

# Green-Wood's Archives

ANTHONY M. CUCCHIARA

ON DECEMBER 15, 1838, eight civic-minded individuals, from the newly formed City of Brooklyn (1834), ferried across the East River to the law office of Stephen C. Williams, located at 54 Wall Street. These leaders, members of The Green-Wood Cemetery Company, gathered to nominate and elect officers and to create an organizational structure. They called upon ALONZO G. HAMMOND to chair the nascent group and appointed HENRY EVELYN PIERREPONT as the recording secretary. In Pierrepont's hand, the first working minutes of the cemetery directors were recorded for posterity. This manuscript, less than two pages long, gives an insight into the thinking of the directors and marks the beginning of Green-Wood Cemetery's institutional archives.

Today, amassed within the archives and file rooms are 175 years of records revealing the illustrious history of this venerable institution. Typically, items such as charters, meeting minutes, deeds, maps, and ledgers constitute an institutional archive. However, at Green-Wood there are many other unique record collections. They include memorandum files, burial order records, and chronological ledgers that were created and used by hundreds of employees over the years to conduct the cemetery's daily business affairs. Each collection within the archives tells a story: of the individuals whose vision and determination guided and directed the cemetery; of how Green-Wood grew physically in size and beauty; and of the 560,000 individuals interred, as well as their family members. These archival records serve as the institution's memory and answer today's and tomorrow's questions posed by genealogists, researchers, historians, family, and cemetery personnel.

NEHEMIAH CLEAVELAND (1806–1877), Green-Wood's first historian, recognized the importance of archival records in his book *Green-Wood: A History of the Institution from 1838–1864*. He wrote, “in preparing this historical account . . . the author had free access to the records and official documents of the incorporation . . . so far as its facts are concerned, the work may be considered authentic in its character.” Archival records are

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ANTHONY M. CUCCHIARA is the former college archivist and head of distinctive collections at the Brooklyn College Library, City University of New York, where he is now professor emeritus. In his twenty-five year tenure at the college, Professor Cucchiara taught archival management and coordinated the college's minor in Archival Studies and Community Documentation. Since 1996, he has been a visiting professor at Pratt Institute's School of Library and Information Science. He is Green-Wood Cemetery's archivist.

indeed “authentic” evidential and informational sources. Within each record, regardless of its format, resides the truth of history.

For many years, Green-Wood’s records were stored in disparate locations and in some cases in environmentally unsafe storage areas. In the early 1990s, the cemetery remedied this situation by evaluating, centralizing, and organizing its historical records. With much of this work accomplished, a second phase was launched in 2009 to rehouse, preserve, and describe millions of items ranging from correspondence to burial orders. It was through the dedicated efforts of over a hundred Green-Wood volunteers, interns, and graduate students that approximately one million items have been organized and preserved. This herculean achievement has revealed an enormous wealth of unique and invaluable historical and genealogical information.

While processing historical records and opening closets (and even a safe), staff, volunteers and interns helped to discover the unknown, including the original New York State Act of Incorporation—the very charter of the Green-Wood Cemetery. This document revealed that a group of prominent Brooklynites led by HENRY E. PIERREPONT, a powerful civic leader of the fledgling City of Brooklyn, petitioned the state legislature to establish a cemetery for the city. Pierrepont envisioned a public cemetery to rival the grand rural cemeteries that Boston and Philadelphia had started just a few years earlier. Undoubtedly, it was because of his advocacy and influence that New York State passed “An Act of Incorporation of The Green-Wood Cemetery Company” on April 18, 1838. This founding document established Green-Wood as a “joint-stock company” for the sole purpose “of establishing a public burial-ground in the City of Brooklyn.” The act set the amount of common stock to be issued, created a tax-exempt status, and established the governance for the new enterprise.

Almost a year to the day after this incorporation, Pierrepont and engineer DAVID BATES DOUGLASS (Green-Wood’s first president) identified and appraised 178 acres in the Gowanus Hills of the City of Brooklyn, overlooking New York Harbor. They envisioned adding more acreage as land became available and funds permitted. However, a year later, there was growing dissatisfaction among the leadership with the joint stock company incorporation structure. Because of its inherent profit incentive, the leaders believed, this structure was incongruous with their “eminently and essentially philanthropic” endeavor. So, again, they petitioned the state legislature to change the organizing structure of Green-Wood. Amended on April 11, 1839, the revised charter dissolved the stock holdings of its members and made each lot owner a “proprietor” with equal ownership, thus removing a profit motive or any semblance of “private gains.”

Other records in the archives document in great detail Green-Wood’s early years. Found within a small bundle of papers tied with a piece of frayed string, were folded letters, documents, and three small notebooks. Atop this stack was a note handwritten

An Act to incorporate the Greenwood Cemetery. Passed April 18. 1838.

The People of the State of New York represented in Senate and Assembly do Enact as follows:

§ 1. All persons who shall become stockholders pursuant to this Act are hereby constituted a body Corporate by the name of "The Greenwood Cemetery" for the purpose of Establishing a public burial ground in the City of Brooklyn.

§ 2. The Capital stock of the said Corporation shall be three hundred thousand dollars which shall be divided into Shares of One hundred dollars each and shall be deemed personal property and be transferable on the books of the Corporation in such manner as the said Corporation shall by its by laws direct.

§ 3. The said Corporation may be and with

This Act of Incorporation, dated April 18, 1838, established Green-Wood Cemetery as a stock holding company enabling their "commissioners" to raise funds for the purchase of tracts of land for "...the purpose of establishing a public burial ground in the City of Brooklyn."

Schedule of Property in 8<sup>th</sup> Ward intended to be taken for the

Name	Proprietor	Ac.	Lot.	Value at Appraisal	Worth
Schoonhoven	85 acres 1022	20	50	50	2500
Stackell	24	60	60	24000	
Dean	23	75	21	217	
Stobson	32	80	31	310	
Wychoff	4	20	2	200	
Aggregate	171 Ac.	2145	Ac.	725	134675

  

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Schoonhoven	85	1022	50	50	2500
Stackell	24	60	60	24000	
Dean	23	75	21	217	
Stobson	32	80	31	310	
Wychoff	4	20	2	200	
Wm. C. Smith	11	75	80	80	1420
William Cartright	8	67	85	80	720
William J. Lewis	4	67	85	80	340
Worfield	4	78	100	100	400
Ward	2	4	78	100	400

Green-Wood's directors moved quickly to identify properties for purchase. They earmarked 2,145 lots constituting 178 acres with an appraised value of \$134,675.00. These lots were carved from the farms of some of the most notable Brooklyn families. This "Schedule of Property in 8<sup>th</sup> Ward intended to be taken for the Greenwood Cemetery" is dated September 24, 1838.

*Greenwood Cemetery Subscriptions continued*

1839			126
Nov. 1	James Anderson <sup>with privilege of one more</sup> Hudson	one	\$10.00
"	Mrs Ann McCreedy Houston	one	\$10.00
"	Robert Martin	One	\$10.00
" 2	Sowell Holbrook	one	
"	Alex Hamilton	+	one
"	Wm B. Crosby	.	one
"	Mrs Samuel Boyd	+	one
"	Wm C. Pierpont		Two
" 21	Cornelius McLean <sup>with permission of 3 more</sup>	3	one \$10.00

Memorialized in this small notebook, "Subscription Booklet of Lot Owners, 1838-1839," is the listing of some of the first "Burying-Plats" owners and the number of lots purchased at the cemetery. Many of New York's most prominent men are on this list.

by John L. Pierpont, son of Henry, dated February 4, 1907, that he had "found among my father's papers. They are of no value to me but may be for your early records." Indeed, they are!

In the tattered notebooks appear the names of the first stockholders of 1838 and the subscription list of lot owners for 1838 and 1842, noting the number of lots purchased. Digging deeper into this cache, an archival intern discovered correspondence related to a pivotal moment in Green-Wood's history. During the 1840s, the cemetery had a difficult time attracting subscriptions to keep it solvent, threatening its survival. In their attempt to generate more subscriptions, the cemetery's directors launched an effort to draw national attention to Green-Wood by memorializing one of the titans of the era, the visionary sixth governor of New York State, DEWITT CLINTON (1769-1828; governor, 1817-1822).

Clinton's stellar achievement was the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. In linking Lake Erie to the Hudson River, the canal opened up New York to worldwide commerce by providing an outlet to the Atlantic Ocean. This engineering feat established New York as the "Empire State" and Clinton as one of New York's greatest leaders. Yet despite this extraordinary accomplishment, Clinton had been buried without a fitting monument in a small cemetery near Albany, New York. In the late 1840s, Green-Wood's directors recognized this egregious oversight and seized the opportunity to enhance the prestige of Green-Wood by commissioning a major sculpture in Clinton's honor. They chose the famed sculptor Henry Kirke Brown (1814-1886). In the stash of papers

held by Henry Pierrepont is the correspondence related to the sculptor's design and plans for its dedication. Brown's letter outlines the specifications for the Clinton monument and itemizes costs of the project. This bronze sculpture was noteworthy for its design and was one of the first heroic bronzes cast in America.

Also found in Pierrepont's papers was a series of letters between the Clinton Monument Committee (formed to raise public funds to defray the costs of the statue and to coordinate a dedication) and two of the country's most noted figures: President Millard Fillmore (1800–1874; 13th president of the United States, 1850–1853), and the most prominent orator of the time, Edward Everett (1794–1865). These prominent men were invited to give remarks at the dedication. Fillmore declined, writing, "I can not feel otherwise than flattered by this invitation and yet for reason of a private nature I feel compelled to decline." But Everett, who had spoken at the dedication of America's first rural cemetery, Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts, accepted, stating, "agreeably to your wish I will hold myself engaged to deliver the address on the occasion of inaugurating the statute of DeWitt Clinton in May next." The completion of the majestic Clinton sculpture in 1853 and the placement of his remains at its base provided Green-Wood with prestige and national recognition.

*Estimate for Executing the Proposed  
Monument to DeWitt Clinton.*

*Modeling, Casting, finishing in the first  
man. the Statue ten ft high \$ 10,000*

*One Brass relief in bronze, representing (with  
allegorical figures) the meeting of the Ocean  
and the northern Lakes 1,500*

*on a pedestal representing Canal, houses,  
figures, sailing boats etc 1,500*

*Base*

*To be made in Ironstone (and  
highly ornamented, ten feet high, Execution  
material, and Placing the whole  
Monument in its place of destination 2,000*

*\$ 15,000*

*H. K. Brown  
Sculptor*

"Estimate for Executing the Proposed Monument to DeWitt Clinton," by sculptor Henry Kirke Brown.

Among Green-Wood's other archival records are land records, conveyances, property deeds, and maps that reflect the institutional vision to capture the tranquility and serenity of the Gowanus Hills. Through these records we learn that Green-Wood was intent on keeping the area as "always. . . a scene of rural quiet, beauty and leafiness, and verdure." To achieve this goal, the cemetery protected the initial 178-acre tract purchased from the Bennett, Bergen, and Wyckoff families and future additions by petitioning the Brooklyn City Council in 1838 for passage of an ordinance preventing "streets and avenues from running through the cemetery lines. . . guaranteed against invasion and disruption." With this protection assured, Green-Wood began to add acreage through incremental purchases. By 1864, it had more than doubled in size to 410 acres, within 68 acres of its present size.

Perhaps the smallest, most contentious, and most significant parcel to be purchased was the Robert Martin property situated at Green-Wood's northwestern corner (at approximately 23rd to 25th Streets and from Fifth to Sixth Avenues). This purchase provided the land where the iconic archway designed by Richard Upjohn (1802–1878) and Richard Michell Upjohn (1828–1903) and built 1861–1863 graces the cemetery entrance.

The details of Upjohn's vision and design for the entrance are found among some early correspondence files. The papers covering this project reveal the architect's specifications, the dimensions of the spires, and the plans for the biblical tableaux that adorn the insets of the entrance.

*Edward Everett was the leading orator at cemetery dedications in America for much of the nineteenth century. He spoke at the dedication of Mount Auburn Cemetery in 1831 and at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in 1863, at the dedication of the National Cemetery there. Everett spoke for about two and one-half hours at Gettysburg; he was followed by President Abraham Lincoln, who delivered his Gettysburg Address in about two minutes.*

Boston 5th Oct 1858

Dear Sir

Your letter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> reached me yesterday and agreeably to your wish I will hold myself engaged to deliver the Address on the occasion of inaugurating the statue of Dr Will Chilton in May next

Any pamphlets pertaining to the monument or to Dr Chilton's Biography will be very acceptable to me

I have the large granite column containing Dr Knack's Memoir

I remain Dear Sir  
with great respect  
faithfully yours

Robert Ray Esq

Edward Everett

Other important and fascinating holdings in the archives are cemetery transaction records: lot books, burial date ledgers, memorandum files, and burial order records. Starting with the very first interment on September 5, 1840, these groups of records provide proof of lot ownership, families' wishes for the care and maintenance of lots, and related correspondence. These records are replete with family trees, genealogical charts, newspaper clippings, personal notes, monument designs and inscriptions, and other family-related information. These unique records, used daily, help cemetery staff to address the myriad questions posed by lot owners and researchers. Not only are these records rich with genealogical and historical information, they also provide evidential information. For example, several years ago, in its effort to restore and preserve the beauty of its monuments, Green-Wood focused on the missing *Angel of Music* sculpture. This piece had surmounted the monument of the first American classical composer, Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829–1869), who was interred in 1870. Last pictured in 1930, the angel sculpture disappeared sometime afterwards. Thinking it might have fallen and was buried, ground crews probed the area surrounding the monument but found nothing. The mystery of the figure's disappearance lingered for decades, until a volunteer who was processing some of the memorandum files came across lot 19581, Gottschalk's lot. There among other documents, clippings, notes, and correspondence were two Polaroid images of the "fallen angel" sprawled on the ground in pieces. The verso of the images contained the note, "Gottschalk, [lot] 19581, angel figure down, vandalism between 10:00p.m. 7-28-59 and 8:00a.m. 7-29-59," providing the visual evidence of the sculpture's demise that had long eluded cemetery officials.

The largest record group within the archive is the burial order files. These files, arranged numerically by lot number, contain burial authorization records, documents that detail family relationships and lineage, family and business correspondence, telegrams, genealogical charts, lot diagrams, sketches, and monument designs, with many files containing individual and family histories and biographies. Moreover, these files treat us to a rich *mélange* of ornate nineteenth- and twentieth-century business and personal stationery. The business stationery is of particular interest because it provides addresses, telephone numbers, and descriptions of funeral products and services, monument makers, transporters, funeral directors, and embalmers, illustrating the network of businesses supporting the mission of Green-Wood Cemetery over the decades.

Maintaining these historical records is an enormous institutional responsibility and commitment requiring vision and financial resources. Green-Wood has succeeded in meeting these challenges, thereby preserving not only its history but that of New York City and the nation. At this auspicious milestone, Green-Wood's 175th anniversary, it can look back with pride, knowing that much has been done to keep its historical records intact and preserved for future generations.