

For Whom the Bell Tolls
Connecticut's Abandoned Cemeteries, 20 Years Later

Jeffrey G. Nolan

In the United States, the number of COVID-19 deaths has in a few months surpassed that from 16 years of war in Vietnam.¹ The overload placed on the deathcare supply chain has, again, brought into focus systemic weaknesses in that industry and beyond. The implications in Connecticut warrant review and corrective action informed by history. Federal intervention is likely required.

Twenty years ago, last month, *The New York Times* ran a story about Connecticut's abandoned cemeteries.² Since then the problems and misgivings have worsened, to the embarrassment of local officials.

Rudy Marconi, First Selectman of Ridgefield, and Chair of the Western Connecticut Regional Council of Governments has been featured in local news stories both for being infected with COVID-19 and for having to appease angry citizens over an abandoned cemetery.³⁻⁵

Thankfully, Marconi's health has improved.⁶ The health of Connecticut's cemeteries, however, has not.⁷⁻⁹ Too few seem to care or know what to do. The bell tolls.

I grew up in Connecticut then left for school and a career in supply chain management. I returned for a third time, a couple years after *The Times* article appeared, to bury my mother in a Brookfield cemetery. It fit the profile of Connecticut's abandoned cemeteries. My father, Tom Nolan, volunteered to restore some dignity to the 6.9-acre site and to restore something less tangible to the community.

At 88, Tom Nolan now wants to pass on the caretaker responsibility. For the last three years, we have planned for his succession by explaining to the community that cemeteries should no longer be run by volunteers. The local paper ran a front-page story that cited the need for economies of scale and technology, and our theme to *regionalize, professionalize, modernize*.¹⁰

Organizations that operate and administer Connecticut's estimated 5,000 cemeteries¹¹ include municipalities, private associations, veteran's administrations, and faith-based organizations. Marbled among these institutions are large numbers of volunteers. They offer time and expertise in an exchange that has become a costly bargain with far reaching consequences.

Sitting with these volunteers in picturesque New England settings evokes an image as iconic as a Norman Rockwell painting. Equally iconic is their outlook that volunteerism alone authorizes a personally and narrowly defined civic duty. The rub is misalignment with the IRS stipulations and obligations of 501(c)(13) cemeteries.¹² Genuine concern for those civic service stipulations is the point of departure. The bell tolls.

Fulfilling the role of a volunteer trustee for a non-profit organization intended to operate in perpetuity takes some forethought and work. There are idiosyncrasies and implications.^{13, 14} And not enough help. There is no state agency that provides active oversight,¹⁵ no trade association that provides training.¹⁶ When asked to concern themselves with these larger issues most volunteers politely decline and instead recommend creating another organization for that.¹⁷ The bell tolls.

Operationally, volunteers may find they need to clean up what their predecessors have left untidy, including details associated with thousands of burial locations quartered and counted in square feet. Today, this requires skills suited to digitally enabled expectations for maps.

Tom Nolan grew up on Long Island when milk was delivered by horse drawn cart. He recalls the arrival of the first television set to his neighborhood. He went to college with Ruth Bader Ginsberg.¹⁸ For much of his career, paychecks were prepared by staff with good penmanship, something unknown among today's touchscreen-only youth. The digital divide separates generations, geographies, and economies.

It took a federal initiative to compel the healthcare industry to adopt modern technologies.¹⁹ Doing so broke a productivity bottleneck by creating an electronic health record that enabled interoperability across healthcare systems and providers.

It may require a similar federal initiative to compel the deathcare industry to adopt equally modern geospatial technology to break location bottlenecks for burials and their associated perpetual care funds.

Connecticut has spent a decade and millions of dollars on failed attempts to create a vital records system.²⁰ Interment details are still submitted to town halls on a paper form, then transcribed manually into books.^{21, 22} Information about exact burial locations is not required and, if submitted, is discarded.²³

In the 20-years since *The Times* reported on Connecticut's abandoned cemeteries, the original misgivings remain. What cannot remain is our tolerance for them.

The lost soul of the authentic Connecticut Yankee is for whom the bell tolls.

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