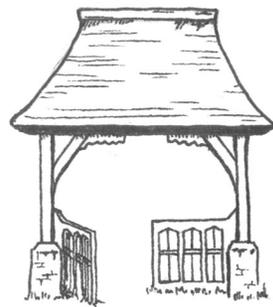




# HOME BURIAL



## A PRACTICAL GUIDE



Woolly Press  
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*Em Willey* is a gravedigger and caretaker of a green burial cemetery in Western North Carolina. They are also a member of Woven Ends Collective, a small organization advocating autonomous deathcare practice through education and collaboration with folks responding to death in their communities. If this zine has sparked a desire to know more or establish a cemetery on your land for home burial, please reach out to [wovenends@proton.me](mailto:wovenends@proton.me) for guidance and encouragement.

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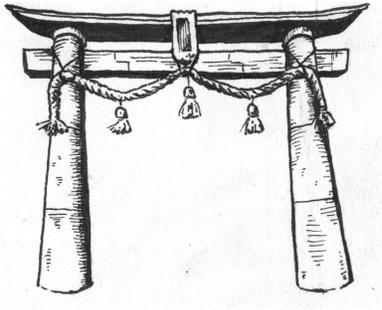
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# Home Burial

*A Practical Guide*

*“Mourn the dead, and fight like hell for the living.”*

*-Mary Harris ‘Mother’ Jones*



## *Introduction*

This zine serves as a practical guide to carrying out a home burial or, more specifically, burying our dead on privately owned land. The following pages make the case for burial as a communal effort, unbound from concerns of cost and profit, and also discuss the bureaucratic and practical aspects of home burial in detail.

The scope of legal information in this zine applies strictly to the U.S. but other sections can certainly apply anywhere. I hope this can serve as a valuable guide during the time of someone's death and also as an encouragement to evolve our burial practices toward something more holistic and autonomous.

A home burial is distinct from a home funeral—the practice of caring for a dead person in one's home. The scope of home burial that follows is also not a guide to establishing a cemetery for profit on private land. The term “home burial,” for our purposes, involves no monetary exchange.

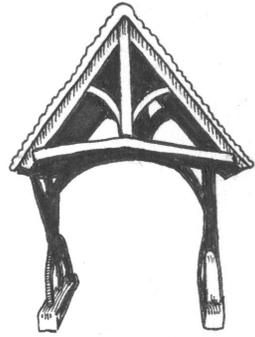
In whatever condition you find yourself when picking up this zine, I hope you can be assured that when we must carry someone to their

grave, we do so together. No one is laid to rest alone. Some of what is written here may seem obvious or intuitive, but grief has a tendency to overwhelm. It is helpful to have plans or practices written down proactively, so we can rely on a clear document instead of our unsteady minds in the aftermath of a death. It's also worth laying out some guidelines since our instincts around death ritual and burial practices have long been undernourished as funeral industries have privatized many practices of caring for the dead.

## *Conclusion*

What comes after a burial can only be known when the time comes. With so many roles to practice, there are a variety of emotional states to experience after participating in home burial. We certainly expect grief in some form but feelings may arise far different from deep sorrow, too. Sometimes I'm struck with a surge of vibrancy after a burial— reminding myself to wield existence passionately and to cherish my loved ones while we are still together. Eventually this feeling yields to other more commonplace ones, the hum of daily demands resumes, but still I continue to hold this reminder in the background. I have felt a sense of awe in the collective effort contributed to a home burial. Looking around at friends and family after the grave is closed, I have thought: wow, we did this well. Gratitude comes alongside that— for the will to show up and work through something difficult together. We all end up traversing a diverse emotional landscape after a home burial and there is no reliable means to prepare for that journey. As best we can, letting go of expectations and just being present can supply what we need in each moment. Easier said than done.

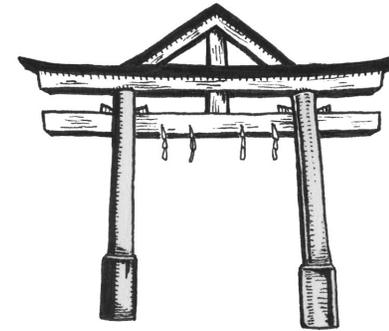
How do we appreciate our loved ones while they live with the same sincerity as when they have died? This question has nudged me again and again in the years I've spent burying friends and strangers. Practicing deathcare informs how we live as much as how we die. This work can germinate seeds of inquiry into profound mysteries and universal human experiences. It can also be simply ordinary and even mundane. No matter the sort, it is a privilege to care for the dead. I hope when each of us encounters this care, we receive something born from the heart by those we love.



### *Closing the Grave*

The practical task of closing a grave is very intuitive and straightforward. A few recommendations: first, when beginning to fill the grave, place each scoop of soil around the body or the casket. Once that space is filled, then scoops can be put on top of the container. Go slowly, be easy on your body, and share the task with as many willing participants as possible. The physicality of closing a grave can be very cathartic to the grief process. Tend to your heart and your breath as you go.

In order to preserve the soil horizons of the gravesite, make sure to place the soil back into the grave in the reverse order that you removed it. Filling the grave starts with the largest pile—the subsoil. Then you'll move to the topsoil pile and finish with the humus layer. It can be helpful to have two folks shoveling into the grave together while two more people pushing dirt from the back of the pile towards the front. The tarps underneath are helpful for consolidating the dirt as you go. Again, if a good heap of rocks was removed during the digging of the grave, most of that mineral material can return to the grave. Keep a few stones set aside for decorating the grave mound if you wish. By the end of the task, the closed grave will have mounded dirt above ground level.



### *A Case for Home Burial*

Many of us have attended or participated in burials carried out by funeral homes in conventional cemeteries and upon reflection, have wondered: why do we do it this way? The common trappings of these burials—the tidy grid of headstones on closely-mowed grass, the pile of dirt covered by green astroturf, a shining lacquered casket poised above a concrete-lined hole—have become the norm. The proceedings may seem very tidy and professional. Moments to participate in the practical act of burial are sparse and might only be ceremonial. While much effort is applied to superficial appearance, something is lacking in emotional expression beyond an obligatory sadness. It's no wonder that carrying the tone of this ritual in our hearts and memories can feel unsettling, especially when it feels contrary to the ways we need to grieve. This dissonance can lead to states of unease or regret, enflaming already difficult emotional landscapes we encounter in the aftermath of a death. For so many of us, even our capacity to imagine our own funeral is narrowed by the industrial norms of our modern funeral practices. But it's not just our imaginations that are limited. When it comes time to face the real experience of burying a loved one, we often feel that we have no choice but to accept the few options provided by a funeral

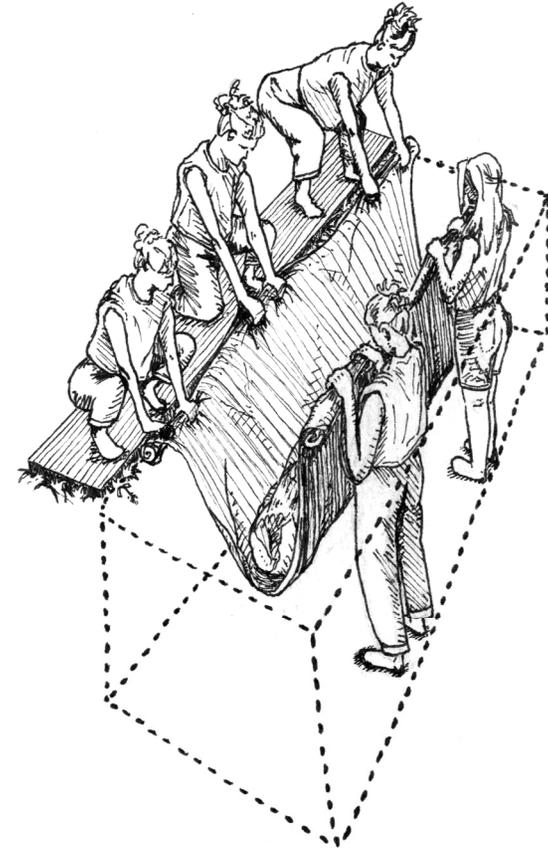
home, at significant financial cost. If we want to be buried and have a place for our loved ones to visit, but the expense is too much, what options do we have? How can we facilitate a burial that resonates with the need to be unrestrained in our grief, to wholly honor someone's life?

The context of modern burial practices has a lengthy history, one especially entwined with our cultural delusions of permanence and separation. Consider the act of embalming a body, sealing it in an aluminum casket, and burying it in a concrete lined grave. There's hardly an act that more obviously separates someone from the wholeness of the earth. So much effort goes into subverting natural processes at a conventional cemetery that a nearly desperate feeling of control permeates the space. Even the native ecology present at these cemeteries is made to submit to a highly controlled monoculture of grass. So it is above and below— control, at all costs.

The fundamental reason these industrialized burial and funeral rites exist is that basic human needs are a source of profit. We live in a time in which our ability to care for someone after their death is privatized by industry. This business has made nearly all practices of caring for the dead their exclusive privilege. And in doing so, they have commodified death, the universal experience all beings face. What a time to die.

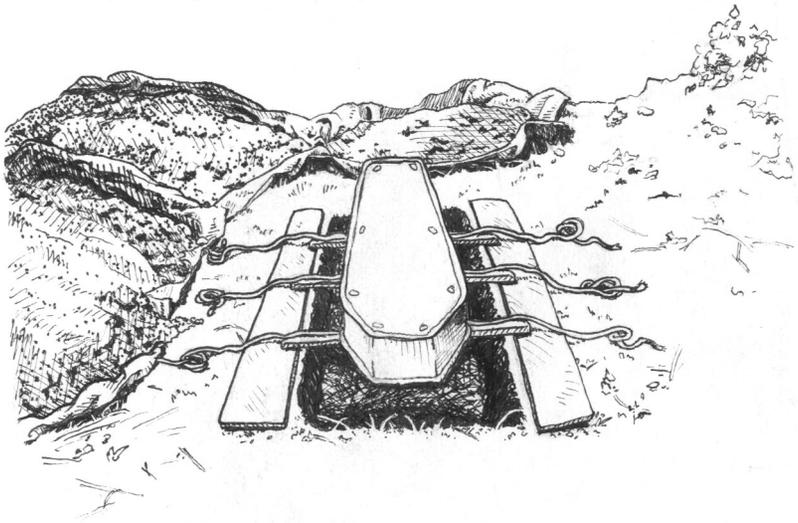
The debt incurred from U.S. funeral costs alone is enough to demand a different method. But even more harrowing is the immeasurable toll taken on our spirits. It is perhaps this profound damage that leads many of us to yearn for and practice alternatives to many of our human customs maligned by the greed for capital. With deathcare specifically, we can work around, or limit, our need for the services of funeral industries. This business relies on people's belief that we are incapable of practicing deathcare independently from it. So often we automatically assume that something is prohibited before actually investigating the possibility. In subverting these assumptions and asking— can we do this on our own?<sup>2</sup>— we disrupt that critical source of discouragement relied upon by funeral homes and their

Lowering a shrouded body starts with the body on top of a sheet placed beside the grave. It's helpful for the extra length of the sheet on either side of the body to be rolled up. Two people will stand inside the grave while two or three others take position on the far side of the body, on ground level. The participants then lift the shrouded body using the sheet. The two folks lifting from inside the grave step back while the other participants step forward. Now the body is hovering over the grave. By slowly unfurling the extra length of sheet from the participants' hands, the body can be gently lowered into the grave. The two people standing in the grave can help center the body if desired. They can also remove the sheet from underneath the body or leave it to be buried.



vital in a casket burial, but it wouldn't hurt. It's also important to keep the piles of soil dry and to keep water out of the grave before and during burial in order to preserve aerobic conditions.

Preparations at the gravesite to assist the lowering of the body are a little different depending on whether you are lowering a casket or a shrouded body. For any gravesite, do your best to have a clear and even footpath to the grave so that folks carrying the body can walk steadily. The arrangement in **Figure B** with three boards laying across the grave is a dependable model for casket burial. Place ropes parallel across the boards that are long enough to lower the casket to the bottom of the grave without participants having to bend over and strain their backs. When the time comes to lower the casket into the grave, folks stationed at each end of the ropes will lift up the casket to hover slightly above the boards. Then one or more additional participants will remove the boards. The casket now has a clear path to be lowered into the bottom of the grave. Try to keep the casket level as it descends. Once the casket rests in the grave, remove the ropes by simply pulling them out. If a rope is trapped by the casket's weight, it can be left to be buried or freed by someone inside the grave, gently moving the casket.



*fig. B*

partners. Collective effort is essential in this undertaking. Close community acting together from the time of death to the closing of the grave and beyond can help ensure that grief is not compounded by isolation. Facing difficulties together, we bolster our spirits.

The practice of home burial is also a practical solution for situations we may encounter when a loved one dies, or when we ourselves die. Most notably, the option of burial on private land can help people who are facing unmanageable funeral costs. Poor folks can be most disadvantaged in dealings with funeral homes, often leading them to select the cheaper choice of cremation despite burial being preferred. But anyone can be buried on private land. There's no requirement of any kind that states one must have familial relation to the land owner of one's place of burial. So when someone is making funeral arrangements and needs a low cost or free option, the prospect of home burial on their own land or a neighbor's land is ideal. Keep in mind that this possibility is dependent on the land's location—home burial is more viable on rural land rather than urban (more on this later).

Many folks who are attentive to the abundant wonder of earth's ecologies may find a home burial appealing as well. This simple burial practice embraces the opportunity for underground decay and transformation, integrating the body with a larger, subterranean ecology through decomposition. Promoting decay is what sets this method apart from modern conventions of burial practiced at mowed-lawn cemeteries involving grave liners, sealed caskets, and embalmed bodies. This form of burial acknowledges the reality that decay is a rich wellspring that compels lifeforms into existence. To partner with this astounding process is to return to our source. In this way, burial is a homecoming and a life-giving act. Despite the recent popularization of "green burial" by the trendy, eco-capitalist branch of the funeral industry, this is an ancient burial practice, long predating the insatiable drive for extraction that came to define our relationship to the planet. And now, as we reckon with the repercussions of pillaging the earth and its inhabitants, some of us are relearning this old practice. Others never left it behind.

The most nourishing practical offering that home burial provides, though, is greater agency. You simply have more say in what happens through home burial. This option provides the opportunity for a physically and emotionally cathartic experience and funeral rites that fit your persuasion of ritual. Meanwhile, the cohesion that bonds close relations is reinforced while participating in home burial. This sense of connection through autonomous deathcare can open the heart and encourage us to find further ways to work together and care for each other. And we are surely in need of that encouragement in these times.

Home burial may also uncork new ways of associating with the dead. Living on land that is also home to burial sites is an opportunity to integrate the dead into the spaces we inhabit both physically and spiritually. This can help avert the isolation inherent in conventional cemetery land use as exclusive territory of the dead, and challenge us to feel more connected to those who've died before us, and to our own eventual death.

Ultimately, home burial is a practical tool for our times and a valuable ritual for ourselves and our close community in the aftermath of death. The aim here is to offer this method of caring for our dead not as an insistence but as an option. While I do present a justified critique of privatization of funeral practices, I do not wish to condemn anyone for participating in the funeral industry or for making use of its services. There may be situations where a funeral home's help is essential in carrying out a home burial. This shouldn't be seen as a blemish on someone's funeral rites. Striving for some misguided form of purity is of no use here. The critical point is that we must evolve our capacity and expand our care for each other after death and in grief.



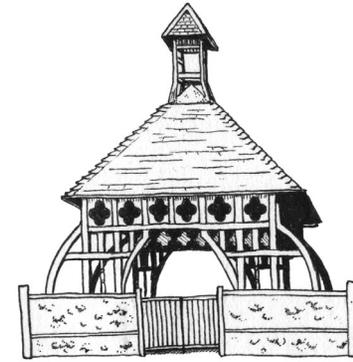
### ***Preparing the Grave to Receive the Body & Lowering the Body***

In burials involving either a casket or a shrouded body, an important consideration is how to optimize conditions inside the grave for complete decomposition. Promoting aerobic breakdown of the body's tissues underground will provide the opportunity for the body to integrate with the earth and potentially help nourish the soil ecology at the gravesite.

Encouraging decomposition inside the grave is done with a very simple task in mind: provide air around the buried body. Though the soil becomes naturally aerated as it is dug up and made less compact, providing pockets of oxygen near the body will help encourage decomposition. For a grave that encloses a shrouded body, in the day or hours before the burial, place a thick layer of sticks and branches on the bottom of the grave. In order to soften the look and feel of this woody material, you can cover it with a layer of leaves or pine needles. This biomass acts as an organic platform, raising the body above the floor of the grave and creating air pockets as the grave is filled with soil. A buried casket already contains a significant amount of space for air so placing sticks and branches into the grave isn't as

Digging the subsoil usually takes a long time and, if there is a significant portion of rock in the soil— considerable effort. A note on really rocky soil: if rocks comprise more than 20% of the material you're digging, nearly all of that rock can be placed back into the grave during burial in order to maintain the soil structure of the site as much as possible. Again, keep the shape as you dig deeper. The walls of the grave need to be plumb when the job is finished; it's easiest to maintain the walls as you go. Digging the deepest part of the grave becomes a one person at-a-time task. Switch out with folks as you get tired.

Different states have different depth requirements for graves, as prescribed by law. Even different counties within the same state may have different requirements of depth or proximity to bodies of water. Like with the legal procedures, you can contact your local zoning department or health department to learn these rules. It is important to note that in a practice of burial that aims to encourage decomposition, a body placed closer to the microbially rich upper soil horizon (i.e., shallower) has a greater opportunity for complete and rapid decomposition. Some other helpful strategies to catalyze the process of decay will be addressed later. Once you've dug the grave to its necessary depth, the job is finished. Cover the grave and soil piles with tarps to ensure they stay dry.



### ***Legal Tasks and Recommendations***

The legal feasibility of home burial depends on your state and county of residence. Most states in the US permit home burial on privately owned land outside of city limits. There are a few exceptions, as of this printing— Washington, Hawaii, and D.C. do not permit burial outside state-sanctioned cemeteries. Essentially, burying someone on private land means conducting a disposition outside the current norm and while this may be somewhat unusual, it is certainly possible and practiced. There are a couple key legal steps to navigate. It's important to know that legality is always changing, and each locale has specific legal circumstances that cannot all be thoroughly addressed in this zine. Consider this a general overview of the legal tasks in establishing a burial ground. Also, please note that much of this takes time— ideally, the steps that follow are enacted well before a death has occurred. Proactivity is your friend.

To start inquiring about the possibility of burial on a given piece of land, the first step is to check the zoning or land use ordinances for the county of the land in question. You need to find out which land use classifications are permitted for cemeteries. From there, you can discern if your land is permitted for cemetery use.

Many counties have online access to their land use ordinance and GIS maps that can be searched. There's also the option of phoning or meeting with your local planning & development department—the local government office responsible for a county's zoning ordinance—who could tell you some of what you need to know about the possibility of burial on your land. One of their staff could even visit your land and assess the potential burial site, if desired. The planning & development department is likely a good source for learning about local and state burial requirements, too, such as grave depth, proximity to bodies of water or utilities, considerations of easements, etc.

Depending on the specifics of your locale, the ease of this inquiry can really vary. Generally speaking, folks living on rural land have a nearly unrestricted ability to do home burials, and this step can often be quite smooth. However, when living on land in municipalities or suburbs, you are more likely to encounter impediments from a myriad of sources, as land use in these areas tends to be restricted to means of economic development.

If you find out that your parcel of land has a use classification that allows burial, you can begin the next steps. If this is not the case, you have a couple options at your disposal. Applications for rezoning or amending the zoning map is one possibility. You could also submit a special use permit to the planning & development department. These are both unwieldy methods of bureaucratic action, so it's reasonable to expect some procedural difficulty/red tape depending on your situation. There's no guarantee of success in this appeal method, but it may be worth the trouble if you feel so inclined.

Once you have secured the legal go-ahead to establish a burial site on your land, please consider amending the deed to your land to reflect the presence of a cemetery. This can happen before or after the burial. By declaring the presence of a cemetery on your land in public record, you secure legal rights to access the burial sites by next-of-kin to the interred. This would also ensure physical integrity

from what comes next—the subsoil. This visual color change is a good cue to move onto the next pile of dirt but may not always appear distinct depending on the site's soil content. Once your digging has removed the topsoil, place the largest tarp down at the long edge of the grave and begin shoveling the subsoil onto it. See **Figure A** for an example of dirt pile arrangement.

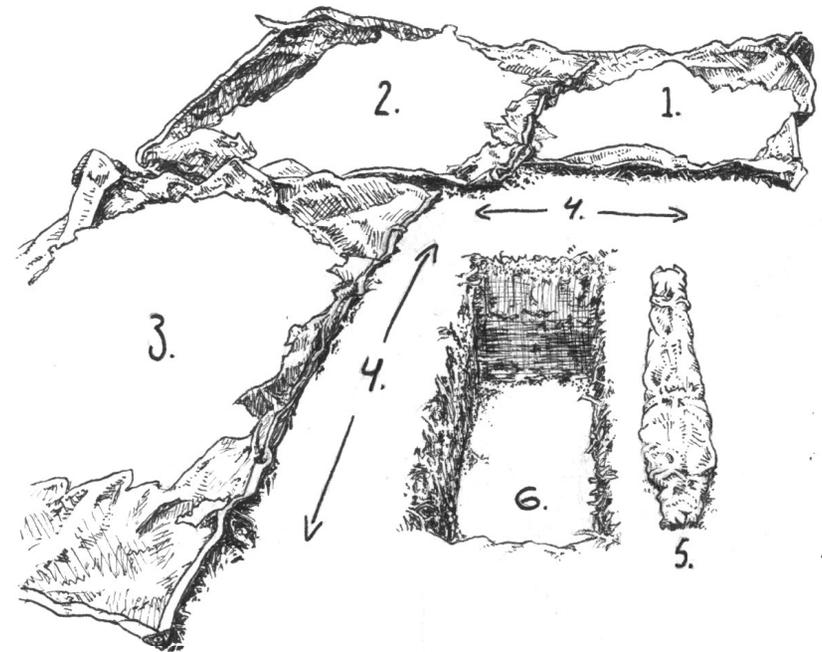


fig. A

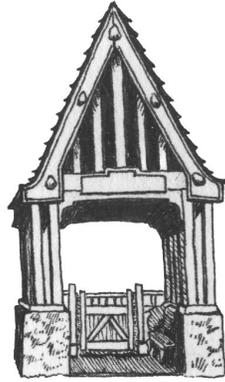
- |            |   |                  |
|------------|---|------------------|
| 1. HUMUS   | 3. SUBSOIL                                | 5. SHROUDED BODY |
| 2. TOPSOIL | 4. FOOT PATH<br>(FOR PLACING<br>A CASKET) | 6. GRAVE         |

Some specific spatial considerations need to be made depending on the grave accommodating either a casket or a shrouded body. For a grave that will hold a shrouded body, the primary concern is to maintain enough space for the body to be placed on the ground immediately beside the grave. From this spot, the shrouded body can be moved into the grave when it's time to coordinate the lowering. This means that when digging, all the piles of earth are situated to provide room for the body to be placed right beside the grave— on one of the long edges. See **Figure A**. In a situation involving a casket, the same positioning of soil piles can be helpful but isn't completely necessary. The most important consideration is to preserve a small bit of space on both long edges of the grave so that when the casket is being placed over the grave, the folks carrying the casket have a footpath. See **Figure B** in the next section. It's important to know that the specific features of a gravesite will determine how well you can provide for these spatial recommendations. Mature trees or other graves or paths might be factors in arranging the spatial aspects of a gravesite. There are certainly more possibilities than the ones mentioned here and pictured. Just do your best with the space you have while prioritizing easy movement of the body to the gravesite and into the earth.

Once you have the dimensions of the grave measured out, digging can begin. Start by placing a medium sized tarp at the foot or head of the grave. This is where the first of three piles of dirt will be placed. Now begin removing the humus layer of soil. This is the first 3 or 4 inches of soil. You'll need to chop through the plant root mass embedded in the top of the earth. Cut large slices 2ft x 2ft with your shovel blade or an edging tool and toss them onto the tarp. Separate the root mass and the soil on the tarp. Set aside or dispose of the root mass and continue shoveling the top 3 to 4 inches of soil onto this first tarp. This will be the smallest pile of dirt.

Next you'll move into the topsoil. This next 4 to 6 inches of dirt should be placed onto its own separate tarp next to the first pile. Be mindful as the dig progresses to maintain the shape of the grave dimensions. This second layer of soil can be pretty distinct in color

of the burial ground in the event of a future sale or legal dispute of property involving your land. These are both critical needs of people invested in a cemetery and must be protected. Amending your deed to include the presence of a burial ground may also be a requirement in your state. Even if it is not required, changing your deed is certainly recommended, but only if it is within your capacity. In rural areas, this task could be as easy as walking into your county zoning office and pointing to the map or plat on your deed. In other situations, amending your deed may be more cumbersome.



### *Selecting the Site & Digging the Grave*

When choosing a grave site you'll want to consider both accessibility and the current inhabitants—plants, animals and people. How many people will need accommodation at the site to attend the burial? Can vegetation be cut/mowed to accommodate these people without compromising important habitat or species? Is the site accessible to elders or folks with physical disabilities? Will the grave be secluded from or proximal to any dwelling spaces or waterways on the property? Is there room at the site for future graves? Whatever you do in order to prepare for this burial, it is important to consider and care for the site in its present and future state.

Once the gravesite is selected, you may need to clear some vegetation to accommodate the grave and several hefty piles of dirt. Once that is done, you can begin digging.

To determine the length of a grave, take the length of the casket or the height of the person (if the body will be shrouded) and add 12 inches. Width of the grave is usually about 3 feet. There may be a reason to have a wider or narrower grave but know that when a grave is much wider than 3 feet, placing a casket and lowering it

can be much more physically challenging. Likewise, with a grave that is too narrow, the dimensions could make it more difficult for the body or casket to avoid contacting the walls of the grave while lowering. Essentially, the priority is for the container or the body to fit with a comfortable margin of space. Don't go so far to save some labor that the casket gets stuck on its way into the grave.

