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Famous, unknown rest together in city's historic sanctuary, with room for more

WHEN KARYL K. EVANS was asked to make a film about the Grove Street Cemetery, she said her mission became to "demystify" the historic site, which remains misunderstood as a resting ground reserved for the rich and famous.

But she had to tell the story of this sprawling 18-acre landmark in just 28 minutes because that's the time limit preferred by public TV stations and school teachers with limited class periods.

"It was a challenge to get in everything that would interest people," said Evans, a North Haven resident who has won five Emmy Awards for her films.

"People think you can only be buried there if you're a Yalie or a WASP," Evans noted. "But there are no restrictions. It's a place where everybody can belong."

Even when this New Haven City Burial Ground (its original name) was laid out in 1796, some lots were set aside for the poor and "people of color." The first person buried there, in 1797, was not a man, but a woman: Martha Townsend.

If you watch Evans' DVD, "Grove Street Cemetery: City of the Dead, City of the Living," you'll learn the city's original burial ground was the New Haven Green. But it became too crowded and then a health con-

cern in 1794 when yellow fever erupted. To buy the DVD, for \$15, call (203) 230-9858.

Civic leader James Hillhouse, who would one day be buried at the new cemetery, was the driving force in establishing the first cemetery in America designed with family plots.

Today there are more than 14,000 people buried there, and room still for at least 1,000 more plots. They aren't cheap; they cost \$6,500. Each plot holds one casket or four urns, according to James Niederman, who chairs the board of the Friends of the Grove Street Cemetery.

The cemetery, which is the same size as the New Haven Green, is open to the public every day from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Public tours resume in May). You enter on Grove Street, walking through the massive Egyptian Revival gate designed by Henry Austin. The unforgettable inscription atop the gate states: "The Dead Shall Be Raised."

The gate and the high stone wall surrounding the cemetery were built in 1845, Niederman said, "to prevent vandalism and keep out stray animals."

At virtually any time when you pass under the gate, you will come upon William Cameron Jr., sitting in his office in a small brick building, originally a chapel. Cameron and his wife, Joan, are the cemetery superintendents, assisted by



Melanie Stengel/Register

A plot at the Grove Street Cemetery costs \$6,500. There are about 1,000 available.

their son, William Cameron III. Cameron Jr. told me that during his three decades there, he has usually logged 10 hours a day, seven days a week. "I've missed eight days in all those years. I like it here."

He added, "The main thing we like about it is helping people. Some of them are so grief-stricken, so lost. It gives me great pleasure to help them."

But they see many other

people who are just strolling around the grounds, enjoying themselves or escaping city life.

"We get a lot of office people during lunchtime," he said.

I asked him if Yale students sit there and study. "Not like they used to. They do come in and walk around. A lot of them are on their cell phones. They should put their phones in their pockets and look around at the beautiful trees, shrubs and

stones. They don't notice them."

Cameron said he bought a plot there in 1977, when the cost was just \$300. "I wanted to feel like I belong," he said.

He used to dig the graves; now his son does it. Often, unlike in the old days, a backhoe is used.

"Years ago, we chopped through the frost, all by hand," he said.

I decided to take a stroll. Choosing Magnolia Avenue —

most of the "streets" are named for trees — I came upon the grave of Kingman Brewster Jr., Yale's president from 1963-77. (There are 16 Yale presidents at this cemetery, including A. Bartlett Giamatti.) Brewster's grave contains this inscription: "The presumption of innocence is not just a legal concept. It rests on that generosity of spirit which assumes the best, not the worst, of the stranger."

Some of the headstones are so old and faded as to be unreadable. But I spotted this message on the grave of William N. Parker, a Yale professor of economics: "Of gratifying, yet heart-wrenching sorrow. That bit of dream I hate, yet feel its kiss! I tell the folks, 'It's I as well as you I miss.' But not so much, since I know what's tomorrow."

And I saw this written on another stone: "Sacred to the memory of William Pilkington who fell asleep in Jesus on June 1, 1886, in the 43rd year of his age. The memory of the just is blessed."

If you keep walking, you will find them: Eli Whitney, Noah Webster, Roger Sherman, Walter Camp ("the father of American football"), New Haven Mayor Richard C. Lee and a memorial stone for Glenn Miller, the bandleader whose plane went down and was never found.

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