

A Conservation Partnership: Conservation Burial Grounds and Land Trusts

by Heidi Hannapel and Jeff Masten

Since 2017, Landmatters has been developing replicable models for conservation burial throughout the country. A conservation burial ground or conservation cemetery is a conservation property that allows green burial. The deliberate conservation of the property seeks to protect a recognized natural space for plants, animals, habitat, and other redeeming conservation values.

The Green Burial Council (GBC) has established certification standards that help distinguish the differences between three types of green burial: hybrid, natural, and conservation burial. A conservation burial ground must follow all the GBC standards for natural burial grounds in addition to these conservation characteristics:

- Guarantee the preservation of the burial ground by *deed restriction, conservation easement or other legally binding and irrevocable agreement* that runs with the land and is enforceable in perpetuity;
- Operate in conjunction with a *non-profit conservation organization or government agency* that has legally binding responsibility for perpetual monitoring and enforcement of the easement;
- *Conserve or restore a minimum of 20 acres, or five acres if contiguous to other protected land; and*



- Have *limits on the allowable burial density.*

The Land Trust: A Required Partnership

A key attribute that separates conservation burial from other forms of green burial is the required partnership with a conservation organization, such as a land trust, and the placement of an irrevocable conservation easement or restriction on the property.

Land trusts are in the business of conservation. They are professional organizations that focus their work on providing opportunities for landowners and governments to conserve land for future

generations. Land trusts specialize in the placement and monitoring of easements—in perpetuity. Most commonly, easements are developed in concert with a land trust.

In our experience, there is not one formula for making a conservation burial project successful; however, we believe the foundation to a successful conservation burial ground is in the strength of the partnership between a burial ground and a land trust—developed with assurance that both parties' goals are aligned and complementary.

As former land trust staff, we have an understanding of how land trusts consider and evaluate their conservation priorities, including the evaluation of a potential



Gravesite at Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery, Florida. Used with permission.



Grave markers at Ramsey Creek Preserve, South Carolina.



Cemeteries are places for people to be memorialized forever, and places for family and loved ones to return to for reflection. Conservation burial grounds serve as a place where individuals' commitment to conservation and perpetuity come together. As many of the conservation burial grounds operating can attest, a very natural overlap exists for the partnership.

conservation burial project. With more land trusts expressing interest in the concept, we have delivered presentations at their annual meetings (2018 and 2019) and at the inaugural Green Burial Council conference (2020). In a survey of land trusts in 2019, we learned these facts:

- 81% consider conservation burial an opportunity to protect more land
- 84% would consider holding an easement for a burial ground
- 75% would consider a partnership opportunity
- 78% would consider owning the land and partnering with an operating company
- 6% currently working on a conservation burial project

Conservation burial will not appeal to all land trusts and it should not be assumed that a land trust will be an interested partner. Land trusts can be skeptical of conservation burial for a number of reasons:

- They are not in the cemetery business.
- They see the project as a distraction, causing their organization to drift from its mission.
- Their conservation properties may have conditions or restrictions placed upon them that eliminate the possibility of burial.

- They are risk averse.
- They lack sufficient resources such as financing, staffing, or timing.

Commonalities Among Them


The relationship and value of the land trust partnership in conservation burial grounds can be explained like this: Land trusts think about their work, particularly conservation easements, in terms of perpetuity. Cemeteries and burial grounds have a similar commitment to perpetuity. They are established and operated with perpetual care funds that support the cemetery's future maintenance in perpetuity.

In our work assisting land trusts in developing conservation burial projects, we find they recognize the many common values and interests: Land trusts are interested in connecting people with nature and to their communities.

Cemeteries are places for people to be memorialized forever, and places for family

and loved ones to return to for reflection. Conservation burial grounds serve as a place where individuals' commitment to conservation and perpetuity come together. As many of the conservation burial grounds operating can attest, a very natural overlap exists for the partnership.

For people exploring the concepts of conservation and conservation burial, we recommend learning about your local land trusts. Recognize that they are private nonprofits serving their communities with clearly stated missions. They can work on projects locally, regionally, or within states. Explore their websites. Learn about their projects. Volunteer for a workday.

Getting to know your local land trust will help you understand its purpose, philosophy, and vision. You might then answer the question: Where does your vision for a conservation burial ground fit within a land trust's mission? 

Landmatters is a small consulting firm, operated by **Heidi Hannapel** and **Jeff Masten**, located in Durham, NC, and focused on the development of conservation burial grounds across the country. Heidi and Jeff have been intrigued by conservation burial for over 14 years. We first learned of the concept in 2006 at the annual meeting of land trusts (Land Trust Alliance Rally). As conservation professionals, we could see the natural intersections with death and the cycle of life, as well as the potential for using burial as a tool to restore and advance future conservation. We have visited 35 natural cemeteries around the country, including the 10 conservation burial grounds currently certified by the Green Burial Council



Pathway at Kokosing Nature Preserve, Ohio.



Nature tour at Heartwood Preserve, Florida. Used with permission.