

WILDWOOD CEMETERY

By Ellen Knight¹

“I only need visit the graveyard of a community to know the character of the people.”

With this quotation from Benjamin Franklin, the Cemetery Commissioners of Winchester began their annual report on December 31, 1899. Their charge was the care of Wildwood Cemetery, almost as old as the town itself and, like the town, a feature which has grown and changed.



In the 1600s before South Woburn had a church and a church cemetery, most burials were in the First Burying Ground in Woburn. In 1794, the Second Burying Ground in Woburn opened. In 1840, the South Woburn Congregational Society built a church above Wedge Pond. Funerals were a municipal function, for which the town kept a hearse and paid for various services, including tolling the bell. Located on an acre behind the first church building, the burying ground was compactly organized with rows of lots sold to families.

Since it was small and could not be enlarged, Town Meeting voted, in the fall of 1851, to borrow from the Winchester Fund (the \$3,000 given by Col. Winchester to the town for the honor of having the town named after him) to purchase and prepare the site. Ten acres were originally purchased for the cemetery in 1851, and Amasa Farrier of Stoneham designed the original plan of lots, carriage-ways, and footpaths.

The sale of lots, plus the sale of the town's interest in the old church burial ground, was always intended to repay the appropriation from the Winchester Fund. Following the consecration ceremony at 1 p.m. on Sept. 15, 1852, at 3 p.m. lots went on sale on Mount Hope, to the highest bidders. Prices scheduled by the cemetery committee ranged from \$5 to \$50.

Not until 32 years later, in 1884, was the cemetery committee instructed to pay over to the town treasurer the balance of the Winchester Fund. The committee returned \$2,600. (The sum would have been closer to the original \$3,000 but for a \$195 loss in the failure of the Mercantile Savings Institute of Boston.) During 1885 an additional \$622 was paid to the treasurer, thus fully repaying the principal with \$222 interest.

After the first church burned in 1854, all its graves were moved to Wildwood. The new church, being larger and set further back, covered the old cemetery site. A hill behind the original church was simultaneously leveled.

During the mid-1880s the Cemetery Committee became convinced that it was time to acquire additional land for the cemetery. On its recommendation 30 additional acres were acquired in 1886, and a new plan, drawn by J. O. Goodwin, a civil engineer in Medford, was finished in 1887. By 1899 about 17 of the 40 acres of the cemetery were in use.

From 1921 to 1923 several additional lots, to either side of the entrance and to the west and north of Granite Avenue were also acquired. The cemetery currently comprises about 75 acres of land.

ORNAMENTAL FEATURES



Civil War Monument

By the time Wildwood Cemetery was created, there was a Rural Cemetery movement, whose earliest representative is Mount Auburn Cemetery (1831). The garden cemetery, including the park-like Wildwood Cemetery, was a result of this movement.

Over the years, various features in the cemetery have been added and taken away. In 1878 and 1879, for example, three new features were added—the soldier’s lot for which “four condemned cannon” were donated for decoration in 1882, a little park on Mount Hope where an iron summer house was erected in 1886, and Consecration Dell.

Some structures or landscaping that were planned were never realized. For example, a site for a chapel was marked on the 1887 plan. In 1899, the cemetery commissioners suggested that “if anyone wishes to do more for the cemetery than erect a monument on his or her own lot ... a rustic chapel made of the natural stone in the Cemetery, with a tower as high as the trees” could be erected. But it was not.

Also shown on the 1887 plan are three lakes. While Halcyon Lake near the Soldier’s Monument was constructed in 1894, plans to locate Silver Lake near the current office and Crystal Lake along present-day Middlesex Street, were apparently abandoned.



As part of a garden cemetery, many headstones themselves were ornamented.

THE DELL

Originally upon entering the cemetery, the Dell with its surrounding plots was the first section of the cemetery which greeted the eye. Part of the 1852 plan, the Dell went under construction in 1878, and a pool at its center was finished in 1879. In the center of the pond was a fountain. The pond was stocked with fish which were removed to a small fish house constructed at the Highland Reservoir during the winter months.



Two views of the Dell
from the early 20th century



The footpath around the pond was named as Violet Path. In the foreground of the 1885 photograph is Winding Path. Opposite it, leading to the new receiving tomb built in 1882, was Cedar Path. Evergreen Path branched off to the east.

According to the 1885 Annual Report the cemetery committee voted not to sell lots in the dell because the place was made into an ornamental plot. The 1887 plan shows that the Dell was enlarged with the addition of a ring of lots around violet Path.

In 1907, the Dell underwent reconstruction, and the road around it was rebuilt. About 1914 the commissioners were reporting problems with leaky pipes at both Halcyon Lake and the pond. In 1915, an attempt not to fill the lake was protested by some who had bought lots there on account of the lake.

Eventually both the pond and the lake were filled in. The Dell's pond disappeared during the Great Depression when the New Deal provided money for work crews to be dispatched to the cemetery. Consecration Dell was filled with trees. In 1936, the Cemetery Committee reported that an Alpine Garden was built near the entrance to supplant the former pool and fountain.

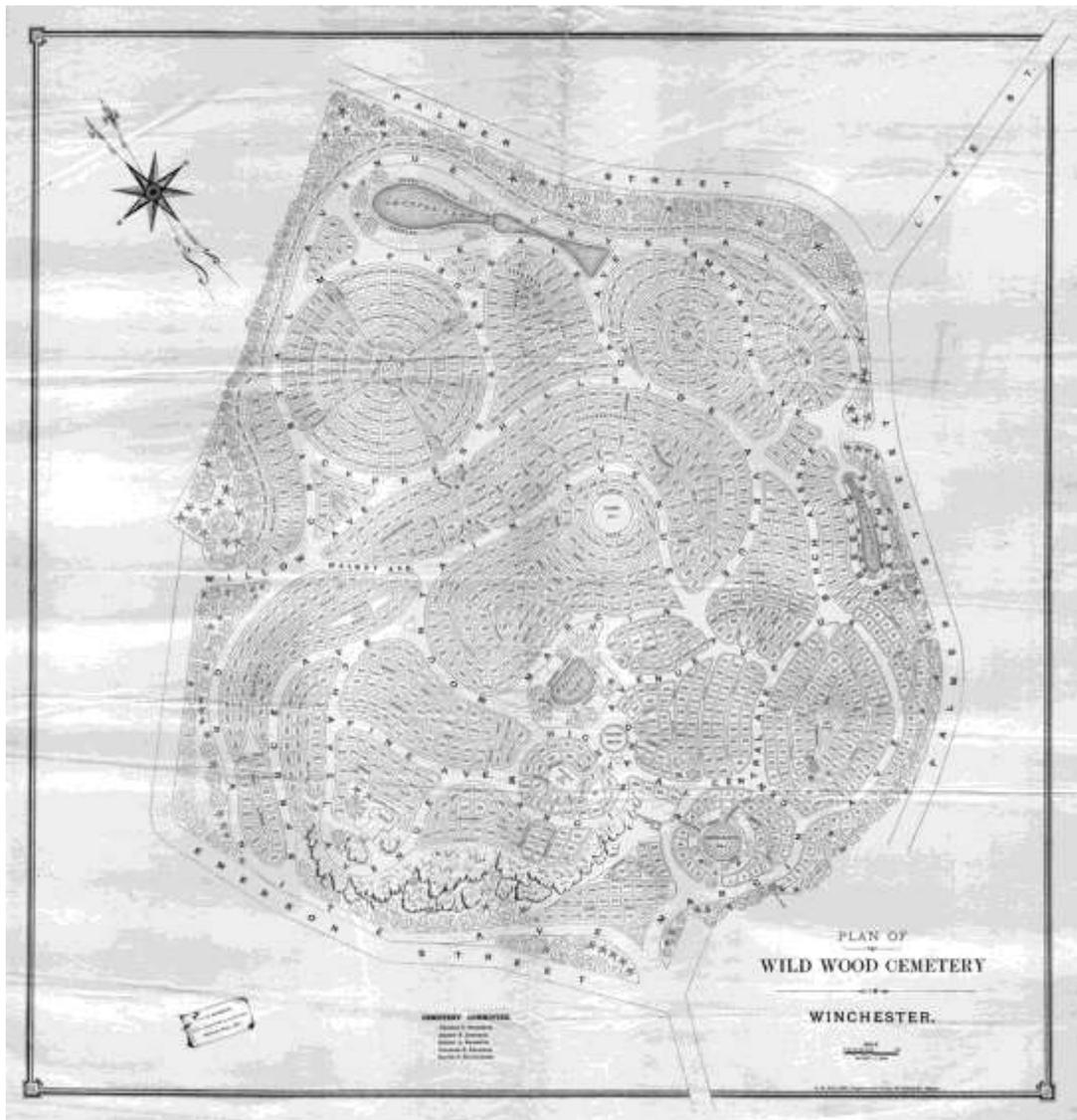
CHANGES

In 1938, the entrance was moved closer to Palmer Street, provided with new iron gates, and landscaped under the direction of the Olmsted Brothers firm of landscape architects.

The bulk of the work at the cemetery has not involved ornamental features but has consisted of grading, preparing lots, paving paths, fixing the fencing, installing water pipes, and planting.

Occasionally beautification projects are proposed, such as one initiated in 1973. In 1999, despite some initial opposition, Town Meeting approved the addition of a columbarium niche wall, a project finished in 2003.

Cemetery administration has also changed over time. After the cemetery was created, it was overseen by a Cemetery Committee. In 1890, a Board of Cemetery Commissioners was elected, replacing the former committee. In 1975, the cemetery was placed within the jurisdiction and responsibility of the Department of Public Works. The old board was replaced with a five-member Wildwood Cemetery Advisory Committee. Though opinions differ about what may improve the site, care for the cemetery continues as a characteristic of the community.



Plan of Wildwood Cemetery, 1887

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of earlier articles by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on May 8, 1998 and May 3, 1999. This article supersedes all previous articles.