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Colma, California, is a modern necropolis. The dead outnumber the living, and zoning ordinances protect cemeteries and mourners from disturbance. Speeding north from San Jose on the I-280 through Colma, it is easy to miss the rows of tombstones beside the highway; dense foliage and residential tracts largely obscure their sight. Bay Area commuters need not look upon death or contemplate their own mortality, and, conversely, the dead are sheltered from the traffic of the living.

North of Colma, across the San Mateo County line in San Francisco, public health codes prohibit burials. Of the dozens of graveyards that once lay within city limits, only two remain: Mission Dolores, a small church cemetery dating from 1776, and the San Francisco National Cemetery at the Presidio, which belongs to the United States military. Neither cemetery accepts new interments. Gone are the Yerba Buena, Laurel Hill, Calvary, Masonic, and Odd Fellows cemeteries and other burial grounds dedicated to ethnic groups, fraternal societies, and the poor. In their place are golf courses, row houses, shopping centers, schools, parks, City Hall, and the Civic Center.

The expulsion of the dead and the reclamation of their space for the living followed a public debate waged for nearly fifty years in which the interests of commercial and real estate development were pitted against those of preserving the cemeteries as historic landmarks and public parks. Two definitions of urban progress competed for a place in the modern landscape, one emphasizing urban growth that made communities prosperous, the other cultural and historical places that bound communities together. The debate captured an early-twentieth-century moment when San Franciscans questioned what kind of city they wanted to live in and what role its past might play in their future.

AMERICAN CEMETERIES

For most historians, the story of American cemeteries begins in the colonial period, when burials took place in fields, city lots, or church graveyards. In the early nineteenth century, as American cities began to expand, the dead became mobile. As historian David Charles Sloane has written, “Americans decided that the colonial graveyard reflected older ideas, passé theologies, and social conflicts. The dead were unprotected and moved from place to place as cities and
A local chapter of the Civil War veterans' group the Grand Army of the Republic and their families celebrate Memorial Day, 1909, in Laurel Hill Cemetery. Created in 1867 from the sale of land in Lone Mountain Cemetery, Laurel Hill was one of the last of San Francisco's cemeteries to relocate south to Colma.

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toms grew.” At the same time, Americans were becoming increasingly anxious about the spread of disease. According to historian Kenneth Jackson, “Although twentieth-century Americans typically regard such church graveyards as picturesque, the colonists tended to view them as foul smelling, unattractive eyesores. . . . This critical view of the church graveyard intensified by the middle of the nineteenth century, when public health reformers came to regard the space as a source of disease.” Nineteenth-century Americans began to fear that graveyards would spread contagion. The combination of this fear and the increasing demand for urban space pushed the dead to the city periphery.

Once the graveyards had been exiled to the suburbs, they became places of refuge from city life. Historians describe this stage of evolution as the “garden” or “rural” cemetery movement. The first of these garden cemeteries was Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Opened in 1831, Mount Auburn was a cemetery, botanical garden, and sculpture museum. Its pristine landscape

Early San Francisco history is preserved on the gravestones of the Mission Dolores Cemetery, the city’s oldest burial ground. Opened in 1776 soon after the establishment of the mission, it is one of two remaining original cemeteries in San Francisco. Among the interred are Native Americans, French and Portuguese settlers, and early Spanish, Mexican, and American pioneers.

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and artful statuary contrasted with the older, unkempt church graveyards.²

The San Francisco cemeteries that became the subject of debate in the twentieth century were born of this nineteenth-century garden-cemetery tradition. Burial plots at the garden cemeteries were expensive and primarily occupied by the city elite, but attendance was open to all. In the United States, the garden cemeteries were the direct precursors of public parks. Before New Yorkers picnicked in Central Park, they took their lunches to Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. An early-nineteenth-century Bostonian might cross the Charles River to Cambridge for a carriage ride through Mount Auburn Cemetery, and

“Rest Dearest Mama” reads a heartfelt banner that once decorated this gravesite in Laurel Hill Cemetery (ca. 1908). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century San Franciscans, like other mourners across the country, frequented cemeteries for recreation as well as memorial observances.

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in San Francisco, when Golden Gate Park was nothing more than sand and brush, San Franciscans strolled amidst the statuary and gazed out over the bay from the Lone Mountain cemeteries, two miles west of downtown.  

With the creation of American public parks in the late nineteenth century, fewer urbanites frequented garden cemeteries for recreation. Expanding cities grew around and enveloped cemeteries like Mount Auburn and Green-Wood. The garden cemeteries were preserved as historic landmarks. Meanwhile, around the turn of the twentieth century, a new kind of cemetery, the lawn-park cemetery, took over the business of burial. Characterized by its austere, minimalist landscaping, the new cemetery was almost exclusively located in the suburbs. David Charles Sloane summarized the changeover from garden to lawn-park cemeteries: “Two centuries of interaction between the cemetery and American society has left the cemetery, once central to the urban scene, a necessary, but not necessarily desirable neighbor in the suburbs.” What these histories describe is an uncomplicated, uncontested transformation from urban to suburban, from public space to dead zone. In these histories, the cemeteries work in tandem with the changing needs of American cities. But in the case of San Francisco, they did not.

LONE MOUNTAIN CEMETERY

If you died in San Francisco in the Gold Rush years of the early 1850s, your final resting place—whether in a graveyard or an empty stretch of land—would have been in the midst of the commercial and residential heart of the city. Your religion or ethnicity might have determined where you were interred, but barring a preference or the funds for private burial, you might have ended up in the municipally run Yerba Buena Cemetery.

Opened in 1850, Yerba Buena occupied a 13-acre area bounded by what today are Market, McAllister, and Larkin streets. As San Francisco grew, the cemetery became overly crowded. But rather than expand Yerba Buena, the city government arranged the sale of 320 acres near Lone Mountain, at the western edge of the city, to real estate developers J. H. Atkinson and C. C. Butler and undertaker Nathaniel Gray for the construction of a new cemetery. Deeming 160 acres enough to “form a sufficiently large cemetery,” the developers subdivided and sold the remainder for residential and commercial use. Atkinson, Butler, and Gray called it Lone Mountain Cemetery, and they modeled it on the garden cemeteries of eastern cities.

The opening of Lone Mountain Cemetery on May 30, 1854, marked the beginning of the segregation of the dead from the living in San Francisco. Atkinson, Butler, and Gray anticipated that it would ultimately replace Yerba Buena, which they considered “too near the city for a permanent burial place.” Lone Mountain was distanced from the traffic and congestion of downtown but close enough for an easy day trip. The Annals of San Francisco described it as “beautifully shaped,” from whose summit “may be obtained one of the finest and most extensive views of land and water.” Other contemporary accounts offered a less glowing description. In 1865, landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted described the cemetery site as “scourged by the wind . . . with no trees or turf and with but stunted verdure of any kind, and this with difficulty kept alive.” Given the area’s natural environment of sand dunes and brush, Olmsted’s description was likely the more accurate.

When it opened, Lone Mountain Cemetery was accessible only by “a circuitous route, nearly four miles in length, by way of Pacific Street and the Presidio.” Later, the city planked an extension of Bush Street, which shortened the trip. The cemetery was bounded by what is now Broderick Street on the east, Arguello Boulevard on the
west, California Street on the north, and Fulton Street on the south. To the west was an area frequently designated on maps of the peninsula as simply Sand Hills but officially called the Outside Lands. Sparsely populated with dairy farms and squatters, the area was outside the chartered limits of the city and belonged to the federal government until 1866, when Congress passed an act relinquishing the land to the city. The Outside Lands—moderately remote, relatively empty, and inexpensive—were prime real estate for cemetery development.7 And develop they did. Lone Mountain Cemetery was subdivided as early as 1854, when it deeded 38 acres to the Masons. The fraternal society built a lavishly designed and landscaped cemetery for its members. In 1860, 49 acres were deeded to the Catholic Archdiocese for Calvary Cemetery. Around the same time, another fraternal society, the Odd Fellows of San Francisco, purchased 27 acres of land near Lone Mountain to open a cemetery for its members. In 1867, Lone Mountain Cemetery sold the remainder of its land to

Created in 1854 on approximately 54 hilly acres in what was called the Outside Lands, Lone Mountain Cemetery was modeled on the grand garden cemeteries of the East—a sign that the young, western American city of San Francisco was on par with the country’s great metropolises. Named in honor of the 500-foot sand hill half a mile to the south, the site was comprised eventually of Calvary (1860), Laurel Hill (1854), Masonic (1864), and the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (1865) cemeteries.
a group of investors who renamed it Laurel Hill, after a garden cemetery in Philadelphia.8

In 1868, the city began exhuming the bodies in Yerba Buena to make room for the new Civic Center and other commercial buildings in what is now the heart of downtown San Francisco. The city sectioned off 200 acres at the far western edge of the San Francisco peninsula, the most remote part of the Outside Lands, and began moving the Yerba Buena bodies there. Tracts of the new City Cemetery were designated for use by various charitable organizations, fraternal societies, and the Chinese. When Yerba Buena Cemetery closed in 1870, San Francisco’s dead were almost exclusively on the western side of the city, in or at the edge of the Outside Lands.9

LIFE AND DEATH IN THE OUTSIDE LANDS

In the late nineteenth century, the settlement of the living in the Outside Lands proceeded more slowly than the settlement of the dead. For much of the nineteenth century, the Outside Lands remained mostly sand dunes, with few developed lots. The San Francisco Examiner described the area in 1889 as “sand and lupin, lupin and sand, more sand and lupin and nothing else until the cliff’s hanging over the ocean.” Some residential development was facilitated by streetcars, which began running along Geary Street in 1877 and California Street in 1878, and the establishment of a utilities infrastructure spearheaded by the area’s first neighborhood improvement clubs in the 1880s. Residents were predominantly professionals, small proprietors, or farm owners living in cottages along the streetcar routes. In the 1880s, a handful of individuals with property adjacent to the cemeteries began to lodge complaints with the city, but for the most part, the living and the dead coexisted peacefully.10

In the 1890s, the emergence of centralized, proactive city planning in San Francisco hastened the rate of residential development in the Outside Lands and increased conflict between living and deceased neighbors. The municipal government began to extend transportation and water...
system service into the neighborhoods. Historians William Issel and Robert Cherny claim that these new responsibilities reflected an “increased role of the city in directing development, which . . . inevitably led to the formalization of the city’s role in the planning of expansion and development.” To further encourage residential and commercial growth in the Outside Lands, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors laid out a tract of 1,000 acres for what would become Golden Gate Park.11

Around the same time, in 1898, San Francisco converted the City Cemetery, on the western edge of the Outside Lands, into Lincoln Park.12 San Franciscans hoped that the parks in the Outside Lands would draw San Franciscans westward as Central Park had drawn Manhattanites northward. As geographer Gray Brechin has written, “Something spectacular was needed to overcome the notorious disadvantages of heavy fog and drifting sand in the bleakly named Outside Lands.” Early plans for public parks in the Outside Lands spoke to the cultural ambitions of San Francisco’s city planners, who sought to emulate the urban landscape of established metropolises like New York and Boston.13

By the 1890s, the neighborhood north of Golden Gate Park, where the cemeteries clustered, had been dubbed the Richmond district. The Richmond Banner, a local newspaper, estimated the Richmond district’s population at only 3,000,
a tiny fraction of the city's overall population, which was 298,997 in 1890 and would climb to 341,772 by 1900.14

A CALL FOR BURIAL CESSION

As the Outside Lands’ population increased, so did the frequency of complaints about the cemeteries. The Richmond District Improvement Association, a group of neighborhood property owners, spearheaded a campaign against the cemeteries. In 1895, the improvement club called for the cessation of burials in San Francisco and the removal of the Lone Mountain cemeteries. The association declared that the cemeteries were detrimental to property values and “blurs on our fair city’s face.” The timing of the first anticemetery campaign coincided with the opening of Golden Gate Park during the Midwinter Exposition of 1894. Not only did the new park take over the recreational function once fulfilled by the Lone Mountain garden cemeteries, it also signaled the city’s commitment to investing in the development of the Outside Lands.15

Richmond residents interpreted the funding of Golden Gate Park as an indication that the city’s Board of Supervisors would support neighborhood action against the cemeteries. In a letter to the editor of the Banner, Charles Hubbs, a lawyer and the president of the Richmond District Improvement Association, wrote, “When in the early history of San Francisco, land in the vicinity of where the cemeteries now are could be purchased for $2.50 and $3.00 per acre; distant from all residences, no Golden Gate Park . . . or other attractions in the western portion of our city then existing; that barren waste of land isolated from habitations . . . was selected to be used for cemetery purposes. . . . After their location, the great
tide of civilization and rapid growth of San Francisco as the great commercial emporium of the Pacific extended its boundaries of residence property . . . and the Richmond district became classified among that available portion of the city in which to live, to have homes, pleasures, business and equal prospects of attaining a similar stand in the progressive advancement of our city as has been accorded other districts therein . . . . The cemeteries must not encroach upon nor stop the progressive advancement of the Richmond District.” The opening of Golden Gate Park marked the beginning of a new era of development in the Outside Lands, where property owners feared the cemeteries would diminish their opportunities to profit from the growth.

Richmond residents claimed that removing the cemeteries would be a sign of a city’s “progressive development.” One editorial in the Banner insisted that “every idea of progressiveness argues in favor of removing the acres of tombstones standing guard over the gateway to this beautiful suburb.” Another editorial offered up Chicago as an example: “We remember when Chicago was struggling out of its swaddling clothes and needed more room to spread out. The Catholic Cemetery was then located on the north side, between the city and Lincoln Park. Not much time was wasted and the citizens promptly brought the matter forcibly before the Aldermen, the sequence of which was that the cemetery was removed in quick order . . . . Californians are proverbially not as rapid as the citizens of the windy city and are apt to deliberate long—sometimes too long—over a project, which means progressive development. These cemeteries, now lying over the best territory should have been removed long ago; at least further burial should have been stopped.”

The Banner editor presented Chicago as a model for how neighborhood improvement clubs might work with municipal government to achieve urban progress, defined as space for more homes and businesses. By failing to adopt this proactive approach to city planning, the editorial suggested, San Francisco not only diminished its development potential, but also failed to meet the standards set by other American cities. This reasoning reflected an impulse that historian Gunther Barth has described as San Franciscans’ “metropolism”: a desire to “inaugurate and maintain a style of life characteristic of great cities . . . to retain an urban outlook and to aspire to city life undeterred by the vast expanse of country separating their new homes from their old ones in Boston, New York, Charleston, Chicago or New Orleans.” Metropolism would figure prominently in all of San Francisco’s subsequent cemetery debates.

But emulating other major American cities was not the only concern of San Francisco cemetery opponents. As health and hygiene became indicators of modernity and civilization, some Richmond residents claimed that the cemeteries threatened the health of San Francisco’s citizens. “All civilized nations bury their dead outside the city limits,” Hubbs wrote in one letter to the editor of the Banner, further remarking, “It is a matter of common remark among medical men that outbreaks of diphtheria and other ‘filth’ diseases are constantly occurring near cemeteries.”

Hubbs’s claim reflected a new awareness of public health and sanitation. In the late nineteenth century, many municipal governments began to monitor activities with potential for contamination or contagion. With the burial process increasingly supervised and legislated by San Francisco’s inspectors of interment and disinterment—part of a legion of food, animal, bakery, bath, laundry, and other official examiners—it is highly unlikely that the San Francisco cemeteries posed a health risk to their neighbors. An 1890 disinterment inspectors’ report refuted the claim that cemeteries spread disease and informed the Board of Supervisors that the real risks lay in removing the dead from their graves: “In this
city, where real estate speculations, as well as sentiment, tends [sic] to depopulate our cemeteries, these small pox cases will occasionally come up.” Better, they reasoned, to leave the dead where they were.20

Confronting the first organized anticemetery campaign, the directors of the cemeteries did not feel the need to defend themselves. First, the laws governing cemetery land made it difficult for a city to compel removal. Although the San Francisco cemeteries sold most of their plots without rights of “burial in perpetuity,” in which plot owners held the equivalent of a title to the grave, the law protected plot owners by stipulating that a city could only remove the cemeteries to abate public nuisance.21 The cemeteries—quiet, peaceful, and well maintained—were not a public nuisance.

Second, the cultural prohibition against disturbing the dead seemed strong enough to thwart any attempt to remove the cemeteries. Even among the members of the Richmond District Improvement Association, there were signs of conflicted feelings: “The cemetery question brought forth a rather stormy contest. Mr. George McGooniss introduced a resolution in favor of allowing the cemetery agitation to rest, supported by Charley Lamar in a lengthy address. Mr. Hubbs championed the cause of not allowing further burials in the cemeteries, severely scoring the action of certain parties in connection with favoring the cemetery side. He addressed the club in eloquent terms, urging the members to stand by him in his fight against the cemetery combine. However, the motion prevailed and was carried.”

In response, Hubbs defected from the Richmond District Improvement Association and in October 1895 formed the Richmond District Property Owners’ Association. The new organization campaigned for burial cessation, a less-drastic measure than removal. But even when arguing for burial cessation, Richmond property owners were laying the groundwork to achieve their ultimate goal: removing the cemetery business from the city. Preventing future burials within the city would stop the expansion of the cemeteries, but more importantly, it would make existing cemeteries unprofitable for the cemetery directors, who would have to purchase additional land outside the city to serve new customers.23

The Richmond District Property Owners’ Association represented the interests in residential and commercial development of some of the wealthiest San Franciscans living in the Outside Lands—including banker William H. Crocker, mine operator L. P. Drexler, and Gustav Sutro, who was instrumental in developing transportation and electricity networks throughout San Francisco. The Banner urged its readers to join the association: “No progressive citizen can afford to ignore so important a movement.” Awaiting the Board of Supervisors’ decision, an editorial declared:

“Where homes and mansions should rear their pinnacles to the western sky, cold tombstones and clammy vaults stand, a silent menace to the living, a mockery to progress and the advancement of civilization.”
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FROM BURIAL CESSION TO REMOVAL

Anticemetary agitation won its first victory on March 26, 1900, when Mayor James D. Phelan approved Ordinance No. 25, which made it illegal to bury or cremate a dead body in San Francisco after August 1, 1901. The ordinance marked a major turning point in the public perception of the cemeteries. No longer seen as a place of recreation, the cemetery was portrayed as a public nuisance whose removal was encouraged. Citing no evidence, the Board of Supervisors determined that “the burial of the dead within the City and County of San Francisco is dangerous to life and detrimental to public health.” Ordinance No. 25 also reflected new conceptions of space and distance in the growing city: The Outside Lands, although still relatively undeveloped, would no longer be considered remote enough for a cemetery.

Ordinance No. 25 was part of Mayor Phelan’s overarching plan to transform the urban landscape of San Francisco and make the city a model of “progressive” development. As historian Philip J. Ethington explains, “by ‘progressive’ Phelan meant, approximately, economic growth and development within a unified, popular civic sense of common interests by means of efficient municipal administration.” Before becoming mayor, Phelan had made a fortune in San Francisco real estate, and he used his political power to expand public transportation and utility services as a means of guiding and stimulating urban growth.

The mayor was also a major proponent of the City Beautiful movement, which designed “imperial” urban landscapes to inspire a sense of civic pride and common heritage among city dwellers. Under Phelan’s mayorality, municipal buildings with imposing facades, pioneer statuary, tree-lined streets, and grand public spaces proliferated. In 1905, Phelan commissioned City Beautiful architect Daniel H. Burnham to draw up plans for citywide “improvement and adornment.” Burnham’s plans recommended removing the cemeteries for practical and aesthetic purposes: “Those cemeteries lying around Lone Mountain constitute a block to the city’s progress and circulation to the west. It is suggested that they be gradually absorbed, partly as streets and partly as parks. Or they might be made the site for public institutions requiring ample settings such as schools, hospitals, etc.” To be a progressive city, Burnham and Phelan agreed, San Francisco needed to combine economic and material growth with urban beauty. The cemeteries did not help the city achieve those goals.

Loopholes in the burial cessation ordinance allowed the cemeteries to continue operating in a limited capacity, doing business in the burial of ashes and vault interment. But cemetery revenues plummeted. Since most of the plots had been sold without perpetual-care funds, the graves began to fall into disrepair. The earthquake that rocked San Francisco in 1906 toppled tombstones and statues, which contributed to the cemeteries’ disorderly appearance. The ordinance, combined with the earthquake, transformed the cemeteries into what Hubbs and the Board of Supervisors had imagined them to be all along: a public nuisance. Armed with photographs and written accounts of the cemeteries’ increasingly dilapidated condition, Richmond residents recommenced their efforts to remove them.

A surge in population in the Richmond and Sunset districts coincided with a new campaign to remove the cemeteries in the 1910s and 1920s.
The opportunity to rebuild after the 1906 earthquake and fire, the abundance of unimproved lots in the Outside Lands, and an expanding network of commuter rails made living beyond Lone Mountain attractive to middle-class San Franciscans.30

In 1914, the Board of Health issued a removal notice, Ordinance No. 2597: “The Masonic, Laurel Hill, Odd Fellows, and Calvary Cemeteries have been declared to be and constitute a public nuisance and a menace and detriment to the public health and welfare.” The ordinance allowed cemetery plot owners fourteen months to remove their deceased. After the sale of the land, the Board of Supervisors promised that part of the proceeds would go toward refunding the cost of removal to plot owners. If plot owners did not remove their deceased relations within the designated time, the cemetery associations or the Board of Health would disinter the unclaimed bodies at the plot owners’ expense.31

Unfortunately, issues of the Richmond Banner no longer exist for this year, but one can imagine how delighted many Richmond residents must have been about the Board of Supervisors’ ordinance to remove the cemeteries. Although cemetery debate had remained largely a neighborhood issue, it did generate some publicity in the San Francisco Chronicle. In letters to the editor, San Franciscans voiced their mixed feelings about the cemeteries. Those in favor of removal argued that the cemeteries impeded urban expansion. The land on which the Lone Mountain cemeteries sat was “greatly needed for home sites for the living.” Supporters of removal portrayed the cemeteries

Prohibited from taking new interments after 1901 by a city ordinance, Lone Mountain cemeteries suffered from falling revenues. Overgrown, unkempt gravesites were a common sight, and the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 only exacerbated the problem by cracking and toppling tombstones. As the San Francisco Chronicle reported on May 6, 1906, “In these stirring times of reconstruction, where every moment means so much to the living, men have little time to give a thought to the dead.”

California Historical Society, FN-26304
as roadblocks between the Richmond district and the city. They supported the Board of Supervisors’ efforts to “remove the dead wall between the two best and growing parts of the city.”

By 1914, the age of the garden cemetery had passed. Americans now buried their dead in lawn-park cemeteries. The removal argument acknowledged the resulting change in the cemeteries’ function: The public park had replaced the cemetery as a place of recreation. One San Franciscan in favor of removal scoffed, “The argument of some contenders that the present cemeteries would be improved and made parks is ridiculous. . . . Who ever heard of a cemetery being a pleasure resort? Would you have your children frolicking among the tombstones? Would they ever learn to have respect for the dead by that method?” Whereas the garden cemeteries had been designed and landscaped for the appreciation and enjoyment of the living, the new lawn-park cemeteries were focused on maintaining a somber environment for the dead and those who mourned them.

As the Richmond and Western Addition neighborhoods blossomed in the first decades of the twentieth century, real estate and commercial developers increasingly saw the Lone Mountain cemeteries as an impediment to urban progress and began to seek cemetery removal. Within a few decades, after vigorous debate, Laurel Hill and Calvary (center) would move to the “cemetery city” of Colma.
The arguments against removal focused primarily on the costs involved. No one knew if the expense of disinterring and re-interring the remains would exceed the value of the property. Property values in the neighborhoods surrounding the cemeteries—the Western Addition, a neighborhood between Van Ness Avenue and Golden Gate Park, and the Outside Lands, which included the Richmond and Sunset neighborhoods—had fluctuated over time. In 1913, sales in the Western Addition totaled $10.3 million and in the Outside Lands, $8.5 million. These figures represented a decline from 1912, when they totaled $14.4 million and $9.5 million, respectively. But they represented an increase in sales from the 1911 totals, which had been only $7.9 million and $8.1 million, respectively.34 The removal ordinance stipulated that the cemetery associations would reimburse the cost of removal to the plot owners after the sale of the land, but if the cemetery property did not sell at a sufficient price, taxpayers might have to cover the shortfall.

Public health and cultural concerns also factored into the arguments against removal. Some residents wondered if digging up the graves would spread contagion through the city: “We do not know how far the estimates for the removal of the dead have been exaggerated, but the removal of the victims of contagious diseases alone, if properly accomplished, will be a heavy tax which cannot be evaded without incurring consequences too frightful to think of.” Cultural prohibitions against disturbing the dead troubled some San Franciscans writing to the Chronicle; in one letter to the editor, a San Franciscan described hearing another exclaim in a butcher shop, “If they are to be digging up cemeteries all the time, what good will it do a fellow to think of his mother’s grave?”35 Other defenders of the cemeteries acknowledged the historical significance of the places of the dead: “What would San Francisco be today had not many of the people who are buried there done what they have in the past. . . . You will find that nine out of ten of those who want the cemeteries removed are people who have not been here long and also have no kin buried there and no thought of San Francisco’s early settlers.”36 In a city where the landscape was always changing, being torn down, knocked down, and rebuilt, and where the population was constantly in flux, the cemeteries had been a cultural institution and a fixture on the map for sixty years. Defending them became a sign of municipal belonging and pride.

By 1914, San Francisco had a new mayor, James Rolph. Although Rolph favored removing the cemeteries to free up space for homes and businesses, he refused to mandate removal without popular approval, and the matter was put to a general vote as Proposition 50 in the November 1914 elections. The result was 68,918 to 43,433 in favor of leaving the cemeteries where they were.37 It must have been a relief for the Calvary and Laurel Hill cemetery associations; the burial cessation ordinance that had taken effect in 1901 had placed Calvary and Laurel Hill cemeteries under more financial duress than Odd Fellows and Masonic, whose shrinking revenue base had been subsidized by donations from their members.

The vote spared Calvary and Laurel Hill the expensive endeavor of disinterring 55,000 and 35,000 bodies, respectively. Meanwhile, the Odd Fellows and Masonic cemetery associations seemed to believe that removal was inevitable and had already begun to court buyers for the San Francisco land. The vote put Odd Fellows
and Masonic cemeteries at the mercy of the plot owners; if they did not want to remove their deceased, then the cemeteries could do nothing.

**URBAN GROWTH AND RENEWED REMOVAL EFFORTS**

By 1920, the pressure to free up space in the Richmond district had reached a critical point. The district’s population had grown to 66,000 residents from 3,000 just twenty-five years earlier. In 1921, the state passed the Morris Act, granting cemetery associations the right to remove and sell their land if a majority of plot owners consented. Two years later, *Hornblower v. Masonic Cemetery Association* challenged the Morris Act on the grounds that it prescribed an improper use of police power and violated the constitutional rights of plot owners.

In a brief “filed on behalf of many families of deceased pioneers,” Francis J. Sullivan argued before the State Supreme Court that the “proper end” of police power was to “secure and promote the public welfare, comfort, and convenience of the citizens as well as the public peace, health, morals, and safety.” Sullivan denied that the cemeteries constituted a threat to San Francisco residents. “It is well known,” he wrote, “that at the time of the earthquake in San Francisco in April 1906, tens of thousands of the people of San Francisco lived for months in these cemeteries . . . and used the water of artesian wells thereon . . . thus showing that in no manner or at all the cemeteries were dangerous for human life.” Sullivan also claimed that the Morris Act violated the rights of plot owners. Removal without their express consent was akin to confiscating property without due process.

The court agreed with Sullivan and barred the cemeteries from any removal without permission from each and every plot owner. This decision was rendered moot just two years later, in 1923.

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*Vote Against The Removal of the Bodies from the Cemeteries*

**No. 50—Vote NO**

**IT IS A PROJECT WITHOUT SENSE OR SENTIMENT**

A LOSS to the STATE of TWO MILLION DOLLARS ($2,000,000) which can be saved by turning the property into Parks at no cost to the City.

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In 1914, the majority of San Francisco voters were unconvinced by the argument that the Lone Mountain cemeteries impeded urban progress. Despite the endorsement of Mayor James Rolph, San Franciscans voted against removing the Lone Mountain cemeteries by nearly a 2-to-1 margin.

*California Historical Society*
with passage of the Second Morris Act, which extended legislative bodies “police power” to remove remains in areas where burial had been prohibited.40

The cemeteries responded differently to the new ordinance. In preparation for removal, Odd Fellows closed its San Francisco cemetery. Masonic was engaged in negotiations for the sale of its land to Saint Ignatius College (later the University of San Francisco). Empowered by the Second Morris Act, the Board of Supervisors once again passed separate ordinances—numbered 6215, 6216, 6234, and 6247—to remove each of the Lone Mountain cemeteries. The Odd Fellows and Masonic cemeteries solicited funds from their affiliated fraternal societies to purchase land in San Mateo County. Not only did financial support from the fraternal societies give Odd Fellows and Masonic more freedom to remove, they were about half the size of Calvary or Laurel Hill, which meant fewer bodies to disinter and lower costs. A lawyer for the Roman Catholic archbishop made a case that the sale of the land would not cover the cost of removing Calvary Cemetery. By way of compromise, the church offered to allow the city to cut roads through the cemetery and permit traffic to flow between the western neighborhoods and the city center.41

Laurel Hill Cemetery was in a more difficult situation. It was independent, without a fraternal society to subsidize its shrinking revenue base or fund a new cemetery in San Mateo County. Laurel Hill also occupied prime real estate in between the major commercial arteries of Clement and Sutter streets. Removing it would do more to facilitate the flow of traffic than removing Calvary, located near the base of Lone Mountain.42

As he had in 1914, Rolph refused to approve the four cemetery removal ordinances without a general vote, and as they went on the ballot as Proposition 43 in November 1924, debate over removal began anew. San Francisco’s commercial and real estate associations came out in force against the cemeteries. The campaign to remove included not only the Richmond and Western Addition improvement clubs but also merchants associations from the Fillmore, Geary, Mission, and Divisadero districts. The Chamber of Commerce and the San Francisco Real Estate Board also endorsed the campaign. These various neighborhood clubs and commercial and real estate associations published a pamphlet quoting Mayor Rolph as saying, “If we must provide for the expansion of our city it must be a city of homes. To this end sentiment must yield to progress. It is conceded by all that at sometime these cemeteries must be removed. All the ground within San Francisco is required for living inhabitants.” In that statement, Mayor Rolph summarized the position that the cemeteries impeded urban progress, growth, and development.43

Cemetery opponents in the Richmond district urged San Francisco to emulate other American cities that had removed cemeteries. A local improvement club argued that cemetery removal was “neither new nor novel in the rapidly growing cities of this country” and published a list of examples in its local paper.44 The removal of church graveyards and even larger city cemeteries was, indeed, fairly common, but not on the scale proposed in San Francisco. The removal of the four Lone Mountain cemeteries would constitute the disinterment of nearly 150,000 bodies.

On the other side of the debate, the Cemetery Defense League, lawyers representing the Laurel Hill Cemetery Association, argued that preserving the past was a means of achieving urban progress. Like the Richmond Improvement Club, the league asked San Franciscans to compare themselves to residents of other major metropolises: “In Eastern cities like New York, Boston, and New Orleans, the old cemeteries lie in the very heart of the business districts, and are never disturbed by ruthless greed, but are the treasured landmarks of the cities. . . . Are we San Francis-
cans more deficient in sentiment and honor for our forefathers than our Eastern brethren?"45 Garden cemeteries in New York, Boston, and New Orleans actually tended to be located in outlying areas, not in business districts as the league claimed. But the pamphlet correctly stated that these cemeteries were preserved by their cities as landmarks. The Cemetery Defense League drew connections between public history and the modern city: If San Francisco hoped to emulate the progress and culture of eastern cities, it would need to consecrate space for the past.

The Society of California Pioneers, a local historical society, joined forces with the Cemetery Defense League. Together, the two organizations published pamphlets outlining the significance of the Lone Mountain cemeteries to the public history of San Francisco: “In these four cemeteries rest the bones of the pioneer citizens of California, and of our forebears of most of our citizens. These cemeteries, hallowed by our early history and consecrated by our dead, have an undeniable claim on the affections of the people of our city. The opening of the graves will call old wounds while sorrow in our hearts remembers the past. It is the last resting place of many of the pioneers and founders of San Francisco. Inscribed on its tombstones may be found much of the early history of our city.”46

The Society of California Pioneers called cemetery removal “a project without sense or sentiment,” and asked “cannot the founders of this state rest in peace until nature has destroyed them, or must they be subject to private greed?” The image of the pioneer, as with the image of the beloved forty-niner, had particular resonance for San Franciscans. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these images were enshrined in public statuary, ceremonial art, and city and state seals. By invoking the pioneer image, cemetery supporters hoped to move San Franciscans to protect a piece of their common heritage.47

Proposition 43, a plan to repeal the Board of Supervisors’ removal ordinances, passed by a narrow margin in the 1924 elections, signaling that while anticemetery sentiment was building, keeping the cemeteries where they were was still the majority opinion. The ordinance would have removed approximately 120,000–150,000 remains from the Lone Mountain cemeteries.

California Historical Society
While the defenders of the cemeteries ascribed meaning to both the place and the remains of the dead, cemetery opponents made the resting place unimportant.

Not to be outdone on the “sentiment” question, cemetery opponents developed their own argument for respecting the dead. At an anticemetery rally, Jacob Nieto, a San Francisco doctor, said, “I believe we show care and respect and reverence for the memory of the dead when we take their remains out of the places where they are uncared for and place them where there is at least the semblance of respect.” The Richmond Banner ran pictures of fallen tombstones and plots overgrown with weeds. After more than two decades without new burials, cost of upkeep at Laurel Hill had outpaced revenues, and the landscape was in shambles. In this condition, opponents argued, the Lone Mountain cemeteries desecrated the places of the dead. They criticized San Francisco’s decision to place Lincoln Park over the old City Cemetery plots rather than removing the bodies: “Today, players of golf make merry over the remains of the dead, unhonored and unsung,” and they urged San Franciscans to take a proactive stance on removal lest “this also be the fate of Laurel Hill, Calvary, Odd Fellows, and Masonic.” Honoring the dead would then be achieved by “removal decently conducted under the loving care and supervision of immediate descendants.” While the defenders of the cemeteries ascribed meaning to both the place and the remains of the dead, cemetery opponents made the resting place unimportant. Only the body mattered, and the bodies were best protected outside the city and away from the living.48

In the 1924 election, public sentiment and history defeated urban expansion and development; with the passage of Proposition 43, San Franciscans voted to keep the cemeteries. The Richmond Improvement Club blamed the outcome on the “very long ballot” and the proposition’s “negative wording [that] confused many [voters].”49 The measure passed by a substantially slimmer margin than the 1914 vote—69,677 versus 62,338. Public opinion was beginning to shift away from preserving the dilapidated cemeteries.

PUBLIC HISTORY OR PUBLIC NUISANCE?

The 1924 vote created yet another storm of litigation, which resulted in a 1930 court decision upholding the city’s right to abate public nuisance and to exercise zoning ordinances against the cemeteries: “The court held that merely because the board did not act affirmatively in declaring all cemeteries to be nuisances, there is no reason why the legislation should be declared invalid. . . . It would be different if the board had permitted interments in one and not in another. Being public nuisances, the cemeteries may be abated one at a time. The board may proceed cautiously, step by step. The court further held that all zoning ordinances are discriminatory in the sense that some property holders are permitted to do and others prohibited from doing the same things in localities which are not dissimilar in actual fact, but that such laws are valid.”50

Released from their obligation to San Francisco plot owners, Masonic and Odd Fellows cemeteries wasted no time. Within a year of the court decision, both had removed their dead to San Mateo County cemeteries. Odd Fellows sold its land for residential development, and Masonic completed its sale to Saint Ignatius College.51 In 1937, when the Board of Supervisors set its deadline for cemetery removal, only Calvary and Laurel Hill remained to fight, and Calvary
quickly surrendered. The archbishop consented to remove to the church’s cemetery in San Mateo County. The land was sold to residential developers and the proceeds used to fund disinterment and removal.

Laurel Hill continued to resist, but it was hardly a formidable presence. Forty years of minimal cash flow had taken its toll on what had been the burial place of the San Francisco elite. Removal seemed imminent, and given the difficulty of locating all the families of the dead, the Laurel Hill Cemetery Association directors knew that the burdens of disinterment would fall to them. The association offered to donate the land to the city for the purpose of establishing a memorial park and published pamphlets extolling the aesthetic features of the site. “What a wonderful view we get from here! I think it is the finest view in the city,” exclaimed a pamphlet issued by the Laurel Hill Memorial Park Association (the association’s newly adopted moniker). An open letter to the Board of Supervisors, signed by an “Old Timer,” called attention to the less-dilapidated parts of the cemetery: “Unlike the western reaches of this burial ground, the eastern part that confronts the passerby on Presidio Avenue is beautiful. It is lovingly tended . . . and its tombs bear names that explain why San Francisco became a great city.” The letter suggested that urban progress was not solely a function of a city’s physical growth. Being a great city meant having a great future, present, and past.52

The association also promised that the park would generate revenues for the Richmond district. One supporter wrote in the Banner, “A memorial park would be a far greater asset to the Richmond district than another subdivision of modern dwellings. If once known, every tourist to San Francisco would want to visit it.” The writer went on to list the numerous monuments to famous Californians buried there. The pamphlets extolled the benefits of historical tourism and cited examples of similar practices in New York and Baltimore: “No sojourner to New York fails to visit Trinity Churchyard. No tourist in Baltimore overlooks the monuments to Edgar Allen [sic] Poe in Westminster Cemetery. . . . Imagine the uproar if anybody today proposed to sweep away those burial places!” Selling Laurel Hill as historical tourism was the last effort to make the cemetery matter to San Francisco.53

ERASED FROM THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

In 1937, the decision to remove Laurel Hill was again put to a vote: 32,449 San Franciscans voted to preserve Laurel Hill as a memorial park and 65,725 voted to remove it. Between the 1924 and 1937 votes, the balance between the material needs of the living and the cultural obligations to the dead finally had tipped. The population in what had once been the Outside Lands had reached 135,294 in 1930. The Richmond district alone had achieved nearly 50 percent growth over its 1920 population.54

Municipal transportation—in particular automobile traffic—also was of increasing concern to San Francisco voters. Cemetery opponents claimed that the cemeteries, lying between the western residential neighborhoods and the city center, caused traffic congestion: “Remove the bodies to decent surroundings; clear the land for residential development, which will prevent our people from crossing the bay; provide streets and avenues to bring in close touch districts now inaccessible to each other by reason of this cemetery obstruction. The progress of the city demands it. Respect for the dead demands it. The rights of the living demand it.”55 The vote made it clear that the cemeteries were a hindrance to progress and urban growth; they had to go.

Striking a deal with Cypress Lawn, a San Mateo County cemetery, the Laurel Hill Cemetery Association disinterred and removed its bodies across
the county line. As stipulated in the 1937 ordinance, grave markers, headstones, and monuments were left on the premises for relatives and friends to claim. The response was less than overwhelming. The Laurel Hill Cemetery Association made direct appeals to various San Francisco historical societies but received almost no reply. The Department of Public Works cleared the remaining headstones and monuments and used them for sea walls at Aquatic Park and the municipal yacht harbor.\textsuperscript{56}

This lack of interest in claiming the artifacts pointed to another possible explanation for the 1937 vote: Rapid population turnover may have reduced the number of residents who had direct relationships with the dead. While the data on Laurel Hill no longer exist, the statistics for the Masonic Cemetery removal demonstrated the challenges in locating relatives. In 1931, Masonic was able to match 50 percent of its interred with living relations. Among those living relations, only half agreed to pay to remove the bodies. The postal service was not able to locate the other half, leaving nearly 15,000 out of 20,000 bodies unclaimed. Laurel Hill, without the benefit of a national fraternal organization and with twice as many bodies as Masonic, was not likely to have located a greater percentage of living relations.

The campaign to remove the Lone Mountain cemeteries had begun in earnest in 1895. After more than forty years, cemetery opponents had finally achieved their goal: the Richmond district was a space for the living and not the dead. Homes and businesses soon filled the void that the Lone Mountain cemeteries had left behind.

\textbf{UNMAKING HISTORIC SPACE}

The San Francisco cemetery debate is a story about the \textit{unmaking} of a place of public history. It speaks to the tenuous, often antagonistic relationship between a city and its history, and it represents the contested process of ascribing...
and unascribing historic meaning to a space. As the era of the garden cemetery passed and burial increasingly occurred outside of San Francisco city limits, the Lone Mountain cemeteries lost their function as recreational space, and the bonds of family and heritage that might have otherwise tethered the place to the community disintegrated.

The Lone Mountain cemeteries—and particularly Laurel Hill—were resting places and monuments to elite, nineteenth-century San Franciscans. As such, they might have been useful for a city imagining a common heritage. By the 1930s, however, the cemeteries had fallen into disrepair, and they no longer conveyed the image that San Francisco hoped to achieve. The city erased the Lone Mountain cemeteries from the urban landscape and removed their function to the suburbs. This literal unmaking of the space was coupled with a conceptual and cultural unmaking of the cemeteries as places of cultural and historical significance.

Perhaps San Francisco grew too quickly. Perhaps if its growth had been more like that of Boston, the Lone Mountain cemeteries would have seemed less like obstacles to urban expansion. But in a rapidly growing city, material and cultural concerns were constantly shuffling priorities. The place of public history is vulnerable to the advance of urban progress. Yet, removed with care, the deceased residents of Lone Mountain were more fortunate than their largely nonelite counterparts interred in the City Cemetery: They now lie six feet under the golf course at Lincoln Park. Even the priorities of place unmaking privilege the few over the many.

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