

Landmark Designation Report  
Mount Auburn Cemetery Gate and Fence

I. Location

Mount Auburn Cemetery occupies 165 acres in Cambridge and Watertown south of Mount Auburn Street and west of Coolidge Avenue. Only 15 acres in the northeastern corner of the Cemetery proper and portions of the Mount Auburn Street frontage are located within Cambridge; the remainder is in the Town of Watertown. Commencing at a point on the abutment of the Watertown Branch overpass on the south side of Mount Auburn Street, the boundary between the two municipalities lies approximately on the fence for 850 feet east to Marker 5, a stone post in the sidewalk about 18 feet outside the fence. From that point the boundary describes a straight line inside the curves of Mount Auburn Street, passing behind the fence and gates for about 1,500 feet to Marker 6 at a point two feet inside the fence opposite the intersection of Mount Auburn and Brattle Streets. The area proposed for landmark status is the area between the city line and Mount Auburn Street between Markers 5 and 6, containing the main gate structure and approximately 900 feet of fence, of which approximately 600 feet is cast iron. Ownership is held by the Proprietors of the Cemetery of Mount Auburn.

II. Description

Although a large proportion of it lies within the Town of Watertown, Mount Auburn Cemetery has always been thought of

as a Cambridge institution, and its fame is widespread, both as the burial place of many famous people and as the first garden cemetery in this country. In the middle decades of the last century Mount Auburn was regarded as one of the outstanding Boston sights and was visited both by simple townspeople and by foreign dignitaries like the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) whose visit in 1860 was commemorated by the planting of a beech tree that still stands. For the convenience of the general public, the Brattle Street horsecar line ran as far as the cemetery gate, a fact that gives some idea of the number of visitors.

The present granite gateway and cast iron fence of Mount Auburn Cemetery were erected during 1842-1844 from the designs of Dr. Jacob Bigelow (1786-1879), Professor of Medicine at Harvard University. Bigelow was among the original founders of Mount Auburn Cemetery, which was established in 1831 in conjunction with the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, the original sponsor of the project. The first efforts to create a suburban garden cemetery in Boston were made by Dr. Bigelow between 1822-1825 when he proposed a ban on church burials within Boston and organized a meeting to plan a rural cemetery in the vicinity of the city. In combination with Henry A. S. Dearborn (1783-1851), President of the Horticultural Society and George W. Brimmer (1782-1838), owner of the Mount Auburn site, the final designs for the Cemetery were developed and laid out during 1830-1832. All three men had known one another through their involvement with the planning and design of the Bunker Hill Monument in

The Egyptian Revival design for the Mount Auburn gateway was originally made by Dr. Bigelow in 1831 as an appropriate motif of immortality and funereal architecture. The conception of the Egyptian styled gateway was apparently based on the portals of the Temple at Karnac from French archeological reports of the Napoleonic expeditions in 1798-1799 as illustrated by Dominique Denon in his Description d'Egypt published in 1802 (American edition 1803). The Mount Auburn gateway follows the style of the Karnac portals with a massive lintel block decorated with a winged globe set on monumental piers. A poem taken from the consecration services for the Cemetery on September 24, 1831 is inscribed on the lintel block facing Mount Auburn Street.

The original gateway for Mount Auburn Cemetery was constructed of wood from a model by Dr. Bigelow and erected on the site of the present granite gateway in 1832. The wooden fence was also erected around the Cemetery during 1832 from the designs of H. A. S. Dearborn. Both the gateway and fence were considered temporary structures until funds could be found for more substantial materials.

In 1842 the original wooden gateway of 1832 was removed to be replaced by the present granite gateway on the same site. As far as can be determined, the granite gateway is an identical copy of the first Bigelow design in all its features and its measurements (25 feet in height, 60 feet in length). It was engineered by Octavius T. Rogers of Quincy, the only firm considered capable of handling the project. The granite blocks were cut at the Rogers quarries and

presumably shipped by barge up the Charles River to the Mount Auburn site in 1843, and the gateway was completed by 1844. The principal engineering feature of the gateway is the monolithic lintel stone, cut from a single block of granite, a considerable achievement for the period. The central gateway is flanked by companion gate lodges and two small obelisks that were part of the original Bigelow design.

The present cast iron fence of the Cemetery along Mount Auburn Street was built in 1844 from Egyptian Revival designs of Dr. Bigelow. It was erected to replace the first wooden fence of 1832 and was part of the same improvement campaign by Bigelow for the rebuilding of the Egyptian gateway. The cast iron fence was manufactured by Adams, Whitredge and Cummings of Boston with granite piers by Octavis T. Rogers from the Quincy quarries. The design of the cast iron fence was presumably based upon Egyptian sources by Dr. Bigelow and follow a naturalistic reed motif with lotus flower pickets. A similar cast iron fence with entranceway was erected on Coolidge Avenue in 1849. This fencing was recently removed, while the original Coolidge Avenue gate and its granite piers still remain intact.

Subsequent modification of the original granite gateway and cast iron fence include additions of the side entrance gates, turnstyles and the replacement of the central gate during the late nineteenth century in an appropriate Egyptian design. At this time changes were also made to the doors and windows of the gate lodges with later stabilization of the main fencing along Mount Auburn Street with concrete

abutments (1923-1926). In all other respects the granite gateway and cast iron fence of Mount Auburn Cemetery remain intact from 1844 following the original Egyptian Revival design of Jacob Bigelow from 1831.

### III. Significance

The establishment of Mount Auburn Cemetery broke many traditions in cemetery design, and signified a radical shift both in cultural concepts of death and in the treatment given human remains. Before the first decade of the nineteenth century, graves were not ostentatiously marked and cemeteries were crowded urban places dug over again and again according to the pressures for additional space. After the turn of the century, religious concepts changed and individual tombs became more ostentatious. At the same time, the concept of a rural garden cemetery, attractively landscaped as a place for enjoyment and contemplation, developed first at Pere Lachaise in Paris and then at Mount Auburn in Cambridge, which became the model for numerous garden cemeteries across the United States.

The granite gateway and cast iron fence of Mount Auburn Cemetery were conceived as a complimentary ensemble of Egyptian Revival design. Together they constitute an important survival of mid-nineteenth century American public architecture. As originally designed by Jacob Bigelow in 1831, the gateway was an innovative project for its period, the first fully realized Egyptian Revival structure in the United States. Egyptian styled gate posts had been erected in 1815 for the Westminster Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland

by Maxmillian Godefroy and Andrew Jackson Davis had proposed an Egyptian cemetery gate in 1828. In this perspective the Mount Auburn gateway is the earliest complete Egyptian Revival design for an American cemetery. Consequently, the Mount Auburn gateway served as a national model for later Egyptian cemetery gateways in the United States. Examples include Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester, New York (1838, demolished), Old Granary Burying Ground in Boston (1840), Cypress Grove Cemetery in New Orleans, Louisiana (1840), Grove Street Cemetery in New Haven, Connecticut (1844), Forest Hills Cemetery in West Roxbury (1848, demolished), and Odd Fellows Cemetery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (1849). The Egyptian gateway of Mount Auburn also inspired the construction of several similarly styled granite vault tombs within the Cemetery itself dating from the mid-nineteenth century.

The Mount Auburn gateway is also significant as an early nineteenth century example of Egyptian Revival style constructed with mid-century granite technology. The extreme simplicity and geometry of the Bigelow design shows affinity to the Neo-Classical French sources from which the gateway was derived. As such, the Mount Auburn gateway emerges as an important example of late Federal period architecture in Boston, comparable with the Bunker Hill monument with which Bigelow had been involved. From the perspective of its granite construction, the Mount Auburn gateway is also an authentic example of the Boston area granite style. It is one of the few monumental structures of its period to survive intact, and is similar to the Boston waterfront warehouses

in its engineering skill.

The cast iron fence of Mount Auburn Cemetery was originally designed by Jacob Bigelow as part of the remodeling campaign for the rebuilding of the Egyptian gateway in 1844, with a companion fence and entrance along Coolidge Avenue. The Egyptian styled fence now standing along Mount Auburn Street is a rare surviving example of early Victorian cast iron work. It is the most elaborate and extensive of the mid-nineteenth century cast iron fences now remaining in the Boston area with exceptionally well modeled Egyptian style lotus motifs for the picket finials. The Mount Auburn fence predates examples in the Back Bay, including the recently restored fence around the Public Garden. The only other contemporary cast iron fencing of similar date is that of the Bunker Hill Monument, also of Egyptian Revival character. Because the design of the Mount Auburn fence was intended as a direct complement to the gateway, the full effect of the Egyptian style sets the picturesque Victorian tone for the Cemetery. Together, the gateway and fence preserve the original Bigelow conception for the Mount Auburn entrance as a symbolic portal into the reflective world of the garden cemetery beyond.

#### IV. Relationship to Criteria for Landmark Designation

The Mount Auburn Cemetery gate and fence clearly meet the criteria for designation under paragraph four of the ordinance governing establishment of protected landmarks. They are structures "importantly associated with ... historic persons", and "with the broad architectural,

aesthetic, cultural ... or social history of the City  
(and) the Commonwealth." They are also "historically  
(and) architecturally significant (in style ...  
method of construction ... (and) association with a famous  
architect)." In many ways, the Mount Auburn gate and  
fence transcend the landmark criteria as structures which  
are associated internationally with a unique style and  
with an important cultural shift in attitudes toward  
death and cemetery design.

Arthur Krim and Charles Sullivan  
Cambridge Historical Commission  
December 3, 1981





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AND THE GREAT WALL BEING  
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