The colonial burial grounds of New Jersey were often associated with churches. These graveyards were situated on small plots of land that were located near or around the houses of worship. Graves were parcelled out as single plots which often created haphazard rows of gravestones with smaller footstones marking the location of the feet.

By the early nineteenth century New Jersey church graveyards were filling to capacity with a dizzying arrangement of gravestones and footstones. As a result, sweeping burial reforms would take place, transforming the design of cemeteries.

This transformation coincides with the spread of the Rural Cemetery movement, a movement that reinvented how society buried its dead. The Rural Cemetery Movement produced large...
garden style cemeteries that were situated on the outskirts of industrialized urban areas. They contained impressive natural landscape features, meandering serpentine paths, and elaborate plantings (Figure 1).

In the early nineteenth century the traditional colonial graveyard fell out of fashion and was replaced with large garden style cemeteries. The earliest example in the United States is Mount Auburn Cemetery near Boston, Massachusetts. Mount Auburn was incorporated in 1831 and was followed by Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia (1836) and Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn (1838). New Jersey’s earliest garden cemetery is Mount Pleasant in Newark, incorporated in 1844.

Often overlooked in this evolutionary history are transitional cemeteries that bridged a gap between the crowded colonial church yards and the garden style cemeteries of the Rural Cemetery Movement. The Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery in Jersey City is one of New Jersey’s earliest examples from this transitional period and its history and importance is discussed in this article (Figure 2).

The Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery, incorporated in 1831, reflects a transition between the colonial church graveyards and the garden cemeteries of the Rural Cemetery Movement. The cemetery encompassed design features from both types of burial grounds but
never fully embraced one or the other. These transitional cemeteries sprung up during a time period of burial reform as society looked for better ways to manage the dead.

The Jersey City & Harsimus Cemetery received attention in the book *New Jersey Cemeteries and Tombstones: History in the Landscape* by Richard Veit and Mark Nonestied—published by Rutgers University Press in 2008. During the research phase of the book there was an unwillingness on the part of the cemetery staff to allow access to early cemetery records and even to the site itself. Much of the information on the cemetery had to be gathered from a few outside and mostly secondary sources.

In 2007, the situation at the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery became dire. The board president had passed away and unpaid workers simply stopped mowing the grass (Personal conversations with Eileen Markenstein). The cemetery quickly became overgrown as concerned descendants convened a meeting to elect a new board. This new board of trustees was soon faced with the monumental task of managing a crowded burial ground with little funds and no room for expansion.

The new board, however, was open to research and understood the historical importance of the site. An opportunity soon developed to examine monuments, vaults, landscape features and the earliest records of the cemetery, including the original minutes.
book that dated from 1830 to 1874. This information helped to shed light on a period of burial reform and how the residents of Jersey City viewed what was in their eyes a “fit and proper burial place.” (Figure 3)

The larger context of burial reform has been defined by David Sloan in his book the Last Great Necessity and in James Steven Curl’s book, Death and Architecture. While Curl’s book is from a British perspective, the chapter titled “The Burial Crisis; overcrowded churchyards; the first fruits of reform; and the first modern cemeteries,” does discuss this transitional time frame and lists a number of cemeteries including those in the United States that fall under this category of the “first fruits of reform.”

**Grove Street Cemetery**

Sloan writes that the model for burial reform is the Grove Street Cemetery in New Haven, Connecticut. Historically known as the New Burying Ground in New Haven the cemetery was incorporated by the State of Connecticut in 1797 when local citizens, led by U.S. Senator James Hillhouse, sought to remedy the problem of overcrowding in the ancient town burial ground located in the heart of New Haven (Sloane 1991:30).

The new cemetery was placed away from the town and laid out on an orderly grid system. Instead of single burial plots, there was an emphasis on family plots which facilitated the erection of larger family monuments instead of smaller individual headstones. The cemetery’s governance was also different. The Grove Street Cemetery was incorporated, laying a framework for ownership and control. Sloan writes that this new institutional structure was unique and its design was considered innovative.

Other cemeteries followed this similar model. Sloan writes about those in New York State and draws emphasis on reform in New York City and the incorporation of the Marble Cemeteries in the early 1830s.

One of the key factors as to why burial reform takes place involves the already crowded conditions of urban churchyards. In addition, outbreaks of disease often strained the space within these graveyards, and in an increasingly health conscious society the space themselves become the focus of debates on the cause of such outbreaks. Prevailing nineteenth century thoughts were that miasmic vapors from the burial grounds caused disease to spread.

As urban society expanded and planned for growth, increasing pressures from higher property values and civic improvement projects would question the placement of graveyards within city limits. Urban society was soon questioning how the dead were to interact with living.
CHARACTERISTICS OF CEMETERY REFORM

Cemeteries like that of the New Haven Burying Ground, the Marble Cemeteries and the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery share some common characteristics. Firstly, they are incorporated with a constitution, bylaws and a governing board that is voted on at annual meetings by the lot holders (Figure 4). This key feature of how the burial ground was governed was a radical departure from the eighteenth century church graveyards that were under the control of the religious authority. This new method of governance would continue to characterize the development of later garden style cemeteries.

A second common characteristic is the overall size of these types of burial grounds. They tended to be small—under 5 acres. During this transitional time period these characteristics are most associated with eighteenth century graveyards and not the larger garden cemeteries that could be up to one hundred acres or more.

Finally, cemeteries during this period of reform are often laid out on a grid system. This feature is not a characteristic of the rural cemetery movement which often incorporated serpentine paths and road systems, but it is in essence applying order to the chaotic haphazard burial practices seen in the eighteenth century graveyard. With the grid system, family plots become the focus and pave the way for the erection of large central dimensional monuments instead of single plots with gravestones as often found in earlier cemeteries.

LOCATION

The Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery is located in Jersey City, Hudson County, New Jersey. Today the burial ground is boxed in by a series of roads, rail lines and apartment buildings. The earliest features of the cemetery are somewhat obscured by later monuments and improvements. In fact, at first glance the cemetery does not convey its importance. Most people would recognize it as the Soprano Cemetery because it’s where HBO filmed several burial scenes for Tony Soprano’s family—as well as for some who got whacked by him. But as one notable historian has said there is more to New Jersey than the Sopranos. (Figure 5)

The seeds of New Jersey burial reform were first planted in 1829 when the body of an unidentified man washed up along the banks of Harsimus Cove in Jersey City and several concerned citizens took it upon themselves to secure a burial space (Veit and Nonestied 2008:78). Local lore and some secondary sources cite an outrageous fee for digging a grave in the local churchyard as the reason behind the formation of the cemetery (Hudson Dispatch, July 28, 1955 and Hudson County Magazine, Fall 1991). We can suspect

Figure 4: The Constitution of the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery as written in the original minute book. Note the fourth line from the top that states that the subscribers of the cemetery had come together “for the purpose of providing a suitable and convenient place for the interment of the dead.” The official incorporation papers filed in 1831 would also echo this sentiment by stating that the subscribers wished to incorporated the cemetery “in order to provide a fit and proper burial place” for the residents of Jersey City and Harsimus.
that other issues were also at work in Jersey City.

One such issue was the appalling condition of crowded graveyards. Prior to the formation of the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery a person who died in that city was more than likely to be buried in one of several church associated graveyards. One of the earliest was the Dutch Reformed graveyard. By 1830 that graveyard had been in existence for approximately 150 years.

Diseases also impacted New Jersey communities, straining space in already crowded graveyards. The state had seen its fair share of epidemics with yellow fever in the late eighteenth century and several cholera outbreaks that took place in the early decades of the nineteenth century. A letter written in 1832 mentions one such outbreak at Bergen Point, just south of Jersey City. (Collection of the Perth Amboy Public Library) The letter goes on to state that “the cholera is raging most violently” and “some of the heartiest farmers have been cut down in a few hours.” (Figure 6)

PRESSURES OF REAL ESTATE

Jersey City like many urban communities in the northeastern part of the state was experiencing a construction boom during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Land nearest the city was expensive and being acquired for industrial and mercantile endeavors.
Since the early nineteenth century the city had been part of a planned expansion project that included the laying out of streets, the filling in of marshes and the delineation of lots for churches and public use (1804 A map of that part of the Town of Jersey commonly called Powles Hook, Joseph F. Mangin). The expansion of Jersey City in the early nineteenth century is similar to what was happening in other communities after the Revolutionary War and during the early years of industrialization. Questions would arise during this period as to what to do with graveyards.

Other common societal concerns included themes on the “grave inviolate,” a term found in documents of the time and a term used by Senator James Hillhouse in New Haven. The term stems from society’s belief in the sanctity of the tomb and concern about the moving of remains.

One of the more notable examples that sums up the issues related to moving graves and the grave inviolate was an article titled “Violation on the Grave” that was published in several New England newspapers and reprinted in the September 16, 1835 edition of the Jersey City Gazette. The story is mostly comprised of an editorial by Mr. Hersy Derby of Salem, Massachusetts. Derby relates his shocking discovery in Salem’s ancient graveyard after he arrived to check on the tomb of the Browne family. He had received a notice from the Board of Health to make sure that graves were properly marked, as the town planned a sale of unused or unclaimed graves (Veit and Nonestied 2008:77).

Instead of a reassurance in the sanctity of the tomb, Mr. Derby found that the graves had been violated, the coffins broken up and the silver coffin plates stolen. Derby’s editorial ends with a series of emotionally charged questions: “I ask, as a lately bereaved father, if the sanctity of the tomb is no longer inviolate? I ask, if those already deeply afflicted, and whose crushed affections are turning to that church yard as the last resting place of what was loveliest and dearest to them on earth...are to have their breaking hearts lacerated anew by learning that the remains...have been thus rudely turned
from the tomb" (Jersey City Gazette, September 16, 1835 and Veit & Nonestied, 2008) (Figure 7)

In essence, Derby’s outrage mirrored society’s concerns about authority and control. Who had the authority to move remains? With churchyards the authority came from the church, sometimes with little say over the decision, but with the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery incorporation becomes a key component because it gave the lot holders the authority to elect a board that would manage and govern the cemetery.

**Steps to Incorporation**

The Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery was officially incorporated on February 9, 1831, just several days after the incorporation of its neighbor, the Marble Cemetery in New York City. Work, however, started the previous year and the minutes book provides historians with a rare chance to see the steps the citizens took to develop the cemetery.

Starting in 1830 the minutes capture the details of the solicitation of subscribers, the formation of the board, the site selection of the cemetery (they examined and met at multiple properties to consider soil conditions and costs), the improvements necessary to the grounds, the approval of a seal, forms for cemetery deeds, and the buying of a shovel for the sexton. In essence, the early Board of Trustees had to plan and create a cemetery from the beginning, which for them must have been a daunting prospect.

For the time period the process was quite rapid with bi-weekly meetings and various processes happening simultaneously. One of the first steps recorded in the minutes book was to solicit for subscribers. The initial promoters first had to see if there was interest from the public for the formation of a burial ground. The first meetings took place at a local hotel where subscribers signed their names in the ledger. The lots sold for $20 each with each subscriber placing an initial down payment of $5.00 (Minute Book 1). The early subscribers list reads like a Who’s Who of Jersey City with well known businessmen and citizens signing the book (Figure 8). Included in this list is William Colgate of Colgate-Palmolive fame who purchased vault lots in the 1830s.

**Figure 8:** Signatures of the original subscribers to the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery as recorded in Minutes Book 1.
At these early meetings the lot holders also elected the first board of trustees. In order to lend legitimacy to what was a new form of burial practice, prominent citizens often made up the governing board (Sloane 1991:69). The President of the Board of the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery was David C. Colden. Colden was the son of Cadwallader Colden a well-known New York City Mayor and lawyer. Cadwallader Colden incidentally was Mayor of New York City during the burial crisis of the early nineteenth century. The family would have certainly understood the importance of burial reform.

It should be noted that during the research phase of the book New Jersey Cemeteries and Tombstones: History in the Landscape, the inability to examine the original cemetery records caused a bit of confusion for this author as to who was instrumental in the formation of the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery—either Cadwallader or his son David. With recent access to these records it now seems clearer that Cadwallader’s son David was more instrumental (Figure 9).

David Colden’s prominence was typical of those involved in this new movement. He had the political clout, legal background and knowledge to legitimize this new ideology and strengthen hopes of making it prosper (Veit and Nonestied 2008:80). Colden was also something of a socialite, having arranged Charles Dickens’ stay in New York City during his American tour in 1842. In fact, Dickens would later write that Colden was his best host on his American tour.

The early trustees also used more than their clout to make things happen. Perhaps more importantly they were involved financially, on several occasions advancing the cemetery money to cover the costs of improvements (Minutes Book 1).

While on the surface the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery appears to have been a private venture for the benefit of its lot holders, there is evidence that it satisfied larger societal needs. This broader mission was also a characteristic at the Grove Street Cemetery in New Haven where some lots were reserved for strangers, paupers, church congregations and for African Americans. At Jersey City the board had received a petition from “the Catholics” for a private burial lot, and there is evidence that Jersey City or Bergen County had purchased a lot or multiple lots for indigent or pauper burials (Minute Book 1).

**THE FIRST DECADE: 1830-1840**

The cemetery land was surveyed by William E. Bridges who had been hired at the October 15, 1830 meeting. He used a grid system with 18 foot by 18 foot family plots and 12 foot by 18 foot

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Figure 9: Signature of Board President, David C. Colden on an early cemetery deed from the 1830s.
vault lots that were divided by the main cemetery road, 12 foot cartways and 6 foot pathways. The total number of lots was 347 (Figure 10 & 11) (1831 Plan of the Jersey City and Abarsimus Cemetery, William E. Bridges).

One of the main features of the cemetery was a six foot high stone wall with coping. The board was specific about the design of the wall as the minutes give detailed specifications and measurements for its construction. The wall was approved at the October 6, 1830 meeting and was completed by July 28, 1831. It does not survive today and seems to have not survived long at all, being taken down by the 1850s and replaced with a wooden fence (Minutes Book 1).

During the first decade of the cemetery’s operation, financial issues became evident. Subscribers made initial deposits of $5.00 with the remaining payments to be made when they took ownership of their cemetery lots. As early as 1831, the board is occupied with collecting money from delinquent lot holders. One example of an extreme late payment involves one such subscriber who had purchased a lot in 1834 and did not pay the balance until twenty years later in 1854. The resulting lack of money prohibited certain improvements. One such improvement was the construction of a keeper’s house. Although depicted on the 1831 map, it appears that the structure was not built until 1849.

**Gravemarkers and Vaults**

The oldest extant gravemarker at the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery is for Andrew Gammell who died in 1830 (Figure 12). The marker is typical of the simple gravestones in use during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Large central monuments were also erected and defined the space of family plots (Figure 13). These types of memorials, with their gleaming white polished surfaces, were a contrast to the older brownstone markers found in the colonial churchyards of downtown Jersey City. Today many of these monuments have eroded or have been encroached upon by later burials.

Vaults were also constructed at the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery. The 1831 Bridges Cemetery Map illustrates a section of

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**Figure 10:** The original lot map for the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery as surveyed by William E. Bridge in 1831. This map had been rolled up and tucked away in a metal canister in a closet of the caretaker’s cottage. The above photograph was taken minutes after the map had been discovered by the author and Board President Eileen Markenstein.

**Figure 11:** The above photograph is a detail of the Bridges Map. The blue colored squares denote lots set aside for the construction of underground vaults—see figure 2.
the cemetery, on the declivity of Bergen’s Hill, reserved for the vaults (Figure 2 and 11). The sloping landscape permitted the vault to be constructed into the hill with the front façade exposed against the hillside. By 1833, however, the board strays from the original design concept and permits vaults on non-vault lots, with a lot owner erecting in that year “marble vaults” below the hill (Minutes Book 1).

A number of early vaults survive and were explored by the author. One of the most impressive was a receiving vault. Receiving vaults were built by the cemeteries for the storage of coffins. This was a common practice in the winter when frozen ground precluded the digging of graves.

The receiving vault at the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery initially started as three private family vaults, built in the 1830s, for the Colgate family (Figure 14 & 15). The Colgate family, whose final resting places would, in fact, be at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, later sells the vaults back to the cemetery association.
who in turn create additions for use as a receiving vault. By 1874, the underground structure included a large complex of vaulted rooms and corridors, with green stained glass skylights and ventilators.

**THE NEXT DECADES: 1840-1860**

During the 1840s and 1850s garden style cemeteries become all the rage and were established in communities throughout New Jersey. During this time, The Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery shifted from its reform roots, adopting certain ideologies of the Rural Cemetery Movement. Money was expended by the board for elaborate plantings, trees, shrubs and flowers, followed in 1857 by signs telling people not to destroy the flowers and shrubs. In 1848, the keeper’s house was completed providing a place for the cemetery to store its records and house the sexton. The cemetery also erected an ornate cast iron gate and a large greenhouse in which to sell flowers (*Minutes Book 1*). All of these decisions by the board
of trustees closely reflected the ideologies that were practiced in the larger garden cemeteries.

Garden-style cemeteries became increasingly popular as visitors flocked from the crowded urban cities to examine the monuments and landscaped grounds on the outskirts of town. At the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery visitors had become such a problem that they were soon required to procure tickets for admission (*Minute Book 1*).

The minutes book also provides information on other cemeteries from which the board members would draw inspiration. On Christmas Day, in 1861, they visited Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, the quintessential garden cemetery of the metropolitan area. They went there to view the public vaults with the intention of forming a plan for the eastern section (the vault section) of the cemetery. It is ironic that a burial ground that had paved the way for the Rural Cemetery Movement, was now looking to those cemeteries for guidance on future improvements projects.

Although the popularity of the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery would increase during the 1850s, the newly opened New York Bay Cemetery, a garden style burial ground in Jersey City, would provide competition and signal a decline soon after (*Figure 16*).

After the Civil War the New York Bay Cemetery became the burial ground of choice for Jersey City residents and the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery became a localized burial ground interring members of a community whose demographics had changed. These changing demographics are reflected in the surviving gravemarkers. By 1880, Germans made up a percentage of the burials. The thick deeply carved brownstone tablet marker for Sophia Hanstein is typical of the German produced brownstone memorials found in Jersey City and westward to Newark in the third and fourth quarters of the nineteenth century (*Figure 17*).

From the 1890s into the early 1900s Russian and other eastern European style markers can be found in the burial ground (*Figure 18*). By the 1910s and 1920s Italian burials could also be found giving the cemetery a multicultural mix.

In less than ten years after the formation of the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery, other cemeteries following the same format were incorporated in New Jersey with almost identical evolutionary histories. One such example was the Mercer Cemetery of Trenton. Incorporated in 1840, the cemetery exemplified a burial ground of the transitional period, but was soon eclipsed by the larger and more popular Riverview Cemetery incorporated eighteen years later in 1858.

At Jersey City, the cemetery would never grow beyond six
acres, and trustees seemed to understand the issue of space as early as 1853 when they looked to acquire more land. By the time they had realized the importance of expansion, the real estate surrounding the cemetery was already developed or simply just too expensive to purchase. It had been placed on the outskirts of town, but not far enough away from the urban core, for no one could predict the population explosion that would eventually engulf the cemetery. In 1876, the burial ground was resurveyed and all unsold family plots were converted to single plots (Figure 19). This desperate measure to maximize space and profit only stayed off the inevitable for a short amount of time.

By the late nineteenth century the cemetery had invested money in a large underground receiving vault which became a way station for bodies awaiting transportation to other cemeteries. Throughout the twentieth century the cemetery quickly filled to capacity and then some. Over the years it has suffered greatly from neglect, but in 2008 with a new board in place the community has rallied to preserve this important site.

The Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery was New Jersey’s experiment with burial reform. In the early decades of the nine-
teenth century society was looking for a better way to handle the dead. The resulting cemeteries in New Haven, Connecticut, New York City and in Jersey City can be viewed as an early response to the call, before the Rural Cemetery Movement swept the country. Ultimately, the downfall of the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery was that it was ahead of its time, especially at a time when the concepts of the Rural Cemetery may not have been well understood. But communities had begun to take that step away from church graveyard, and burial grounds like the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery were part of the answer as its citizens looked to break from older traditions and to reform—to create something new and to “provide a fit and proper burial place.”

The current board of trustees has done a tremendous job of trying to bring the Jersey City and Harsimus Cemetery back from the brink of abandonment. Their hard work and understanding of the site’s important history has breathed new life into it. They continue to move forward with plans to make a cemetery with a rich past a viable part of Jersey City’s future. For more information on their endeavors visit their website at www.jerseycitycemetery.org. The author wishes to thank Eileen Markenstein for her willingness to allow unprecedented access to the cemetery’s records and grounds. For comments or further question, please contact Mark Nonestied at mn1908@aol.com

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