

The National Spotlight Returns to Connecticut

By Jeffrey G. Nolan

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Connecticut continues to abandon its cemeteries as aging volunteers and part-time caretakers find few succession options available. For three decades the problem has persisted, despite grass roots efforts, legislative initiatives, and reporting by *The New York Times*.

Memorial sites and cemeteries *matter*. When the national spotlight returns to Connecticut to celebrate the opening of the Sandy Hook Memorial, we will be reminded of that once again.

The mission of Newtown's Permanent Memorial Commission is to remember, honor and celebrate those who died and to provide comfort to those who loved and were touched by them.

Each of Connecticut's 5,000 cemeteries opened with similar missions. Hundreds have not stood the test of time or permanence.

What matters is found among the memories, ideals, and symbols that hold together generations of families and their communities. Ben Franklin famously said, "*To know the character of a community, I need only visit its cemeteries.*"

Why these places matter today is because they indicate capabilities at the state, regional, and community-level to solve long-term problems that span generations.

Viewed in that light, a creeping blight of abandoned cemeteries juxtaposed to an admirable new multi-million-dollar memorial becomes a symbol of a different kind. It exemplifies a *capabilities gap* that is comparable to Connecticut's better-known wealth and achievement gaps.

There is hope. Just off the Guilford Green are words of a covenant carved into a 24-foot slab of Stony Creek granite – granite used for the base of the Statue of Liberty and walls of West Point.

Written in 1639 by pilgrims sailing toward the new world, the signers knew that a harsh reality was ahead, and that survival would require them to stick together.

They vowed an oath of fidelity committing to each other. Each according to his ability, each according to his need. It is as profound as it is simple. It embodies the essential paradox of freedom: the liberty to freely choose to bind oneself to others. *Semper fidelis*. It works. Too many have forgotten or conflated the meaning of this founding principle.

It is time to remember. And by doing so rekindle the spirit that animates and energizes meaningful endeavors. It is time to map a path forward. The aim is not only to restore physical places that are in need, but also to reveal an enduring quality of character that Franklin would recognize as worthy.

The solution begins by *joining together* to regionalize, professionalize, and modernize Connecticut's approach to interring its dead and honorably memorializing them.

Doing so would also serve as a political reminder that deference to local autonomy is not jeopardized by collaboration – collaboration that is needed to survive by achieving economies of scale, providing access to technology, and benefiting from knowledgeable professionals.

Collaboration brings efficiency that is based on information which is *institutionalized memory*. In an increasingly information-intensive and knowledge-based economy, *what do we know if we have no memory?*

In 1994, then State Representative now Senator, Joan Hartley of Waterbury, put forth a proposal to create a State-level Commission on Cemeteries intended to prevent the kind of unfortunate situation we have today.

It is time to create that Commission and to manage cemeteries and memorial sites cooperatively by regionalizing, professionalizing, and modernizing them.

Charles, Eleanor. "Saving Abandoned Cemeteries and Grave Markers." *The New York Times*, April 30, 2000, In the Region/Connecticut. <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/30/realestate/in-the-region-connecticut-saving-abandoned-cemeteries-and-grave-markers.html>

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