

The Psychiatric Hospital and Cemeteries

On January 9, 1874, a state-of-the-art psychiatric hospital opened on the Ridges in Athens. “The Athens Lunatic Asylum” featured elegant buildings with stately furniture and elaborate landscaping with ponds, fountains and parks -- all in the midst of a huge multi-product farm designed not only to make the hospital largely self sufficient in food stuffs but also to give the patients healthy, open-air employment. The idea was that, in a setting such as this, patients would surely improve even if they might not be cured.

Later that decade, a cemetery on Tower Drive was opened to serve as the final resting place for the minority of deceased patients whose families failed to claim their bodies in time for burial elsewhere. In 1913, the last 26 women were interred across a little ravine just to the north of the Tower Cemetery. The following year, the last men were buried in the Tower complex. Burials then moved -- first for the women, then for men -- to the Second Cemetery on the

top, western-most slope of the hill across from the Dairy Barn. That facility was used until 1950 (for women) and 1951 (for men) when the New Cemetery was opened on the eastern edge of Dairy Barn Hill. It, in turn, received burials until 1972. Thereafter, until the hospital itself was closed in 1991, unclaimed bodies were then taken to Townhouse and Temple Methodist Church cemeteries in Albany, Ohio.

Virtually everything about burial on the Ridges was austere. The unembalmed bodies were washed, wrapped in simple shrouds, and placed in plain wooden coffins. Normally, the funeral “procession” was comprised of six people: four grave-digger/pall-bearers, a representative of the hospital and a chaplain. The service consisted of an opening and closing prayer and, in the case of Christians, a reading from Scripture – no personalized eulogy, no one else in attendance. From the 1870s to 1943, graves were marked only with small, sequentially numbered, marble stones which corroded rapidly and were easily broken – no names, no dates. Beginning in 1943, name and date of death began to appear, but on the same sort of stone. Only in the New Cemetery and in Albany are there “normal” stones - a majority cut from weather-proof granite - featuring name,

and in most cases, both vital dates.

Though the Tower Cemetery was originally meticulously landscaped with shrubs, flowers and an artificial pond at its base, it and the subsequent two were poorly maintained during much of the 20th Century. Faced with budgetary constraints, hospital administrators chose to put scarce funds into the living rather than the dead. Uprooted and broken stones were seldom repaired or reset. Grave dimples (which occur when wooden coffins and unembalmed bodies decompose causing the soil above to subside) were left unfilled, especially in the newer cemeteries. Hundreds of the grave sites on the edges of all three cemeteries became overgrown with brush and trees. And the pond down hill from the Tower Cemetery was left unrepaired after its dam was breached in the 1960s. The chaplain and others campaigned to rectify this situation, but to no avail.

When Ohio University purchased the Ridges in 1988, the cemeteries became little orphaned islands of state property in a sea of Ohio University land. Fortunately, the University chose to maintain them as a courtesy to the State. From then on, Ohio University crews mowed the open

sections and meticulously trimmed around all stones in those areas. It did not, however, have the manpower to correct preexisting problems.

Disrepair apparently led to superstition and disrespect. By the late 20th century, there were stories that the cemeteries were haunted. The Fox Family Channel actually featured “The Ghosts of Athens” -- notably in those cemeteries -- in its program “World’s Scariest Places” and Ohio University student groups included them in Halloween tours.

The Ridges Cemeteries Project

By 2000 the condition of the cemeteries and the disrespect to which they were being subjected finally led people from the local Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Services (317) Board and the Ohio Department of Mental Health to create a multi-entity, ad hoc, Ridges Cemeteries Committee to address the problem. In subsequent years, the Committee was able to mobilize in-kind and monetary support from an array

Visitors’ Key to Numbered Points of Special Interest along the Walk

- 1 Brush, thistle, creek and mowed lawn environment. Look for nesting warblers, gold finch, and blue birds.
- 2 White pines such as those on this slope provide roosting areas for owl, hawks and wild turkey and early summer nesting sites for early songbirds.
- 3 A little wooded area containing a sample of relatively young hardwoods – cherry, maple, ash, hickory, oak and walnut - which have already crowded out most early successional growth except a couple of sassafras like the one in the foreground.
- 4 Three 19th Century trees: black gum (right), red oak (foreground), sugar maple (to the left). Horizontal limbs on the maple and oak are so big that they have begun to shed.
- 5 A stand of young cherry trees (dark, scaly bark). The small fruit provide an excellent source of food for birds and other animals late in the growing season.
- 6 Nesting box for sparrow hawk or kestrel.
- 7 Holly trees. Seeds from the berries of this ornamental (probably part of the original landscaping at the hospital) were carried to this area in the feces of the animals that ate them.
- 8 “Abundance Hollow.” Nineteenth century trees include this majestic beech tree (foreground), black gum (just beyond the far right of the clearing), white oak (to the immediate right) and black walnut (to the left of the steps by the beech). With its many holes, the hollow beech provides nesting sites for many types of birds and mammals. The abundant nuts and fruit from these four trees supply food throughout the fall and winter.
- 9 Walnut grove. The native black walnut tree is allelopathic: it gives off a chemical which prevents or retards the growth of competitive vegetation around it. Note that the one big walnut in the foreground seems to have produced the many smaller offspring around it. Little else grows here. Note also the abundance of nuts on the ground during most of the year. These are a great source of food for a variety of animals. Black walnut lumber is prized for furniture making.
- 10 Fallen trees (foreground) are vital to the ecosystem in that they provide habitat for a variety of amphibians, reptiles and small mammals which, in turn, are food for other animals.
- 11 The garlic mustard that carpets much of this area and crowds out native wild flowers during the growing season is an exotic intrusive.
- 12 Early growth brush and trees. A favorite haunt for deer and a nesting place for numerous songbirds.
- 13 A stand of Osage orange or “hedge apple.” Fruit not edible. Not native to this part of the country. Used by Native Americans for the making of bows and by farmers for long lasting fence posts and living fences.
- 14 Largely submerged trees – like this uprooted cherry – are actually good for the pond ecosystem. They provide places for fingerling fish to hide from larger fish; a landing and takeoff platform for water fowl, and a good spot for reptiles to sun.
- 15 This stand of white pine was probably planted to control erosion into the pond.
- 16 Wood duck box.
- 17 Large black cherry. Wood from a tree of this size is highly valued for furniture making.
- 18 Paw paws. When the Cemeteries Project began, the mini-cemetery in front of you was completely overrun by trees and brush including many paw paws. After the graves were cleared, a number of paw paws remained on the far edge and especially in the upper right hand corner. Normally found on the edges of woods, the paw paw has strong smelling bark and leaves that most creatures find inedible. However its tasty fruit, which ripens in September, is consumed by humans and other animals alike. After being eaten by a raccoon, fox, or other mammal, the hard indigestible seeds are simultaneously fertilized and “sown” in other areas when the animal defecates. For information about paw paws go to <http://www.integrationacres.com>.
- 19 A small stand of sassafras (foreground). Early settlers drank a delicious tea made from boiling the roots of small sassafras trees. They felt it was good for “cleansing the blood” in the spring. An early successional, the sassafras tree rarely grows very large. For a spectacular rare exception see the huge sassafras nearby on South Park Drive across from the ball park.
- 20 Bat box on a 19th century red oak. This and two other nearby boxes were erected to provide roosting areas for bats to control mosquitoes at the pond. In a completely natural setting, the smaller bats, such as the endangered Indiana Bat, will often roost under the bark of shagbark hickory or white oak. Note the shelves of bark on the large upper limbs of the 19th century white oak just to the left.

of public and private entities and individuals in the region. These included the 317 Board, Americorps, Appalachian Behavioral Healthcare, the Arnold Air Society, The City of Athens, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Gathering Place, Hocking College, the Hocking Correctional Facility, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the O'Bleness Foundation, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Ohio University and the Outback Conservation Corps. By 2006, with their support, the cemeteries were largely restored, the old pond was rebuilt and a Ridges Cemeteries Nature Walk, linking the Tower Cemetery with the newer ones, had been built.

The Peter E. Nagy Memorial Pond – named for an Athens native and Ohio University student whose life was cut short as a result of mental illness -- and the Nature Walk are designed to encourage visitors to see the cemeteries and surrounding countryside not as haunted grounds but as places of contemplative beauty.

In 2005, after testimony by the Cemeteries Committee and with the sponsorship of State Representative Jimmy Stewart, a law was enacted giving public access to the identity of those buried in all state mental hospital graveyards in Ohio. Now, persons interested in locating particular graves may access needed information by contacting the Athens County Historical Society (592-2280) or NAMI Athens (593-7424 or namiathens@gmail.com) or by visiting the NAMI website namiathensohio.org.

The Ridges Cemeteries Nature Walk

Two themes leap to mind when considering the flora and fauna of the Nature Walk: **regeneration** and ecological **diversity**.

Regeneration. It may be hard to imagine that, by the late 19th Century, much of Eastern United States – including this now heavily-wooded part of Ohio -- had been almost completely deforested. The land was utilized for growing crops and pasturing livestock while the wood itself had been consumed for fuel and other industrial purposes. Only when farming and industrial technology changed in the 20th Century, did the forests begin to grow back.

Interestingly, the history of the Ridges presents an even more dramatic example of deforestation and land degradation. The large farm purchased by the State for the construction of the hospital had been deforested several decades earlier. And from the 1870s until the mid 20th Century, the hospital continued to keep it open for farming. Accordingly, most of the area through which the Walk meanders had been deforested and ecologically

degraded for well over a century before it gradually began to grow back.

True, the visitor will notice some spectacular big, spreading trees of several different species along ridge and fence lines, in gulches and on hillsides. Perhaps dating to the mid-19th Century, they had been allowed to grow in the open to mark boundaries or provide shade for animals or stability to slopes. But most of the trees along the Nature Walk are much younger.

This gradual reforestation of open land is called ecological succession. It normally takes seventy-five to a hundred years to complete and goes through stages. In the early stages, vines, brush, and early successional trees such as sassafras, black locust, redbud, and paw paw prosper along side saplings of later growth species such as oak, hickory, maple, cherry and beech. Eventually, the latter shade out the former and a hardwood forest emerges with very little undergrowth. In later stage forests, evidence of long gone early stage growth can often be seen in the form of thick wild grape vines shooting up from relatively open spaces on the forest floor eventually to entangle old growth hardwood trees. Those vines did not simply leap many feet through the air to their current hosts. They originally climbed now long dead and decayed early successional trees and wound their way onto the saplings that became their current hosts.

As of the early 21st Century, the relatively young forests along the Nature Walk were about half way along their way to becoming mature forests.

Diversity. The second feature of the Nature Walk is certainly the variety of plant communities through which it passes.

Starting opposite the Dairy Barn, one first passes over a creek that, beyond the cleared area, runs through brush and thistle. This early successional area is an excellent nesting area for several types of warblers. In season, the thistle seed attracts numerous gold finches.

Next, one walks up the step-way through a stand of white pine probably planted by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s.

On the hill are the New Cemetery and the Second Cemetery. Deer and turkey frequent the open areas. Bobcat, first sighted in 2004, may be responsible for the piles of turkey feathers sometimes found here and elsewhere on the walk. Open areas such as that at the base of the hill and in all the cemeteries are ideal feeding grounds for bluebirds attracted by the dozen nesting boxes erected for them in these areas.

Beyond the cemeteries, one comes into an upland area attractive to a variety of songbirds and small and large mammals. Though there are a few spectacular mature trees along this part of the Walk, most of the plant growth here

is early successional. At this point, non-native and intrusive exotic vines, brambles and bushes compete with native species. Imported into the United States deliberately or accidentally over the last century, the exotics have been spread by the animals that eat their seeds/fruit. Now well established, they include Japanese honeysuckle, multiflora rose, privet and garlic mustard. A surprising number of holly bushes also serve as examples of growth not native to Athens county.

After the upland country, the walk descends through a deeply wooded area with some old trees including more white pines. The nut trees attract squirrels and other small mammals and provide good roosts.

After descending the hill and crossing to Piggery Lane one passes more new growth brush and small trees on the left which features a wide variety of intrusive exotics. The environment abounds with song birds, deer and other wildlife.

Next, following the arrows, one arrives at Nagy Pond. Nearby bat and swallow boxes provide nesting and roosting sites for the small creatures that patrol the evening skies for mosquitoes. A big nesting box on a pole in the pond is made to attract wood duck. The pond itself provides a habitat for a myriad of fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals.

From the headwaters of the pond, the Walk leads to the Tower Cemetery which is fringed by stately 19th Century trees mixed with some early growth. Bluebird, flickers, piliated and other kinds of woodpeckers and deer are often visible.

Tax deductible donations or bequests for the continuing renovation of the Cemeteries and the maintenance of The Nature Walk and Nagy Pond are most appreciated. They can be made to NAMI Athens (100 Hospital Drive, Athens, Ohio 45701) with specification that the support is for "The Cemeteries Project."

*Dear Visitor: Unless you would like to keep it, please put this brochure in the brochure box at the other end of the Walk so that others may use it.
Thank you.*

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Visitor's Guide

The State Psychiatric Hospital Cemeteries

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The Ridges Cemeteries Nature Walk

Athens, Ohio