

The Voice of Vale Cemetery Established 1857

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Spring 2026

Schenectady, N.Y.

Letter from the President:

Dear Friends of Vale Cemetery,

As the seasons turn and our community looks for places of reflection, discovery, and connection, I invite you to spend time exploring the remarkable landscape of Vale Cemetery. For more than 170 years, Vale has been a place where history, nature, and community come together—and today, it continues to offer a peaceful refuge in the heart of Schenectady.

Many are surprised to learn that Vale is recognized as a **Class 1 Arboretum** (<https://arbnet.org/morton-register/vale-arboretum/>), home to an extraordinary collection of trees that represent both our natural heritage and our ongoing commitment to preservation. Whether you are a longtime visitor or discovering Vale for the first time, the grounds offer something new to appreciate in every season.

We are pleased to offer **guided tours** that highlight the stories of the people who shaped our region, the artistry of our monuments, and the ecological richness of our landscape. These tours provide a wonderful opportunity to deepen your understanding of the history and culture embedded in our grounds.

Of course, you are always welcome to enjoy a **self-guided walk** at your own pace. Wander the winding paths, admire the historic monuments and inscriptions on burial sites, observe the wildlife, or simply enjoy a quiet

moment beneath the canopy of our arboretum. Vale belongs to all of us, and we are proud to share it with the community.

I hope you will visit soon and experience the beauty, history, and serenity that make Vale Cemetery such a treasured part of Schenectady.
Warm regards,
Thomas Ciancetta
President, Vale Cemetery Association

Vale Looking for Volunteers:

Vale could use assistance with trash and branch collection, raking, the placing of flags on veterans graves, inventorying tipped stones and stone cleaning. We are also looking to rework the landscaping around the urn garden and possibly develop a memorial rose garden. Additionally, the cemetery is looking to further organize some of the records in the caretaker's house. Help is needed for desk coverage during tours and events. If interested, please call or email the main office. Opportunities will be posted on the main Facebook page as well.



Photo taken by Paula Lemire from last year's Caring for your Cemetery Day

Upcoming 2026 Tours at Vale Cemetery:

Below is Vale Cemetery's tour schedule for 2026. Please note tours commence at 2pm on Sunday and those on Thursday at 5:30pm. All tours begin at the historic Caretaker's House and the cost is \$10.00 per attendee (children under 12 free.) If you are a member of Vale Cemetery Preservation Inc. it is free. Tours typically last between 1.5 and 2 hours. Each one will also be announced on the Cemetery's Facebook page as time draws closer.

- Sunday, May 3rd-Victorian Lady in Mourning - Sue McLane
- Thursday, June 4th - Dutch and Early Settlers and their Influence on the Development of Schenectady - Scott Haefner
- Thursday, June 18th-1857 Map Tour - Paula Lemire
- Thursday, July 9th - Schenectady and the American Revolution - Mike Diana
- Thursday, August 6th - Giants of Industry - Chris Hunter
- Sunday, September 13th - Schenectady and the Civil War - Jeff Austin
- Sunday, October 4th - Notable Women - Sue McLane

Upcoming 2026 Events at Vale Cemetery:

Below are the events currently scheduled. Please note other will arise throughout the year, so be to check our Facebook page. These include gravestone cleaning classes and the inventorying of tipped stones, the American Revolution 250th and the interment of the skull at Union College and much more. Additionally, Vale is partnering with ReTree Schenectady for nature walks and identifying invasive species of plant life.

- Friday, April 24th - Arbor Day - 10am
- Saturday, April 25th - Caring for your Cemetery Day - 10am - 1pm (Rain date 4/26/2026)
- Saturday, June 6th - Birding at Vale - George Steele - 7:30am
- Sunday, November 8th - Stockadathon



*Monument commemorating the 57 American Revolution soldiers.
Location - Vale Park*

Memorial Day Commemoration:

The Vale Cemetery will observe Memorial Day at 10:30 a.m. May 25th with a formal ceremony. Taps, a flag raising, and the National Anthem will be on the program. Veterans' groups representing all military branches will participate. Local dignitaries will speak briefly at the Veterans' Plot. Participants will assemble at Vale's Veteran Section near the main entrance at 907 State St.

Juneteenth Celebration:

On Friday, June 19th at 6pm, Vale Cemetery will host a Juneteenth celebration at the African American Ancestral Burial Ground. Juneteenth commemorates the last slaves freed under the Emancipation Proclamation, June 19th, 1865. Individuals such as runaway slave Moses Viney and Jared Jackson (served in Civil War) are buried in this plot. Moses Viney's grave received the Underground Railroad Network to Freedom designation.



Children of The Vale - By Jeff Austin:

Making plans to visit a local cemetery? Most of us focus on visiting the memorials, headstones, and graves of older relatives and friends. We remember and celebrate beloved parents and grandparents, cousins and mentors many of who lived long, productive, and interesting lives. But historic Vale Cemetery has a large population that rivals the number of these revered senior citizens: Children. There is something especially heartbreaking about the loss of a young child, of a bright future suddenly gone dark. Their premature deaths upset the natural order dictating that parents predecease their progeny. Unfortunately, as in any war, natural disaster, or outbreak of disease, it is the young children who suffer the most.

Despite the wonders of the emerging modern world, the mid-19th century was depressingly similar

in some ways to the late Middle Ages. In American cities, food and water sources were subject to contamination, and crude sewage disposal systems, strained by overcrowding, spawned vermin which in turn, spread disease. Epidemics raged unchecked across the globe and vaccines were still decades away. Young children had no resistance, no immunity to the recurring waves of disease that flooded their world.

Early death records in Schenectady and other cities were mostly recitations of symptoms as opposed to causes-examples include “diarrhea” or convulsions”. In 1850, the leading cause of death in children was infectious disease, accounting for one-third of all children newborn to one year. Another 25% of deaths occurred in children aged one to four. These were mostly respiratory diseases, such as “consumption” (TB), pneumonia, bronchitis, and pneumonia, but other common diseases of the time included cholera, scarlet fever, measles, and whooping cough.



Photo taken by Jeff Austin.

Before 1900, prenatal care was rare; medical attention centered around labor and delivery, which had its own potential perils. Most religions encouraged large families, with some prohibiting contraception, which was often ineffective or hazardous. Fertility was a sign of the Lord’s favor, lending prestige to families “blessed by God”.

Reaching the age of five was a significant milestone as 30% to 50% of children during this period did not. Surviving until the teen years greatly increased the chances of reaching adulthood, as infectious disease centered on younger children. Surviving childhood meant that adults could reasonably expect to live into their 60s or even 70s, as child mortality rates greatly skewed overall life expectancy. It is impossible for us today to immerse ourselves in a paradigm where you knew your children had a 50/50 chance of reaching adulthood. It speaks to a weary resignation, an acceptance of death buoyed by strong religious beliefs expressed through communal worship and prayer. Mourners were supported by sympathetic neighbors and friends; few families were spared a similar tragedy.

By 1900, pneumonia and tuberculosis emerged as the leading causes of childhood death, with overcrowding and contaminated milk contributing to an overall 30%

death rate in young ones under five. Progress brought purer water supplies, efficient sewers and the first vaccines, greatly improving overall quality of life. Emerging programs mothers-to-be and newborns began to address long-standing concerns, and pasteurization meant safer milk. But the young children of America continued to die at a disproportionate and alarming rate. In older cemeteries such as Vale, it is not uncommon to see two large adult stones in line with two, three or more children’s stones.

Most children’s headstones are easy to see. They are often white marble-symbols of purity. They are usually smaller in stature and depth, some crowned by a lamb or cherub. Lambs, the most common, represent innocence in the eyes of Christ the Shepard, the Lamb of God. Cherubs are guardian angels watching over their fallen charges. Broken flower buds or stems signify a life cut short. Other common symbols include daisies, doves, fawns and baby rabbits. Short poems or statements of grief often adorn the bottom of their headstones, some including calls to God. Some headstones bear no formal name, being referred to as “Baby _____” or “Infant Child of _____”. Many had no separate stone made at the time of their death. Their names would be added later to their parents’ headstones when they reunited.

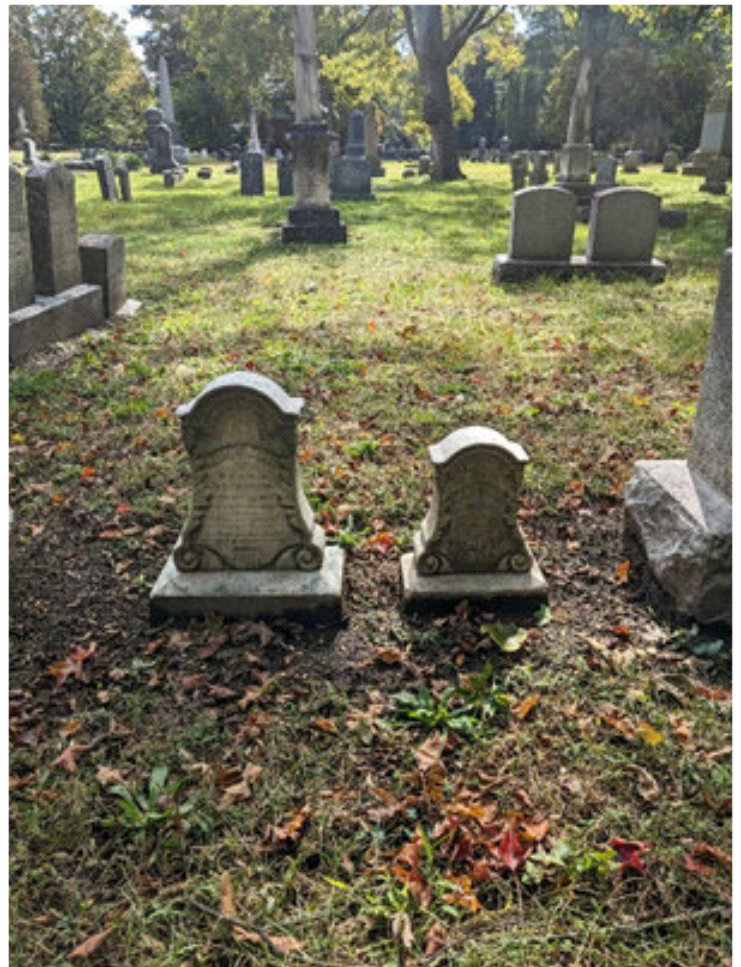


Photo taken by Jeff Austin.

Children were interred separately from their parents for many reasons. Some families practiced a religion preventing stillborn children from being buried in consecrated ground, believing they had no soul before baptism. To this day, cemeteries across the country have dedicated children's areas or parks where the recently deceased can make "friends and play" with other interred children as it might be decades before their parents would join them in death. It was and still is common for children to be later reunited in their parents' plot.

Economic factors also played a part; a child's headstone, plot, and other burial expenses were much less than adults but still too dear for some—a significant point when considering the large numbers of young deaths at the time. These and some other separated infants and babies, as well as other unidentified young souls, were buried with neither ceremonies nor headstones. They are identified by their location but have no markers.

It is a persistent misconception that parents waited to name their children until they were older. High infant mortality rates often prompted quick namings and baptisms—sometimes on the same day. This ensured the child was recognized by God before their death. A favored name given to a child who died was usually given to the next newborn same-sexed child. In some cases, first names had implications for inheritance. Treasured and handed-down names honored ancestors and cemented the continuation of legacies.

By 1930, improved hygiene standards, water filtration, health education, and child nutritional programs had significantly lowered the infant mortality rate. More effective and available vaccine greatly reduced deaths in all age groups, especially in children. The introduction of sulfa drugs in the late 1930s and the advent of penicillin in the 1940s ushered in a new era of better health outcomes.

By 1955, accidents took more children's lives than infectious diseases, as doctors turned their attention to preventive medicine. That same year, the polio vaccine was introduced to a grateful nation, including two anxious Schenectady parents about to give birth to a future Vale staff writer! By the modern age, the overall infant mortality rate had dropped by more than 95%. Life expectancy went from 50 in 1900 to 76 by 2000—a testament to the continuing importance of modern science and research.

To wander through Vale is to witness the evolution of modern medicine as seen through the lens of those who came before us. Their bravery and stoic acceptance of inconsolable loss is an example for all of us about overcoming odds and persevering in the face of personal tragedy. These small stones stand as sad and gentle reminders of our ancestors' resilience and the unforgiving price they paid for living in an era before

modern medicine eased the grief of having children.

Source used to compose this article:

1) Robert V. Wells. *Facing the 'King of Terrors': Death and Society in an American Community, 1750-1990*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, UK 2000.
<https://www.amazon.com/Facing-King-Terrors-Community-1750-1990/dp/0521633192>

**The Soul Effigies of John Zuricher -
By Paula Lemire:**

Amid the mostly white marble stones in the First Reformed Church plot (Section I), the sandstone markers stand out and not only for their deep russet color; many of these headstones are carved with winged faces known as soul effigies and many of them are the work of stone carver John Zuricher.

Soul effigies became popular as funerary art in New England, northern New Jersey, New York City, and the lower Hudson Valley in the early to mid-18th century. The winged faces replaced the earlier "memento mori" design of a winged skull and represented the human soul as it ascends from earthly morality to heavenly immortality. The designs ranged from crude or cartoonish to elaborate heads complete with crowns or even curled wigs. Towards the late 18th century, soul effigies fell out of favor as weeping willows and classically inspired urns became the most popular designs for headstones.



Photo taken by Paula Lemire.

Based in New York City, John (or Johannes) Zuricher was one of the most prolific gravestone carvers in the above regions, reportedly creating nearly twenty percent of the surviving Dutch-language stones in the lower Hudson Valley. There are known works as far south as South Carolina.

Active from the late 1740s through the beginning of the Revolution, his works are easily recognized. His inscriptions are often in Dutch, though he also worked in English as well. His lettering is simple, elegant, and usually well-spaced. The finals are often carved with tight spirals. The wings typically feature crescent-shaped cuts to delineate feathers.

The faces of Zuricher's soul effigies vary in shape and are quite whimsical. Some smile, others like stoic or even a little glum. Some are topped with spirals suggesting hair, crowns (representing heavenly glory), or flames (representing the immortal spirit). Several depict flowers which seem to sprout from the heads. One example in Westchester County has a pineapple!

Zuricher also carved at least some of the sandstone mile markers placed along the Albany Post Road between Albany and New York City, some of which still survive.

Zuricher's date of birth is unknown, but his name hints at possible Swiss origins. He married in the Reformed Church in Manhattan in 1745 and died at Haverstraw, Orange County, in 1784.



Photo taken by Paula Lemire.

Vale has almost a dozen examples of Zuricher's art; many of them are in remarkable condition. There are also several badly worn stones which show some traces of his style. Our neighbors in the historic Stockade, St. George's Episcopal Church and the First Presbyterian Church also have Zuricher stones in their graveyards.

Some of the Zuricher stones at Vale include:

- Annatye Vedder (1761)
- Mary Vedder (1761)
- Jacobus Vedder (1762)
- Aengelte Beek (1758)
- Catherine Campbell (1767)
- Sanders Van Schaick (1762)

It's not known if any of these stones are signed as the carver's signature typically appeared close to the base and would now be concealed by the earth.

Sources used to compose this article:

- 1) Deetz, James, *Small Things Forgotten*
- 2) Richards, Brandon, *Hier Leydt Begraven: A Primer on Dutch Colonial Gravestones*. Northeast Historical Archaeology, Volume 43, Article 2, 2014
- 3) Veit, Richard and Baugher, Shereen, John Zuricher, Stone Cutter, and His Imprint on the Religious Landscape of Colonial New York

Attention Lot Owners:

Vale Cemetery Association will host a day for lot owners to come and clean off old decorations from their graves and plant flowers. Garbage bins will be placed around the cemetery for easy disposal of items. The date of this clean-up is scheduled for Saturday, May 16th from 10am-5pm.

Call for Historical Records:

Vale Cemetery Preservation Inc is again looking for historical documents such as postcards, photos, maps, drawings, reports, newspaper articles and ledger books telling of the cemetery's rich past. Vale is interested in adding this information to our archives and potentially place it online. If you would like to donate items or allow us to digitize and then return them, please email or call the main office.

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 Preservation Inc (VCPI)

Membership:

We are currently offering individual memberships at an annual cost of \$25.00. Member benefits currently include free admission to public tours, attendance of VCPI meetings and the ability to elect a Board of Directors at the annual meeting held in December. You can apply for membership on the Cemetery's main website or send a check made out to Vale Cemetery Preservation Inc.



Vale Cemetery

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Vale Cemetery Association Board of Trustees and Staff:

- President-Thomas Ciancetta
- Vice-President-John Gearing
- Secretary-Daniel Bradt
- Treasurer-Marion "Jet" Jackson
- Elena Alvarez
- Jill Bogdanowicz-Wilson
- Angela Commito
- Carla Hernas, VMD
- William Mclean "Mac" Sudduth
- Superintendent-Clark Adams
- Crematory Operator-James Carpenter
- Office Administrator-Paula Lemire

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

