



Figure 1. View of Mount Pleasant Cemetery from west of Yonge Street towards entrance and Edmund Burke's mortuary chapel.

## Easeful Death in Toronto: A History of Mount Pleasant Cemetery

by Sally Coutts

When it opened on 4 November 1876, Mount Pleasant was Toronto's biggest cemetery. Among the city's first professionally designed landscapes, by the 1890s Mount Pleasant was an important Toronto tourist attraction. To this day, the cemetery can be counted as one of Toronto's premier open spaces.

The cemetery building trend begun in Britain and the United States in the 1830s had much to do with Mount Pleasant's initial design. From that date until the 1880s, large landscaped cemeteries were built on the fringes of many American cities. These cemeteries were originally constructed by concerned individuals reacting against the abysmal conditions in existing burial facilities. By the 1870s, even communities like Toronto that had never experienced gruesome conditions in their graveyards, built landscaped cemeteries. At this stage, such cemeteries were status symbols of a society not only concerned with the celebration of death but also concerned with demonstrating that the dead in their city were properly honoured.

In colonial America and in Great Britain prior to the Industrial Revolution, cemeteries such as Mount Pleasant did not exist. For generations, most people were buried in simple churchyards or interred in crypts under parish churches.

By the first twenty years of the nineteenth century serious overcrowding in churchyards prompted interest in the creation of alternative burial facilities in Britain and the United States. In England local newspapers published lurid stories of churchyards swimming in black slime with disinterred corpses strewn about. In addition, public health reformers had made a tentative connection between the spread of disease and these unsanitary graveyards. It was generally supposed that huge infected miasmas that could float anywhere hung over these burial plots.<sup>1</sup>

Whether it was industrialization, immigration or a combination of the two that caused cities to grow, the resulting social disruption was felt by all. For the first time, thousands of Britons and Americans were living in centres with no family associations or landmarks. This also explains the sudden popularity of the Arcadian cemeteries in the 1830s—they provided the new urban population with the chance to buy permanently a piece of the idyllic rural world they imagined they had left behind.

Also during the nineteenth century, mourning became increasingly ritualized. It has always been accepted that survivors will have warm and compassionate feelings towards the dead. For generations, these feelings were satisfied by simple religious ceremonies at the graveside. In

the nineteenth century, those left behind demanded increasingly large and more elaborate tombstones and funerals, longer official mourning periods and very distinctive mourning costumes.<sup>2</sup> These rituals became accepted social behaviour for all stratas of society. The development of this new sensitivity to death (in both Britain and North America) together with urban alienation and the horrible conditions in existing cemeteries prompted focussed public attention on the reform of burial facilities.

In the search for a suitable form for these new cemeteries, most designers were influenced by Paris' Pere Lachaise Cemetery, one of the leading tourist attractions of the pre-Eiffel Tower city.<sup>3</sup> Designed in 1804 and improved in the 1820s, this cemetery was itself influenced by the British landscape garden so popular in the eighteenth century. Interestingly, the proponents of a new type of cemetery, by turning to France for inspiration were really just re-applying a British triumph—the landscape garden—to a new form, the cemetery.

The landscape garden, with its informal, natural landscapes, punctuated by artfully placed clumps of trees, serpentine paths and ruins which formed picturesque tableaux, first appeared in the eighteenth century as a reaction against the stiff formality of the straight avenues, parterres and topiary of previous generations' gardens. Gardeners such as Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton, among others, transformed the parks of many British stately homes into picturesque landscapes. These new parks, while not cemeteries per se, often featured memorials to the dead. Even when they did not the atmosphere created by the landscape garden was generally felt to be conducive to spiritual thoughts.

In addition, while choosing to adapt the form of the British landscape garden to the cemetery, early designers were fulfilling a still unuttered urban need for open spaces, where the population could escape the noise, dirt and hustle of the city.

One of Britain's first new style cemeteries, St. James, built in Liverpool between 1825 and 1829,<sup>4</sup> was situated in an old stone quarry. St. James was followed by London's Kensal Green and Highgate cemeteries, built in 1833 respectively.<sup>5</sup> These cemeteries all featured simple serpentine tree-lined roads, above-ground catacombs, individual grave enclosures, and marble slabs laid on the grave. Most of these early British cemeteries employed both an architect and a landscape gardener to plan them. By the 1840s the new cemetery movement had acquired a champion, John Claudius Loudon. Loudon was a leader in landscape architecture in the 19th century and wrote extensively on the subject. He published a huge *Encyclopedia of Gardening* in 1822 that was frequently reprinted and he continued to publish extensively in the 1820s and 1830s. In ad-

dition, in 1836, he was the editor of 5 different magazines, including the influential *Gardeners Magazine*. In 1843, this energetic writer turned his attention to cemeteries. That year he published a book containing many of his ideas. This book, entitled *The Principles of Landscape Gardening and of Landscape Architecture applied to the laying-out of Public Cemeteries and the Improvement of Churchyards*, had a widespread influence in England. Loudon despised the resemblance of certain cemeteries to "pleasure grounds" and stressed that flower beds, weeping willow trees, paths that meandered without purpose and trees in clumps rather than in rows, had no place in a cemetery. Rather, he believed that the atmosphere of a cemetery should be solemn, uplifting and educational. He advocated the labelling of trees and shrubs so that every trip to a cemetery would benefit the visitor.

Loudon's eloquent writing assured that park-like cemeteries could never be popular in Britain, although they were to achieve and retain great acclaim in the United States. The reason that American cemeteries evolved into a form so different than their British counterparts, in spite of their common roots is that by the time Loudon's work crossed the Atlantic, Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery had achieved such prominence that nothing could alter the path that American cemetery design was to take. One of Mount Auburn's heartiest supporters was A.J. Downing, the American landscape gardener who published *Cottage Architecture* in 1848 and was active in many aspects of the early parks movement in the United States. Downing often commented on new cemetery designs and was involved in the design of Montreal's Mount Royal cemetery. Downing read Loudon in the 1840s and dismissed his ideas, preferring the example already set by cemeteries such as Mount Auburn in Boston and Green-Wood in Brooklyn.<sup>7</sup> Toronto's Mount Pleasant was destined to follow Mount Auburn's example.

Mount Auburn's early promoters, who worked with the Massachusetts Horticulcultural Society in developing the design and layout of that cemetery, looked to Pere Lachaise for their inspiration. When completed, the early Mount Auburn shared an irregular topography and serpentine road network which also featured a pond.<sup>8</sup> It appears that the inclusion of water in this facility set a trend for many of the American cemeteries that followed. For example, Green-wood Cemetery, Brooklyn (1838) Mount Hope, Rochester (1838), Green Mount in Baltimore (1839), Woodlawn in Buffalo (1842), Spring Grove, Cincinnati (1844) and Hollywood in Richmond, Virginia (1844), all featured ponds and roadways similar to Mount Auburn's.

Toronto was still a raw colonial centre during this active period of American cemetery construction and this perhaps explains the lateness of the city to follow the popular fashion and develop a rural cemetery. In addition, the dire conditions of overcrowding in cemeteries that led to a public outcry and demands for new facilities more sensitive to the needs of the bereaved did not exist in Toronto in the 1830s. At this juncture, the city had ample burial space for Anglicans and Roman Catholics, but none for non-conformists, who were not allowed to bury their own dead.<sup>9</sup> This unequal situation eventually prompted leading non-conformists, to establish the group that was to become the Toronto General Burying Grounds Trust, the proprietors of Mount Pleasant cemetery. In 1825 they petitioned the Legislature for permission to establish a cemetery. Accordingly on 26 January 1826 the Toronto General Burying Grounds Trust (hereafter the Trust) was established by an act of the Legislature.<sup>10</sup> The new trustees purchased land at the corner of Yonge and Bloor and the first interment took place in July 1826. The village of Yorkville soon surrounded the cemetery and in 1855 the village's inhabitants petitioned to close the facility because it was thought to be impeding the growth of the centre. Their request was granted and arrangements were made for the disinterment of those buried there. Most were relocated to the Necropolis, the Trust's newly purchased land in present-day Cabbagetown.<sup>11</sup>

The Necropolis has a splendid location on the crest of the Don Valley, overlooking the Rosedale Ravine. In the 1850s, industries crowded the valley, among them a very smelly glue factory. This offended many mourners and so, instead of expanding southward as was originally intended, the Trust sold that property to the city, and began to search for more land. In 1873, they purchased all 200 acres of Lot 19, Concession 3 for \$20,000 for the express purpose of building a new cemetery.<sup>12</sup> The new facility, Mount Pleasant Cemetery, is located just north of the present day intersection of St. Clair Avenue and Yonge Street. At the time of its construction, the city of Toronto lay far to the south.

It is probable that the purchase was made not only out of necessity but also because the trustees wanted to demonstrate that Torontonians shared the high feelings of other North Americans and therefore needed one of the new landscaped cemeteries.

The trustees acted quickly to transform their new site from what was referred to as a "thistle farm" into an urban sanctuary. On 17 June 1874 the Trust discussed the possible hiring of H.A. Engelhardt a "landscape gardener" to work with them on the plans for the cemetery.<sup>13</sup>

Engelhardt was born in Prussia in the 1830s, emigrating to Baltimore, Maryland in 1851. He came to Canada in 1870 and quickly established a reputation for himself in southern Ontario as a landscape gardener. Doubtless Engelhardt became familiar with some of the famous cemeteries of the United States during his 20 years there.

Engelhardt laid out a number of grounds, including cemeteries at Port Hope and Belleville.<sup>14</sup> He also published a book entitled *The Beauties of Nature Combined with Art* in 1872, that included a chapter on cemetery design.<sup>15</sup>

Engelhardt's view of the function of the cemetery was typical of many of his Victorian contemporaries. In his chapter on cemeteries he said:

Well may that city or town be proud, that can boast such a "City of the dead." Strangers visit such places with interest, while relatives and friends are led to higher and nobler aspirations, as they meditate amidst such places of solemn and yet graceful attractions . . .<sup>16</sup>

Engelhardt also made clear what he considered to be the ideal terrain for a cemetery. He said "if the site chosen should possess natural advantages such as hills and dales, groves and creeks, so much the better, but the improvements should agree and conform to the natural features of the place."<sup>17</sup> In addition, he did not admire the British tendency also evident in the Necropolis to enclose graves with low fences because it marred the "harmonious appearance of the cemetery."<sup>18</sup> Engelhardt approved of all the trees that "wept" such as weeping ash, willow and birch.<sup>19</sup>

In 1874, Engelhardt was paid \$300.00 to prepare preliminary sketches for Mount Pleasant.<sup>20</sup> The trustees were pleased with the results and Engelhardt was hired to complete his designs. He worked quickly and construction tenders were called on 13 November 1874.<sup>21</sup> Early in 1875, the possibility of retaining Engelhardt full time was discussed and he was hired as the cemetery's first superintendent.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the design process, Engelhardt worked closely with the trustees who also had very clear ideas about what the new cemetery should look like. Throughout 1874, 1875 and 1876, the design and layout of Mount Pleasant were their foremost concern. In May 1874, a group of three trustees made a trip to Mount Hope, the city-owned cemetery in Rochester, and talked to its superintendent and board about cemetery planning and management.<sup>23</sup>

Of the 200 acres purchased for Mount Pleasant, Engelhardt was to transform about 53 acres into a cemetery.<sup>24</sup> By the spring and summer of 1875, real progress had been made. From the *Minutes*, it appears that there were three major concerns in Mount Pleasant's design. They were: the road network, the diversion of the creek and the planting of trees and shrubs. Until the turn of the century, the entrance to the cemetery was off Yonge Street, at the north end of the cemetery (Figure 1). The entrance and the mortuary chapel were directly across from it, providing a central point from which the road network emanated.

Early in the design process the trustees decided that there were not enough curved roads in the cemetery and instructed Engelhardt to add curves and create circles and squares.<sup>25</sup> Although no maps from this early stage exist, the Goad's Fire Insurance map of 1890 shows a busy con-

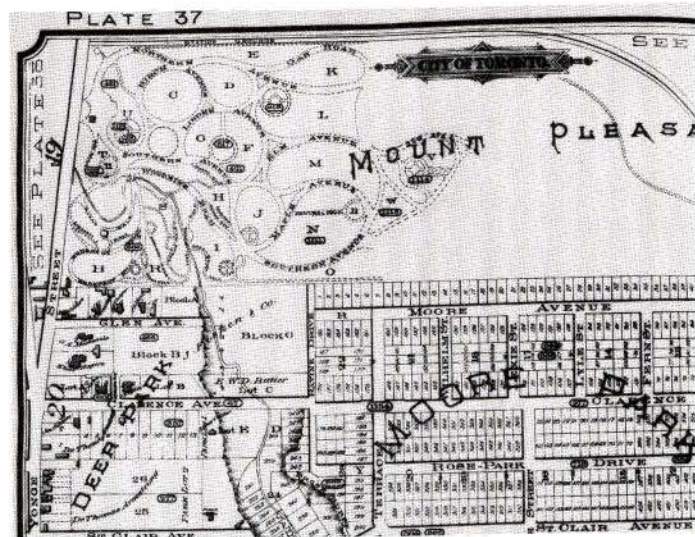


Figure 2. Fire insurance map showing road network, Mount Pleasant Cemetery, 1894. Charles E. Goad, *Fire Insurance Plan of Toronto* (Toronto: Charles E. Goad, 1894), plate 37.

centration of highly squiggly roads and paths (Figure 2). Following the American trend, all the roads laid out were named after either trees (Beech, Willow, Elm) or their location (Prospect, Northern, Crescent)

In May 1875 Engelhardt dammed the creek flowing through the grounds in order to create a series of small lakes. His plans for this part of the cemetery grew more elaborate over the years and the *Minutes* record requests for funds to build rustic bridges, an island in the middle of the largest lake and to plant trees around it.<sup>26</sup> The results of his efforts were successful and an 1875 article described the pond as "a beautiful lakelet" (Figure 5).<sup>27</sup> In the 1880s Engelhardt bought swans for his lake, but they were eaten by dogs.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, the lakes no longer exist. In the 1930s the expense involved in their maintenance was too high and the decision was taken to fill them in. This process was completed in the 1950s when soil from the excavation of the subways across the street was used to complete the grading.

The choice of trees and plants was as important to Engelhardt as the physical design of the cemetery. The *Minutes* indicate that he was constantly ordering nursery catalogues from the United States and Canada in his search for suitable greenery. Luckily, the trustees shared his views on the importance of trees, and it is not uncommon to come across references in the *Minutes* to Engelhardt ordering evergreens or a number of his favourite "weeping" varieties.

Although work on the cemetery progressed well, by the summer of 1876, the minutes record that the grounds were still not ready to be used. Finally, on 4 November 1876, the cemetery was officially opened, before a crowd of about 200 people to whom the chairman of the Trust, William MacMaster, delivered a speech.

Most Toronto papers sent reporters to cover the opening and all reported favourably. The *Globe* described the cemetery as a "quiet resting place for the dead," and also stated that sections of the cemetery would be "eagerly sought for."<sup>29</sup> The *Mail* provided a glimpse of the cemetery's appearance, stating: "The large plots are surrounded by avenues, roads and walks, that sweep in graceful curves through the grounds."<sup>30</sup> Most contemporary reports praised the clever way that Engelhardt had subdued "nature." References were made in both major papers to the wretched appearance of the land before Engelhardt went to work and transformed it into an ideal bucolic landscape.<sup>31</sup>

The first rules and regulations of Mount Pleasant, published in 1876, also mentioned the importance of the transformation. In the introduction, the Trust proudly claimed that "What was once a rough and impassable ravine now bears the impress of art."<sup>32</sup> Engelhardt's influence over the trustees is evident in the strict rules listed in this publication. The Trust maintained that groups or clumps or trees were highly desirable, and that "there is nothing so pleasing at all seasons . . . as a closely shaven green sward."<sup>33</sup> The Trust exerted little control over monument design, but ensured that plots remained big so the cemetery would not be overcrowded. They shared the popular disdain for flowers in a cemetery maintaining that "To arrange a burial plot as one would plant a garden is, to say the least, in very questionable taste."<sup>34</sup> However, from an early date, the Trust did lay out flower beds, not directly associated with individual graves. In concluding the trustees gave themselves a pat on the back saying "It may be questioned whether any other place of burial in Toronto has awakened an interest as wide and deep."<sup>35</sup>

Engelhardt remained superintendent of the cemetery until 1888. By about 1910 the landscaped portion of the 200 acres owned by the Trust had increased to about 100 from the original 53 acres.<sup>36</sup> As the years progressed the value of the cemetery as a resort for city-bound Torontonians was often acknowledged. An 1886 unmarked newspaper clipping now held by the Trust went so far as to say that the city would benefit even more from the cemetery if there was Sunday street car service.

Many other Canadian cities developed large rural cemeteries in the late nineteenth century. For example, Montreal's Mount Royal cemetery was incorporated in 1847 and A.J. Downing, the American landscape gardener, was involved in the early stages of its design. Like Mount Pleasant, Mount Royal had an artificial lake and an extremely intricate road network. Hamilton Cemetery was founded in the 1850s by the city's major Protestant faiths, but did not grow substantially until the 1870s. Like Mount Pleasant, it has no straight roads. Yarmouth, Nova Scotia and Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island also built cemeteries similar to Mount Pleasant in the 1870s, although on a much smaller scale.

Mount Pleasant was similar to its American predecessors and Canadian counterparts in its development as a popular destination for excursionists and tourists. Virtually every city with a rural cemetery soon found it to be a popular place of recreation, perhaps because these cities, like Toronto in the 1870s, lacked public parks. The restful landscaping, shining lakes and peaceful surroundings of cemeteries everywhere answered very real human needs. Even after Toronto developed more parks, Mount Pleasant remained popular. Today, the trustees continue

to encourage recreational use of the grounds, to an extent undreamed of by the original trustees who urged "decorous" behaviour at all times.

Engelhardt's basic design persists despite the loss of his beloved lakes in the 1930s and the gradual simplification of the road pattern. Although clearly modelled after American cemeteries of the nineteenth century, Mount Pleasant's original designer developed a plan strong enough to persist to this day. Perhaps because of this design and the dedication of the Trust to the cemetery, Mount Pleasant remains an important Toronto landmark. □

## NOTES

1. The source of much of the information about early cemeteries related here is James Stevens Curl, who has written extensively on cemeteries and funerary architecture. In particular chapters 5, 7, 8 and 9 of *A Celebration of Death* (London: Constable, 1980), were useful. In addition, his *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (London: David and Charles, 1972) was also helpful.
2. Martha V. Pike and Janice Gray Armstrong, *A Time to Mourn* (Stony Brook: The Museums at Stony Brook, 1980). This book is the catalogue for an exhibition called "Expressions of Grief in Nineteenth Century American" and contains essays on mourning portraits, costumes, rituals and customs.
3. Richard A. Etlin "Pere Lachaise and the Garden Cemetery," *Journal of Garden History*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (July-September 1984), pp. 211-233.
4. James Stevens Curl, "The Design of Early British Cemeteries," *Journal of Garden History*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (July-September 1984), p. 226.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 231-32.
6. Curl devotes an entire chapter entitled "John Claudius Loudon and the Garden Cemetery Movement," to the famous gardener in his *A Celebration of Death*, op. cit., pp. 244-65. In addition Loudon's work has been reprinted; John Claudius Loudon, *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries* (Surrey: Ivet Books Limited, 1981).
7. David Schuyler, "The Evolution of the Anglo-American Rural Cemetery," *Journal of Garden History*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (July-September 1984), p. 302.
8. Barbara Rotundo, "Mount Auburn: Fortunate Coincidences and Ideal Solution," *Journal of Garden History*, Vol. 4, No. 3, (July-September 1984), p. 261.
9. Toronto General Burying Grounds Trust (hereafter TGBGT), *Historical Sketch and Rules and Regulations* (Toronto: TGBGT, 1891), p. 10.
10. Upper Canada "An Act Respecting the Purchase of Certain Lands for the purpose of Establishing a Cemetery", 7 Geo. IV, c. 21.
11. TGBGT, op. cit., TGBGT, *Historical Sketch . . .*, pp. 10-11.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
13. TGBGT, *Minutes*, 17 July 1874. The Trust allowed me limited access to selections of their minutes for the purposes of this paper.
14. Pleasance Crawford has undertaken extensive research on H.A. Engelhardt's life and career. She presented a paper in 1984 to the German-Canadian Historic Association entitled "H.A. Engelhardt 1830-1897: Landscape Designer.
15. H.A. Engelhardt, *The Beauties of Nature Combined with Art* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1872), pp. 28-31.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 28-29.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
20. TGBGT, *Minutes*, 17 July 1874.
21. TGBGT, *Minutes*, 8 January 1875.
22. TGBGT, *Minutes*, 16 October 1874.
23. TGBGT, *Minutes*, 11 May 1874.
24. TGBGT, *Rules and Regulations* (Toronto: TGBGT, 1876), p. 1.
25. TGBGT, *Minutes*, 21 July 1876.
26. TGBGT, *Minutes*, 19 May 1875.
27. "A sweet last resting place," *Liberal* (Toronto), 4 April 1875, p. 6.
28. This unfortunate incident is referred to in the TGBGT, *Minutes*, 14 April 1880.
29. "A Quiet Resting Place for the Dead," *Daily Globe* (Toronto), 6 November 1876.
30. "Mount Pleasant Cemetery," *Mail* (Toronto), 6 November 1876.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
32. TGBGT, *Rules and Regulations* (Toronto: TGBGT, 1876), p. 3.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
36. TGBGT, *Historical Sketch and Rules and Regulations* (Toronto: TGBGT, 1891), p. 14.
37. "Mount Pleasant," *Globe*, (Toronto), 26 September 1891, p. 6.