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*Bringing Iron Back to Life:*

## Robert Chase Restores and Rejuvenates Hollywood Cemetery's Iconic Iron Fences

The state of Virginia, which oversees Hollywood Cemetery Presidents Circle, hired Robert Chase in 2015 to repair and restore President James Monroe's tomb. The first step was to disassemble its 660 pieces and haul them off site. Then came the repair, cleaning, repainting, reassembling, and reinstallation. Less than 5% needed replacing, but his company brought new life to the Gothic-style sarcophagus, known as the Birdcage. (see page 7)



*Robert Chase in his workplace*

Ever since, Chase has partnered with Hollywood Cemetery to restore its historic iron fences, many

dating back to the mid-19th century when iron was Richmond's third most prominent industry. Some were family commissions, while the cemetery funded others to promote the sale of lots. Some are cast iron, others wrought iron, and some a combination.

Hollywood Cemetery General Manager David Gilliam said that Friends of Hollywood funding has allowed the organization to move from basic preservation and maintenance to a full 15- to 20-year restoration plan for all iron fences on the grounds. "This work is important to the history and overall aesthetics of the cemetery," Gilliam said.

Chase's company, Chase Architectural Metal, employs six highly skilled fabricators. At its helm is a self-taught master of the trade, a thin and wiry man and whirlwind of energy and passion for a lost art. "I like the history, being able to maintain that history and keep it moving forward so other people can enjoy it," Chase said.

An unexpected windfall funded the startup for his business. Driving home from a high school graduation party, Chase was hit by a drunk driver, breaking both his arms and his femur. A settlement afforded money to buy a Cary Street building for his home and a fledgling welding  
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## Iron Fences (*continued*)

business, then focused on metal furniture and lighting, which morphed into a boutique operation that specializes in one-of-a-kind architectural and ornamental metalworks.

After selling the first location, Chase rented an airplane hangar in Hanover before moving to the Manchester area in 2005. The fenced-in operation now spans a city block providing the freedom and space to bring in structures of all sizes, take them apart and put them back together, and in many cases, replicate to perfection.

The property houses three large bays, 10-foot sheers for cutting steel sheets, a forklift that can extend 20 feet, and a large assortment of machines for cutting, shaping, forming and bending metal.

Fences are often complex with doors, hinges, finials and ornamental additions such as scrolls, Greek keys and vines. Sometimes, intricate molds are recreated for replacement pieces to be welded back in.



*Restored fence posts and finials ready for installation*

The precision and fabrication skills required to clean, repair and replicate metalwork cannot be understated. Removal and transportation alone can be herculean. Take, for example, an unsightly chain-link fence that formerly lined the cemetery's west property line along Dodson Road. The 900-foot iron replacement Chase built tips the scales at 80,000 pounds. Installation involved installing each 8-foot, 900-pound section one at a time.

The company also restored 1,500 feet of fence that runs adjacent to Idlewood Avenue. While some work could be

accomplished in place, much had to be removed, blasted clean, repainted and re-erected.

The cleaning process involves a high-powered air compressor that blows a slag called Black Beauty to blast away decades of debris and junk. The product Chase usually uses to repaint is a commercial-grade Rustoleum. "Believe it or not, it's the best paint we've come across," said owner Robert Chase. "It will last."

Substantial fence work has focused on Section K, the first area of the cemetery to be developed. Included are fences around the plot of St. Catherine's School Founder Virginia Ellett and one of Hollywood's few cast iron fences topped with fabricated spears. Through the decades the cast iron gate bottom, decorated with ornate, upside down torches symbolizing the end of life, was covered by dirt. Chase stepped in again to unearth, blast, repaint and reinstall the gate so that the upside-down torches now rest above ground.

The variety of Chase's work in the concept, design and fabrication of metalworks has no boundaries. He fabricated doors for George and Martha Washington's tomb at Mount Vernon and the fence around Thomas Jefferson's cemetery at Monticello. When a six-foot Tiffany metal finial on the roof of Bonnie Mellon's potting shed at Oak Spring Farms was deteriorating, Chase restored and duplicated the floral bouquet, replete with 39 species of plants and flowers, to replace the original that's now part of an exhibition. He builds one-of-a-kind shower surrounds and hoods for high-end homes as well as stairs, pergolas, furniture and lighting in all kinds of metals, including aluminum, steel, bronze and copper.

Chase was once a pro race car driver who owned a race car manufacturing company. He left that arena when he married at age 50 and had children, explaining the closing of that chapter: "Racing and marriage do not go hand in hand."

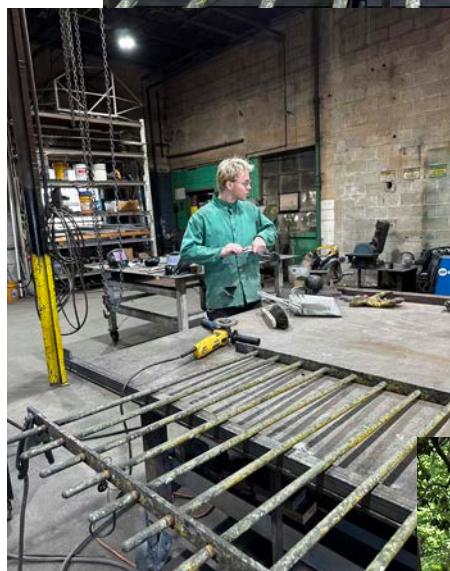
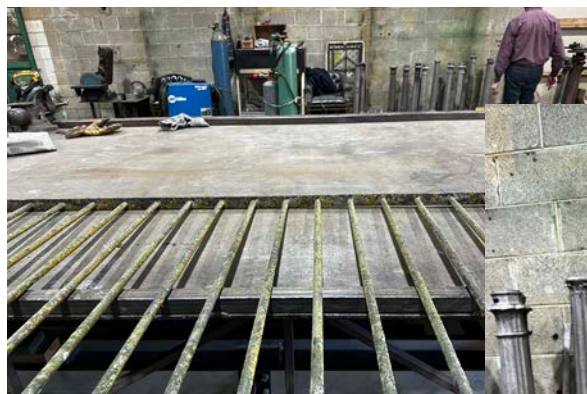
Chase's three teenage sons, who learned to weld at age 11, have grown up in the business. In recent years, they've learned to run computer-aided design programs and operate machinery. He said, "Hopefully I can turn this little business of mine into a legacy, and my children can carry it on."

*(continued on page 3)*

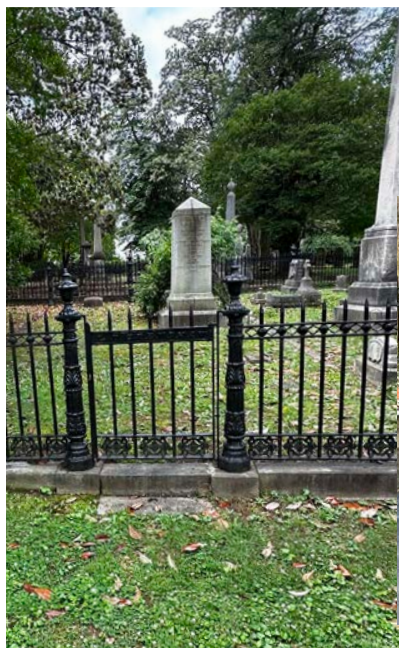
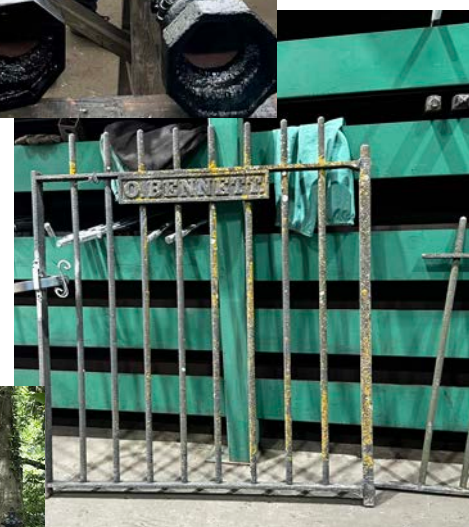


## Iron Fences (continued)

### *Where the “Magic” is Performed*



### *Restored for Next 100 Years*

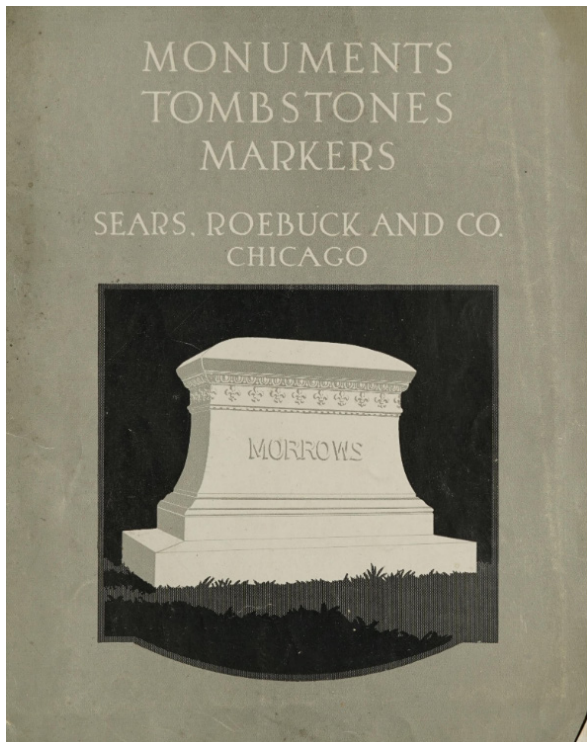




## *Sears Leaves a Mark With Mail-Order Tombstones*

Once upon a time you could mail order live monkeys and chickens from Sears, Roebuck & Co., along with pretty much everything else under the sun.

While most purchases related to household goods and tools, other surprising offerings of relevance to Hollywood Cemetery were tombstones and monuments. Sears sold the marble and granite markers for almost 100 years, from around the turn of the 20th century through 1993 with the shuttering of its catalog and stone business.



*The cover of an early Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog*

After Kenny Jarrell, a Hollywood grounds foreman for more than 30 years, watched a YouTube video on how to identify these Sears graveside relics, he surmised that the Richmond cemetery was home to hundreds, said Assistant General Manager William Oakes.

Composition varied. A 1919 Sears catalog referenced Vermont marble, gray Barre granite and American red granite, while a 1939 catalog advertised three colored granites from St. Cloud, Minnesota and a Southern Gray Granite, mostly produced in Georgia.

A 1906 Sears “Tombstones and Monuments” mailer claimed that its Dark Veined and White Rutland Italian Marble came from the best quarry in the Barre Mountains

of Vermont. It touted excellence with no shortage of superlatives, describing its skilled artisans as the best money can hire, men who devoted their lives to this class of work, “fitting them for turning out a production superior to that coming from any other producers.” It claimed to have the latest type of mills, the largest gang saws, immense lathes, and the “most perfect automatic power-revolving rubbing beds” as well as the most modern pneumatic tools.

Many Hollywood stones linked to Sears have raised vs. carved-in lettering, which required larger blocks of stone as well as more time and finesse. Oakes concurred that Sears delivered high quality work to Hollywood, noting that the works he’s observed are cleanly made without visible mistakes.

The 1906 Sears tombstone mailer advertised stone granite and marble samples for less than a \$1 and provided a money-back guarantee that included shipping costs. It also listed pre-selected epitaphs and their prices, along with a host of customer testimonials.

Distinctive elements of Sears’s products in Hollywood include ivy, crosses, open Bibles, raised (vs. engraved) lettering, and many other stylistic features displayed in old catalog photographs.

Oakes has observed that none of Sears’s monuments and tombstones bear any marking, symbol, or name that identify Sears as their manufacturer. He has opined that since it was generally known that Sears was the only mass producer of what was very popular, recognizable funerary stone work during the first half of the 20th century, actual credit on individual creations was deemed unnecessary.

Sears also manufactured and sold cross statues with an epitaph at the bottom, including a children’s version with a lamb. Several of those stand on Hollywood grounds.

The 1906 catalog said that while a dealer would ask \$75 for a monument and up to \$40 for a tombstone, Sears sold it for \$35 and about \$20, respectively, or about half the going rate.

*(continued on page 5)*



### Sears (*continued*)

The retail goliath cut costs by chiseling, engraving, finishing and polishing the pieces in the same location from which they were quarried and then shipping them directly to their final destinations, eliminating the middlemen, such as a wholesaler, funeral home or monument dealer, who would drive up costs, Oakes said. “From beginning to completion, the end product only changed hands once, cutting down on costs,” he added.

According to one Sears catalog, “It is an art, and our business is to bring granite and marble memorials within the reach of all people, eliminating all the intermediate

profits of the wholesaler, the retailer, and the travelling commission salesman, retaining for ourselves only our one small conscientious margin of profit.”

In recent decades, Sears has been replaced by Amazon as a provider of monuments and tombstones. Though the online giant doesn't offer the same diversity of products as Sears, (e.g., live monkeys or chickens), it too serves a great number of our population with many needs and wants reflective of a modern world that Sears catalog makers could never have imagined.



*Pages  
from a  
Sears, Roebuck & Co.  
catalog*



*Finished  
Monuments  
installed  
in the  
cemetery*





## The Early Years:

# How Hollywood Struggled and Persevered

Influenced by the English Garden style in Paris, Boston, and New York, Richmond leaders in the 1840s wanted the same for their prosperous city then well on its way to becoming the industrial center of Virginia.

The idea came to fruition when Joshua Fry, a commission merchant, and William Haxall of a flour-milling family, met in 1847 in Boston at Mount Auburn, the first rural cemetery developed in America. Whether the Richmond men met by happenstance or hatched a plan in advance isn't clear, but they returned home determined to establish a similar burial ground in Richmond. Existing city cemeteries were running out of room. Industrialization and urbanization translated to less green space and clean air.

While Hollywood was never intended to be for profit, its civic-minded founders faced challenges at every turn. To say they were determined would be a gross understatement.

With help from Isaac Davenport, Sr. and William Mitchell, Jr., Haxall and Fry raised \$4,675 to buy 43 acres from Lewis Harvie, trustee for Jacquelin Harvie, who inherited the property from his father Col. John Harvie, a member of Continental Congress and Richmond's fourth mayor.

The forested tract known as Harvie's Woods sat on a steep granite bluff overlooking the James River Falls. The property is described in a caption in John Peter's book *Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery*, as having a "romantic wildness manifested by rippling streams, dense woodlands, dramatic ravines, leafy glades, sun-dappled hills, and panoramic views of the city, the river and beyond."

When it was time to draw up plans, the founders turned to William Pratt, a daguerreotypist and architect who moved to Richmond from Baltimore, where he served as superintendent of Green Mount Cemetery. Pratt's drawings never came to fruition, and he went on to work as superintendent of building and grounds at the University of Virginia.

The board then reached out to John Notman who designed Laurel Hill, the rural cemetery of Philadelphia where he

lived. In a three-page letter to the board, he stated his intention to "create a graveyard in a forest" and outlined his plans. "Notman was such a genius, not just with landscape design but he knew how to bring the board along to fully want to adopt his plan," said long-time Valentine Museum tour guide who researched the letter at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture.

Notman wrote: "Objections may be made to the number and length of the roads. To these I say -- they provide the perfect opening up of the whole grounds to the casual visitor. The pleasure of such a drive with charming views will induce visitors to become purchasers of lots."



*John Notman (1810 - 1865)*

Notman's plan included a system of winding roads that made it easier for carriages to navigate the steep slopes and also provided angles and corner lots described as "desirable for the display of monuments or tombs." The plan also provided generous pathways to access individual lots. He placed the entrance at the northeast corner, the most convenient to the city and with the most desirable views of the hills and valleys, which he said distinguished Hollywood from any cemetery he'd ever seen.

Notman named the site "Holly-Wood" for the extensive growth of holly trees on the grounds, trees long



## The Early Years (*continued*)

associated with immortality. He laid out the cemetery in sections labeled alphabetically from A to W with lots encompassing 200 to 800 square feet. He included five bridges, a stable for horses, sheds for visiting vehicles and a pond. He recommended dense plantings for privacy and that all trees and bushes be sourced locally since indigenous species would be more likely to thrive.

Work laying out the cemetery began in 1848 with 12 to 25 laborers.

Initial criticism stemmed from concerns that the location would impede Richmond's growth to the west. The founders initially hoped to sell at least 100 shares at \$100 a share, which they anticipated would cover the land, a fence, a cemetery keeper's house, clearing costs and initial landscaping. The first offering fell far short with only 56 subscribers.

Sluggish sales continued for years, partially due to difficulties procuring a charter, which offered guarantees of permanence and fiscal responsibility. Adjacent landowners claiming rights-of-way through the cemetery property posed additional complications.

The cemetery became a hot target for rival local newspapers with two in favor of its development and another urging people to withhold support and criticizing its "pernicious" design.

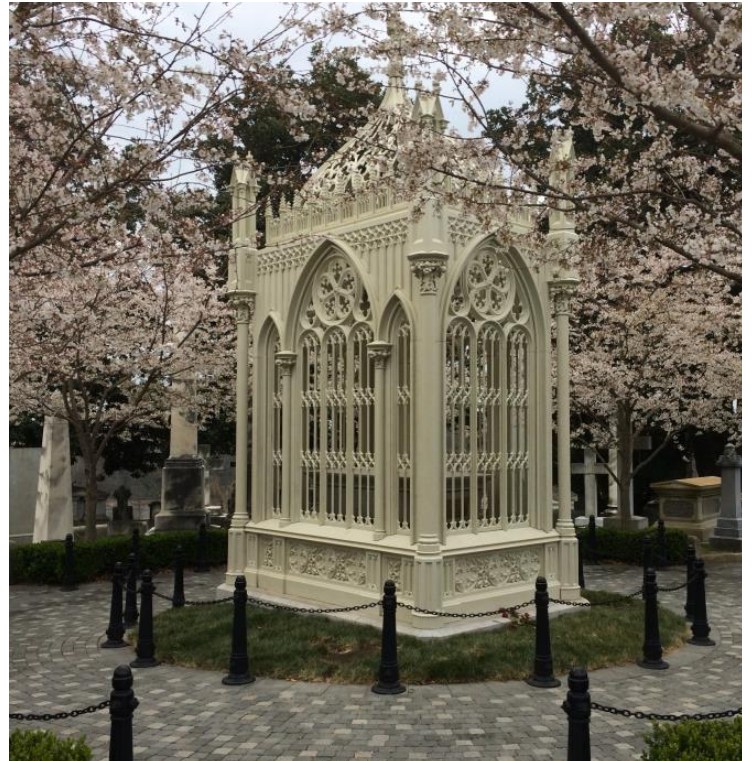
Other challenges included a dispute with the city regarding water pipes and expensive repairs from flooding.

Money to cover financial shortfalls included loans as well as selling firewood from felled trees and hay from grass planting in plowed sections.

Gradually Hollywood gained a stronger footing. As the 1850s progressed, plot sales increased, lot owners invested in iron railings, monuments, trees, shrubs and flowers, and public support grew as evidenced by an omnibus line that ran to the cemetery every afternoon granting visitors easier access.

The ratification of a charter in 1856 was a pivotal milestone. A corporate seal pictured an incense lamp and flame, symbolic of a soul rising from mortal ashes. The design with a holly leaf addition is still in use.

The coup de grace of Hollywood's turnaround was the return of deceased President James Monroe's body to native soil. After his wife's death, poor health and financial difficulties prompted him to relocate from Loudoun County to the New York home of his younger daughter, where he died in 1831. He was reinterred at Hollywood in 1858, a celebration that coincided with Independence Day festivities.



*The Birdcage  
Tomb of President James Monroe  
in Hollywood's Presidents Circle*

Mary Michell wrote in her book, *Hollywood Cemetery: The History of a Southern Shrine*: "Fierce sectional differences were momentarily ignored while Americans, North and South, paid homage to a fallen hero from a seemingly tranquil era. ... The founders of Hollywood Cemetery sought more modest results: Monroe's reinterment in Hollywood gave the cemetery prestige and assured its place in the affections of Richmond-area residents."

### *NEXT UP: The Civil War Years*

*Information for this story was compiled from Mary Michell's, **Hollywood Cemetery: The History of a Southern Shrine** and from John Peter's **Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery**.*

*(continued on page 8)*



## The Early Years (*continued*)



**Richmond from Hollywood.** Engraving image courtesy of the Virginia Museum of History and Culture

### **RURAL CEMETERY FACTS OF INTEREST** **About the Nationwide Trend that Fueled Hollywood's Founding**

- Flourished as urban graveyards became overcrowded and hazardous to health.
- Drew heavily on influences from Europe.
- Occurred when Richmond was becoming urbanized and industrialized, when large gardens and green spaces were disappearing.
- Emphasized melancholy contemplation, the heart of Romanticism, which flourished and wielded influence through the 1800s.
- Based in part on the theory that cemeteries are as much for the living as the dead.
- Dictated by picturesque landscapes.
- Served as retreats from everyday life, also precursors to U.S. public parks.
- Adopted the word “cemetery” (from the Greek word for a sleeping chamber) in lieu of graveyard and the word “casket” (from the word for chest) in lieu of coffin.
- Changed iconography from morbid representatives such as skull and crossbones, soul effigies, and hourglasses to softer, more emotional symbols such as angels, flowers, doves, wreaths and joined hands.
- Changed gravestone inscriptions from “here lies the body of” to “in memory of.”



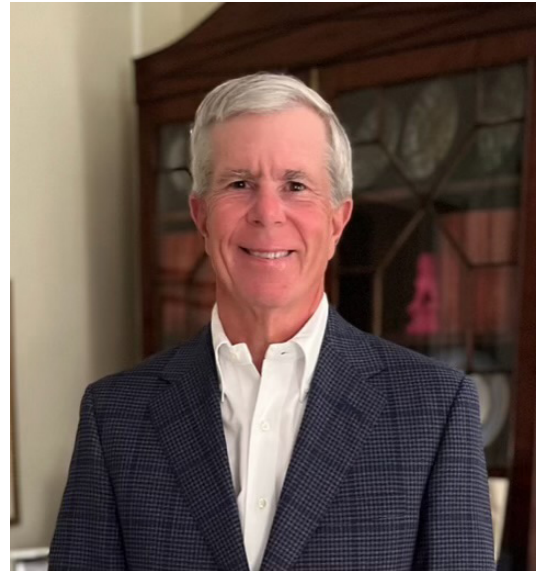
## James “Jimmy” G. Rose Jr. Joins Friends of Hollywood Board

Friends of Hollywood Cemetery welcomes its newest board member James “Jimmy” G. Rose Jr., a Richmond native with five generations of family laid to rest in Hollywood’s historic grounds.

Rose has long supported the cemetery’s efforts to preserve and maintain its grounds. “I love the history of the cemetery and hope that I may be helpful,” he said.

Rose graduated from St. Christopher’s School, the University of Virginia’s McIntire School of Commerce and received his MBA from UVa’s Darden School of Business. The investment banker retired in 2016 after working 30 years primarily in New York for Bank of America Merrill Lynch and its predecessors. He now serves as a senior advisor to Falcon Affiliates, a private investment firm.

Rose also serves on the board for Sandpiper Lodging Trust, a Richmond real estate investment trust that develops and owns extended stay hotel properties, as well as Tidewater Fleet Supply, a Norfolk-based truck and



trailer part distribution company. He is a former board member of the Edgar Allan Poe Museum and served on the Westminster Canterbury corporate board where he chaired the Investment Committee.

### *Hollywood Cemetery at Night: Full Moon Tours*

Step into the stillness of history under the glow of the full moon. Join us for a 90-minute walking tour through the timeless grounds of Hollywood Cemetery, where atmosphere takes center stage. These limited-capacity nighttime experiences offer a rare chance to explore the cemetery after dark with the moon, and the quiet beauty of this sacred landscape.

#### Tour Dates & Moons:

- June 11 – Strawberry Moon
- July 10 – Buck Moon
- August 9 – Sturgeon Moon

#### Details:

- 7:30–9:00 p.m.
- Meet at the main gate (street parking outside of the cemetery only)
- 20 participants maximum
- \$25 per person – all proceeds benefit Friends of Hollywood Cemetery
- No refunds or transfers
- Spaces are limited. Reserve your place and experience the magic of moonlight in one of Richmond’s most iconic landmarks.

**Please R.S.V.P. to Kelly Wilbanks at [kwilbanks@hollywoodcemetery.org](mailto:kwilbanks@hollywoodcemetery.org) or call the office at (804) 648-8501.**

## 2025 Contributors to Friends of Hollywood Cemetery

*We are indeed grateful to the following donors for their generous support of Friends through May 5, 2025. You have enabled us to raise awareness of Hollywood and to continue vital monument and fence restoration. Thank you for helping us to preserve Hollywood Cemetery for generations to come.*



J. Mason New  
Chair, Friends of Hollywood Cemetery

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We invite you to join the **1847 Society** and continue the ongoing restoration and preservation of Hollywood Cemetery.

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Richmond, Virginia 23220**

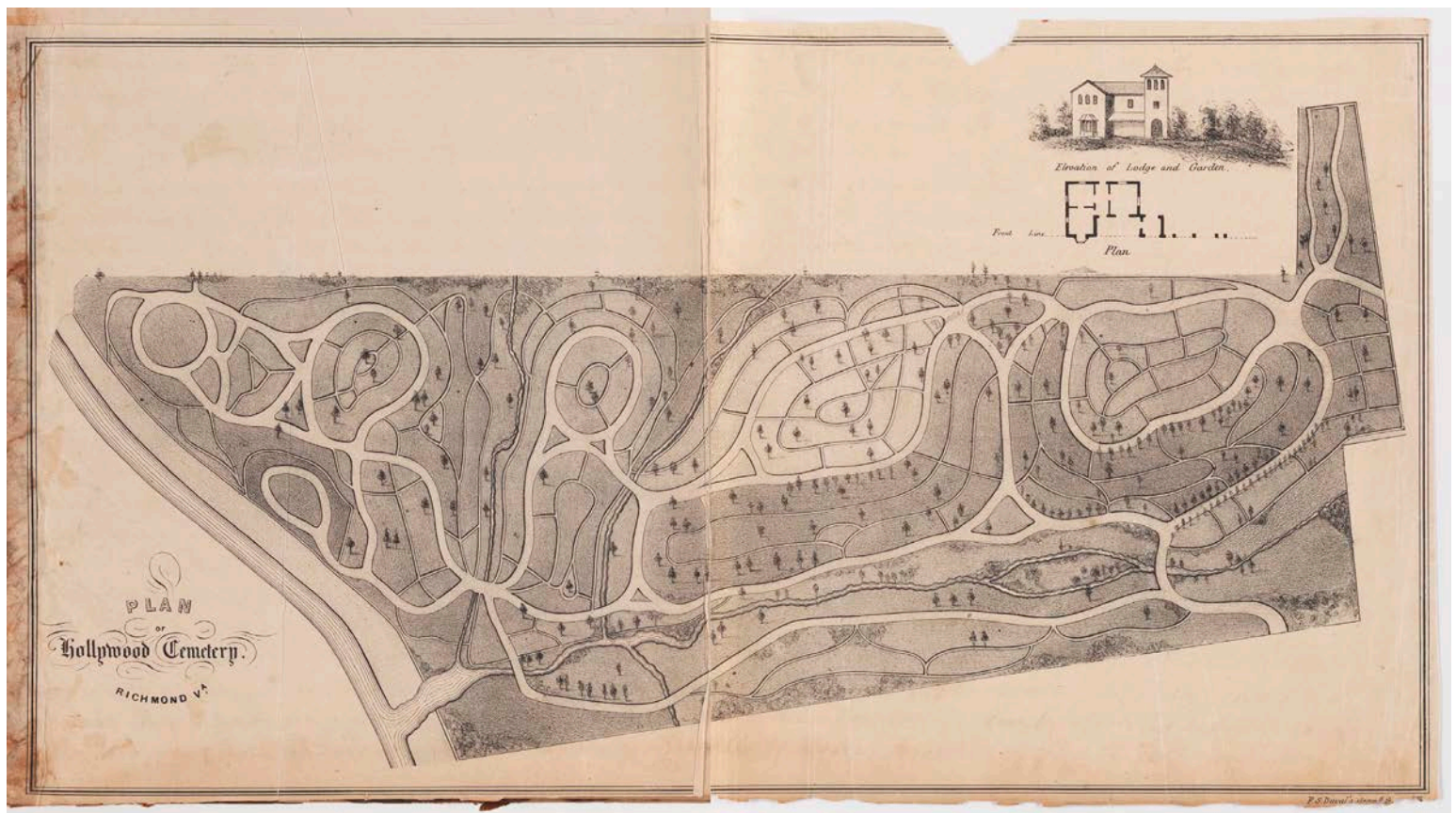
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*John Notman's grounds plan for Hollywood Cemetery (1848). The plan required only minor changes to the natural terrain of the 43 acre tract.*

*Courtesy of the Virginia Museum of History and Culture*