

## No Landscape Tells But One Story, No History Follows But One Path

By Michael R. Allen

*Humankind, no matter how powerful, cannot take away the rights of the earth. Ultimately, nature rules. That is the great democratic gift earth offers us – that sweet death to which we all inevitably go – into that final communion.*

-- bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*

Out at dusk, in wooded shelter, flocks of birds flutter overhead in southward formation. The brittle leaves rustle and fall in autumnal procession. Through the interstices, framed by branches and trunks, golden evening light opens views of the steel cylinder column of a large billboard. Behind the rise, there is the cacophonous, white-noise-laden horizon line of the interstate atop its berm. Airplanes glide across the sky, quieter and safer than the cars and trucks. This landscape falls into night, reminded of its precariousness and every change wrought upon it by the passage of nearly a century. This landscape is the Washington Park Cemetery, which unfolds a record of St. Louis' knotted confusions over land, race and capital.

Twelve miles south, at the corner of Arsenal and Ivanhoe avenues in south St. Louis, a tranquil neighborhood conveys the look of stability and time wearing beautifully. The commercial district on Ivanhoe Avenue includes a beloved pizzeria, a farm-to-table restaurant, small businesses and a church bowling alley. Well-kept side streets are lined with single family homes that enjoy stable prices, and house families who cherish their desired neighborhood. This is Ivanhoe Park, an enclave developed in 1912 as the city grew its then-suburban reaches—neighborhoods where houses were spaced apart and set back from the street with private lawns. This landscape, free from the flyover noise, is the product of the same processes that built the cemetery—and one of the same land developers.

Today Washington Park Cemetery offers visages that provoke concern and even outrage, while Ivanhoe Park blends into south St. Louis' belt of stable middle-class neighborhoods. The dividend is the product of the deliberate acts of realtor Joseph J. Hauer, whose ownership interest crafted both, and the racialized hegemonic real estate regime in which Hauer was a key player. This regime enacted different outcomes for white and black St. Louisans, and its veil of comparable landscape designs has now split into a set of contradictory conditions. The beautiful rural lawn-park cemetery, laid out in 1921, has been cleaved by Interstate 70; evacuated on the northern section; encompassed by decidedly profane commercial development; partly overgrown by forestation; and passed from one owner to another, defying its historic promise of perpetual care in a city where erasure and abandonment are nearly

equivalent spatial conditions to building and care, the condition truly is no more unusual than Ivanhoe Park's genial neighborliness. Here are the two faces of the divided city, which cannot be seen in the mirror separately.

Too often tales of St. Louis' racial divisions would cast a landscape like Washington Park Cemetery in a deterministic narrative, where its abandonment seems inevitable, and its future tenuous. Yet the linearity of geographic analysis ignores that the stories we tell about places are our own forms of marking lines on the land, even when we retell the past. We should not make Washington Park Cemetery and sites of black heritage forged through racist practices into abject landscapes that confirm our pessimism. Instead, we should see them as parts of a whole regional geography *dependent* on contradictions and oppositions. Our lens must step back and see how the condition of this cemetery implicates other landscapes. Every land line has two sides that are *both* products of the demarcation.

Another side to the narrative of St. Louis' segregated past that must be confronted is the litany of ways in which the landscapes of racialized power were distinguished. In fact, the entire city was produced through negotiation and renegotiation of racial power, and both the separated areas and sites of contestation often looked indistinguishable. The power of design to mystify power relations is latent in Washington Park Cemetery, Bellefontaine Cemetery, Ivanhoe Park, Ferguson, Washington University and many other places that seem in accord but mask the land lines of Jim Crow.

One of the videos the artist Denise Ward-Brown produced for the exhibit features an interview with M. Bernadette Officer captures the mystification of power, when Officer states that the segregated practices of cemeteries around St. Louis often were not even stated in writing, and that the Sunset Garden of Memory's Cemetery became a black cultural landscape not through restriction but through white people's unwillingness to be buried there. We have learned more about inscribed racism, and that shows that sites within racial power relations are interrelated, forming a coherent whole. The divided city is not a set of discrete parts that can be understood separately, but an entire geographic system produced by political hegemony. Within the system, parts began more identically than not, although today differences are more stark.

### **The Landscape of Washington Park Cemetery**

The production of new open spaces in the 19th century would intersect with the agenda of racially dividing the city in the 20th century Great Migration. However, the rise of the picturesque rural

cemetery and suburban landscape movements encoded power relations that always tended to favor dominant power. The first cemetery embodying a new picturesque landscape in St. Louis was Bellefontaine Cemetery, planned after 1849 and designed by Almerin Hotchkiss. Hotchkiss had served as superintendent of Green Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, one of the nation's first landscapes to embody the rural cemetery movement's principles of organization. The rural cemetery movement inscribed the burial ground as both ritual and recreational space, a conjoined purpose that has shaped cemetery design in the United States ever since. Rather than pack burials together, or leave them unmarked on rolling open fields, the rural cemetery utilized a rich, romantic vocabulary of tree plantings, topographic alterations and paved paths to perfect orderly invented wilderness. Rural cemeteries privileged visual experience, and attenuated the landscape tradition of the private garden that was still nascent in America in the mid-19th century. Rural cemeteries adopted an essentially aristocratic vision of land—land as beautiful, ordered and owned (metaphorically) by those who traversed it.

Perhaps fitting for a republic whose political notion of liberty derived from Greco-Christian beliefs in divine rights and natural law, the nation's first public parks adopted the rural cemetery landscape philosophy. Early public parks were open to all, and the ordered nature the harbinger for generating a public that bridged classes. In sites like Central Park (designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, who became the voice of the landscape movement) in New York or Tower Grove Park in St. Louis, the landscapes were both visually delightful and socially inclusive—for a while. However, the new landscapes paradoxically reinforced class divisions. The mobility required to reach new public parks, and the assumption of leisure time in one's life, privileged affluence. Few new parks were built in dense poor neighborhoods in urban America. St. Louis was no exception, and playgrounds and parks would not be built in the inner city until after 1905. By the 20th century, white racism would add a new layer of restriction to both park and cemetery landscapes that had purported to point Americans to the natural order of heaven. No wonder that geographer J.B. Jackson would write that Olmsted and the rural park movement's social philosophy "called for the fragmentation of society" even while its landscapes were sublimely powerful. Cemeteries and parks were mystifying their own origins, which were often venal or tortured.

Washington Park Cemetery embodies the full visual power and political contradictions of American landscape design. The ordered set of paved paths and earliest tree plantings, planned by master cemetery designer G.D. Joyce in 1921, offer welcome respite from the humdrum of the material world. Joyce was a partner in the Joyce Surveying Company, which designed the plans of other rural lawn-park

cemeteries including Memorial Park Cemetery, Laurel Hills Cemetery, Lake Charles Cemetery and other suburban burial grounds reserved for white burials. Joyce's determination to perfect Washington Park Cemetery shows through years of change. The still-intact park-lawns adjacent to Natural Bridge Road frame views of an intentional tree canopy that includes a colonnade of Ginkgos and tulips. The cemetery is a rightful descendant of Bellefontaine, which also lost mass to the interstate when it was built in 1956.

The landscape of Washington Park Cemetery reflected the further veiling of the segregationist St. Louis real estate machine. Hauer, a powerful member of the St. Louis Real Estate Board that adopted an official policy of segregated sales in 1923, and Andrew H. Watson, lawyer and court reporter, led the effort to develop the 75-acre site as a black cemetery. Watson incorporated a company that purchased the land from the estate of grain merchant B.H. Lang in 1920. Watson and Hauer were simultaneously creating a magnificently designed perpetual care cemetery for black St. Louisans, who were excluded from others, benefitting from a Jim Crow world in which they were culpable. The landscape was a peer to many of the also for-profit suburban lawn-park cemeteries for whites that Joyce also designed. It did not visually proclaim its separate nature. Records show that the developers established a perpetual care fund for the cemetery, but the fund was discontinued at some point not well established in records. The complexity of white racism shows in this project—the investors were both accused of disrupting bucolic country land with the presence of black St. Louisans, whose rights to picnic at the cemetery they defended. They also were supportive of restrictions on land rights within the City of St. Louis, including the rights for equal interment and recreational use of public parks.

In the same year that Watson and Hauer opened the cemetery, white residents of north St. Louis began organizing to restrict access to Fairground and O'Fallon parks—public parks built according to the rural landscape philosophy—for black picnickers. Mayor Henry Kiel eventually signed a bill abridging picnic rights to appease white leaders worried about integration's impact on real estate values. Three years after the cemetery opened, the St. Louis Real Estate Exchange (with Hauer's participation) crafted its infamous referendum restricting home sales to black buyers, which required Supreme Court dismantling in 1948's *Shelley v. Kraemer* decision. In the realm of growing restrictions, Washington Park Cemetery in unincorporated St. Louis County was both a safe-haven for black St. Louis and the capitalist plans of its incorporators. Shareholders in the Washington Park Cemetery Association included Congressman William Igoe, District Attorney James Carroll and many white lawyers—all men who assented to spatial segregation and played roles in its constitution, implementation and state sanction. "Perpetual care" promised by the cemetery masked an intention to profit from a diseased system of land division and

capitalist exploitation. The logic of this system was in fact perpetual disruption, through legal tools, physical barriers and cultural domination.

The original company continued to own the cemetery until 1955, bending its purposes toward the end. The City of St. Louis relocated its “potter’s field” burials from a municipal cemetery at Hampton and Fyler avenues to the site in 1950. In 1952, the St. Louis County Department of Health had interred 300 bodies from the shuttered Wesleyan Cemetery at Washington Park—in a single burial. The owners ended single interments in 1953, shortly before selling the cemetery to Harlin Brown and Manuel Lasky in 1955. Washington Park Cemetery was sufficiently marginalized that the Missouri Department of Transportation decided to cleave it in two to build Interstate 70, separating nearly 12,000 bodies buried in the northern section from the rest of the cemetery. Brown and Lasky did not protest, nor did they balk when the City of St. Louis overpaid them for nine acres needed to expand Lambert Airport’s runways. Although burials resumed in 1965, the cemetery’s next decades would see scandal and ultimately abandonment. The landscape’s fate seemed a metaphor for the changes that north County itself was enduring, as it passed from edenic ideals to profane realities. Yet the families whose relatives were buried there continued cultural reverence, even as owners failed.

In origin and current disposition, Washington Park Cemetery proves the rule rather than serves as the exception. Segregated burial occurred across the United States even after the emancipation, and affected even free people before then. In fact, the only integration at Washington Park and other cemeteries in St. Louis occurred when white people with no known relatives were buried in black cemeteries because that was cheaper for the city and county governments than buying plots in white cemeteries. White superstitions about the interaction of bodies, racist mythologies and pseudoscience justifying exclusions, and capitalist privileging of the higher economic abilities of white landowners leaves this nation with a burial landscape that speaks the contradictions of its society. Eventual integration of burial landscapes followed integration of desirable suburbs—black families often abandoned historically black sites that were symptomatic of inequality, and assimilated into other sites.

### **Preservation, Black History and Social Resolution**

Today, as preservationist Nadia Orton observed in an article for the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2016, the conditions of black cemeteries often match the conditions of their surrounding neighborhoods. Preservation efforts like the current campaigns at Washington Park Cemetery and

nearby Greenwood Cemetery are underway across the country, and typically are not part of larger regional, mostly white-led preservation fundraising efforts and cultural heritage tourism. There is a perpetual separation from abundant social resources for many black cemetery landscapes. Yet these cemeteries also maintain cultural customs often forbidden by strict management programs at other cemeteries, such as the use of homemade wood or concrete markers, grave decoration, offerings and tree and bush plantings by family members. Black cemeteries enact burial customs going back to the early diasporan influence in North America and even back to African societies. Washington Park Cemetery was more managed than others around St. Louis, but shows signs of these traditions that are a significant part of St. Louis' cultural heritage—which has included the customs of black people since its founding.

St. Louis still exhibits a stunning ambivalence toward preservation of sites of black history and culture. In just the last year, the city witnessed the demolition of the living heritage of part of the St. Louis Place neighborhood for the headquarters of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, and the demolition of the former St. Mary's Infirmary, the first local hospital with an integrated medical staff and one of the first to train black nursing candidates. Preservation law failed to protect these sites, and the significance to black culture in the city went unmentioned in the press. Omission dominates the collective memory of such sites. Perhaps the prototypical commemorative model for black history sites is shown in the Mill Creek Valley, the city's once-largest black neighborhood eventually completely erased in urban renewal. Not so much as a single plaque or street name reminds the public that the place existed.

Yet at Washington Park Cemetery, the care of generations of families for their memories is evident. In a 1985 account of black cemeteries in St. Louis, historian Kathy McKoy noted that graves at Washington Park displayed traditional enclosures of fences, stones and shells; evergreen plantings; and gravel blankets. These acts of care also continued cultural traditions. Today, some graves at the cemetery show similar memory preservation, and the current owner is working to uncover more graves from the underbrush. Not far away, the 32 acres of historic black Greenwood Cemetery (1874) show the success of a campaign to remove forestation and reset grave markers. Both efforts, however, rely on the power of individual acts instead of large endowments.

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The historian Pierre Nora distinguishes between history, which builds collective narratives that often obscure certain events, and memory, which includes the subjective array of personal remembered experience. Washington Park Cemetery embodies Nora’s concept of the “site of memory” – marginalized by many accounts, but revered by many people and connected through origin and oral history to other sites. Yet local history is in a moment of renegotiation, and its narrative fixity has ended as St. Louis acknowledges much long-veiled memory of experience. Now may be the moment where St. Louis’ history can become collectively the never-ending arc toward justice that it has been for many outside of its published accounts. Retelling St. Louis’ history requires acknowledged, protected and marked story sites that show people the spaces where we have made the city, wrought injustices, and worked to understand how to heal. Washington Park Cemetery makes for a powerfully evocative site upon which we can witness our history as it has happened, and imagine its future happening.

### **How We Make Our Future Landscape**

At Washington Park Cemetery, the actual geography of a place like St. Louis becomes evident. This is a geography where lines laid by surveyors and landscape designers alike are cleavages marking social territories. In this world, lines confer interior and exterior status, no matter how pretty the lawns in between. This territorial ferocity, this fearful division of people, draws itself into lines across this entire continent. This cemetery is not a small lament, recognized locally, but part of an ineluctable system of land divisions whose scars are named and picked but never healed. There are many Americans who assume that Black Lives Matter—as cry or suspicious subject —began with Ferguson, or in outrage expressed to litanies of tragically mundane police shootings, or in disgust with the Chicago murder rate. That’s an amnesiac history.

The attempt to locate origins of movements, to mark in time cries for humanity that are perpetual, has traumatized both designated memorial landscapes and vernacular neighborhoods of St. Louis alike. When Washington Park Cemetery opened in 1921 as a speculative capitalist project, black St. Louisans were fighting for equal access to use public parks in north city. White St. Louisans had tortured survey lines since the Great Migration began, using streets, parks, and cemeteries—spaces that should have constituted commons capable of forming an inclusive public—into a containable series of policed domains, often with financial benefits. Washington Park Cemetery reminds us that the present condition is continuous with our past, and that the beauty realized then could well be the justice achieved now. James Baldwin powerfully enjoined us to know that: “History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We *are* our history. If we pretend otherwise, we literally are criminals.”

Today, the powerful gatekeepers of the land are failing Washington Park Cemetery and so many other sites of black heritage. Historic preservation, which largely has been the record of privilege in this country, decided that the federal National Historic Preservation Act should make cemeteries—landscapes of the everyday rituals that unite people—difficult to be granted official status because of their commonality. The preservation of historic exceptions reinforces class and race divides. Simultaneously, as architects and designers probe the fractured reaches of St. Louis, they often come to mark their own intellectual territories. Sites that deflect easy readings, and fit the strands of human grief that tie all people together, seem to have no stewards—only people drawing lines atop the decades of lines that have already exhausted hope.

The photographs of the cemetery from the 1990s taken by Jennifer Colten suggest a mode of appreciating the cemetery that honors its intentions *and* sees more than despair in its altered state. In image after image, including some gripping images from the 1993 exhumation of bodies in the northern section, we see a landscape venerated as much by devoted relatives of interments as by the persistence of nature. The cemetery’s current condition reveals a hard honest truth, no longer concealing power relationships, and suggesting an ecological beauty constant amid social maladjustment. Of course, the current state does not necessarily represent justice for those buried there. Justice remains the aspiration for this land, and current awareness and ownership place that closer in reach than ever before. While the abundance of unplanned trees disrupts visual order and individual burials, the trees are powerful. One African American burial tradition is the planting of a tree at a grave site as a symbol of immortality. Washington Park Cemetery’s accidental forest almost seems protective and healing, at least in the face of threatening redevelopment that could do much worse. Yet the forest prevents the



buried from proclaiming their names and lives as part of history. Thus removal of the forest is a goal of those whose loved ones reside on the land. As the forest slowly disappears, what will emerge in full view again will be a hallowed resting place, renewed as a cultural land shared in common.

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