

## The Development of Oak Grove

by Jim Kiely



photo: S. Gernald

In walking through the older portions of Oak Grove Cemetery, one is struck by the naturalism of its roadway contours and overhanging oaks as well as by the process of discovery that take place while climbing its winding hills. These features and the cemetery's proximity to the Brooks Estate are clues to important nineteenth-century social developments that took place within Medford and across the country as a whole. To follow is a brief history of Oak Grove Cemetery and the historical context in which it was originally designed and operated.

In the seventeenth century, the Brooks family, who were then farmers, became the owners of a roughly triangular 400-acre land tract between the Mystic Valley Parkway and Winthrop Street – to use modern reference points. Through centuries of subdivision and land sales, the Brooks property was reduced to a few parcels near the Mystic River and

the Mystic Lakes. When wealth came to the Brooks family in the early nineteenth century, Peter Chardon Brooks I and his son, Gorham, restored the family property to nearly its original size through a series of peaceful buyouts. In the mid-1850s, Gorham bequeathed to his sons, Peter III and Shepherd, nearly all of the land comprising the family's newly reconstituted homestead.

At the time of the inheritance, the Brooks' land holdings were larger than they would ever be again. As quickly as the family had accumulated its property, Peter III, Shepherd and their uncle Edward began to sell or give it away for the greater public good. The process leading up to the first major land divestment had actually begun before Shepherd and Peter's father died in 1855 and eventually resulted in the establishment of Oak Grove Cemetery.

*continued page 5*

Seven years earlier, in November 1848, Medford had created a five-member committee to find land on which the city could establish a new burial ground. Impressed, as many communities were, with the wooded beauty of the then new Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Medford did not want to construct a barren churchyard-type cemetery but a large, picturesque area that could serve as both an interment site and a park. This immensely popular, distinctly American design concept had actually originated at Mt. Auburn, which the city of Cambridge constructed in the 1830s. First championed by physician and horticulturist Jacob Bigelow (1787-1879) and then the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, Mt. Auburn was designed to serve a public health need and what Bigelow considered an innate human need to commune with nature.

With horticulturist Henry Dearborn (1783-1851), Bigelow developed a landscape plan that radically departed from the then-typical churchyard aesthetic, and with help from the Horticultural Society, he secured construction start-up funds from the Massachusetts legislature. When Mt. Auburn first opened its gates, it presented (and still presents!) vistas that evolved as visitors moved from place to place, paths and roads that conformed with the area's topography, trees and shrubs that grew in naturalistic patterns, and a pond that seemed to have been created by anything but human force. In 1850, the cemetery also contained a forest of some 30,000 North American and European trees and shrubs that had been selected from nurseries Dearborn had established to diversify the area's horticulture.



Home of Gorham Brooks in West Medford around the mid-1800s.

How popular did Mt. Auburn become? By 1853, its somewhat overwhelmed custodians instituted ticket sales to control the influx of visitors, many of whom would travel from different parts of the country to experience the cemetery. By any measure, Mt.



Photo: S. Gerswald

Auburn set the standard for American cemetery design, and Medford was just one of many American municipalities that wished to replicate it.

In March 1849, Medford's special committee issued a recommendation that the town spend up to \$550 an acre to purchase 10.5 acres of land from local resident Leonard Buckman. The city first approved the recommendation, but after purchasing the land in 1851, it opted to build an alms house on the property instead. In July 1852 the search committee was reconstituted, and one month later it recommended that Medford purchase 12 acres of

Brooks family land at the corner of Winthrop Street and Playstead Road.

Medford approved the \$5,000 purchase of Rock Pasture, as the Brooks family called it, in part because it shared many of Mt. Auburn Cemetery's physical characteristics. According to contemporary accounts it "had a varied surface of hill, valley and plain; was well covered with young oaks and beautiful forest-trees; its soil was dry and not liable to injury from rain...." In March 1853, Medford instructed the committee to prepare the property for use, which it did by, among other things, laying out pathways and erecting a stone wall at a total cost of \$7,510. Following an October consecration ceremony, the town raised approximately \$1,600 toward the bill through the auction and private sale of burial plots to Medford citizens.

continued page 6

### **Oak Grove** *continued*

Rules adopted to govern this new patch of public land, christened Oak Grove Cemetery, indicate the extent to which Medford wished to preserve both its sanctity and its park-like nature. Written alongside rules pertaining to burial depth, plot ownership, exhumation and even the discharge of firearms were prohibitions on building tombs and monuments, and statements that encouraged plot owners to plant trees, shrubs and flowers. In sum, the final document stated, "the town of Medford will forever keep in good repair the fence, gates, carriage-ways, and footpaths of the cemetery, and make a secure place of burial for the dead, and an attractive resort for the living." On many occasions, enthused citizens approved financial measures to add and preserve landscape features, a fact in evidence today as you wind along the old cemetery's footpaths beneath ancient oak and maple trees.

By 1873, the cemetery had become too small to meet the demand for space, so Medford voted that a "proper committee be authorized to purchase the land of [the Brooks family] adjoining the cemetery, at a price not exceeding \$1,000 per acre." The pur-

chase was approved and executed in 1875 for \$21,700. When the additional 22 acres were added to the cemetery, the town extended its original set of rules and regulations across the entire property to create a coherent, picturesque whole.

In 1902, Shepherd Brooks gave the cemetery an additional 10 acres of land, which is located behind the former Gleason School on Playstead Road. This was the last parcel of land that would be added to the cemetery before Medford gained control over the last of the Brooks property in the early 1940s. The cemetery's original park aesthetic was not built into this 10-acre addition. Instead a grid replaced the winding roads and paths of the nineteenth century, trees and shrubs were planted sparingly and headstones were laid closer together. Later additions to the cemetery would follow the same suit owing primarily to the great increase in the number of Medford residents over time and the disappearance of open, available land. Nonetheless, for nearly 160 years Oak Grove has preserved much of what made its older sections noteworthy. That it borders the present Brooks Estate is a tribute to the family that made it possible.