



► **Russ Burns** is director of All Saints Cemetery and its green burial section, The Preserve, all part of Mt. Elliott Cemetery Association, which includes six cemeteries in southeastern Michigan.

► He has been in the profession since 1981 and is a graduate of ICCFA University. He holds a bachelor's degree in management. A member of the Clarkston and Waterford Chamber of Commerce, he studies history and conducts historical tours of Mt. Elliott.

[rburns@mtelliott.com](mailto:rburns@mtelliott.com)

[www.mtelliott.com](http://www.mtelliott.com)



► **Jack Goodnoe** has more than 30 years of experience in strategic land use planning and site design, with an expertise in cemetery planning. He heads his own company, Jack C. Goodnoe Cemetery Planning and Design.

► He is an instructor at ICCFA University and a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Nature Conservancy and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

[jack@jackgoodnoe.com](mailto:jack@jackgoodnoe.com)  
734.769.1400

[www.jackgoodnoe.com](http://www.jackgoodnoe.com)

## GREEN SERVICES

For All Saints Cemetery, adding a natural burial area has drawn interest from families who want a “green” burial and are preplanning to make sure they get it. Winning a landscape architecture award is sure to increase public awareness of The Preserve.



The Preserve natural burial cemetery at All Saints Cemetery.

# Award-winning green section designed to give families options

**T**he Preserve at All Saints Cemetery, part of Mt. Elliott Cemetery Association, has won a 2015 award from the Michigan Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects. The Preserve received a Merit Award in the category of landscape architectural sustainability.

ICCFA Magazine talked to All Saints Cemetery Director Russ Burns about The Preserve and to landscape architect Jack C. Goodnoe about this project and about the design of green cemeteries in general.

### Attracting buyers from near and far

The first phase of The Preserve has been operating since September 2010 and, according to Burns, about 200 sites have been sold (almost all advance sales) and about 30

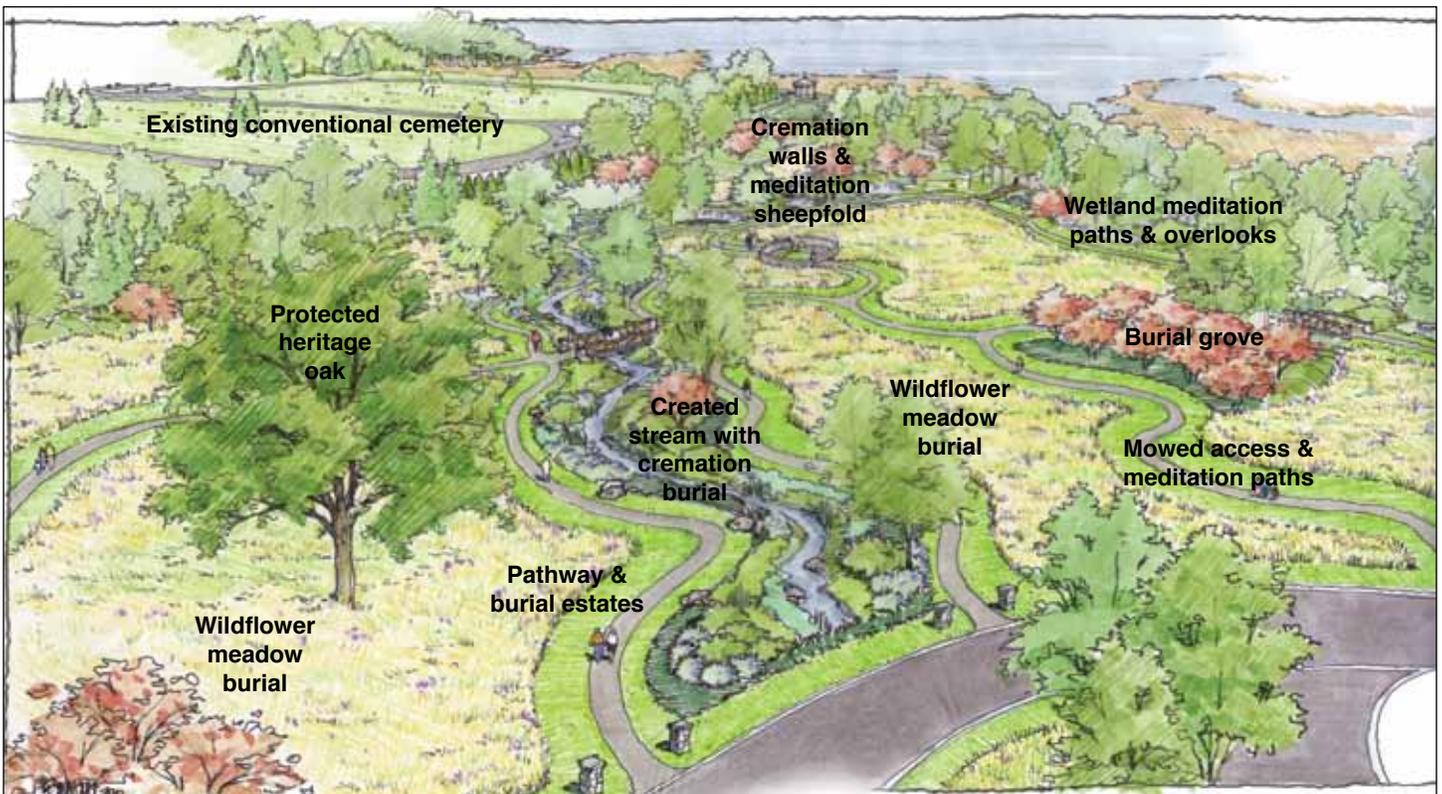
burials have taken place in the six-acre area developed so far in the 40-acre site slated for gradual development in five phases.

Many people buying in The Preserve come from 40 miles away, Burns said. “We had one woman come in from Chicago. And we just recently buried someone from Atlanta, Georgia. They found us online. They had ties to Michigan at some point in their lives, but even so, they were living in another state and chose The Preserve because of its natural beauty.”

The Preserve is the first natural burial ground at a Mt. Elliott Cemetery Association cemetery. It was developed to give families more choices, Burns said. “We recognized the green movement has been gaining momentum in other business sectors, and we wanted to provide a green choice for

This early construction photo shows the natural cemetery separated from the existing traditional cemetery by a mature evergreen hedgerow.





**Above**, Phase 1 of the five-phase master plan for The Preserve at All Saints Cemetery. **Below**, the Phase 1 burial plan accommodates traditional grave layout for accurate grave locations within a naturalistic pathway and landscape system.

our families. We realize that green burial is not for everyone, but it garners interest from many learning more about preplanning.”

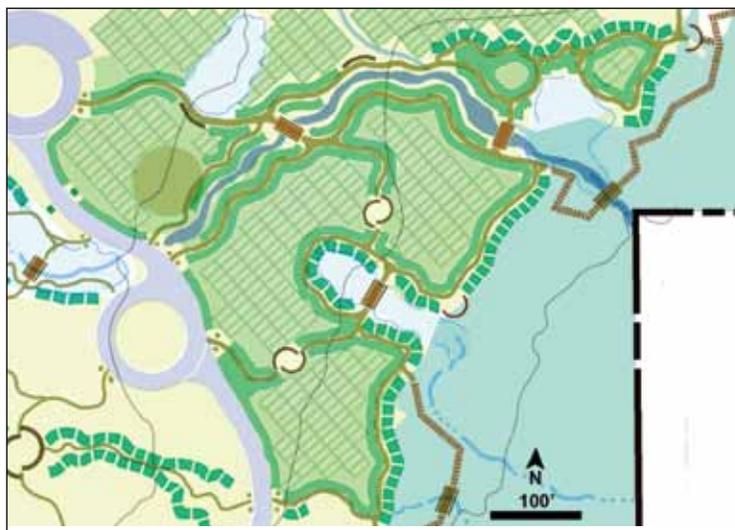
All Saints was a natural choice because of its fairly rural location, “kind of an in-between area” about 40 miles north of Detroit and 20 miles south of Flint, Burns said. “It’s a pretty area.”

The cemetery is situated on Lotus Maceday Lake, and about two-thirds of the land is not yet developed. Two different areas were considered for use as a natural burial ground.

One was by the lake, heavily wooded but basically flat. The other area had a creek running through it and more diversity in the landscape. “The only views were of the lake, rolling landscape, woods and meadows,” Burns said.

“We enlisted the opinions of a few local naturalist organizations around here, and we also talked to the Campbells from Ramsey Creek Preserve in South Carolina (the first natural burial ground in the United States).”

Goodnoe, who has done conventional



cemetery planning for All Saints and developed the plan for The Preserve, agreed with the recommendation to use the 40-acre parcel with the creek running through it and with open meadows.

Goodnoe did a thorough environmental analysis of the site and developed the master plan, creating a road system and breaking the project into sequential phases.

### Meeting the design challenge

“I think part of the design challenge with green burial is how do you put enough

people in the ground to make it economically viable and still maintain a natural setting,” said Goodnoe. “I think one of the successes of The Preserve is that they’ve used the exact same burial system that All Saints has in its conventional cemetery.”

The Preserve uses a traditional grid layout (shown at left) for the burials despite the natural landscaping above ground. Burns said Phase 1 should handle nearly 2,000 burials, and he figures that the development of Phase 2 might not be needed for a decade or so.

The graves are somewhat larger in The Preserve, measuring 4 feet by 10 feet, compared to 3 feet by 8 and a half feet in the conventional sections.

And the graves are divided into two categories: visitation and non-visitation. Visitation areas about pathways and families can have memorials placed on them.

All memorials are rocks excavated from the site. “Since we’re on a lake, we’re loaded with rocks,” Burns said. When families select a visitation grave they select a rock from the cemetery’s inventory and it’s inscribed



**Top and right**, burials made in the non-visitation meadows do not have memorials, and visitors are not allowed to walk on the site, though they can look over the meadows from the pathways. **Above left**, a memorial stone from one of the visitation grave sites, adjacent to a walking path. The stones are excavated from the site. Use of local materials is a plus in green development.

according to the family’s design and put in place. If they want to bring in their own rock, as long as it fits in, that’s OK also, he said.

The non-visitation grave sites are in the meadow, and people are not allowed to walk onto the meadow; they must stay on the pathways. “They can’t walk out there and leave flowers at their loved one’s grave. It’s strictly going back to nature.”

For people who want to be buried in a non-visitation site but also want a memorial to visit, there is the option of a name being inscribed on the cenotaph wall, the rock wall modeled after English sheepfolds. The waist-high, half circle wall is made with natural rocks, stacked but not cemented (photos, page 48).

Making use of cenotaphs and limiting where memorials can be placed is something else The Preserve has done right, according to Goodnoe. “If you have every grave marked with a boulder, you have a field you can’t run a tractor through.”

If you can’t run a tractor through in order to mow, you have to use fire to control plant growth, and that’s not something you should do routinely, he said. “It’s good once in a while—at most every five years or so. If it’s



**A springtime view in The Preserve looking toward Lotus Maceday Lake.**

used too often, it kills the bioactivity of the soil.”

Almost all of the preneed burial sales have been for visitation sites, Burns said, attributing it to the appeal of the creek. “That’s where everything is selling, right alongside the creek. People really like listening to the falling water. And they love the natural rock memorials.”

Despite their selection of a natural cemetery, most people “are still coming out of a traditional mindset,” where a grave gets a memorial, Goodnoe said. “And people do like to touch the boulder.”

Goodnoe thinks that as time goes by, more people will be willing to buy non-

visitation graves with the understanding that no one will be “tramping through that meadow.” In public presentations he’s given, people seem willing to accept the idea of a meadow where none of the graves have markers and the meadow remains undisturbed.

Nevertheless, the visitation areas are the ones that are selling now. Perhaps this means that more pathways should be added so that more visitation graves can be made available, Goodnoe said. “I don’t know; we’re still learning.”

The graves in The Preserve cost more than the graves in the conventional sections, Burns said, but the price includes the rock memorials, and families do not have to buy vaults.

### Doing the interments

About a third to half of the burials so far have involved shrouded rather than casketed bodies, Burns said. The rest use woven or wooden caskets or cardboard cremation containers, all biodegradable. “I’m actually surprised that we’re getting so many shrouds; I kind of like it.”

► to page 44

## The Preserve's purpose

The purpose of The Preserve at All Saints Cemetery, as outlined in the award-winning submission by landscape architect Jack C. Goodnoe to the Michigan Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects:

- to preserve, utilize and enhance the natural systems of the site;
- to meet the changing cultural and ethical desire for sustainability;
- to reduce or eliminate the use of herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers for landscape maintenance;
- to minimize traditional cemetery lawn mowing for reduced fossil fuel consumption;
- to use native and on-site materials for landscape development;
- to eliminate the need for lawn and landscape irrigation; and
- to bury and memorialize using only biodegradable materials. □

**The three ecosystems of the existing site shaped the land-use strategies and cemetery design solutions.**



►from page 42

Green burials are similar to cremation services in that whatever families choose to do, the cemetery accommodates them, he said, “so each service is kind of different.”

Some people want the body lowered into the grave immediately, while other families want to say prayers first, perhaps sing as the body is being lowered. Committal services range from nothing at all to Christian to Native American. Several Native Americans have been buried in The Preserve. “This is a great option for them,” Burns said.

The cemetery uses a pneumatic tire casket bier with an attractive “green” board on it for transporting shrouded or casketed bodies to The Preserve, but Burns has been looking into purchasing a transportation carriage from Kinkaraco. Some funeral directors simply use a gurney, primarily in the case of a shrouded burial.

Openings are done with a backhoe. Closings are started by hand, with a backhoe used to finish. The gravesite is then left to settle naturally for several weeks; filling in is done as needed. “Then nature takes over with grasses and plants,” Burns said.

## Handling maintenance

There is maintenance involved in managing a natural burial ground. In addition to the development costs, the Green Burial Council, which has certified The Preserve as a natural burial ground, requires the cemetery to have a plan in place to manage invasive species, Burns said.

Mowing is done once or twice a year. The wildlife seems to take care of itself, he said, but there are invasive plants to worry about. Michigan has a real problem with a phragmites. “They grow to 12 to 14 feet and are super-invasive,” Burns said.

Last spring, the cemetery made the news with its controlled burn of phragmites down by the lake and in one of areas set for future development as part of The Preserve. A naturalist, Jim Brook of Native Lakescapes, organized the burn and advises him on how to manage the area, Burns said. “We were in the Detroit Free Press, the Oakland Press and the Clarkston News, a local paper.”

Overall, the amount of effort involved in maintaining the natural cemetery is about the same as in a conventional cemetery, Burns said.

In addition to controlling invasive species, they make sure the bridges over the creek are safe, clear out the creek after the winter snow melt-off and remind families as needed that “they can’t do things like throw your lawn mower in the back of your truck and mow your loved one’s grave—I’ve had that happen.”

When you have a natural burial section, you need to write down what the landscape is going to be like and exactly what kind of maintenance is going to take place so that families know what to expect, Goodnoe said.

“I encourage all cemeteries adopting ‘green’ to make sure they sit down and think through those issues (visitation/ nonvisitation, maintenance, memorials, etc.) and have an agreement in place.”

## Marketing The Preserve

“We have a specific marketing plan designed to promote The Preserve,” Burns said. They participate in expos and hold seminars to let people know about The Preserve, and find a receptive audience.

In general, the people who attend “have all done their homework,” Burns

“At seminars where everything All Saints has to offer is being discussed, the No. 1 topic raised by attendees is cremation, and The Preserve is No. 2, Burns said. “Sometimes green’s No. 1 and cremation’s No. 2.”—Russ Burns, director of The Preserve at All Saints Cemetery



**Mt. Elliott Cemetery Association CEO and General Manager Michael Chilcote walks through the meadow in the fall along the mowed pathway that provides access to both visitation and, from a distance, non-visitiation grave sites.**

said. “They know about green. What they’re primarily asking us is what are we doing to guarantee that it’s going to stay green, what are we doing as far as pest management and management of invasives.”

They talk to funeral directors, as well. “We have a liaison, Karen Mack, who visits with funeral directors and explains that we have this property,” Burns said. “She also goes out into the community and talks to senior groups and historical societies and other organizations and talks about both our green and conventional options.

“At seminars where everything All Saints has to offer is being discussed, the No. 1 topic raised by attendees is cremation, and The Preserve is No. 2, Burns said. “Sometimes green’s No. 1 and cremation’s No. 2.”

A recent seminar featured someone from William Sullivan & Son Funeral Home as well as The Preserve talking about green burial. The funeral home brought a woven casket and biodegradable urn to show attendees.

“They brought the first burial out here for The Preserve, and they’ve done a couple more since then. They are very interested in green; they look at it like we do, as another choice to give families.”

Overall, funeral directors have been receptive, Burns said, which is important as Michigan does not allow combination funeral-cemetery operations.

They also advertise in local and green-oriented publications, and “referral partners” such as elder law attorneys and financial planners are also spreading the word.

### **Making green profitable**

Goodnoe has strong opinions about how to develop natural burial grounds that are profitable as well as attractive.

“I think there are a lot of unique issues associated with green burial that aren’t readily apparent that have to be thought through,” Goodnoe said. “One of the things that’s kind of significant about this is that it’s like cremation 20 years ago: People are still trying to figure it out.”

As people in the funeral/cemetery profession are constantly saying, there are “shades” of green. Or, in this case, types of green cemeteries.

Goodnoe feels that a hybrid cemetery has the best chance of being profitable. In other words, a natural burial ground such as The Preserve, a green cemetery



within a traditional one. Why? Are the traditional sections expected to subsidize the green section? No; Goodnoe believes it's important because cemeterians know how to run a cemetery.

"There are so many things about the cemetery industry related to how you treat families, how you maintain the site, how you deal with cortege services, how you set prices—all of the things that every cemerterian deals with every day that are critical to the cemetery's financial success as well as the happiness of the customers.

"And I think that's what's often missing in the natural cemeteries that are done first and foremost as conservancies by people coming out of the environmental movement, because they don't bring with them the history and the skills and the knowledge of traditional cemeterians."

Goodnoe is not a fan of the environmental cemetery model that involves a large piece of land with widely spaced burials. "I think if you have a park of 100 acres and every place in it that you want to walk has somebody buried in it, it's a different environment than a regular park.

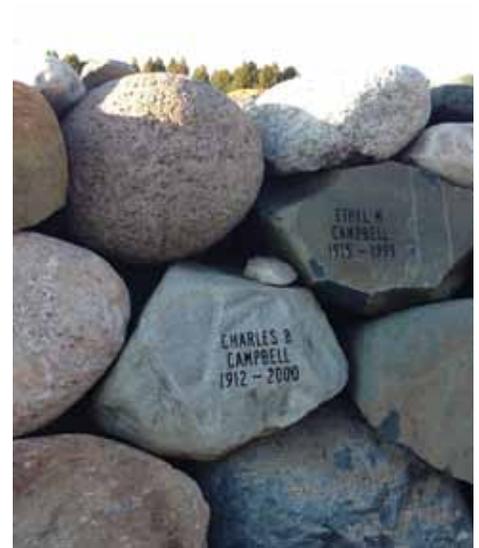
"I believe cemeteries should be run like cemeteries, not like natural areas, and I believe that you should minimize your consumption of land, not maximize it."

### **Welcoming cremation**

"I am a firm believer that green cemeteries have to embrace cremation," Goodnoe said. "Some people say, 'You're burning up fossil fuels.' I've done a little research, and I've discovered that it effectively takes about as much BTUs as a full tank of gas in an SUV—about 19 gallons of gas—to cremate a body.

"So with all of the energy you've spent during your life in travel, in heating yourself and your water and in flying on vacations, is it greener to take up 10 times as much land, which is a truly non-renewable resource, instead of using one tank of gas?"

► to page 48



**Left, The Preserve’s meadow sheepfold meditation garden, inspired by a traditional English sheepfold. Naturally occurring rocks from the glacial origins of the site are used for the cremation memorial wall, seen in detail above.**

➤ *from page 47*

“So many of the natural burial people still think that cremation’s a nasty thing, and it’s not. The stacks are regulated; the amount of what goes into the air is absolutely minimal. The sensationalism that surrounds cremation is misguided.”

Goodnoe firmly believes that natural burial grounds should allow the burial of cremated remains. “Cremains have virtually no impact on the environment. They’re inert.”

There is a cremation area in The Preserve at All Saints Cemetery. The cremation graves in The Preserve are four feet square, while they are three feet square in the conventional sections, and urns used in The Preserve must be biodegradable.

Spouses can also choose to be cremated and interred in the same full-body-sized grave in The Preserve. Or, one spouse can choose full-body burial and the other cremation with interment in the same grave.

Another thing to consider, Goodnoe said, is that “when you lay an organic system over a rectilinear system (as seen on the burial plan on page

40), you’re going to end up with lots of little corners between the pathway and the grid, and those spaces can be sold for cremation graves.”

**Considering additional factors**

The Preserve’s burial sites are in meadows, a choice Goodnoe favors rather than woodlands. Burial in woodlands might seem like an appealing choice, he said, but the fact is, you can only dig so many holes for full-body burial in the woods “before you’ve dramatically disrupted the root zone of the woods itself.” If the burials are few and far between, that’s OK, but with

a commercial cemetery, you hope to be doing more frequent burials. If you want to do burials in woodlands, Goodnoe suggests sticking to burial of cremated remains and placing full-body burials in a meadow.

A design approach he’s taken a couple of times is to have a cemetery using woods for natural burials create “sun pockets,” areas where they open up the woods to create a grove or “sun spot” in the woodlands. They then develop that cleared area, perhaps a quarter of an area in size, as a meadow.

This does two things: It creates meadows that are appropriate for full-body burial and it creates more edges. “People love edges,” Goodnoe said.

“The edges are always the most valuable part of any cemetery, because people like those interfaces between environments that are the richest environmentally. And interestingly enough, they’re also the richest emotionally. People naturally like edges.

“So if you create this little sun pocket within a woodlands, you’ve just opened up that much more ‘edge’ where you can raise your prices, and you can offer woodland, edge and meadow burials all simultaneously.”



**A bridge over an ephemeral stream, created when natural springs were revealed on the site and designed as a central feature of The Preserve.**