to the next one, in this instance a manhole cover in Chinatown—the Cemetery's ambiance was enhanced by a welcoming firepit with hot dogs and marshmallows. On the other hand, requests to use the Cemetery for Halloween parties, vampire meets and TV shows featuring ghost hunters or exploring the paranormal are rejected.

Its contemporary incarnation as a venue for life-affirming events is a far cry from the Cemetery's mid-19th-century origins. History textbooks move from one war to the next; peacetime is not as dramatic. But the period between the War of 1812 and the Civil War is when the Marble Cemetery founders left their marks on New York City. These importers, doctors, ship's captains, and attorneys were members of the first generation of entrepreneurs after the American Revolution, attracted to the city by the lure of expanding commerce and cultural sophistication. Civic pride was turning New Yorkers away from Europe to the bountiful American harvest of domestic enterprise.

Commerce with the Caribbean had long made East Coast ports susceptible to outbreaks of tropical illnesses. The devastating yellow fever epidemic of 1822, which originated near the Trinity Wall Street churchyard, was believed to be caused by the miasmas from shallow graves. It spurred the Common Council to ban burials below Canal Street. The city fathers hoped to curb the spread of disease by allowing burials only in sealed private vaults. By 1851, traditional earth burials were banned everywhere below 86th street - a ruling that still stands today (exempting family vaults).

The Cemetery lies in the East Village, hidden in the interior of the block between Second Avenue and the Bowery and 2nd and 3rd Streets. It is accessible through two pairs of handsome iron gates on either end of a 100-foot-long alley. Worn marble plaques set in the walls indicate the purchasers' names and vault

ROB WILLIAMSON



Above: The Cemetery is accessible through two pairs of handsome iron gates on either end of a 100-foot-long alley.

numbers. The popularity of the NYMC was so great that entrepreneur Perkins Nichols immediately built another cemetery a block away, the New York City Marble Cemetery (nycmc.org) across Second Avenue, with its gate on Second Street. Although identical below ground, the two cemeteries look quite different to passersby and have always been independent of each other. That cemetery can be easily seen from the street and has many large funerary monuments on the lawn. The similarity of the names and addresses has caused endless confusion from 1831 to the present day.

In the 1830s, the New York Marble Cemetery was the most sought-after place in New York City to bury one's family, but for the last 100 years it has hardly been used at all. Until the turn of the latest century, it was aging in place, its high marble walls slowly deteriorating, its lawn overcome with weeds, and its use removed from family tradition. Acid rain, vines and tree roots, and vibrations from heavy traffic all added to the problems of age.

Why didn't the Cemetery simply disappear? The saving grace was the Luquer

family, whose three generations of trustees kept an eye on the place, even from afar. They were the last trustees with the keys to the gates and boxes full of records. Thanks to them, the Cemetery is fortunate to have its original burial registers, minute books, and complete written records detailing its early formation. All of these are now in safekeeping at the New-York Historical Society. Amazingly, the cancelled checks for construction are all extant. The checkbook still has some blank checks for the Merchants' National Bank. After 200 years of mergers, MNB is now part of JPMorgan Chase. Chase might honor a check, but the Cemetery is holding the balance of \$22.96 for sentimental reasons.

Annotated interment lists with full identification have been published, including cause of death, occupations, parentage, places of death, and relationships to other owners. To better understand the lives of the founders, biographical information is




Above: Guests at a summer soiree sponsored by Dreaming Tree Wines (owned by rock star Dave Matthews) enjoy a wine tasting and food products launch in 2016. Rentals of the secret garden help pay for restoration of the grounds and walls.

constantly being gathered, as are reproductions of portraits of the early owners, 19th-century merchant advertisements, and images of the ships owned by the founders. Through the stories of those interred in its vaults, the Cemetery in effect serves as a repository for information providing insight into an important transformative period in New York and

American history. But not all such stories pertain to its occupants. The purchaser of the only vault that was never used was a privateer out of Baltimore, with letters of marque from Buenos Aires. In 1817, he captured a Spanish East Indies ship carrying a cargo valued at between one and one and a half million dollars, a record for a single prize. When his descendants were informed by the trustees that they owned a vault, and who it was that had purchased it, they could not help wondering if that is where his gold was stored.

The treasure has not been located, but the Luquers managed the Marble

Cemetery's modest endowment so well that much-needed restoration could start as the 20th century ended. It is the mission of the current trustees to identify new owners, rebuild the protective walls and restore the grounds, all with the aim of restarting burials and increasing the number of appreciative visitors. Contributions during the past 20 years have allowed extensive professional restoration, but much work still remains. With more descendant-owners willing to embrace their ancestors' perpetual gift to them, it can be accomplished. For more information, go to marblecemetery.org. 

ORIG: BARBRI/GETTY IMAGES



Above: W. Heindrich, *Ernest Fiedler Family*, 1850, Private Collection. Fiedler married the daughter of Eli Hart, who built this house at 38 Bond Street, just two blocks from the Cemetery. Hart—a prosperous flour wholesaler and Erie Canal Commissioner—was one of the original Cemetery purchasers. The portrait on

the left wall is by Rembrandt Peale; the family still owns the Greek Revival fireplace surround on the right; the tree in the back parlor was one of the first Christmas trees in New York.

Left: James Brown—founder of Brown Brothers, later Brown Brothers Harriman—was one of the original purchasers in 1831 of crypts in the New York Marble Cemetery. Private collection. Artist unknown, but may have been Rembrandt Peale.



FIEDLER FAMILY PORTRAIT: REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION

Family Crypts For Sale

Cemetery trustees have officially reclaimed two empty crypts, which are for sale to individual families (price on request). They present a rare opportunity for burial on Manhattan. Aside from Trinity Church Cemetery in Upper Manhattan, there are few permanent resting places available in the city.

The descendants of the original owners are all current owners and all have the right to bury their families in their vaults. Only a fraction of them bear the same last name as their Cemetery ancestors, so sleuthing is required. Among the 200 original families are these:

Auchincloss	Fanshaw	Markoe	Post	Stone
Averill	Gordon	Mason	Quackenbush	Strong
Bogert	Haight	Morrison	Randolph	Tallmadge
Chester	Hall	Newcomb	Richards	Tileston
Crary	Holmes	Nevins	Riggs	Vandervoort
Cruikshank	Hone	Ogden	Russell	VanNest
Dey	Lane	Olyphant	Scribner	VanZandt
Douglass	Lord	Osborn	Shephard	Varick
DuBois	Many	Phelps	Spring	Wright