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Birding at Mount Auburn Cemetery

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Some of the earliest examples in the U.S. of pleasant roads specifically designed for leisure and enjoyment were, curiously enough, blended into the concept of the landscaped cemetery, a novel approach of the early 19th century. Creative departures from the austere and utilitarian graveyards of the early American colonies, these “rural cemeteries” were intended to be bucolic retreats located not far from—or even right within—crowded cities.

The first of these, consecrated in 1831, was

Mount Auburn Cemetery on the Cambridge–Wartertown line in eastern Massachusetts. It was also the first large-scale, designed landscape open to the U.S. public. The semi-rural hundred-acre tract was known locally as “Sweet Auburn”—after a poem by Oliver Goldsmith. Originally it was to be both a cemetery and an experimental project of the then-new Massachusetts Horticultural Society.

Once established, Mount Auburn Cemetery would become a model for other cemeteries with innovative design—in Brooklyn, Baltimore,



Nancy Sferra (third from left) and other birders at Mount Auburn Cemetery; see text for details. *Cambridge, Massachusetts; 14 May 1989. Photo by © Bob Abrams.*

Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and elsewhere. These rural cemeteries would become popular destinations for Sunday carriage drives and casual strolls, providing the first popular expression of Romantic Era landscape design in the U.S. This vision of landscape design can be seen on an old map of Mt. Cemetery (below) from 1847.

The trend spread beyond the concept of the landscaped cemetery to include grand and well-designed city parks, many linked to the pioneering work of Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of American landscape architecture. Olmsted and his visionary colleagues designed parks as famous as New York's Central Park and Boston's Emerald Necklace, and extensive park systems in Buffalo, Milwaukee, and Chicago. They also laid out the plans for grand and green college campuses across the country.

Mount Auburn is located close to Boston, with its vibrant cultural and commercial life, and it is especially close to Harvard University. Given these geographic affinities, the cemetery became known as the “backyard haunt” and “agreeable refuge,” a venue of inspiration for many birding and ornithological superstars.

William Brewster, one of the progenitors of American ornithology and bird conservation—he was founder and president of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, a founder of the American Ornithologists' Union, and first president of the Massachusetts Audubon Society—lived in Cambridge, within walking distance of the cemetery. He wrote with fondness about Mount Auburn in his substantial *Birds of the Cambridge Region of Massachusetts* (1906). In that volume, he mourned the loss of habitat at Mount Auburn,

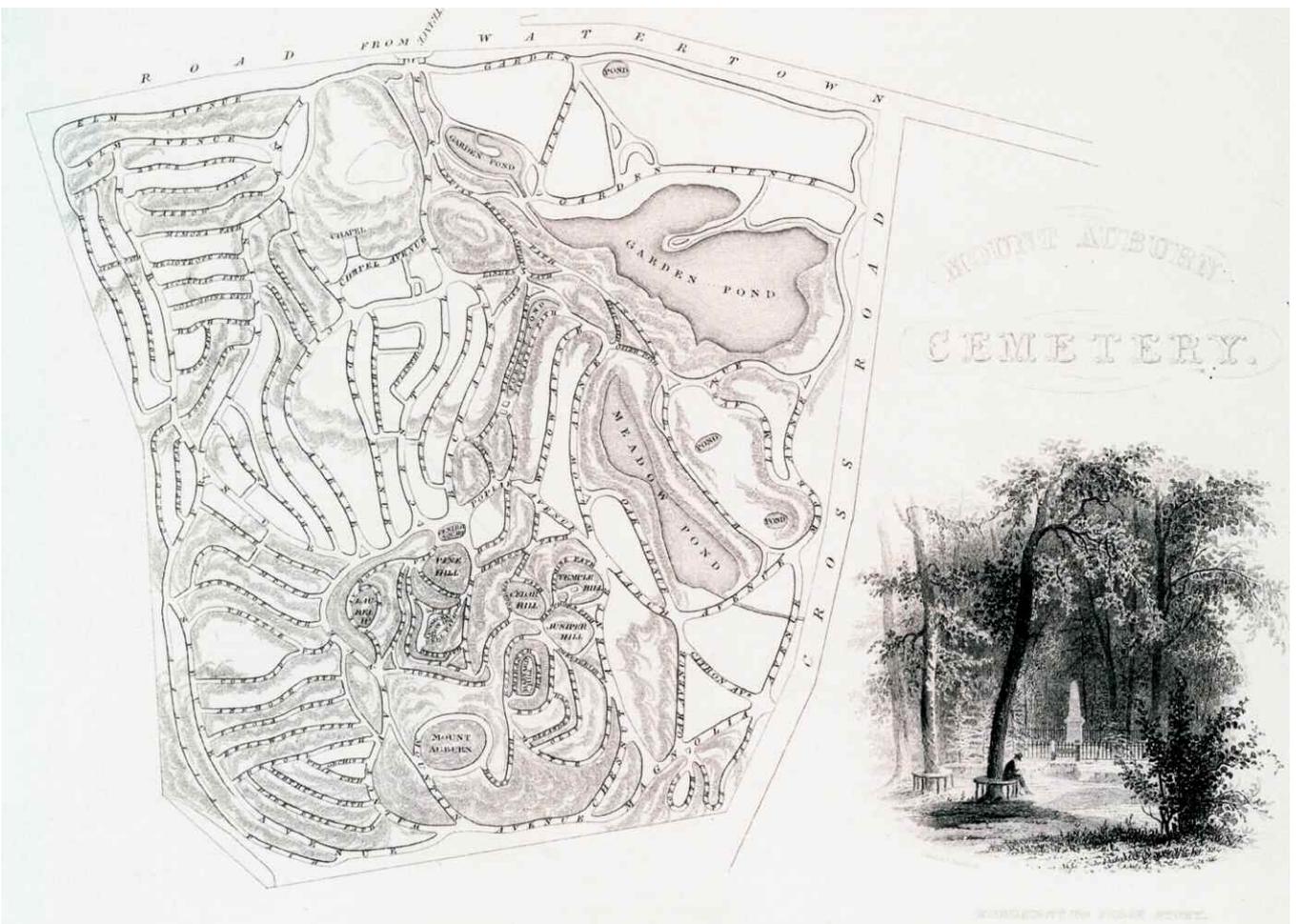


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over-managed as it was during a period of formal and “gardenesque” landscaping, with trees trimmed and undergrowth cut away.

Soon, however, a process of “re-greening” was under way, a process whereby trees and shrubs planted in the last decades of the 19th century were allowed to mature into vibrant habitat. This re-greening was carefully managed to be aesthetically pleasing and attractive to migratory birds—and to birders! Aware of and impressed by the Mount Auburn standard, T. Gilbert Pearson, chief executive officer of the National Association of Audubon Societies, began urging urban dwellers to maximize the use of green spaces in their midst—including cemeteries—as bird sanctuaries.

Ludlow Griscom, the patron saint of modern birding, arrived in Cambridge in late 1927, and a new chapter was opened for Mount Auburn. The site would soon be known as a much-vaunted spring migrant trap, well covered by birders. Griscom observed that Mount Auburn Cemetery “appears as a green oasis in a vast desert, and...[birds] make for it as the best place they can see below them.”

The status of Mount Auburn Cemetery as a draw for birders had been changed—permanently and for the better. Roger Tory Peterson remarked in 1968 in a *Boston Globe* article on birding at Mount Auburn, “I was a regular visitor here, looking for warblers, when I was teaching at Brookline [at the Rivers Country Day School, 1931–34].” Peterson added that some of his first significant photos of birds were taken at Mount Auburn.

In spring fallouts at Mount Auburn, the cemetery’s foliage seems to be dripping with birds—warblers, thrushes, orioles, tanagers—pursued by admiring birders. One such spring search is depicted in our photo. It’s a spring scene, of course—14 May 1989, to be exact—captured by Bob Abrams. For this “Big Day,” Bob decided to go beyond the usual count of bird species to see how many *birders* he could identify. On that day, at Mount Auburn and beyond, some 75 birders were identified. Another 50 remained unidentified, indicating heavy birding traffic in the area in spring. Most of the six birders here are unidentified, although the third birder from the left is Nancy Sferra. The

precise location of the photo is Willow Avenue, near Auburn Lake in the northeastern part of the cemetery.

Mount Auburn is not simply a spring birding locale. It is attractive to birders at almost any time, whether one considers the more subtle fall migration, the winter residents (including possible owls and winter finches), or the summer breeders (with nearly 50 species nesting at the cemetery).

Mount Auburn is so attractive and it has such a coterie of fans that in 1986, three years before this photo was taken, the Friends of Mount Auburn Cemetery was established. This association is dedicated to the appreciation and preservation of the wonders of Mount Auburn. In 2004, the Friends published a 32-page guide to the site, *Birds and Birding at Mount Auburn Cemetery*, written by Mass Audubon’s well-known Christopher Leahy and charmingly illustrated by Clare Walker Leslie.

Many birders will appreciate that Mount Auburn Cemetery is one of the most beloved of the designated Important Bird Areas in Massachusetts. Its status as a U.S. National Historic Landmark, designated by the U.S. Department of the Interior (through the U.S. National Park Service), doesn’t hurt, either.

A final thought. Remember that Mount Auburn functions as an active cemetery. For some birders, this bucolic retreat may be a place to consider for their “final big sit.”

Acknowledgments

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Readers can discover more about Mount Auburn Cemetery online <mountauburn.org>.