A HANDFUL OF BONES, A GLASS FULL OF DIRT: ASHOKAN RESERVOIR CEMETERY RELOCATIONS AND THE LIMINALITY OF THE BODY AFTER BURIAL

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Abstract

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In the first decade of the twentieth century, when the water of the Catskill Mountains first began flowing into New York City faucets, one small valley became a lake. In part a sanitary measure, roughly three thousand graves were exhumed from thirty-two cemeteries during the Ashokan reservoir’s construction. Examined within the context of changing deathways at the turn of the twentieth century, the Ashokan cemetery relocations illustrate the enduring cultural value of the material corpse. Although scholars define the recently dead body as a liminal figure between life and death, this thesis argues that the buried and decomposing corpse also occupies a liminal space between human and non-human/nature. Uncomfortable with the corpse’s ambiguous status, early cremationists, sanitarians, and public health activists sought to establish the buried corpse as primarily nature’s domain, while the actions of Ashokan residents emphasized the corpse as human above all else.
Introduction

Clean water, clean air, simple folk, and thanks to Washington Irving’s The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, the restless dead: these were the associations nineteenth-century Americans made with upstate New York. To city-dwellers, the Catskills represented an escape, a short train ride that could liberate them from their busy, dirty, city lives.¹ In the words of the illustrious, if fictional, Catskill native Dietrich Knickerbocker: “It is in such little retired Dutch valleys... that population, manners, and customs remain fixed; while the great torrent of migration and improvement... sweeps by them unobserved.”² With such a reputation, it comes as no surprise that the “sleepy hollows” of New York were dotted with boarding houses, fishing camps, hunting lodges, sanitariums and other such retreats for the health and enjoyment of their southern neighbors. Far from being fixed in time, the Catskills were a bustling hinterland to the growing city.³ By the late nineteenth century, in the throes of the sanitary movement, New York urbanites concluded that the filth and pollution of their city had permeated even the drinking water. Their gaze soon fell upon upstate Catskill sanctuaries, imaginations full of trickling natural springs and the clear water of country wells. Measured against such a vision of purity, the tucked away valleys in Westchester, Putnam, and Ulster counties could hardly compare.

¹ For more on the relationship between New York City and the Catskills see David Stradling, Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills, Seattle: University of Washington Press (2007), 5-19.
³ Stradling, Making Mountains, 13.
The Great Croton Aqueduct, constructed in 1842, was the municipality’s first attempt at delivering upstate water to urban residents, but by the late nineteenth century the cleanliness of this source was also in question. In the first decade of the twentieth century, city officials, engineers, and sanitarians set their sights farther upstate, some ninety miles from Manhattan to the Esopus Valley. With Catskill peaks forming natural walls, this site was described as an “ancient lake” formed during the glacial period, to be re-­‐claimed for the benefit of the metropolis. Unfortunately, before the cleansing waters could flow, the corrupting influence of human settlement would need to be eradicated; small towns, teeming cesspools, and more than a few headless horsemen were flushed out of the small valley. The Ashokan Reservoir, which began construction in 1908, “reclaimed” over 10,000 acres, dislocating the area’s inhabitants. Roughly two thousand residents – some with ancestral ties to the early era of Dutch settlement – were forced to abandon longstanding homesteads, leaving behind the towns built by their forefathers. As for their actual forefathers, the Ashokan residents gathered what flesh and bone remained and took it with them.

When journalists and other writers, some separated by more than a century, make mention of the drowned towns of upstate New York, one phrase is repeated: “even the dead” were forced to move.4 Even the dead, whose limbs had long since given up mobility, made their way up the mountain and out of the little valley they

once called home. Thirty-two cemeteries, containing close to 3,000 graves, were relocated during the construction of the Ashokan Reservoir. To some city dwellers, this was seen as necessity. Many believed cemeteries to be breeding grounds for miasmas, and held that decaying organic matter was a vile contagion that poisoned air, dirt, and underground water tables alike.\(^5\) To sanitarians, cremationists, and similar minded individuals, the corpse was not a singular human entity, but a loaded magazine of disease – from which decomposing matter crept and crawled into the soil and groundwater. By this mentality, removing bodily remains from the future reservoir site was as logical as clearing out a cesspool. For Ashokan people, removing the dead was also a matter of course, but for very different reasons.

To the people of the Ashokan region, family members, community members, ancestors, and friends resided below cemetery soil. They did not entertain the possibility that their loved ones had become the soil. Through the action of reburial, the living proclaimed their dead as human above all else. The current historiography of death argues that the corpse occupies a liminal position between life and death, which ultimately ends with burial. While this may or may not be the case, the status of liminality is often applied transhistorically, without clear connotations of time and place. Timeless as the corpse may seem, different generations and cultures have imagined, reimagined, and even chosen not to imagine the body after death. Burial, while socially significant, does not herald the end of corpse’s story. The body

does not disappear after it is planted in the ground. Due in part to the ardent rhetoric of cremation advocates, late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Americans were increasingly aware of the status of human flesh resigned to the natural world: breaking into elements and minerals, marching onward in a process of decay. And yet, beautified cemeteries, sturdy caskets and stone grave markers told a different story – one of social continuity, in which the human identity was not diminished. With both of these opposing viewpoints clearly at play, the corpse after burial had not simply exited the liminal space between life and death. Caught between two different (and seemingly tidy) polarities, it had entered a new liminal space – between human and nature. The liminality of the buried corpse had unique meaning to the Ashokan residents who exhumed and reburied their own dead. Their actions were a proclamation in favor of the corpse as primarily human rather than purely nature.

Although drowned towns are often portrayed as little more than an interesting footnote in the greater narrative of urban water supply, they carry a mystique all their own. As recently as 2009, the flooded valleys of upstate New York were named one of the “World’s Eeriest Abandoned Places,” by Travel and Leisure magazine. “Fortunately,” the popular magazine states, “the bodies from 32 cemeteries were relocated.” That the dead were relocated was good fortune, surely, but fortunate for whom? Fortunate for the Ashokan families, who were able to keep

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6 This notion has recently begun garnering greater attention in the field of environmental history. See Ellen Stroud, “Six Feet Under the Field: Dead Bodies in the Classroom,” *Environmental History* 8, no. 4 (2003): 618-627.
8 Ibid.
their dead close? Fortunate for New York City residents who need not worry about finding the residue of someone’s grandma in their morning coffee pot? Fortunate for the dead, who were not lost below reservoir waters, whose names still sit upon stones that attest to a life once lived? Thomas Laqueur, in a recent essay on death in the nineteenth century, noted that it “takes a lot of cultural work to put the dead to rest.”9 Echoing that sentiment, putting the dead to rest only to dig them back up and put them to rest a second time takes even more work. Exhumations are uniquely qualified to help us understand the cultural value that the material corpse retains after burial.

In the case of the Ashokan reservoir, municipal powers did not force rural residents to retrieve their dead. While city appointed officials were diligent in mapping every burial ground to assure that each grave was vacated, those that were unclaimed by family members were not left behind. If a relative could not be found or instead choose not to be involved in the relocations, the city took responsibility in removing the remains. While the city provided monetary reimbursements to families who exhumed their own dead, there was no real financial benefit in doing so. Small and often inadequate sums were given, usually long after the reburial had already taken place, forcing some families into debt.10 Those who took responsibility for corpses exhumed them personally, which turned farmers and innkeepers into gravediggers; each risked the supposed dangers of cemetery seepage. Despite such

10 “Ashokan Cemeteries: City Delays in Making Payment for Work Done,” Kingston Daily Freeman (KDF), October 31, 1910.
difficulties, only 300 of the roughly 3,000 bodies buried in the Esopus Valley were left unclaimed. While some historians have argued that by the early twentieth century cemeteries were losing cultural value, replaced by more symbolic forms of memorialization, this number attests to the ongoing importance of the actual physical corpse. It also emphasizes the persistence of earlier conceptions of disease causation.

The Ashokan residents, by and large, took responsibility for the exhumation and relocation of corpses in the Esopus Valley. However, the monetary costs inherent in this undertaking fell under the guidelines of eminent domain. Some families accepted the small, allotted amount offered by the city, but a majority of people filed individual claims for reimbursement, to be examined by a specialized Commission. This Commission was responsible for handling all eminent domain claims and determining the value of homes, farms, businesses and properties. The local voices that arise from these claims provide valuable insights into the way turn of the century rural Americans conceived of the body after burial. Additionally, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century debates surrounding corpse disposal offer a rich contextual basis that is essential to determining what was at stake in the

12 The Ulster County Historical Society in Kingston, New York houses tens-of-thousands of pages of condemnation hearing transcripts. These have proved a surprising source of previously unexplored material on cemetery relocations. This source has helped me to locate the often-overlooked voices of local residents, which are vital to understanding the significance of exhumation. Additionally, the Vera Sickler Collection, held by the Town of Olive Archives, as well as material from the Haviland-Heidgerd Historical Collection of New Paltz, New York allowed me to explore the local perspective in greater detail.
13 David Stradling provides an excellent summation of the Commission’s proceedings and highlights several important property cases. See Stradling, Making Mountains, 140-176.
action of reburial. These documents reveal how the cremationist movement re-envisioned the corpse after burial as a natural, as opposed to human entity, and how the Ashokan exhumations comprised a kind of rebuttal to that notion.

A Place to Bury, A Time to Grieve: American Deathways in the Nineteenth Century

Stephen Prothero has described death as a “sort of alchemy,” that transforms the living body into a heap of inert flesh – a corpse. Though the flesh may be plucked and pulled and prayed over, it must ultimately be banished and disposed “so that the tasks of the living can proceed.”14 While the finality implied is overstated, historians, anthropologists, and other death studies professionals share his fixation with the fresh corpse. Typically the word corpse is used to refer to the recently dead. It is the mass of bone and muscle left behind on the battlefield. It is the serene-faced, cross-armed vestige one whispers to at a funeral. It is seen as fully human, complete in its mortality. These corpses are not living, but, scholars have argued, they are not fully dead. They instead occupy an elevated and unsettling social position derived from their liminal state.15 Gary Laderman succinctly described this liminal period as one in which: “the former living being who had inhabited the body continued to be associated with the remains until they were removed from the sight

14 Prothero, Purified by Fire, 1-2.
of the living (emphasis added).” From the moment of death to the moment of burial, the corpse is described as an ambiguous being; one that still wears the face of a departed loved one, but one who must be hurried away before that mask slips. Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth explain that the tradition of viewing at a funeral allows the living to look beyond the “material reality of death” and instead see “presence and continuity of identity,” for one brief moment before the body is proscribed to the grave. With the rise of death professions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this moment became carefully managed and controlled.

Embalmimg, first brought into widespread practice in America during the Civil War, was the cornerstone of late nineteenth-century death professions. By the mid-nineteenth century, management of the corpse had already begun to move into more practiced hands. Instead of family members cleaning the deceased body to be laid out in-home, undertakers assumed this duty. With the rise of embalming, undertakers transcended their role as grief counselors and gained a modicum of prestige as scientists. They were learned men with an advanced understanding of

17 Elizabeth Hallam, Jenny Hockey and Glennys Howarth, *Beyond the Body: Death and Social Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 136. I would like to add that while historians of death strongly correlate the concept of individual identity with funerals, they continuously leave the question of identity after burial open and unanswered. *Beyond the Body* stresses that social continuity of the dead is carried out through symbolic memorialization after burial, but this line of argumentation unnecessarily undermines the cultural value of the material corpse.
human anatomy. Furthermore they touted their own expertise in sanitizing the
human corpse, proclaiming that they rendered it safe for interaction with the living
for much longer periods than previously imagined. Under an undertaker’s careful
guidance, funerals could become lavish, planned, well-orchestrated events
(depending on one’s budget) and exorbitant funerary rituals became attainable
status symbols for the middle class. In the same period, cemeteries similarly
became elaborate, plotted and planned locales in which wealthy could declare their
status, and the poor attain status that had escaped them in life. These newly
founded and highly individualized burial locations were deemed “rural” cemeteries.

In nineteenth-century America, the dead body was at once an object of
reverence and revulsion. The rural cemetery movement, which began in 1831 with
the founding of Boston’s Mount Auburn cemetery, clearly encompassed both
polarities. Predating the cremation movements’ quest for burial reform, the rural
cemetery movement criticized lax burial laws in American cities. In urban
churchyards and potter’s fields it was typical for corpses to be stacked four or five
high, with only a few inches of dirt between them. Contemporaries complained
that with so little soil separating the living from the dead there was an actual stench

and France, 1750-1820*. Edited by Colon Jones and Dror Wahrman. Berkley: University of California
23 In addition to urban churchyards, early American scholars have noted the Puritan disregard for
the human corpse. Puritans viewed the body as a site of moral corruption, and the decaying corpse
was emblematic of the fate of those denied entrance into heaven. See James Deetz, “Death’s Head,
Cherub, Urn and Willow,” *Natural History* 76, no. 3 (1967): 29-37, also Laderman, 52.
of decay. Although physicians debated the exact mechanisms of transmission, the prevailing miasmatic theory of contagion maintained that disease could be spread through malodorous or foul air, resulting in humoral imbalance. Following that notion, health-minded reformers, widely labeled sanitarians, advocated for change in burial custom. As urban graveyards became noticeably and pungently overpopulated, they were obvious targets for reform. By the mid-nineteenth century, earth burial was banned by most municipalities, resulting in new cemeteries founded on city outskirts where corpses could be spread out and the threat of misamatic disease neutralized.

Although public health concerns were a major factor in the shift toward rural cemeteries, historians argue that the rural cemetery movement was also an expression of Enlightenment-era theological changes that deemphasized the horrors of hell and promoted a more merciful depiction of God. Death as sleep became the ruling image. Burial was an act of retiring the deceased to peaceful slumber, where the body could await resurrection on Judgment Day. Far from fearing death, rural cemetery supporters hoped that people would commune with the dead and reflect on divine matters in a beautiful, natural environment. The definition of “natural,” however, was a point of contention. Promoters of rural cemeteries had a very particular understanding of what a natural environmental should look like. Founder

of the Mount Auburn cemetery, Jacob Bigelow, was both a physician and widely known horticulturalist. Horticultural societies ardently promoted the moralizing influence of farming and gardening. They romanticized the rural world and saw it as morally superior and untouched by the corruption that plagued cities. Celebration of nature was at forefront of the rural cemetery movement, but this depiction of nature was meticulously managed, designed, and controlled.28 Paradoxically, rural cemeteries did not only exist on the fringes of urban centers, but also in the very farmlands and small towns that city cemetery designers sought to emulate. For rural communities, the contrived landscapes of the rural cemetery movement were also most desirable. Popular as rural cemeteries became, historians have argued that their moment of precedence was temporary, soon to be outmoded by lawn park cemeteries and less material forms of memorialization.29 By the final decades of the nineteenth century, simplicity, efficiency and emotional authenticity became the vogue.

To be accused of sentimentality in the late nineteenth century was to be charged with emotional inauthenticity.30 For the upper classes, especially, this was a period of backlash against sentimentality, and the rural cemeteries that had entranced the mid-century generation were becoming decidedly passé. A female

28 Ibid, 46, 52.
30 Scholars have similarly condemned sentimental speech, writing and literature as contrived and unworthy of evaluation. Sentimentality has been associated with a more ritualized, “domesticated” understanding of death. In opposition to this trend Mary Louise Kete has argued that for many nineteenth-century Americans, especially those of the working and middle classes, writing and reading sentimental literature was a community building practice that drew otherwise isolated people into a collaborative identity through the expression of grief. For more on sentimentality in the nineteenth-century see Mary Louise Kete, Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 3, 52, 182.
cremationist writing in 1899 expressed her disgust with “the usual mode of funeral
ceremony with its ostentation and pageantry.” She described traditional earth burial
as a “false show... of protracted mourning and darkened houses.” For those who
already found the trappings of grief to ring false, cremation offered an enticing
alternative. New and without proscribed rituals, the cremation movement allowed
supporters to express grief in their own way. Cremationists argued that they
celebrated the deceased person's memory instead of their “tenement of clay.”

Historians of death typically associate cremation with the rise of the Memorial-Park
cemetery movement, arguing that both represent a devaluation of the material
corpse. According to cemetery specialist David Sloane, most white, Protestant
Americans moved away from the rural cemetery movement and embraced less
material conceptions of death. The only notable exception, he maintains, were the
“offended, frightened, and horrified immigrant communities... Their cemeteries
remained closer to the early ideal of the rural cemetery than to the beautified
landscape-lawn of the park.” As can be see in the Ashokan region, however, many
long-standing American communities continued to keep close ties to the dead.

32 The Urn 3, no. 5 (May, 1894), 4.
33 For more on the Memorial Park Cemetery movement see David Sloane, The Last Great Necessity,
Chapter 7.
34 Sloane, The Last Great Necessity, 113.
Danger in the Mountains: The Cremation Movement as a Catalyst for Watershed Sanitation

There is a suggested finality in the action of burial that makes exhumation taboo. The living, however, often disturb the dead for their own purposes. In the nineteenth century, one well-known (and feared) example was that of the anatomist, who was portrayed as a deviant figure that crept into quiet churchyards to kidnap corpses for dissection in the name of science. These “bodysnatchers” were almost universally abhorred, and leant particular horror to pauper burials in unprotected potter’s fields. 35 On the other end of the spectrum, turn-of-the-century Americans would also have been familiar with highly publicized reburials of significant literary, political, and military figures, which were conceived as acts of veneration and national pride. 36 While bodysnatching and “notable” reburials both, in some way depicted a commodified corpse, neither practice fundamentally challenged the corpse as a primarily human entity; after all, even anatomists required the corpse for its human properties. Watershed cemetery relocations, such as those that took place in the Esopus Valley, however, were directly linked to public fears over the ever-changing and essentially un-human state of the decaying corpse. Removing cemeteries was proclaimed necessary to maintain water purity. This notion, derived primarily from the cremation movement, represented a uniquely dehumanized conception of the dead body particular to that period.

Even prior to the construction of the Ashokan reservoir, corpses were sometimes relocated for the protection of New York’s water supply; watershed area cemeteries had been indicted as a source of water contamination as early as the 1870s. When the Croton water system was constructed in 1842, it was celebrated as a long-term solution to New York’s water supply and water purity problems. Located roughly twenty miles north of the city, in Westchester County, the small reservoirs seemed reasonably tucked away and protected. However, the 1880s and 90s saw an explosion of Croton watershed investigations. Due to poor filtration and a lack of water purity guidelines, even your average nonscientific layperson would be able to see or smell changes in water supply conditions. Early Croton water analyses often focused on distinguishing characteristics such as color, smell and taste. An 1879, the New York City Health Department was called to action when the water had acquired a “vivid grass green color.” In his final report, investigator Elwyn Waller noted possible problems stemming from: “decomposing bodies of fish, sewage, or other poisonous material.” Although cemeteries were not specifically mentioned in his report, Waller’s emphasis on decomposing matter highlighted the path that later investigators would take toward cemetery seepage fears.

Putrefaction was the primary danger associated with cemetery seepage. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, any consumption of decaying organic

37 As Christopher Hamlin has shown, water analysis was a crude science in the mid nineteenth century and many analysts were in disagreement over water purity’s overall impact on public health. Christopher Hamlin, A Science of Impurity: Water Analysis in Nineteenth Century Britain, Berkley: University of California Press, 1990.
39 Ibid.
matter was deemed particularly harmful to one’s overall health. The increasingly popular zymotic theory of contagion held that putrefying material acted as a fermenting agent within the body, causing healthy tissues break down and decay. However, it was not completely divorced from earlier humoral and miasmatic theories, which took into account the whole body and one’s environment, rather than looking for specific disease causes. Putrefaction was considered especially harmful to those already suffering a weak constitution and they were thought to be prime targets for putrefaction and cemetery seepage. As water analysts developed the tools to identify markers of organic decay such as nitrogen and ammonia, fear of putrefaction increased.

An investigation conducted by in 1888 by Sanitary Inspector Lucus noted at least five cemeteries that he argued contributed to the pollution of the Croton water supply. This accusation would have likely passed without notice had it not been for the particular hostility of the sanitary movement toward earth burial. Agrippa Nelson Bell, M.D., founder and editor of New York’s premier journal on sanitary science, The Sanitarian, did not allow the five cemeteries listed in Lucas’ report to go unnoticed. He called all New Yorkers’ attention to the “enormous mass of

40 Hamlin, A Science of Impurity, 73-78.
42 A.N. Bell, “The Future of the New York Water Supply,” The Sanitarian 21. (July-December, 1888): 547. Agrippa Nelson Bell was the founder and editor of The Sanitarian, and was also a member of a number of important medical organizations. His obituary, printed by the American Clinical and Climatological Association, named him “a member of the American Public Health Association; Climatological Association; Honorary President of the International Congress of Tuberculosis in 1904; passed Assistant Surgeon U.S. Navy from 1847 to 1850 with service during the Mexican War; a medical officer of the Navy during the Civil War; Superintendent of the Floating Hospital for Yellow
putrefying human remains” contained within the aforementioned cemeteries and expressed his disgust that “all of the excretions and soakage of this loathsome mass of putrefactive material are drained into the Croton!” In his view, cemeteries were an even more threatening form of water contamination than sewage: “This [cemetry problem], let it be borne in mind, is not surface pollution, or that which is or can easily be, by common consent, collected and cremated, or purified by combined irrigation and filtration.”43 Instead, he argued, it was a threat that could only be eliminated through eradicating the practice of earth burial all together.

Due in part to agitation of sanitarians and cremationists, a wider audience began taking notice of the watershed cemetery threat. Another article published that same year reported a recent investigation where a pair of “keen-sighted and quick-scented” gentlemen found a startling source of pollution. As they began “looking and smelling over the drainage” of the great Croton watershed, they noted a number of nuisances that might threaten the health of New York City residents. Their adept noses led them to a multitude of “cesspools, stables, slaughterhouses, and addenda,” whose drainage mingled with Croton waters, made unsettling chemical additions to its composition, and rendered it unfit for everyday use. As if these “nuisances” alone were not enough cause for concern, the Times reported that there was an even more troublesome source of pollution found on the watershed:

_Fever Patients, New York City, 1861; from 1870 to 1875 Inspector for Quarantines for the National Board of Health; a member of the National Quarantine Convention from 1857 to 1860; Commissioner of Quarantine of New York from 1870 to 1873; for twenty-one years Visiting Physician to the Brooklyn Hospital._

cemeteries. It revealed, “At the very moderate death rate of 20 per 1,000, 500 corpses are annually interred within the soil through which our drinking water trickles to us.” 44 Corpses, putrid and rotting, oozed their essence into the earth of the Croton watershed, infecting its subsoil. “Cremationists are a gruesome sort of persons,” the Times concluded, “but this is one of the occasions when they ought to come out strong.” 45

With upstate pollutants garnering such attention, city officials hoped to ease New Yorkers’ minds though a display of action. The Webster Act, passed in 1893, authorized the Department of Public Works to condemn and purchase any piece of land within three hundred feet of the Croton River or its tributaries that was found to be a source of pollution. Commissioner Daly, who signed the Act, surveyed the land personally and employed a patrol of fifty men to be placed on permanent guard around the watershed. Although much of this work centered on sewage, the cemetery threat was not overlooked. The Times deemed the Act an “important step” in eradicating the danger of cemetery seepage. 46

As the Croton water system expanded at the close of the nineteenth century, a number of Westchester county cemeteries in the watershed vicinity were removed, including the Croton Valley Friends Cemetery, Kinscio Methodist Church Cemetery, Whitlockville Cemetery, Hoyt Private Cemetery, Golden’s Bridge Cemetery, Mills Road Cemetery, St. Joseph’s Cemetery, Pines Bridge Methodist

46 New York Times, “Removing Croton Nuisances: Important Work Done by Commissioner Daly and Dr. Edison,” April 30, 1893.
Cemetery, as well as a sizable number of smaller family burying grounds.47 While these relocations were nowhere near the scale of those that took place in the Ashokan region, they provided both experience and precedence for the city to follow in removing cemetery “nuisances.” The problem with upstate water, as one New York author concisely states: “It is certainly as perfect a watershed as can be found in this country. Its supply by nature is abundant and pure.” Unfortunately, “the beautiful country from which this grand supply of water springs has, like all beautiful countries, become populated.”48 Thus, the perfect illusion of upstate water purity was tainted because the mountains were home to a sizable living (and dead) human population. While the cremation movement was certainly responsible for drawing attention to the dead, their ideology dictated that corpses should not be considered a human component of the population.

“Rest! No, Not For an Instant”: Philosophical Underpinnings of the Cremation Movement

The early cremationists had a unique conception of the corpse after burial, clearly articulated by their most popular writings. Sir Henry Thompson, an English surgeon who is widely considered the founder of the modern cremationist movement, witnessed a working cremation chamber at the 1873 World Exposition in Vienna. Less than a year later, the Contemporary Review published his essay, “The

Treatment of the Body After Death,” which quickly set the world ablaze with his bold rhetoric of sanitation in death and his controversial utilitarian suggestion that human remains could be used as fertilizer.49 Thompson is well recognized by death historians, but a close evaluation of his seminal work and its underlying rationale is largely missing from the historiography. In order to understand early twentieth-century cemetery relocations within the context of changing American deathways, a deeper exploration is necessary. Thompson’s conception of the material body after death was the most direct challenge to the corpse’s humanity in the late nineteenth century.

To most scholars Thompson was a radical – a man of science, far removed from the more sensitive aspects of death. Stephen Prothero notes that Thompson ultimately became a blemish on the movement that later cremationists would try to erase.50 However, both historians and Thompson’s own contemporaries have misrepresented his logic in suggesting that cremated remains be used as fertilizer. Out of their original context in “The Treatment of the Body After Death,” his statements would seem to characterize the corpse as no more than a repulsive pollutant to be destroyed. If this were the case, his argument would hardly be unique compared to other burial reformers, such as those of the early nineteenth century. His argument for utility, when separated from his broader philosophy, seemed to many like a devious attempt to achieve monetary gain from human death.

In actuality, Thompson did not devalue death. While his views were radical, they

50 Prothero, Purified by Fire, 131.
were not so in the way many people assume. Challenging the reigning image of death as “eternal rest,” he exclaimed: “Rest! no, not for an instant. Never was there greater activity than at this moment exists in that still corpse.” To Thompson, the body after death was much more than a still, lifeless form. Activity never ceases, he explained, but it is “of a different kind to that which was before.” Activity beyond death was Thompson’s radical insight. In this oft-cited essay he published nature’s itinerary. Death was not man at rest, but nature in motion.

Thompson’s nature was tireless. This “marvelously complex machine” worked to reduce the physical form into nondescript carbonic acid, water, and ammonia, as well as lime, phosphorous, iron, sulfur, and other minerals. If at any given moment, the flesh planted in the earth was becoming a new composition of minerals and elements, as he argued, then how could the corpse be defined as a singular entity? There was nothing human in such a description. Thompson, for much of his argument, avoided using the word human altogether. The process that he described was framed in terms of an intimate relationship between animal and vegetable kingdoms. What once formed animal would soon form vegetable. Plants breathed the gases released by the process of decay and fed off the soil that was once man’s body. He was suggesting that through decay the animal and vegetable worlds merged. Nature was represented as both animal and vegetable, element and mineral. While the natural corpse was all of these things, it was not human.52

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Of course, Thompson was not the first person to make such an observation. Scientists and poets alike had long marveled at the interconnectedness of life, death, and decay.\textsuperscript{53} In reciting the processes by which the corpse becomes new matter he conceded, “I suppose that these facts are known to most readers, but I require a clear statement of them here as preliminary to my next subject.”\textsuperscript{54} While this concept may have been known to some readers, the image of death as sleep was deeply embedded, and few people choose to consider the fate of planted corpses any further. Separation from the dead (whether through rural cemeteries or the use of undertakers) and a strong Christian belief in Resurrection obscured the physical-realities of death for most Americans.\textsuperscript{55} The way that Thompson carefully constructed his argument in terms of animal and vegetable organic matter clearly assigned the corpse to the domain of nature. However, before readers became too comfortable with the symbiotic world he had been describing, Thompson reminded them of the dangers of putrefaction. He wrote: “The process of decomposition affecting an animal body is one that has a disagreeable, injurious, often fatal influence on the living man... even the putrefaction of some of the most insignificant animals has sufficed to destroy the noblest.”\textsuperscript{56} In an instant, the comfortable exchange of matter he had described a few sentences prior now brought to mind the horrors of disease. Only after re-envisioning the human corpse as a non-human,\hfill

\textsuperscript{54} Thompson, “The Treatment of the Body After Death,” 321.
\textsuperscript{56} Thompson, “The Treatment of the Body After Death,” 321.
natural entity, did Thompson’s tone shift from that of the conversational scientist to the urgent reformer. Putrefaction of organic matter, rather than the still form of a deceased loved one, was his chosen target.

An essential component of the cremationist argument in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was its representation of earth burial as unnatural. Although Thompson is often credited with promoting the argument that the decaying body was a source of disease and pollution, he had surprisingly little to say on that matter. He wrote: “There is no necessity to prove, as the fact is too patent, that our present mode of treating the dead ... is full of danger to the living.” 57 Instead, his argument probed deeper, and leant specificity to what was previously a vague threat. He focused on the manner in which bodies were placed in the earth, and where in the earth they were geographically placed. He stressed that the beneficial and useful role that the decomposing corpse plays in the natural world cannot be properly achieved when the body is interred “six feet under.” He explained that in order to be easily converted into vegetable matter, the corpse must be placed high in the soil, allowing shallow roots to harvest the mineral composition that was once a human body. Instead, he lamented, the dead are placed “in the lower soil, where they are not merely useless, but where they often mingle with and pollute the streams which furnish our tables.” 58 Cremationists typically highlighted pollution of water, rather than pollution of air and used emerging (although largely

unscientific) chemical evidence to scaffold their claims.\textsuperscript{59} Earlier sanitary reformers who attacked the dangers of city churchyards and potter's fields had complained that the dead were not being buried deeply enough and disease easily contaminated the air when so little soil separated the dead and the living. As a result, rural cemeteries and similarly reformed burial sites required that graves be dug several feet deep. Bringing the water table to the forefront, Thompson added terror to deep graves as well, and emphasized the inadequacy of rural cemeteries as a sanitary measure. The efforts of earlier generations, by his argument, were not enough to protect the living. Man, Thompson insisted, must take action. “Nature’s many agents, laden with power, the over-action of which is harmful, we cannot stop, but we tame, guide, and make them our most profitable servants.”\textsuperscript{60} If the corpse was part of nature, an ever-changing amalgamation of elements and minerals that would continue its work in all circumstances, then man would have to respond to it like any inexorable force of nature – through careful control.

Thompson’s essay demonstrated that earth burial thwarted the proper work of nature and threatened the health of man, but what could be done? He responded: “Do that which is done in all good work of every kind – follow Nature’s indication, and do the work she does, but do it better and more rapidly.”\textsuperscript{61} Ideally, he argued, earth burial would provide the soil with nutrients. The corpse would become food for vegetation that was later ingested by animals, and so on. The purpose of


\textsuperscript{60} Thompson, “The Treatment of the Body After Death,” 325.

\textsuperscript{61} Thompson, “The Treatment of the Body After Death,” 325.
Thompson’s long reiteration of the natural life cycle was to allow his readers to more easily digest his rationale for cremation. Thompson argued that when the body became cremated the chemical process that was already occurring would be forced to occur more rapidly. He explained that the remaining “ash” was composed of the same materials that the slowly decomposing corpse would become. Gases would swiftly escape the cremation chamber to be “consumed by plants and trees,” while the quickly-rendered mineral materials would be made innocuous to the living by bypassing the dangerous process of putrefaction.

The argument Thompson was best known for is utility. He provided very specific calculations to explain how the English people could benefit economically from using cremated remains as fertilizer. Many who found this utilitarian line of reasoning offensive were shocked by the idea of using the dead in such a callous manner. However, Sir Henry Thompson did not make this proposal lightly. He only suggested it after he had carefully constructed an argument that differentiated the dead person from the corpse. In his understanding, the corpse was no longer human, but an object of nature. Its physical processes were governed not by human will but by natural chemical actions. Cremation was not the act of burning people but of perfecting nature. Thompson concluded his landmark essay by expressing his hope that, in the not too distant future, people would consider “what I am fairly entitled to call, the Natural, in place of the present Artificial Treatment of the body after death.”62 His wish was soon fulfilled, as his essay sparked a movement.

Although some cremationists sought to distance themselves from Thompson’s “ashes as fertilizer” argument, they continued to promote his conception of the corpse as dehumanized nature. Cremation was not simply a new way of disposing of the dead, but a careful reassertion of man’s role in the natural world. Echoes of Thompson’s arguments can be found in nearly every piece of pro-cremation literature produced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both in England and in the United States. As they explained the scientific process that took place in a crematorium, most reformers first reiterated Thompson’s understanding of the slow-changing corpse after burial. With cremation, one supporter wrote, “the body is thus reduced to its ultimate chemical elements in a few hours. Nature’s indications are thus anticipated... nothing is lost by this process that nature would save by hers.”63 To the majority of cremationists, it was of the utmost importance to stress that this was a natural process, far superior to that which would occur in the ground. Earth burial, conversely, was recast as a cultural practice that impeded the work of nature. Cremationist R. E. Whitman wrote: “We may delay this process (decomposition) by deep-dug graves, by the cunning combination of metal, glass, and cement, but we only make longer the day of burning.” The seemingly endless process of decay that occurs in the ground was portrayed as particularly unruly. He stressed that after death the body placed in the ground would never again be one single entity. It would instead be

ever changing: "The imagination sickens and gives over the attempt to conceive of
the numberless forms, the particles of matter which compose one dead body."64

Whitman’s “The Question of Cremation,” published in 1885 in a New York
newspaper, illustrates the continuity of Thompson’s conception of man and nature.
Whitman declared, “the entire earth is consecrated to the use of man,”
cremationists, “only desire to so preserve it, and to stop as soon as may be its
desecration by the burial of dead bodies.” He compared the dead person to a lost
limb or body part; whatever function the discarded flesh previously held was of
little consequence. “Once dead it is so much material in nature’s great laboratory for
conversion into new forms of life, either vegetable or animal.”65 He urged readers to
see the dead body not just as a useless part of the human world, but rather as an
integral part of the natural one. Whitman, like Thompson, emphasized that the dead
person and the physical corpse were not one and the same. “A dead body, though of
our dearest and most cherished, must in her vast economy contribute its elements,”
he explained, “It is no longer an entity, only a mass of convertible material, and
man’s uttermost of ingenious endeavors delays but never thwarts her process.” 66

In 1889, when the United States Cremation Company, in conjunction with the
New York Cremation Company, asked supporters to articulate their views for
publication, most responders reiterated Thompson’s original points and arguments.
Many described the differences between earth burial and incineration as differences
between slow and quick combustion. Agreeing that the body would be reduced to

64 R.E. Whitman, “The Question of Cremation” The New York Daily Graphic (1885)
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
basic elements regardless, the question was only by what means.67 “Putrefaction,” one responder explained, “is a slow burning (cremaca in sío), and is chemically the same ... as that performed by rapid oxidization of the solids and fluids by intense heat in an hour of time.”68 By characterizing both methods of disposal as a type of combustion, cremationists emphasized that the choice was then not between preservation and destruction of the body, but between two methods of decomposition – one of which was safer, quicker, more natural, scientific, and efficient.

To accept cremation was to celebrate modern man’s triumph over nature – his ability to subdue and perfect it. However, this required that one be capable of conceptually separating the human body, with all its emotional attachments, from the natural corpse. As one cremationist explained, “the cemetery or churchyard is by many persons regarded as a shrine of sentiment, and to such persons, the idea of cremation gives rise to feelings of abhorrence.”69 Sentimentality was the chosen enemy of modern cremation, and early cremationists acknowledged that they were fighting an uphill battle. Earth burial was deeply ingrained in Western culture, and the advent of cremation corresponded with an era of heightened public mourning, more elaborate death rituals, and new technologies in physical preservation. Cremationists were denouncing the corpse’s humanity at a cultural moment in which the dead body was increasingly revered. To depict the natural corpse as

68 Ibid., 29.
essentially non-human was antithetical to popular opinion. Despite such difficulties, cremationists believed their arguments could easily withstand any challenge on grounds of sanitation, religion and legality. By the end of the nineteenth century, the New York Cremation Society proudly proclaimed: “All other objections have been overcome.” Personal sentiment, however, was harder to rebut. It concluded: “Today hostility to the reform [is] ... based only on prejudice, false sentiment, or blind conservatism.”

Cremationists insisted that attachment to the grave was not true grief but false sentiment, a willing dismissal of reason. A reasoning mind, they argued, would not be able to accept that one’s dead quietly rested underground, intact and awaiting the Judgment. Sentiment, reformers maintained, was willful ignorance or deception. In complaint against the “poetry of the grave,” one cremationist argued that American funerary practices “draw a veil over the future, which prevents us from seeing clearly. We speak of the dead as resting, or sleeping, in the grave. We even cheat ourselves into the belief that when we visit their graves we are somehow nearer to them than elsewhere.” While most cremationists did not challenge the notion of life beyond death, they believed it was more spiritual to reject the “tenement of clay” than idolize the body of the deceased. They equated the physical form after death with other non-human pollutants. Writing for The Urn, a monthly cremationist publication, one supporter expressed his hope that “a dead body will be regarded in its true light - as so much refuse, to be destroyed at once as

70 “Opinions on Cremation,” 2.
71 The Urn 3, no. 4 (April, 1894), 6-7.
72 Prothero, Purified by Fire, 80.
a sanitary measure.”73 Again there is a clear contrast between the cremation movement and earlier measures for burial reform. Cremationists demanded complete rejection of the dehumanized corpse and their rhetoric belittled those who memorialized the corrupting flesh.

Adamant as cremationists were against sentimentality and a strictly human (as opposed to scientific or natural) understanding of the dead body, reformers often spoke of the power of a “conversion experience.” These encounters conveyed an emotional response to witnessing human bodily decay. Letters and opinions published in The Urn frequently reference such conversions. One letter aptly explains: "If those who call incineration revolution could once witness the exhumation of a body that has been buried a year or two, they would never be buried themselves... One experience would dispel all sentiment... The eye cannot behold or the mind imagine, a more repulsive, shocking, or hideous sight.”74 Examples of conversion experiences were a cornerstone facet of cremationist publications at the turn of the twentieth century.

In one case, the editor of the Urn prefaced a letter written by a recent convert with the statement that, "Among the different means to win friends for cremation," witnessing an exhumation was “nauseating but absolutely effective.” In the letter that followed, a man explained that he was charged with moving remains several family members, whose bodies were not just buried, but encased in heavy brick cells, hermetically sealed, with 2,000 pound stone tops. He affirmed, "no expense

73 The Urn 3, no. 5 (May, 1894), 4.
74 The Urn 3, no. 9 (September, 1894), 9.
was spared to render the cells impervious to all dampness." He went to the gravesite expecting the exhumation to be a very easy affair, but, he writes, "to my horror and the surprise of every person present, the cells were found entirely filled with black water, very offensive, and the caskets were ‘all afloat.’" This example shows that even the most careful efforts to preserve the dead were thwarted by unruly nature. In this particular case, the physical corpse was not even present; the presence of effluvia alone was enough to dissuade him from earth burial. Declaring himself a proud cremationist, he preached: "My experience in making these removals converted me to fire worship. No soaking or slow combustion for me. It seems that if people would only consider what disgusting conditions accompany earth burial they would allow none of it for themselves or any one they have regard for."75

Similar stories appeared in various forms throughout the cremationist literature.76 In each case, the lesson was that personal knowledge of bodily decomposition had the power to erase misguided sentiments that ascribed humanity to the decaying material, and would serve to enlighten a person to the corpse’s true status as a natural mass of elements.77

Although witnessing an exhumation was seen as a most effective means of conversion, few people actually had the opportunity to do so. Cremationist publication The Urn sought to remedy this by publishing a shocking example of the "truth" of earth burial. A three-page, fold-out photographic spread titled "Our Silent

75 The Urn 4, no. 9, "Connecticut Disinterments," (April, 1895), 5.
76 R.E. Whitman, “The Question of Cremation.”
77 Although those that witnessed the exhumations did have an emotional response, whether that was indignation over the true state of one’s beloved dead, or simple, visceral revulsion, the authenticity of these emotions was not in question; thus their responses were not considered “sentimental.”
Majority!” depicted the actual images of no less than seven corpses in varying states of decay. In a journal where pictures were few in number, this feature grabbed the attention of readers, and the subject matter became a point of reference for many articles to come. The accompanying captions included: “lively flies swarm from the body, numerous insect eggs;” “the whole surface of the body covered with mould;” and “liver and intestines recognizable.” Crematoriums also kept similar photographs on hand to share with visitors. Kate Swan, a journalist investigating the debate between earth burial and cremation, wrote of her repulsion when, during an interview, a crematorium engineer presented her with pictures of decaying bodies. Although she was a cremationist prior to this experience, she testified that the images cemented her beliefs.

In 1908-1912, during the construction of the Ashokan Reservoir, no photographs were needed to reveal the countless forms of the decomposing body after death. Nearly 3,000 examples of decay’s physical reality were brought to light; yet, in contrast to cremationist conversion narrative, in each case the corpse made its way back into the soil. The cremation movement did not gain a single convert among the Ashokan residents. Before this significant fact can be written off as simple adherence to tradition, it is worth noting that cremation was growing in popularity throughout the region and faced no religious barriers in that area. A number of Ulster County residents were cremated at Fresh Pond Cemetery in New

78 The Urn 2, no. 6 “Our Silent Majority,” (July, 1893).
79 Ibid.
York City and had their ashes interred at Wiltwyk Cemetery.\textsuperscript{81} The cremation movement presented decomposition as an undeniable fact, known only to the enlightened few. Cremationists held that those who witnessed the body in a state of decomposition could not deny that the corpse fell within nature’s domain. However, the actions of the Ashokan residents defied such assumptions. They served as a testament to the cultural value of earth burial and highlighted an enduring understanding of the body after death as primarily human.

A "Notable" Parallel: The Relocation of Governor George Clinton’s Remains

In 1908, the year that the Ashokan exhumations began, reburial was at the forefront of many American minds. However, as the population turned its attention toward upstate New York, it was not the little towns of the Ashokan Valley that held their interest. Another notable reburial was taking place. In the city of Kingston – less than ten miles from the new reservoir site – former New York Governor George Clinton was buried for a second time. Although native to Ulster County, Clinton was originally buried in the nation’s capital after suffering a fatal attack of pneumonia in 1812. When Kingston city officials began planning the 250\textsuperscript{th} anniversary celebration of the city’s founding, the relocation of Governor Clinton’s grave was considered the event’s crowning highlight. Large crowds, military salutes, and religious sermons followed Clinton’s physical remains as they were carried from the Congressional Cemetery in Washington D.C. to New York City and up the Hudson River by gunboat. When the bones reached their final destination in Kingston, New Yorkers rejoiced

\textsuperscript{81} KDF, “Cremated and Buried,” December 9, 1905.
the long-awaited homecoming of a local hero. As the first Governor of New York state and Vice President to both Jefferson and Madison, Clinton was, according to fellow former New York Governor David B. Hill, “Ulster’s greatest gift to America and the cause of liberty.”82

Although large-scale exhumations, such as that which took place in the Esopus Valley, have not yet garnered much attention from historians, “notable” exhumations of political, literary, and military figures have recently been the subject of discussion. Michael Kammen argues that veneration of the body after death is a sort of historic revisionism. Referencing what he calls the “politics of exhumation,” Kammen highlights reverence for reputation, the resolution of difference, and collective pride as key aspects of famous individuals’ exhumations. He argues that groups and nationalities reclaimed the distinguished dead as markers of their own superiority.83 Katherine Verdery’s The Political Lives of Dead Bodies similarly emphasizes power of reburial to rectify historic wrongs and make broader statements about current political affairs. She argues that the dead are “heavy symbols” because “they were once human beings... people cared about them when they were alive, and identify with them.”84 While this may be the case, it is

82 James Austin Holden, Public Papers of George Clinton, First Governor of New York, 1777-1795 (Albany: New York State University, 1914), 1013.
important to note that people identify with what is *identifiably* human, not human corpses in general.

The remains of Governor Clinton were not in a perfect state of preservation when they were exhumed from Washington. A tree root had ruptured the coffin, leaving the remains partially disintegrated and floating in what was described as “water.” The surviving portions of bone and flesh were examined by physicians before being returned to a lead casket, which was then encased in copper, and covered in freshly painted and polished wood.85 The vault of the tomb that was constructed to house Clinton’s remains in the Kingston’s Dutch Cemetery was sealed with cement. State historian Holden, recalled the event: “The hero now sleeps his last sleep within this solid block of artificial stone... not far removed from the home of his childhood, and the historic scenes within which much of his active life was spent.”86 It is ironic that New Yorkers lamented Clinton’s body being left in “alien soil,” and yet, when it was returned to New York soil, every action was taken to prevent the remains from ever touching it. It is obvious that keeping the corpse whole, human, and engaged (at least symbolically) in human activity (sleep), was the objective. Holden’s reference to the home and scenes of Clinton’s “active life” seems to suggest juxtaposition to Clinton’s inactive life as a corpse. As in the Ashokan exhumations, continuity of identity far surpasses the continuity of physical activity that cremationist Henry Thompson alluded to when describing the “restless” corpse.

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86 Ibid, 1013.
While the reburial of Governor George Clinton was a triumphant moment for New Yorkers, which allowed them to celebrate their own state’s contribution to the American Revolution and the founding of a nation, the forced exhumations that took place in the nearby Espous Valley did not share such a jubilant tone. Looking back on the event, one Olive resident described the cemetery relocation process as the “worst chapter in the building of that reservoir” – more offensive than displacing the living.87 Whilst no deceased resident could claim the national and political significance of a seven-time state governor, the names etched onto the tombstones across those small towns were significant in their own locales. They were founding fathers, revolutionary war veterans, and original landowners whose farms and businesses later generations had inherited.88 Speaking at Clinton’s reburial, Gov. David B. Hill exclaimed: “Here has been brought his [Clinton’s] material monument. It shows the signs of age and decay. But look around you and you see the monument he erected, which grows more magnificent with passing years.”89 Alluding to the state of New York, the nation, and American democracy, Hill suggested a legacy beyond the physical form. The legacy that the Ashokan dead had created would not be preserved. Reservoir waters would eradicate their city streets and town halls, post offices and meeting places, homes and farms. In the face of such destruction, the decaying material monument became all the more valuable.

87 Vera Sickler, Folder:“Handwritten Notes,” “Vera Sickler Collection,” Town of Olive Archives, Olive, NY.
89 James Austin Holden, Public Papers of George Clinton, First Governor of New York, 1777-1795 (Albany: New York State University, 1914), 1013.
A Personal Look at Decay and the Personhood of the Decaying Body

When the New York Board of Water Supply hired thousands of workers to construct the Ashokan Reservoir – a workforce large enough to form its own small town, police force, hospital, and baseball team – it is notable that removal of cemeteries was left to the locals. The Ashokan cemetery relocations took place at a time when death had become increasingly professionalized. In many parts of America, friends and family members no longer dealt personally with death. Undertakers were the supervisors of rituals to separate the living from the dead. Although there were a number of undertakers working in nearby Kingston and rural residents were known to utilize their services, there was no team of undertakers and gravediggers employed to oversee the cemetery relocations. According to The Catskill Water System News (a newspaper printed in the Ashokan work camps during construction), the Board of Water Supply acknowledged that whatever plan was developed for the necessary removal of human bodies should “not conflict with the feelings or sentiments of the surviving relatives.” In 1909, the city issued advertisements advising residents to make arrangements to remove their own dead. The advertisements also stated that city would provide fifteen dollars to cover the cost of each removal, as well as an additional three dollars to reset each headstone. Once residents proved their relationships to the deceased, they were granted permission to move the bodies. Residents submitted formal applications during this process, and, according to The Catskill Water System News: “Each application was

90 Ibid.
investigated by the Board... the relationship alleged therein checked with
information from other sources before permission was granted.”

The Ashokan people were not legally obligated to take responsibility for the
corpses interred in reservoir land. The Board of Water Supply wanted cemeteries
empty and sanitized, and it handled the reburial of all unclaimed remains. And yet,
of the roughly 2,800 bodies removed during the relocations, about 2,500 were
exhumed personally by family and community members. Although cremationists
argued that the sight of the bodily decay would convert any person to their cause,
cremation gained not a single convert among the Ashokan residents. The Ashokan
cemetery relocations exist as a neat summation of the major debates surrounding
American deathways in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Within
this event one can trace the driving sentiments of the rural cemetery movement and
clearly see the components cited as necessary in the typical cremation conversion
myth. Veneration for and repugnance toward the dead are both present. Those
removing local corpses were not bereaved mourners, seeking closure. The liminal
funerary moment that historians like to reference had, in most cases, long past.
Consigned to the tomb, it would seem that that corpses could no longer derive
power from their in-between status, which straddled the polarities of life and death.
This did not make them symbolically powerless however. As decaying and distorted

92 TCWSN, “The Removal of Bodies from the Ashokan Cemeteries,” May 20, 1912
93 New York City Board of Water Supply, “Fifth Annual Report,” (New York, 1910), 97, and TCWSN,
“The Removal of Bodies from the Ashokan Cemeteries,” May 20, 1912. Some men who had been
involved in multiple removals marketed themselves as “undertakers” to assist their neighbors.
effigies, the relocated dead were instead trapped between two different polarities – that of human and nature.

The recently buried – those that were visually closest to human – were horrifying to those who relocated them. The Catskill Water System News recounted one case in which a man, along with a small party of neighbors, set out to remove several graves of the “very recently deceased.” After breaking open the first coffin, the man, terrified by what he had seen, excused himself to “fetch a pair of gloves.” Along with the gloves, he retrieved a bottle of liquor, which he shared with the grave digging party. By lunchtime the entire group was intoxicated, and spent the afternoon “moralizing on the vanity of things mundane,” preaching, and singing hymns to help them through their gruesome work.94 When forced to face the corpse in this rarely encountered, actively decaying state – a visible counterpoint to the “death as sleep” mentality – these local men responded with communal activities (singing, drinking, and soliloquizing) and relied on the support of neighbors and religion. Nicholas Marshall, exploring expressions of grief in the private lives of New Yorkers, argues that frequent encounters with death and illness in the nineteenth century resulted in an increasingly sentimentalized culture, often fixated on the “assurance and relief...of religion”.95 During the Ashokan exhumations, these shared


95 Nicholas Marshall, “In the Midst of Life we are in Death,” in Mortal Remains: Death in Early America, edited by Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstien (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 177-9. This perspective is also in line with Marie Louise Kete’s arguments about the high cultural value of sentimentality, see Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America.
practices and institutions offered solace to a population that was becoming very aware of the reality of decay through their personal interactions with the dead.

Because of the long history of settlement in the area, there were many graves disinterred whose contents could barely be recognized as human. In the case of graves over one hundred years old, it was reported that there was “little to remove but the ashes and a few bones.”96 In one upstate cemetery removal case, a gravedigger from Westchester County testified on the cost of exhumation. When asked what was typically done in cases where the human remains amount to very little, he responded that a human-sized coffin is usually used. He elaborated: “In one case I furnished a 7-foot box and there was only about a handful of bones.”97 Regardless of the physical state of bodily remains, those involved in the exhumations treated them as human, and sought to symbolically link the remains to their former human form by using full-sized coffins. It is significant that the recently dead, complete in their human shape, and the long dead, reduced to formless bone and dust, were reburied in exactly the same manner – the same manner they would have been buried in had they died a week prior. The physical state of the remains had no bearing on their treatment. The wide variation in early twentieth-century attitudes toward the human corpse – ranging from the cremationist perspective that correlated bodily decay with unruly nature, to the ruling “death as sleep” mantra that obscured any thought of the physical form – illustrate the ambiguity

96 Catskill Mountain News, “Removing Unknown Dead,” September 1, 1911.
surrounding the corpse after burial. For most people these competing philosophies existed in an abstract sense. This was a luxury denied to those who were forced to exhume the dead, and their actions speak more loudly than rhetoric. When a handful of bones are laid in a seven-foot coffin, that action stands as a testament to the corpse’s perceived humanity.

During the reburial process, it was apparent that the view of the body as human, first and foremost, continued even when the work of nature (decay) was so obviously occurring. People defended against decomposition, even when as it was visibly happening. The theme of protecting the long-dead body from further corruption arose again when residents and their lawyers objected to the city's choice in “coffin” material. The first person to raise the issue was Augustus Hayes, the vice-president of Kingston’s Wiltwyk cemetery, who frequently testified as an expert witness on behalf of Ashokan residents during the condemnation hearings. In estimating the cost of cemetery relocation, he questioned why the city only provided the very cheapest coffins, stating “a pumpkin pine box... would rot as soon as you put it into the ground.”98 The lawyer representing the city pressed Hayes to admit that all boxes will eventually rot, a point that Hayes conceded; however, he maintained “a chestnut box lasts a great many years.”99 The question of pine versus chestnut boxes came up several times after Haynes testimony, and residents urged the city to pay for chestnut boxes. This overwhelming desire to preserve the corpses from decay defies the cremationists’ depiction of the corpse as primarily nature.

98 Ashokan Reservoir Awards (hereafter cited as ARA) Roll 60: 5156, Ulster County Clerk’s Office.
99 Ibid.
While there is no clear indication of whether or not residents reinterred their dead with any form of ceremony, the trial documents provide yet another example in which the corpse is defended as a human entity. In addition to keeping the reinterred body from “decaying” too fast in a pumpkin pine box, there was some concern over keeping the dead separate from non-human objects. Despite their proclaimed sensitivity to “sentiment,” city representatives were very preoccupied with the economics of reburial and ardently tried to keep the costs of cemetery relocation down. In one condemnation trial, a city representative argued that, to keep costs low, human remains should be transported along with their gravestones. The “cemetery expert” that was brought in to testify on the costs incurred in reburial was surprised at the thought of transporting the two together, stating: “I presumed a marble man would move the monument and an undertaker would move the body.”\(^{100}\) In this case, it is clear that having the human body transported by an undertaker’s wagon protected it from being relegated to material object status. It is also likely that this mode of transportation was used to provide at least some semblance of ritual and ceremony to reburial.

**In Defense of Human: The Ashokan Reservoir Condemnation Proceedings**

While the Board of Water Supply and the city of New York were attempting to cut cemetery relocation costs, the financial burden fell upon the residents who had taken responsibility for reburial. Compensation from the city was very slow to

\(^{100}\) ARA, Roll 60: 5272, Ulster County Clerk’s Office.
arrive, and in the meantime securing plots in new cemeteries usually required a cash deposit of some sort. Even prior to losing their homes and livelihoods, a great number of Ashokan residents were poor or working class. In an interview conducted in 1977, an elderly man who had lived through the construction of the Ashokan reservoir explained: “Many of the inhabitants were making just a meager living, supplementing farming by taking in summer boarders. Board in those days on the farms averaged approximately $10.00 per week per person.”101 Despite such difficulties, earth-burial was desired. The *Kingston Daily Freeman* reported: “In many cases [families of the deceased] are compelled to borrow from banks sufficient money with which to purchase new lots and pay for the cost of removal of the bodies from the Ashokan cemeteries to the new graves.”102 That people would go to such extremes to assure proper reburial, even when they were likely also waiting on compensation for homes and businesses, illustrates how important cemetery relocation was to Ashokan residents. Furthermore, their concerns went beyond simple reburial. In addition to keeping the decaying (or fully decomposed) corpse from further destruction, Ashokan families wanted the very best new gravesites for their loved ones.

Sizeable expenses associated with funerals, cemetery plots, and monuments were a significant item in the cremationist critique of earth-burial. The “economic argument” held that cremation would erase class stratification after death by dealing with all human remains in a universal manner. Simple cremation, removed

from the ceremonies associated with death, was cheaper than earth-burial in many cases. Even so, cremation was not an option employed by any of the Ashokan residents. Though the cost of reburial was a concern, economic strain did not seem to be a limiting factor. Historian Thomas Laqueur explains that by the mid-nineteenth century, associations between “proper” burial and social status became so heightened that pauper burials in free public lots were seen as emblematic of “earthly failure.” Consequently, it was not abnormal for the poor to go into debt in order to “properly” honor the dead. In the Ashokan region, as the structures, landmarks, businesses, and homesteads that were once markers of the deceased’s earthy success slipped beneath reservoir waters, protecting the monuments of the dead and providing proper reburial may have seemed like the only way to safeguard what little was left of them.

In part because the city was so slow to issue reimbursement for relocated graves, and in part because the amount allotted was so low, Ashokan residents participated in condemnation proceedings that took place before a Commission in Kingston, composed of both city and state representatives, at which individual residents filed claims for monetary reimbursement. For Commissioners, determining an adequate allotment for cemetery plots was sometimes more difficult than for farms or houses.

103 Prothero, Purified by Fire, 125.
105 “Condemnation Proceedings” or alternatively “Condemnation Trials” and “Condemnation Hearings” were official terms used to describe the process of determining and providing compensation for property lost during the construction of the reservoir.
In the 1909 case of Ashokan resident John W. Castle, controversy arose when an expert witness wished to submit prices of the plots in a number of nearby cemeteries for comparison. He believed that, because the cemeteries he was referencing were the very cemeteries in which many Ashokan residents wished to relocate their dead, knowing the cost would be relevant. New York City's petitioner, John J. Linson, argued that it was unacceptable to determine the value of the property in question (John Castle's cemetery plot) by comparing it to the cost of a plot in a Kingston cemetery – just as it would be unacceptable to determine the value of a specific farm by looking at another farm one town over. Representing John Castle, lawyer William Brinnier countered: “The City says to him [Castle]: ‘You must go away from here, you must remove your dead... [Can they] take their dead from their last resting place just for the bare value of this property?’”\textsuperscript{106} Legally, the values of homes and farms had to be accepted for the value appraised, even if the replacement homes or farms that Ashokan residents could purchase with that amount were less agreeable. In his argument, Brinnier was trying to emphasize that cemetery plots were different from other forms of property because one \textit{must} have a place to put one’s dead.\textsuperscript{107} A farmer could choose not to buy another field if he couldn’t afford it. A person moving a corpse, however, did not have the luxury of choice. Brinner’s speech had the desired effect and persuaded Commissioners to hear testimony that put cemetery lot prices in perspective. Most cemeteries in the area charged more for plots than the fifteen dollars promised by the Board of Water

\textsuperscript{106} ARA Roll 57, “Parcel 659 A-10,” 2226-2227, Ulster County Clerk’s Office.
\textsuperscript{107} ARA, Roll 57, “Parcel 659 A-10,” 2224, Ulster County Clerk’s Office.
Supply, and if residents were to bury there they would require compensation adequate to cover the cost of reburial.

As New York City representative Linson indicated, not all cemeteries were considered equal. By the late nineteenth century, even rural people who had lived their lives surrounded by nature longed to be buried on quiet hillsides with beautifully landscaped walkways.\textsuperscript{108} Although the rural cemetery movement, as its name implies, was envisioned as a way to bring rural (traditional) morals and natural beauty to city dwellers, it was not just city folks who followed the trend.\textsuperscript{109} While some New York City residents preferred to think of the Catskills as untouched by change, the rural cemetery movement had clearly reached the Ashokan region. Founded in the 1850s during the height of the rural cemetery movement, Kingston’s Wiltwyk Rural Cemetery was still growing and thriving well into the first decade of the twentieth century. Portions of the cemetery were designed and redesigned every decade, and the emphasis on ascetic beauty in burial sites did not decline. In 1907, one local paper reported: “One of the handsomest autumnal effects to be seen in the vicinity of this city is afforded by the mass of violet tinted summer grass on the grounds of the Wiltwyck Rural Cemetery.”\textsuperscript{110} By the early twentieth century, Wiltwyck board members were also promoting the “modern” notion of perpetual care, which, according to the Kingston Daily Freeman, included “maintenance of the

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{108}{Sloane, \textit{The Last Great Necessity}, 92.}
\footnote{109}{Sloane, \textit{The Last Great Necessity}, xxii.}
\footnote{110}{“Odds and Ends,” \textit{KDF}, September 7, 1904.}
\end{footnotes}
designed lots, and of the grass, trees and shrubbery growing theron.”¹¹¹ A special police officer was even appointed to guard against flower thieves.¹¹² Throughout the condemnation proceedings, Wiltwyck Rural Cemetery was used as a sort of measuring stick whereby other local cemeteries were judged.

Not far from Wiltwyck, many small cemeteries of the Ashokan reservoir area were, prior to condemnation, becoming more like rural cemeteries. In Olive’s Lee Cemetery, the largest to be removed, cemetery experts frequently referenced the curbing, shrubbery, flowers, and fencing in the plots.¹¹³ Families forced to relocate graves insisted that compensation be made for such improvements, so that they could be recreated in new cemeteries. As in rural cemeteries, plot owners (and family members) were free to elaborate and embellish their purchased property. The cemetery plots of the rural cemetery movement were highly individualized and centered upon the identity and wealth of the person buried there. In Lee cemetery, one plot included a fountain, a one-ton marble tombstone, as well as accompanying marble corner and footstones.¹¹⁴ Originally, rural cemetery designers hoped that these locations would be inviting to the living; however, the opinions expressed by Ashokan residents and their representatives indicate that surviving relatives believed they were primarily serving the interests of the dead in recreating beautified gravesites.

¹¹¹ “Cemetery Lots,” KDF, May 4, 1907.
¹¹² Special Officer Appointed,” KDF, September 14, 1903.
¹¹³ ARA, Roll 57: 2233, Ulster County Clerk’s Office.
¹¹⁴ ARA, Roll 60: 5368, Ulster County Clerk’s Office.
The popular portrayal of death as sleep was apparent in language used to describe cemetery plots. During the condemnation proceedings, a claimant’s lawyer asked his witness: “Would you consider that [plot] a proper and appropriate place for the repose of your body, if it was not to be taken by the City of New York for a water supply?” 115 The reposing (as opposed to decomposing) body was categorically perceived as human. It was still, singular, and whole. While cremation advocates argued that such beliefs were extremely outmoded and naive, the evidence of the Ashokan Valley suggests that they had not declined in popularity.

Another argument cremationists dismissed was the link between the corporeal form and the soul or spirit. In one cemetery plot case, the claimant’s lawyer asked a witness: “Would you want to have your soul repose in a lot?” The language used here is indicative of the continuity of the body/soul association that cremationists were hoping to eradicate. Notably, the city representative objected to that line of questioning, stating: “None of these cemeteries are used for the burial of souls... there are some people that would not prefer to be in any cemetery; some people prefer to be cremated.”116

This brief reference hinted at major tensions surrounding death mentalities at the turn of the century. The popular depiction of death as sleep, which many Ashokan residents subscribed to, faced doubt and skepticism from those who saw the human soul as completely divorced from the material body. The lawyer’s passing reference to cremation indicates that it was becoming a legitimate

115 ARA, Roll 55: 344, Ulster County Clerk’s Office.
116 ARA Roll 55: 364-365, Ulster County Clerk’s Office.
alternative to earth burial, and that it was emblematic of more “modern” opinions toward death. However, it is clear that in the Ashokan region, people still felt that the cemetery had deeper connections to the individuals buried in its soil and thought the soul continued to have some relationship to the dead body.

This view was challenged by cases in which old grave markers could not be erected in a new location – a rule to which some cemeteries subscribed. This problem brought ownership of the monument quickly into question. Were gravestones the possession of the living, or the personal property of the dead? The *Kingston Daily Freeman* covered the Commission’s lengthy debate. The Commission ultimately concluded that monuments were erected for three reasons. First was simple ornamentation, which they associated with the plot and not with the buried corpse. Second was commemoration of the dead. The Commission reasoned that the grave was “raised not to the dead body but to perpetuate the memory of those who have died.”\(^\text{117}\) In both of these instances, the tombstone was declared to be a possession of the living, and their ruling implies that cemeteries, more generally, are not constructed for the benefit of the dead. The Commission decreed that the last and final purpose for a monument was the only one that actually tied it to the physical remains; this purpose was identification. Identification did not render tombstones the property of the deceased, but did declare the grave marker and bodily remains indissoluble. Only after the monument was established as

\(^\text{117}\) *KDF*, “Tombstones are Real Estate,” June 2, 1909.
inseparable from the physical remains did the Commission require the city to furnish a new monument in cases where the old one could not be moved.\textsuperscript{118}

Despite the Commission’s implication that cemeteries primarily served the emotional needs of the living, Ashokan residents continued to view bodily remains as formerly living people with relevant desires that should be respected. Residents would assert the value of cemetery plots based on their own personal preferences, projecting those thoughts onto the inanimate dead. In a hearing to determine the value of a plot in the Lee Cemetery, one witness claimed that the cemetery lots on the north end should be valued higher than other lots in the same cemetery. When asked to justify his reasoning, he explained: “I would prefer them; if I were to be buried there, I would want to be buried on the knell.” When pressed to explain why, he opined that the view from there was nicer.\textsuperscript{119} To be buried high on a hill, with a beautiful view, is in line with the sentimental view of death coming out of the rural cemetery movement and illustrates the movement’s continued influence. The witness, in this case envisioned himself as deceased, and ascribed human wants and desires to the material corpse. Clearly, the gruesome natural state of decay encountered during the exhumations and promoted by cremationists was not the conception of death that drove the actions of Ashokan residents. Although their dead did not often resemble the whole corpses originally interred, remains were still envisioned as first and foremost human.

\textsuperscript{118} \textit{KDF}, “Tombstones are Real Estate,” June 2, 1909.
\textsuperscript{119} ARA, Roll 55: 373-775, Ulster County Clerk's Office.
City Sentiments

The number of graves personally relocated by Ashokan residents represents an extremely large percentage of the total graves removed for the reservoir’s construction. Only about three hundred were left unclaimed for the city to remove. This fact, however, was greatly obscured by the literature coming out of New York City following construction. In October of 1917, a full decade after the Board of Water Supply began its work, city residents, including engineers, artists, and representatives of local museums and universities, converged to celebrate the completion of the Ashokan Reservoir and Catskill Aqueduct.\textsuperscript{120} The “Catskill Aqueduct Celebration Publications,” were a collection of articles issued in commemoration of that event, and include a brief, but enlightening explanation of cemetery relocations. The article avowed that all efforts were made to contact local friends and relations and that they were given a two-year period to relocate their dead. However, the writer continued: “Evidence of the transitoriness of human life or the indifference of the living generation to the memory of their ancestors” was evident when “many” of the deceased’s relations could either not be found, or instead chose not to transfer bodies.\textsuperscript{121} In this event, it explained, the city hired workers to remove the remaining bodies and had them “reverently reinterred in other cemeteries.” \textsuperscript{122} The overall tone used to describe the cemetery relocations blithely obscured the sentiments of Ashokan residents and was not an accurate

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
portrayal of the city’s role in cemetery relocations. By carefully omitting the specific number of graves that the city actually relocated, this article made it appear as though the altruistic metropolis graciously restored reverence to an otherwise forgotten population of the dead – whom the unfeeling rural people would have otherwise abandoned. This was simply not the case.

The remains that were left for the city to remove were not even necessarily unclaimed. During the Ashokan cemetery relocations, some rural residents attempted to relocate the remains of community members who were not specifically blood related, but due to the regulations set up by the Board of Water Supply this was not permitted. One Ashokan farmer applied to personally remove a large number of old graves located on his property. Because he could not prove a familial relationship to the remains, however, the Board of Water supply denied his application. When the city-hired workers came to remove the physical remains, the farmer was visibly upset and accused the workers of being “bodysnatchers.” Despite his protestation, he was powerless to stop them. Attachment to the dead, for some, went beyond ancestral ties. There is an element of adoptive ancestry that binds persons to their shared cultural heritage. It is clear that the farmer in this case understood the physical remains to be his fellow community members – non-living neighbors, whose bodies should not be abandoned to the care (or misuse, as indicated by the ‘bodysnatching’ claim) of outsiders. In cases such as this, when older graves are involved, it was likely that the physical remains did not amount to very much. The Catskill Water System News, which reported on some of the

relocations done by the city, made mention of local woodchucks, who had
apparently done some relocating of their own: “These pragmatical little animals
were found in almost all cemeteries, sometimes three separate burrows leading to a
single grave.”124 The newspaper does not include any explanation of what was done
in these cases, or how the physical remains (presumably bones) were then grouped
or reburied. It seems reasonable, however, to doubt that seven-foot coffins were
used to house the mismatched remains that fell to the city’s care.

While local residents carefully chose new final “resting” places for the bodies
of their family members, unclaimed physical remains were taken to the nearest and
most readily available burial site outside of the watershed’s perimeters. The small
site, now called Bushkill Cemetery, includes six tight lines of uniform bluestone
markers, each inscribed with a set of initials and a number. Even as the “Catskill
Aqueduct Celebration Publications” congratulated the Board of Water Supply for
restoring reverence to the forgotten dead – the dead remained forgotten. Though
each stone had two neatly carved letters, these initials were in no way related to any
former human identity; rather, they indicated the name of the cemetery in which the
remains were originally interred. The current manager of the Bushkill Cemetery
(which is still in operation) maintains that the tidy rows of markers continue to be a
mystery; there exists no associated paperwork to identify remains.125 It could be
argued that because the city reburied remains its actions can be seen as a testament
to the corpse as a primarily human entity. At the same time, however, the cemetery

plots in Bushkill are sized much closer to small boxes than human-sized coffins, and the lack of personal identification on grave markers implies a disregard for individual identity.

In the 1930s, when the next crop of upstate reservoirs was being built, it was suggested that city-hired gravediggers in the Ashokan region had done little more than go through the motions of exhumation. One upstate newspaper relayed a bit of hearsay about the work of a city-hired gravedigger: “He dug a small hole, particularly in cases of old graves, recovered a shin bone or thigh or skull, threw them in a box with dirt enough to give it weight, and the job was done.”

Paradoxically, cremation advocates and others that considered the buried corpse as primarily nature would have likely argued that the bit of dirt thrown in the box was as much a part of the bodily remains as bits of bone. However, the newspaper writer in this case was referencing the “incomplete” exhumations as a cautionary tale so that “friends and relatives of the dead of this valley will do well to inspect the removal of cemeteries when the day comes that they are to go.”

In this period, several decades later, human remains continued to be described in the same terms as the living. They were seen as singular entities, not as a countless mass of ever-changing, decaying material, but as family. Corpses were practically personified as defenseless children for whom relatives needed to take paternal responsibility –

126 The Catskill Mountain News, August 7, 1936.
127 Ibid.
cradling their bones and giving and them a legal voice – so that the unscrupulous city would not dismiss or rob them of their humanity.128

While the strange markers and small plots of the Bushkill cemetery are somewhat ambiguous and do not clearly categorize the buried body as human or nature, there were other cases in this period where New York City was more transparent in its position. When a new crematorium was constructed in the 1890s on Swinburne Island to dispose of remains in quarantine cemeteries, it is obvious that fear of cemetery seepage went beyond rhetoric. Graves that were dug prior to the crematorium’s construction were exhumed and the remains destroyed. According to The New York Herald: "The work was undertaken by the State to... obviate all danger hereafter from infecting... [the area] with contagious diseases."129 Although most of the graves contained the remains of immigrants with few family members or ties to the region, some were decorated with iron crosses or marble headstones, indicating that they were not “unclaimed” or without sentimental attachments. Nevertheless, as The New York Herald reported, these graves were emptied by a hired crew that scraped out each burial site and unceremoniously dumped any and all remains onto a “rude bier,” which “when it was loaded with all the bodies it could hold, the bearers carried it to a pit into which the flesh and bones were dumped to await cremation.”130 While the newspaper writer was somewhat

128 See Ewa Domanska, “Necrocacy,” History of the Human Sciences 18, no. 2. (2005): 120. Domanska explains that when the dead bodies are described in terms of a “caregiving” relationship, this inherently imposes a hierarchy in which the living become superior to the dead.
129 “Resurrecting Quarantine’s Dead,” New York Herald, February 12, 1890.
130 Ibid.
shocked by the treatment of corpses in this instance, he conceded that it was "necessary work." 131

Conclusion

The necessity of exhumation - which may have been more immediate in quarantine burial grounds, but was also clearly at work in the upstate Ashokan region – illustrates how late nineteenth and early twentieth-century reformers’ new emphasis on the dangers of decomposition invited Americans to think about the dead body as a primarily natural entity. This conception of the dead body, however, could be adopted or discarded at will. The remains of Governor George Clinton, for example, were treated as holy relics that generated power from their human identify and moved thousands of people to converge and pay their respects. The manner of his reburial, which emphasized bodily preservation, actively fought against the abandonment of human remains to what was deemed the “domain of nature.” His lead-lined, copper-encased coffin is emblematic of the sharp dividing line between human and nature that many desperately fought to maintain in this period. In the Ashokan, this line was preserved through chestnut coffins as opposed to pine, and seven-foot, human-shaped caskets as opposed to better fitting and more economical small boxes. That people could and did choose to think of the dead body as primarily nature or primarily human highlights the enduring liminal status of the corpse after burial.

131 Ibid.
Early cremationists, though critical of the corpse as contaminant, were equally concerned with eradicating the notion of the “whole” corpse. Peeling back the beautified veneer that the rural cemetery movement placed on earth burial, cremationists, quite literally (as the photographs of “Our Silent Majority” can attest) exposed the corpse as far from whole. They stressed that the body after burial is in a constant state of activity. Sir Henry Thompson’s understanding of the “restless” corpse became a foundational argument for the movement. Although later cremationists abandoned his hope that remains, once fully disseminated into ash, could be returned to the soil as fertilizer, they continued to make reference to the ever-changing, multi-status of the buried corpse to combat “death as sleep” mentalities. The corpse, once denied representation as a singular entity, could become the far more powerful and terrifying multiple of cemetery seepage; it could be part of the soil, laced into water, and easily move beyond a localized threat. Categorizing the corpse as a multifaceted natural element allowed cremationists to re-envision an ancient, seemingly heathen practice as modern, sanitary, and efficient. Cremation was therefore not the act of burning dead humans, but an improvement upon nature. It provided comparable results to the “slow combustion” of decay, but in a more controlled and contained manner. In many ways, Thompson envisioned cremation as similar to damming a river. Just because the dead body was irrevocably consigned to the natural world, did not mean it could not be controlled and made to serve human will.132

132 It should be noted that as the cremation movement gained momentum, the act of cremation
When historians allude to the liminality of the body after death, they are referencing a short, well-defined period of time. Gary Laderman's *The Sacred Remains* emphasizes that from the moment of last breath to the moment of burial, the corpse is “unstable, indeterminate, and ambiguous.”133 Suspended between the polarities of life and death, it was a liminal entity. I have argued that the body after burial remained just as unstable, indeterminate, and ambiguous as its freshly embalmed counterpart. During the period of the Ashokan exhumations, the buried corpse was treated as both a natural and a human entity. However, unlike the funerary corpse, its period of liminality is less defined. Its human or natural status could be changed as frequently as the whims of those who described it. Contrary to cremationist's predictions, not all people who encountered the corpse in its natural state of decay were convinced of its non-human status. Undoubtedly, the Ashokan people who personally exhumed the dead witnessed the messy reality of the corpse after burial. But regardless of whether the bodies had been buried one or one hundred years ago, they were treated the same. Indefinable human remains were placed in human-sized receptacles and buried under markers that bore human names. For the Ashokan people, the simple fact that decay had already occurred did not mean that remains should not be protected from further decomposition.

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became ritualized, sacralized, and ashes were clearly understood as human remains. Urn-burial was highly individual and ashes were personified rather than being understood as sanitized nature. What this paper is most concerned with, however, is the way in which early cremationists re-envisioned the corpse after burial. Despite attitude changes in later eras of the cremation movement, Thompson's argument for the corpse as a restless form of nature continued to be used, uncritically, even alongside more sentimental depictions of cremation. For more on ritual in the cremation movement see Stephen Prothero, *Purified By Fire: A History of Cremation in America*, University of California Press, 2001.

133 Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 27.
In addition to illustrating the liminality of the body after burial, what the Ashokan and cremationist examples demonstrate is an ongoing process of bifurcation. Given the longevity of the buried corpse’s liminal status (with no clear end point), the proscription of primary characteristics allowed it to remain a useable symbol for many different viewpoints. For cremationists, the corpse fell primarily into the domain of nature; for those who practiced earth burial and continued to view death as sleep, the corpse was primarily human. The cremation movement, despite is wide-reaching and influential claims, did not become popular in America until well into the twentieth century. While resistance to the cremation movement was often criticized as gratuitous adherence to tradition, the Ashokan example demonstrates that decisions regarding the status of the corpse after burial were more complex. Furthermore, because the Ashokan represented one of the earliest examples of public-works-related mass-exhumation, the decisions made there influenced the way cemetery relocations were handled in later projects.134

Liminality and the accompanying bifurcation of the material corpse, while particularly pertinent at the turn of the century, is not a concept that has diminished. In the late nineteenth century, Sir Henry Thompson emphasized that the role the material corpse played as a natural entity whose primary engagement was the transfer of energy – an energy that could be controlled for human benefit.

134 Cemetery relocations that took place during the construction of the Delaware System in the 1930s followed very similar protocol; however, there has been no major research on mass-exhumations for public works projects in America. Given how revealing the Ashokan example has been of American deathways during the early twentieth century, a wide investigation of exhumation in America could likely bear notable insights regarding death culture in America, especially as it pertains to the material corpse.
Even now, in the twenty-first century, current “green” schemes have made similar arguments. In 2011, the Abbey Stadium Center in Reddich, UK put forth a particularly controversial proposal to heat its swimming pool. Working in conjunction with a nearby crematorium, this plan hoped to harness the "wasted" heat energy produced during cremation.\textsuperscript{135} Many locals have protested the scheme, calling it "strange and eerie," stating: "It just does not feel right." They argue that there is something very uncomfortable about using “a loved one” to heat a swimming pool.\textsuperscript{136} As in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people are very resistant seeing the corpse as anything other than human – whether it is “heat energy” for a pool or fertilizer for a vegetable garden, both conceptions somehow threaten the corpse as a primarily human entity.


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