The Voice of Vale Cemetery

Established 1857

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Fall 2026 **Schenectady, N.Y.**

Letter from the President:

Dear Friends of Vale Cemetery,

As we reflect on the past several months, I am grateful for the dedication of our staff, volunteers, and supporters who help preserve and enhance our historic cemetery.

I am pleased to report that our grounds staff have remounted more than 80 monuments and headstones throughout the cemetery. Many of these repairs were necessary due to vandalism, while others resulted from age, weather, and shifting ground. These efforts help ensure that the memorials of Vale Cemetery remain safe, dignified, and lasting tributes.

I also want to share that Vale Cemetery Preservation, Inc. is moving forward with a professional study to guide the long-term maintenance and preservation of the historic McEvoy House at 907 State Street. This important step will help us better understand the building's preservation needs and develop a responsible plan for its future stewardship.

At our Annual Lot Owners' Meeting in October, we were pleased to elect Margaret "Maggie" Brown to the Board of Trustees of the Vale Cemetery Association. Maggie brings a strong commitment to our work, and we look forward to her contributions as we continue to preserve and improve the cemetery. Please join me in welcoming Maggie.

As always, we encourage members of the public to visit the beautiful grounds of Vale Cemetery to experience its rich history, remarkable monuments, and peaceful landscape. We also invite you to become more involved through our volunteer programs and special guided tours. Information about upcoming volunteer opportunities and tour schedules will be included in our Spring newsletter, Facebook, Website and we hope you will consider joining us in preserving this community treasure.

Thank you for your continued support of Vale Cemetery. Together, we are preserving an important part of Schenectady's history for future generations.
Sincerely,

Thomas Ciancetta
President, Vale Cemetery Assocation

Vale Cemetery 2026 Tours and Events Recap — By Paul Contarino:

Vale Cemetery hosted another great season of tours and recognizes all those who conducted them. The season commenced with Sue McLane's *Victorian Lady in Mourning*, followed by Betsy Henry's *Nature Walk though Vale Park*. Scott Haefner led *The Dutch and Early Settlers* as well as the *Giants of Industry*. George Steele presented *Birding at Vale*, followed by an *Owl Prowl*. Mike Diana led *Schenectady and the American Revolution*; Jeff Austin presented *Schenectady and the Civil War* and Paula Lemire led the *1857 Map Tour*.

Meanwhile, this year's Juneteenth commemoration experienced a large turnout with renewed interest in the African American Ancestral Burial Ground. The Cemetery thanks the Hamilton Hill Arts Center and Community Fathers for their continued collaboration as well as the Schenectady County Historical Society and former VCA board member, Julia Holcomb, in their efforts to document overall African American history in Schenectady.

Vale continued its efforts to improve the grounds in and around Vale Park. These efforts included participation in **Caring for Your Cemetery Day,** sponsored by the New York State Division of Cemeteries (4/25), and two clean-up days with **One Schenectady** (5/31 and 10/25) both of which highly productive.

Meanwhile, a team of Masons from **St. George's Lodge** led by Ed Mosso, cleared out fallen branches around the grave of Mordecai Myers grave (B2) and removed brush from the Christopher Yates plot (7/25). After a brief hiatus, the sheep returned to graze the Dell, courtesy of Dutch Barn Farms, once again earning widespread acclaim from visitors.

Melody Howarth conducted her popular gravestone cleaning



Photo taken by Paula Lemire of the Mason Clean-Up of the Yates Plot.

and repair classes (4/10), while the Cemetery also celebrated Arbor Day with a tree-planting event, assisted by the City of Schenectady and Betsy Henry of ReTree Schenectady.

We also thank the many individuals who picked up bags of litter throughout the year and reported incidents as they arose. Every effort, no matter how small, makes a difference. The broader community is taking notice, and that growing sense of stewardship is having a positive impact on the Cemetery and Vale Park.

Restoration of the Grand Army Plot — By Paula Lemire, Office Administrator:

The plot is spacious and most beautifully located in the center of the Cemetery…This provision is wise and thoughtful, and characterized by the great forethought and watchfulness that has always marked the present management of the Cemetery.
Evening Star & Times, May 21, 1862

The Civil War had been raging for a year and Union casualties were increasing, both those killed in battle and those who died shortly thereafter from wounds, as well as those who died of diseases that spread quickly through camps.

While many soldiers were buried near the battlefields and camps where they died, there were families who made private arrangements to bring their fallen sons home for burial. Some grieving kin made the journey themselves while some hired undertakers or others to handle the process. (The practical concerns of preserving soldiers' bodies to return home for burial led to the rise of modern embalming with many undertakers setting up portable shops near Army camps.) Some of the soldiers whose remains were sent back north were buried in family-owned plots. Many cemeteries also began to set aside lots for those who fell in battle or died in local military hospitals, as well as whose families lacked the means to purchase burials spaces.



Photo taken by Paula Lemire of the Grand Army of the Republic lot following restoration.

In Schenectady, the Evening Star & Times newspaper noted that "City Authorities have not made any appropriation for the burial of our soldiery who may be carried home from this war; nor selected any burial lot for the purpose. The Vale Cemetery Association, therefore, at their last meeting, selected a lot for the reception of the bodies of our patriot dead."

The motion to create a plot for the fallen at Vale was unanimously approved by the Cemetery's Board of Trustees on May 23, 1862 and read, in part, "resolved….to select a suitable plot, surveyed and laid out as first class, for the free interment of such soldiers, residents of Schenectady, who have fallen or who may hereafter fall in the defense of their country in the present rebellion."

The 40-grave plot selected was in the section bounded by Linden Way and Elm Wood Way (now Section N). The first interment was George Creghenek who was born in Hungary on August 15, 1822 and died on May 16, 1862. Little else is known about him; his white marble stone is generally illegible except for his name and a flag. The final interment in the plot was William M. Shepherd was laid to rest in 1920. A native of Ohio who served in Company D, 42nd Indiana Infantry, he spent his final years in the Schenectady area. The plot, teardrop-shaped and arranged around a central flagpole, became known as The Grand Army of The Republic lot after the massive veterans organization formed in 1866.

This summer the plot underwent a complete restoration thanks to a cemetery conservator who anonymously donated the work, as well as the Colonel George L. Willard Camp #54 of the Sons of Union Veterans of The Civil War and volunteers. All of the headstones were cleaned, fallen stones were repaired and reset, and a new flag raised. One stone was damaged beyond repair and a new stone has been applied for through the Veterans Administration.

Victorian Mourning Practices — By Jeff Austin:

Victorian mourning practices transformed grief from a private emotion into a highly structured public ritual that shaped America's expressions of loss and cultural attitudes toward death.

Queen Victoria's lifelong mourning of Prince Albert's death in 1863 created a highly formalized "cult of grief". Her influence on women's fashion led to strict, multi-stage rules for wearing black.

The first stage of Victorian mourning, called deep or full mourning, involved strict isolation, a withdrawal from society immediately following a loved one's death. The wearing of non-reflective heavy silk crepe, intentionally coarse and scratchy, reflected the internal burden of grief. Full-length black veils, called weeping veils or widow's weeds, completely covered the face, with black bonnets, gloves, and parasols completing the ensemble. No jewelry was worn. This lasted up to a year; deep mourning was about creating distance from everyday life.

After several months, women transitioned to a second or "ordinary" mourning. This included slightly softer or shinier fabrics

like silk and understated jewelry made of jet or vulcanite, often including hair from the deceased (memento mori). This lasted nine to twelve months. Half mourning involved the gradual return to society as grief gradually lifted. After 18 months to two years, women could incorporate muted colors such as mauve, lavender, and grey.

Clothes expressed gender roles, social hierarchy and demanded a public performance that fell mostly to women, who might remain in their grieving clothes for up to four years! While their mourning clothes were unmistakable, men's mourning attire followed simpler rules, meant to be less restrictive and brief. Deep mourning for men lasted about a year. They wore standard dark suits, black gloves, cufflinks and cravats, and a dark hat with a black crepe or silk hat band called a "weeper" that was tied so that the long fabric tails hung down the back of the hat. Children weren't required to wear mourning clothes; however, the staff of wealthy households were expected to conform.

These rigid multi-staged Victorian rituals of grief quickly crossed the Atlantic to reshape American society. Victorian styles became a widespread social norm. This trend accelerated as high mortality rates from disease and the onset of the Civil War made death a constant presence in American life. This led to the rise of department stores catering specifically to mourning attire. Mourning photography (post-mortem portraits) provided loved ones with a prized family keepsake. The popularity of embalming - originally used to transport war casualties - kept bodies presentable for extended Victorian-style viewing rituals. This trend also signaled the start of a shift from traditional funerals in one's home parlor where families washed and prepared the body to professional undertakers and their funeral parlors.



A Victorian woman wearing a widow's cap. Illustration from The Strand Magazine (1890). Photo retrieved from Wikipedia.org.

Strict mourning rules and rituals were expensive, placing financial burdens on many households. Wealthy American families were able to maintain elaborate wardrobes and visit specialized mourning salons. However, poorer families could not afford new black wardrobes, so they frequently had to dye their everyday clothes black in outdoor vats using inexpensive or natural dyes, leading to a faded or overdyed appearance and the pungent smell of dye wafting over 19th century towns.

Victorian mourning structures encouraged more empathic interactions, helping create a culture where grief was openly recognized and respected, bridging the gap between personal sorrow and public communal support, ensuring no one felt alone during their time of loss.

The Gravestone Cleaning Classes — By Melody Howarth:

A gravestone cleaning class is offered in partnership with SUNY Schenectady's Community Archaeology Program as an elective within their two-year certificate. It runs as a one-day seminar in both April and October. The next one is scheduled for April 3rd, 2027 from 10:00am-2:30pm through the college.

The course covers gentle cleaning methods specifically designed to protect historically significant stones, such as marble, limestone, shale, and sandstone—many of which can be found at the Vale Cemetery. We also address cleaning granite, a denser material commonly used today, using a similar process. By the end of the seminar, students gain the skills needed to safely clean family gravestones or participate in preservation projects, without causing further harm to compromised stones.

To register, please keep an eye on the Workforce Development section of the SUNY Schenectady website or call 518-595-1101. Melody's contact info is below for any further questions.

MB Restorations LLC
Gravestone Care and Repair
Phone: 518-441-4068
Email: melzbellesrestorations@gmail.com

Donations:

Please consider making a donation to Vale Cemetery Preservation Inc. Contributions go a long way in maintaining and preserving cemetery grounds and neighboring Vale Park and allows our organization to hosts tours and events. VCPI is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Checks can be made out to Vale Cemetery Preservation Inc or donations made online. https://valecemetery.org/help

VALE CEMETERY

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Vale Cemetery Association
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- Superintendent-Clark Adams
- Crematory Operator-James Carpenter
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Please contact Vale Cemetery
by phone or email for the following:

- To receive your newsletter via e-mail (Vale continues its efforts to go green)
- Had a change of address or e-mail?
- Know someone who would like to receive the newsletter?
- Unsubscribe to the newsletter
- Volunteer opportunities
- Have an idea for a tour or event? (there is a tours/ events committee that meets)
- Would like to advertise your business in our newsletter

