Ivy Hill Cemetery
Historical Preservation Society

ivyhillcemetery.net or IHCHPS.org
2823 King St, Alexandria, VA 22302

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Preservation in Action: Restoring and Protecting Ivy Hill's Receiving Vault

By Catherine Weinraub

Tucked within the historic grounds of Ivy Hill Cemetery is a small but important reminder of how families once cared for their dead: the cemetery's receiving vault, built in 1856. Though modest in size, the vault provides an important connection to the burial customs and practical challenges faced by families in nineteenth-century Alexandria.

In the nineteenth century, families were generally responsible for arranging the burial of their loved ones. Weather, however, could make that difficult. When the ground was frozen, muddy, or otherwise unsuitable for digging, a deceased person could temporarily be placed in the receiving vault until conditions allowed for a proper burial. The vault provided a secure and dignified place for temporary interment, allowing families to delay the burial until the ground could be properly prepared.

The receiving vault is an important part of Ivy Hill's history because it reflects funeral and burial practices from a time before modern funeral homes, mechanical excavation equipment, and today's year-round burial practices. Structures such as receiving vaults were once an important feature of rural and garden cemeteries, but relatively few survive today. Ivy Hill's vault therefore represents not only the cemetery's own history, but also a broader chapter in the history of American funerary practices.

Continuing the Preservation Work

Beginning in 2012, Ivy Hill Cemetery undertook a series of improvements to preserve and stabilize this historic structure. The vault was cleaned out, the floor was excavated, and a concrete floor was added. A new sidewalk was installed leading to the entrance, and the historic door was rehung. These improvements addressed some of the immediate needs of the structure while also making the vault more accessible for future preservation work. As part of the preservation efforts, the vault was also scanned, creating a detailed record of the structure that can provide valuable documentation for future research and conservation.

Preserving a structure that is more than 170 years old requires ongoing care. Today, the receiving vault needs a professional inspection and structural investigation to determine its current condition and identify any areas requiring repair or stabilization. A thorough assessment will help Ivy Hill Cemetery develop an appropriate preservation plan and prioritize future work.

The receiving vault is more than a historic structure—it is a tangible connection to nineteenth-century burial traditions and to the families who relied on Ivy Hill Cemetery during times of loss. Its preservation helps us understand not only how people were buried, but also how communities and families navigated death, mourning, and burial in an earlier era.

Continued preservation will ensure that this often-overlooked part of Ivy Hill's landscape remains intact and can continue to tell the story of how Alexandria's community cared for its dead—and how those traditions have changed over time.

Recent Events at the Cemetery



Our July lecture featured Jenny Waters, Museum Director of the Lee-Fendall House Museum and Garden. She presented on WWII's top-secret intelligence facility in what is now Fort Hunt Park. The site would later become connected to Wernher Von Braun's Operation Paperclip.



Our most recent lecture featured Catherine Weinraub, the Society's Historian. Dressed in period costume, she presented a fascinating look at Victorian-era mourning practices and the customs surrounding death and remembrance.



The City of Alexandria's Fire Department had their annual Wreath Laying Ceremony to honor those who lost their lives in the line of duty. The annual service dates back to 1856 and provides an opportunity for the community to come together in remembrance of those that made the ultimate sacrifice in service to others.



Ivy Hill's Tree Canopy: A Habitat for the Other Residents at Ivy Hill



Ivy Hill Cemetery's 22 acres is home to a variety of mature trees and unique flora, but the grounds also provide a haven for wildlife. From birds and squirrels to other creatures that find shelter among the trees and historic monuments, Ivy Hill is a living landscape shared by many residents. What have you seen on your Ivy Hill visits? We would love to hear about your wildlife observations! You can also share your photos by emailing them to executivedirector@ihchps.org. Thank you for helping us celebrate the diverse wildlife that calls Ivy Hill home!





Upcoming Events at the Cemetery

To celebrate our 170 year milestone, we are continuing to host a variety of events.
Mark your calendar!

Guillotine Theatre: The Funeral of Edgar Allan Poe
Friday, October 30, 7:00 PM
Outdoors at The Receiving Vault
Event Registration on our website – Limited Seating

Actors from Guillotine Theatre portray the late poet's friends & family, reading: Ligea, The Premature Burial, The Cask of Amontillado, Eleanora, &The Raven

Veterans Flag Placing
Saturday, November 7 - 1:00 PM

Ashes, Sacrifice and Remembrance: The History of the Firefighters' Memorial
Saturday, November 14, 1:00 PM
Event Registration on our website – Limited Seating

Discover the story behind the Firemen's Monument and the tragedy that inspired it. This lecture explores the devastating fire that killed seven firemen and the profound impact their sacrifice had on the city.
Learn about the events surrounding the fire, the community's response to this heartbreaking loss, and the effort to create a lasting memorial in their honor. This presentation reveals how the monument embodies 19th-century ideals of courage, sacrifice, public service, and remembrance – and why its story continues to resonate today.

Ivy Hill Cemetery Historical Preservation Society relies on your support to continue its work. Our educational programs, historical research, preservation of green spaces, and care of historic structures and monuments would not be possible without the generosity of our community.

Please look for our annual donation letter in the coming weeks, or make a contribution today through PayPal:

PayPal.me/IHCHPS

Your support helps preserve Ivy Hill's history and ensures that its stories, landscape, and monuments will continue to enrich future generations.

Thank you for being part of Ivy Hill Cemetery's story!

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