



# NEW YORK MARBLE CEMETERY

SECOND AVENUE ABOVE EAST SECOND STREET

[www.marblecemetery.org](http://www.marblecemetery.org)

October 2020

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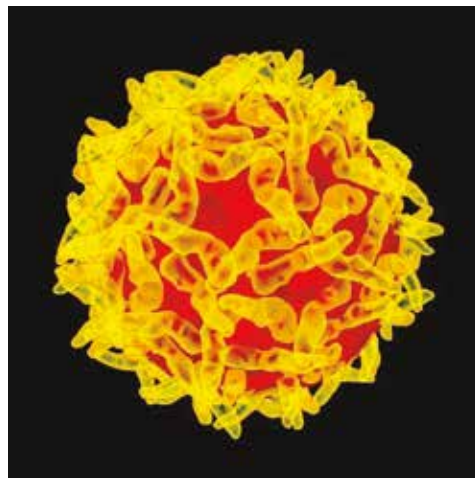
It has been a very quiet year in the Cemetery. There have been no rentals for weddings or other private parties, no photo shoots or fashion shows taking advantage of our handsome garden, and no restoration work. The Cemetery has been in lockdown, just like all of us. We didn't want to let the months pass without a chance to keep in touch, though, so instead of the progress report we normally send, here is some historical background drawn from Anne Brown's *New York Marble Cemetery Interments, 1830-1937, 2nd Edition, 2020*.

## FOUNDING THE CEMETERY

Pass through two pairs of iron gates in a narrow alley, and unexpected bright blue appears. It is the sky over the New York Marble Cemetery, unchanged since 1830. The following year the Cemetery was incorporated as the first non-sectarian cemetery in New York City open to the public. This quiet, half-acre site on lower Manhattan, entered from the west side of Second Avenue between 2nd and 3rd Streets, was chosen when it was on the edge of residential development. Immediately to its south, around Houston Street, a number of church cemeteries were already in existence.

The overcrowding of traditional churchyards, and fears that decomposition of shallow burials was contributing to deadly epidemics, led to a ban on earth burials. The Yellow Fever outbreak of 1822 had killed almost 400 New Yorkers. As

it turned out, that was the last major Yellow Fever outbreak in the city, but it provided the impetus for health legislation for years to come.



*Yellow Fever Virus*

Science was beginning to study germs. Many in the medical community favored non-commercial, underground family

vaults as a means of avoiding contamination. Among them was the eminent Dr. David Hosack, widely respected as one of New York City's leading citizens, who proposed eight-foot by ten-foot vaults similar to those found under Italian churches. [Dr. Hosack was the subject of last year's newsletter.] Burial legislation for Manhattan passed by the Common Council came in three major steps:

31 March 1823 No earth burials south of a Canal Street-Sullivan Street-Grand Street line. Amended 9 June 1825 to allow private family vaults.

15 November 1833 No earth burials south of 14th Street.

3 February 1851 No earth burials south of 86th Street. Private vaults allowed. No new cemeteries on Manhattan.

*Continued on page 2*

**NEW YORK MARBLE CEMETERY**  
**EAST WALL TABLET, 1833**

By 1900, this was already illegible. The trustees listed were the trustees during incorporation. By the time the tablet was carved, John Hone had died. The likely wording is to the right.



c. 1915 Courtesy Museum of the City of New York

THE NEW YORK  
 MARBLE CEMETERY  
 INCORPORATED  
 FEBRUARY 4TH, 1831  
 TRUSTEES  
 JOHN HONE, PRESIDENT  
 BENJAMIN STRONG  
 ROBERT CENTER  
 BENJAMIN L. SWAN  
 NATHANIEL RICHARDS  
 FOUNDED BY  
 PERKINS NICHOLS

A PLACE OF INTERMENT  
 FOR GENTLEMEN

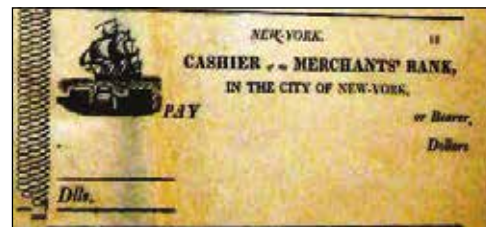
**FOUNDING THE CEMETERY - continued from page 1**

Hosack and five other doctors who later purchased vaults in the New York Marble Cemetery testified in favor of the 1825 amendment. To comply with the new law, developer Perkins Nichols, with Anthony Dey and George W. Strong acting as his organizing trustees, built solid marble vaults the size of small rooms - with walls and arched ceilings a full foot thick - ten feet underground in the excavated interior of the block bounded by Second Avenue, Second Street, Third Street, and the Bowery.

There is not a single marker on the ground; instead, marble plaques set into the Cemetery's long north and south walls give the names of the owners of the buried vaults nearby. [Having no headstones is what enables the Cemetery to look like a garden and be such a perfect site for its rentals.] The names of those interred are not engraved, and only half the owners are buried in the vaults that bear their names. Many plaques are missing and many that are still in place are now illegible.

Over 2,085 persons have been placed in the vaults: the first was a child of Dr. Post in 1830, the last, Charles Janeway VanZandt in 1937. Half of the older caskets were tiny, holding children aged six and under. Contagious childhood diseases such as scarlet fever, measles, and whooping cough, as well as infections for which there were not yet antibiotics (erysipelas, pneumonia, cholera, etc.), contributed to a level of early mortality fortunately forgotten in many parts of the world. For adults, the leading cause of death by far was tuberculosis, then known as phthisis pulmonalis. A surprising number of people who reached maturity, however, lived into their eighties and even nineties, and invariably died of "old age."

*Continued on page 3*



*The Cemetery has an enviable paper trail. Should it ask JPMorgan Chase, the successor bank, if this 1830 check is valid? There may be a credit balance of \$22.96.*

**NEW YORK MARBLE CEMETERY, INC.**  
*A 501(c)(13) registered charity*

**CONTACT**

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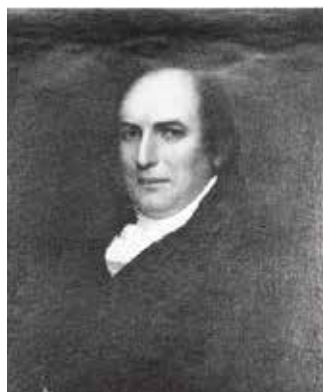
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 Landscaper: Gresham Lang

**FOUNDING THE CEMETERY - continued from page 2**

Centered on the East Wall is a large, completely illegible marble tablet which once noted the name and founding date of the Cemetery and the five original trustees – John Hone, President; Benjamin Strong; Robert Center, Benjamin L. Swan; and Nathaniel Richards. Below that was written “Founded by Perkins Nichols” and the oft-quoted phrase that this was “a place of interment for gentlemen.” “Gentlemen” referred to behavior and social standing, not sex. Half of the burials were women and girls, of course, and not all the original purchasers were men. Rachel Coskry was a widow continuing her husband’s business and Mary Lagear was an unmarried woman. Lucia Grosvenor Williams bought her own vault in 1838, despite her husband having purchased one in 1831.



Founding trustees, left to right: John Hone by Rembrandt Peale; Benjamin Strong; Benjamin Swan by Samuel Waldo, Rose Hill Mansion; Nathaniel Richards by Mary Wray, Florence Griswold Museum

By mid-century, rural cemeteries had become the preference of most New York families. Green-Wood in nearby Brooklyn had its first burials in 1840, followed quickly by Trinity Manhattanville, Cypress Hills, Sleepy Hollow, Woodlawn, and many others. Not only did the next generation provide for its immediate families with plots in these spacious and scenic places, but many older remains were moved out of lower Manhattan and reinterred. Removals were from cemeteries that were still functioning as well as from church graveyards that were being closed down. The Marble Cemetery contributed to this trend by giving up over one-third of its inhabitants.

*Continued on page 4*

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**OWNERS MEETING**

**SUNDAY  
MAY 2, 2021  
1-4 PM**

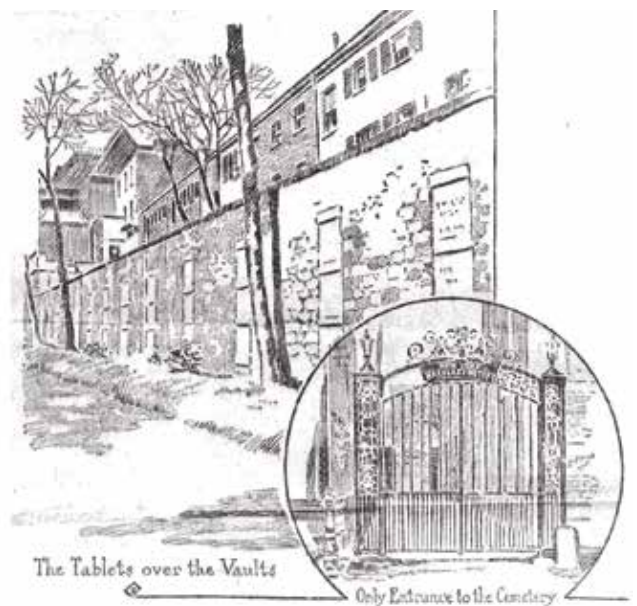
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Photographer: Gresham Lang

**FOUNDING THE CEMETERY - continued from page 3**

The two Marble Cemeteries [the similar New York City Marble Cemetery is on the other side of Second Avenue] fell so far out of favor and fashion that in the late 1800s there were moves to have them closed down so that their land could be used for either private development or for public schools or parks. Social reformer Jacob A. Riis and the East Side Good Government Club led a movement to convert the New York Marble Cemetery into a playground. It gained the approval of both government officials and the Cemetery's own officers in 1897, but failed because all the descendants could not be located to give their assent. In 1905 there was a final attempt by some of the heirs to relocate all the remains out of town and abolish the Cemetery. This failed at the last minute, due mainly to appeals to sentiment, but not before some families had emptied their vaults. Renewed interest

and reorganization followed, and a campaign for funds was successful enough to make immediate repairs to the Cemetery and endow it well enough to see it through the 20th century. The Cemetery was designated a New York City Landmark in 1969 and placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.



The Tablets over the Vaults

Only Entrance to the Cemetery

From an unidentified 1914 newspaper

*NEW YORK MARBLE CEMETERY INTERMENTS, 1830-1937*  
by Anne W. Brown

Historical background, Founding legal documents transcribed  
2,085 burials organized by family vault  
Biographical information with sources for almost every burial  
Second edition, publ. 2020, Hardbound, x + 411 pp., illus.  
\$55 postpaid from the author  
Send inquiries to [AWB@chesapeake.net](mailto:AWB@chesapeake.net)