INTRODUCTION

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The founding of Magnolia Cemetery was the first capital investment in what would later become the staple commodity of Charleston, the aura of local memory. Long before tourist groups in horse-drawn-carriages obliged resident motorists to deal with the complications of living in a historic showcase, Magnolia sought to combine a commemorative spectacle with an institution that would serve basic human needs. The cemetery made this marriage work to an extent that provides a model for the living city, although that success of the cemetery came in unforeseen and traumatic ways.

The establishment of Magnolia was part of the development of nineteenth-century urban infrastructure in what was then the twelfth-largest city in the United States. As the Charleston artist Charles Fraser observed in his November 1850 dedication address, the opening of Mount Auburn Cemetery outside Boston in 1831 had “marked an era of taste in our country” that spread quickly to Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia (1836), Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn (1838), Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati (1845), and Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond (1848). The so-called rural cemetery movement reflected shifting religious and cultural ideas about death. The new institutions aimed to replace bleak and ominous church graveyards with sylvan spaces in which beautifully regenerating trees and flowers surrounded decorous memorials. The carefully wrought landscapes aspired to facilitate serene contemplation of the blissfully reposing dead and provide assurances of eternal life. Twenty-two-year-old Charleston poet Henry Timrod aptly declared in the ode he composed for the Magnolia dedication that the emerging idea of the cemetery was to “make it a place to love, and not to fear.” These sentiments overlapped with social attitudes toward growing and increasingly heterogeneous cities. Critics argued that churchyards exposed burial sites and mourners to the convulsions and indifference of street life and that rural cemeteries situated the response to death in a more controlled private enclave.

The men who incorporated Magnolia in 1849 were committed to keeping Charleston up to date with the current trends of the age. None of the original directors—William D. Dukes, William D. Porter, George N. Reynolds, Frederick Richards, and William S. Walker—was a member of an old Charleston family. None was a member of the planter elite who owned fashionable town houses. Instead they were all leading figures in business and law. The first president, Edward Sebring, was president of the State Bank, a key financial booster of city development. The founders hired the young Edward C. Jones to design the grounds and buildings of Magnolia; he would soon earn his fame as the leading...
These impulses collided with local interests in traditional patterns of burial, particularly in church graveyards. The conflict expressed itself most sharply when projected onto debates about health policy. Proponents of rural cemeteries often claimed that urban interments were dangerous sources of miasma. These allegations were especially sensitive in fever-ridden Charleston, and many church officials and members vigorously rejected them. The opening of new cemeteries within the city limits had already been banned for three years when Mayor Henry Laurens Pinckney called for prohibition of all urban burials in 1839 on the basis of "numerous and appalling facts . . . sustained by the concurrent opinion of the medical profession." Despite Pinckney’s influence and the shadow of a recent epidemic, however his bid to close the churchyards failed completely in the face of the support the established practice drew from influential congregations. Several years later Wentworth Street Baptist Church challenged the 1836 ban by establishing a new cemetery. Represented by Magnolia cofounder William D. Porter, who was coincidentally corporation counsel for Charleston, the city sued to force the church to shut down its graveyard. After appealing unsuccessfully to the state’s supreme court, the congregation wound up buying a large plot in Magnolia to relocate the bodies already interred and secure room for the future. But the churches had shown that they would not easily yield to the new nondenominational cemetery.
Subsequent proposals to close all churchyards after the 1858 epidemic illustrated the relations between Magnolia and its competitors. A sensational pamphlet echoed Pinckney’s republished arguments and added that urban burials were increasing because church policies for reassigning burial space continually renewed the substantial remaining capacity of those facilities. From the opposing side, a memorial signed by 148 well-connected residents pointed out that the 1850s had been the worst decade for yellow fever in city history even though up to nine-tenths of all fever victims had been buried in Magnolia as a precautionary measure. The churchyards, these petitioners concluded, could not be at fault.

Under these circumstances Magnolia made limited early progress toward matching the churchyards as a repository of community memory. The fullest statement of this objective was the original poem “The City of the Silent,” which William Gilmore Simms delivered at the November 1850 dedication. The poem presented a lengthy, recondite tour of the funereal shrines of various civilizations, culminating in Magnolia as the definitive expression of South Carolina history and culture. Simms envisioned the translation to the cemetery of the remains of Pinckneys, Gadsdens, and Rutledges and the raising of monuments to Isaac Hayne, John Laurens, Francis Marion, and other Revolutionary War heroes. Most timely was his suggestion that Magnolia would be an ideal final resting place for John C. Calhoun, whose death several months earlier had prompted many suggestions for public commemorations.

Consistent with Simms’s prospectus, Magnolia began to cultivate a civic dimension during its first decade. The founders bought a touching slice of memory with the land from the Magnolia Umbra plantation. A young man setting out for the Mexican War from this estate had bid farewell to his mother at a large tree, under which he asked to be buried if he did not return. She complied with this request when he succumbed to disease at the end of the war, and the tree came to be a revered spot in the cemetery. Other sentimental associations gradually developed. Travel writers, who were important promoters of the rural cemetery movement, praised the beauty of Magnolia in several accounts of Charleston during the 1850s and also commented on the noteworthy tombs. Simms reported in a national magazine in 1857 that the grounds were splendidly suited “to fill the soul with a grateful melancholy” and predicted that the cemetery “lacks nothing but time to hallow it with great and peculiar attractions.”

A few steps toward providing these great and peculiar attractions took place during the late 1850s. Richard Yeadon of the Charleston Courier launched a successful campaign to bring the remains of Hugh Swinton Legaré home from Mount Auburn, where he had been buried in 1843 after he died on a trip to Boston. Shortly before the highly publicized effort concluded with Legaré’s reinterment in October 1857, the cemetery received its most distinguished addition to date when the family of Langdon Cheves determined to bury him at Magnolia. That decision probably reflected in part the plans of Cheves’s daughter Louisa McCord to commission an exceptionally impressive monument featuring a statue by Hiram Powers, a desire that would prove frustratingly elusive for her. Meanwhile other public monuments appeared at the cemetery. The Washington Light Infantry dedicated a column entwined with ivy in honor of William Washington and his wife, who had given the corps its standard, the flag carried by Colonel Washington’s partisan force at Eutaw.
A broken column honored Robert Barnwell Rhett’s nephew William R. Taber after the Charleston Mercury editor died in a celebrated duel, though the family buried him in the Rhett vault at St. Philip’s.

Although significant, these results fell short of what Simms had anticipated in 1850. The proprietors of the cemetery did not undertake to build any monuments, in contrast to the precedent of Mount Auburn, and no Revolutionary War heroes were moved to the cemetery. At its third meeting in January 1850 the board of trustees authorized William D. Porter to seek permission from the family of Gen. William Moultrie to reinter his remains in an appropriate place at Magnolia, which overlooked the Sullivan’s Island site of Moultrie’s famous palmetto fort. But the initiative failed, for Moultrie had been buried in an unmarked grave at Windsor Hill Plantation that could no longer be located. John C. Calhoun, the most prestigious corpse in the state, remained entombed in St. Philip’s churchyard. In its first fifteen years the cemetery attracted relatively few of the citizens most widely associated with Charleston. During this period James L. Petigru, James Gadsden, Joel R. Poinsett, Mitchell King, Samuel Gilman, John Blake White, and James Adger were all buried elsewhere. Charles Fraser, orator at the dedication of Magnolia, was buried at St. Michael’s. Even Henry Laurens Pinckney, the early champion of suburban interment, was buried at the Circular Congregational Church. Prominent Charlestonians, it seemed, were too strongly attached to the churchyards for Magnolia to win a conspicuous place on the collective imaginative map of the city.

The Civil War transformed Magnolia into a public shrine far more resonant than the historical theme park Simms had described. Confederate troops camped in the cemetery for three years and built breastworks in it for the defense of Charleston. They also turned to it to accommodate the shocking number of wartime burials, which Magnolia was better prepared to handle than any other graveyard in the Charleston area. More than eight hundred soldiers and sailors in Confederate service were interred at the property during the war, mostly in a starkly grided new Soldiers’ Ground that established a stern counterpoint to the gently curving lanes and idiosyncratic family tombs envisioned by the cemetery founders. The Confederate dead gravitated to Magnolia for reasons other than numbers and logistical convenience. Some bodies were unidentified and would otherwise have been candidates for burial in a municipal potter’s field, an alternative that the war made politically unacceptable. And even the fallen who were well known and ceremoniously mourned, such as Confederate submarine developer Horace L. Hunley and Fort Sumter commander John Mitchel, Jr., had in many cases come to Charleston only as a result of the war and lacked the local ties that might have led to a churchyard burial. Some Confederates would later be reburied elsewhere by their families, but Magnolia provided a permanent manifestation of the temporary wartime community.

Most important for Magnolia, in the wake of the Civil War the bodies of dead soldiers became vital to American memory at Gettysburg, Arlington, and other locations, including Charleston. An early example of cemetery politics focused on the interment of several Union soldiers. The famous 54th Massachusetts regiment camped at Magnolia after the occupation of Charleston in February 1865, and Union commanders allowed the troops to cut down for firewood a grove of oak trees that had been a centerpiece of the landscaping design. The Magnolia founders had reserved this chapel grove as a public space and
permitted no burials in it, but abolitionist James Redpath led a northern group that, in the words of diarist Esther Hill Hawks, “selected the finest place in the Cemetery for our ‘brave and honored dead’ much to the evident disgust of a rebel who is still in charge of the grounds.” The Magnolia board of trustees complained to the commanding officer, Gen. John P. Hatch, that the burials would invade private property and violate the consecrated purpose of the chapel grove. But Hatch ordered that the controversial graves would
remain in their prominent location and that they would be protected by a high wooden palisade (also contrary to cemetery regulations). Only after another few years, when similar security concerns led to an overall regional consolidation of federal burials in a national military cemetery system, were the Union dead removed from Magnolia and taken to Beaufort National Cemetery.

In the meantime Magnolia had begun to emerge as a leading site of Confederate memory. The inaugural observance of Memorial Day at the cemetery on June 16, 1866, was among the most auspicious in the South, for Henry Timrod contributed to it an ode that would be widely admired for decades to follow:

Sleep sweetly in your humble graves,  
Sleep, martyrs of a fallen cause;  
Though yet no marble column craves  
The pilgrim here to pause.

In seeds of laurel in the earth  
The blossom of your fame is blown,  
And, somewhere, waiting for its birth,  
The shaft is in the stone!

Meanwhile, behalf the tardy years  
Which keep in trust your storied tombs,  
Behold! your sisters bring their tears,  
And these memorial blooms.

Small tributes! but your shades will smile  
More proudly on these wreaths to-day,  
Than when some cannon-moulded pile  
Shall overlook this bay.

Stoop, angels, hither from the skies!  
There is no holier spot of ground  
Than where defeated valor lies  
By mourning beauty crowned!

Memorial Day soon expanded into an elaborate civic ritual organized by the Ladies Memorial Association. Businesses closed early every May 10, the anniversary of Stonewall Jackson's death, so white Charlestonians could gather at the cemetery at 5:00. For more than a half-century after the war, newspaper reports consistently estimated attendance to be two or three thousand. Exercises included prayers, hymns, instrumental music, readings of Timrod's ode, original poems, and frequently an oration. The focal point was the decoration of soldiers' graves. The young women of the Confederate Home School usually took a prominent part in the proceedings, and other community notables rotated through different roles. Some annual observances were particularly charged with emotion. Surely one of the most dramatic was the ceremony of 1871, when six thousand people gathered for the interment of the remains of eighty-four South Carolinians whom the
Ladies Memorial Association had brought home from the battlefield at Gettysburg. Rev. John L. Girardeau delivered a fiery anti-Reconstruction address in which he urged his listeners to resist what he described as the radicalism undermining family, church, and state and thereby ensure that the soldiers did not die in vain.

Similar commemorative impulses supplied, many times over, the monument that Timrod had foreseen in his ode. At the 1870 Memorial Day observance the Ladies Memorial Association laid the cornerstone for the “Defenders of Charleston” monument that would be unveiled at a state reunion of Confederate veterans in November 1882 in a ceremony that featured Gen. Wade Hampton as the main speaker. While that project was still in its early phases, the Washington Light Infantry dedicated a memorial to its war dead on June 16, 1870. Other monuments erected at Magnolia honored German soldiers, Irish soldiers, the Charleston Light Dragoons, Confederate generals from South Carolina, Confederate sailors, and the ironclads, forts, and batteries engaged in the defense of Charleston harbor. Markers for individual soldiers proliferated even more rapidly as Confederate veterans passed from the scene.

The extent to which soldiers’ graves, Memorial Day, and Confederate monuments made Magnolia a representative expression of the Lost Cause was captured with sly satire by the most eminent travel writer to visit Charleston in the early twentieth century, Henry James. Acknowledging that it was by now a cliché to identify a cemetery as an illustration of the picturesque charm of an American city, James nevertheless put forward Magnolia as the epitome of the charm of the slaveholding South, “the charm, I mean of the flower-crowned waste that was, by my measure, what the monomania had most prepared itself to bequeath.” At Magnolia that influence distilled an “irresistible poetry” from “the golden afternoon, the low, silvery, seaward horizon, as of wide, sleepy, game-haunted inlets and reed-smothered banks, possible site of some Venice that had never mustered, the luxury, in the mild air, of shrub and plant and blossom that the pale North can but distantly envy.” Amid this magniloquent setting and the commensurably pious inscriptions on the stones, even James, whose brother had served in the 54th Massachusetts, could feel for an hour that he was “really capable of the highest Carolinian pitch.”

The impact of the Civil War on Magnolia reached beyond the rituals and memorials to the daily administration of the cemetery. Antebellum sales of lots had been substantial but had not matched the large outlays for landscaping. After the war the corporation shared in the overall economic ruin of the white South. Many of the firms in which it had invested were now bankrupt. Like other enterprises, moreover, Magnolia would no longer be able to rely on slave labor—one of the first steps of the corporation had been the purchase of two slaves to work in the cemetery. At the same time, the proprietors faced heavy expenses to repair the damage caused by years of neglect and military use of the grounds. The financial rescue of Magnolia coincided with the political “redemption” of South Carolina. In June 1877 a group of thirty Charlestonians bought the cemetery for thirty thousand dollars from the original proprietors. The revitalization of the cemetery and realization of its original promise paralleled the self-conscious regeneration of the white South after Reconstruction.

The shareholders of the corporation included some of the wealthiest and most prominent citizens of Charleston. Among the initial directors were the bankers Andrew Simonds
and James S. Gibbes. The second president of the cemetery, after twenty-seven years under Edward Sebring, was William C. Bee, who had long been the head of the Magnolia lot holders' association. The most important force in the new ownership was the merchant and banker George Walton Williams, who became president on Bee's death in 1882 and remained in that office until his own death in 1903. Williams had been interested in Magnolia since burying three children there during the yellow fever epidemic of August 1854, followed a year later by his first wife, and he illustrated the way in which deep private ties to the cemetery converged with a sense of public responsibility to the Confederate past. While he was the very epitome of a dynamic, forward-looking New South businessman, he was also the president of the gentleman's auxiliary association of the Confederate Home. That institution, like the Ladies Memorial Association so active at Magnolia, was presided over by founder Mary Amarinthia Snowden, whom Williams called “one of the most remarkable women Charleston ever produced.” If the Lost Cause was not as central to Williams's view of Magnolia as it was for someone such as Snowden or Maj. Henry E. Young, a director of the new corporation and its attorney until his death, all agreed that remembrance of the Civil War gave Magnolia a distinctive and important place in the life of the community.

Similar considerations helped Magnolia attract an increasing share of the most prominent Charlestonians after the war. Some of these, such as James Conner and Wilmot Gibbes DeSaussure, were men for whom Confederate military service had been a significant interlude in a varied, active life. The unifying appeal of the cemetery was not, however, restricted to veterans. In the case of William Gilmore Simms, interred a few days before dedication of the Washington Light Infantry monument, burial in Magnolia brought to fulfillment an ideal of the cemetery as a site of South Carolinian nationalism that he had held since its dedication. For George Alfred Trenholm, who had signed the 1859 petition to protect the old churchyards, the experience of the war and service as Confederate secretary of the treasury perhaps pointed toward interment at Magnolia. William Aiken, Isaac Hayne, Alfred Huger, and A. G. Magrath were other Charlestonians whose political commitments indicate how the local elite increasingly came to be buried at Magnolia in the decades after the Confederate war.

As G. W. Williams appreciated, the future of the cemetery depended not merely on preserving shrines to the Confederacy or local notables but on providing valuable services to large numbers of ordinary people. His effective management soon restored the fortunes of Magnolia to the point that the corporation could pay the shareholders a modest annual dividend while the cemetery regained and expanded on its beauty, developing the landscape that Henry James found so evocative on his visit in 1905. Along the way cemetery officials dealt with such challenges as the cyclone of 1885, the earthquake of 1886, and the hurricane of 1893, all of which wreaked havoc but none of which exasperated Williams as much as the lot holders who neglected graves and failed to enter into arrangements with the cemetery for permanent maintenance. He also continued until the end of his tenure to complain about church graveyards, but Magnolia had secured a strong competitive position, aided by regulatory restrictions on recycling of urban burial space and by the sheer number of local interments. Williams's final report to the lot holders was a good measure of his success. He proudly noted that the cemetery had spared no expense in
preparing for the tourists who would find Magnolia to be one of the most attractive places in Charleston when they visited the city for the South Carolina Interstate and West Indian Exposition of 1902. He reported that the number of people buried in the cemetery had almost doubled during his tenure and was now approximately eleven thousand, of whom about one thousand were Confederate dead.

By the twentieth century Magnolia came to reflect a broader range of lives led in Charleston. The cemetery commanded a high percentage of local burials, and it could satisfy the most discriminating expectation for permanent repose in a quintessential Charleston institution. As years passed, the Magnolia firmament extended well beyond Confederate luminaries. The Charleston Renaissance brought to the city a new creative spirit that rather pointedly ignored the Lost Cause, and many of its leading figures—including Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, Josephine Pinckney, John Bennett, and Albert Simons—would eventually rest at Magnolia. The civil rights movement produced outstanding Charlestonians more openly antithetical to the Confederate inheritance who would find a final home at Magnolia, most notably J. Waties Waring. Commemoration of the Confederacy did not disappear from the cemetery, as evidenced by the spectacular ceremonies surrounding the burial in April 2004 of the bodies of crew members recovered on the raising of the submarine Hunley from Charleston harbor. That aspect of local history, however, was now one of the many different parts of a past remembered at Magnolia.

Like the other great rural cemeteries, Magnolia offered a new definition of the relationship between public and private realms. Motivated less by municipal necessity than by civic self-expression, it opened a public space in which to conduct an essential activity that had long been fundamental to private institutions such as families and churches. The Magnolia initiative assumed that networks of kinship and religion and work and education came together in a coherent community that shaped the legacies of the people buried in the cemetery. At the same time, the rural cemetery conferred a kind of citizenship on the dead and suggested that those individuals could still embody the community in their various ways. The promoters of Magnolia Cemetery built wisely in centering their efforts on the close interconnection between personal and collective identity in Charleston. The local culture abounded in representative figures, and it fostered a reverence for the examples of previous generations. Through the powers of memory for which it is famous, Charleston continues to benefit from the contributions of its residents in the City of the Silent.