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Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery (Foreword)

Edward L. Ayers

University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/history-faculty-publications>Part of the [History Commons](#)

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FOREWORD



As John O. Peters's wonderful book reveals, Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery tells many stories. Decade by decade, generation by generation, Hollywood changed as times changed. Symbols of eternal rest evolved as people's ideas of death and life evolved. What one generation imagined as obelisks and columns the next imagined as doves and angels, stone trees and granite flowers, somber human figures and immense temples. The iron fences and elaborate gates of one century became sleek and understated stones set flush in the ground in the next.

Hollywood Cemetery began as a business venture when Richmond was booming in the 1840s. Leading figures in the southern city, impressed by the up-to-date garden cemeteries of France, Boston, and New York, argued that Richmond deserved nothing less. The founders of Hollywood, like so many other entrepreneurs in the city, sought to capture the power of the James River. Investing in land with a sweeping view of the majestic falls, the early builders of Hollywood claimed a setting to rival any in the world. They marked the new enterprise with novel words—"cemetery" replaced the more literal "graveyard," "casket" took the place of "coffin." Despite the innovations, sales were sluggish for years until the novelty of the cemetery became familiar, until President James Monroe's body was moved to a prominent spot, and until the cemetery's beauty became more cultivated.

The fragile new enterprise, like the city itself, was forever defined by the Civil War. Eighteen thousand soldiers are buried at Hollywood, their bodies brought from hospitals and houses all over the city. Devoted female volunteers of the city helped heal the raw earth, helped shelter young men whose families would not have the chance to care for their graves. Memorial Day ceremonies became the most important days in the cemetery. The rough and towering pyramid, assembled from stone quarried at the James, memorialized the Lost Cause while small Confederate flags stood over individual graves. For decades, former soldiers and officers were brought to Hollywood Cemetery.

Across the twentieth century and into our own time, Hollywood Cemetery has continually changed even as it sustains the memories and markers of times long gone. To visit Hollywood today is to visit a place that still exerts its power, that offers symbols of loss, gratitude, memory, and hope from times not our own. Through the words and images of this book, those eighty thousand stories speak to us still.

EDWARD L. AYERS
PRESIDENT, UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
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