

## 'Till death do us part'

**It may sound macabre to hold a wedding in a graveyard, but couples looking for tranquillity and a little history are gathering their dearly beloved among the dearly departed for the big day, David Andreatta writes**

**DAVID ANDREATTA**  
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After an exhaustive search for that perfect setting to say "till death do us part," bride-to-be and funeral director Andrée Meunier settled on the ironically obvious - a cemetery.

"The grounds are beautiful, there are flowers, there is history there," said Ms. Meunier, 26, who plans to marry this December in the chapel at Williamsburg Cemetery in her hometown of Kitchener, Ont.

"We looked at so many churches, some grand churches where our service would be lost, and I said, 'I know this little place, just keep an open mind,' " Ms. Meunier recalled telling loved ones. "At first they were like, 'A cemetery?' Then they saw it and said, 'This is beautiful.' "

While celebrating a new life surrounded by death may sound macabre, couples searching for tranquillity on a day famous for emotional turbulence are gathering their dearly beloved among the dearly departed.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Kirstie and Mitch Robinson tied the knot last month in the graveyard next to their church in Hendersonville, Tenn. (*David Wright*)



Charmed by the historical significance and immaculately manicured grounds of cemeteries, couples who once might have shuddered at the notion of getting hitched among eternally silent witnesses are overlooking the gloom and embracing burial grounds as backdrops for their special day.

Kirstie and Mitch Robinson, who tied the knot last month in the graveyard next to their Beech Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville, Tenn., saw the cemetery, with its resting places for War of 1812 and U.S. Civil War veterans, as a way to link their future in the community

with the past.

"When you walk through it, you don't really feel like it's a dark or morbid place," said Mr. Robinson, 26, who mapped the burial ground for an Eagle Scout project as a teenager and had photos taken with his bride amid its centuries-old headstones. "To us, it was like having photos made at a historical home."

For generations it has been common for couples with a parent who is deceased to incorporate the final resting place into their wedding day by stopping there en route from church to reception.

But exchanging vows at the cemetery is less typical, and a scenario that did not sit well with Jennifer Tremblay at first.

The 27-year-old teacher from Kitchener was introduced to the idea last year by a stranger who overheard her lamenting the choice of venues for her impending nuptials and began extolling the setting of his recent wedding.

"It sounded beautiful, and then he said 'Williamsburg,' and I said 'Williamsburg? That's where my dad is buried,' " Ms. Tremblay recalled. "I was kind of freaked out, actually."

She had always thought of the cemetery as "a little piece of heaven," but "I couldn't get the headstones out of my mind. I didn't want to be married and looking at all these gravesites."

Ms. Tremblay eventually reconsidered. She was married on July 7 in the cemetery chapel and left her bouquet at her father's grave.

"I wanted my dad to be a part of the ceremony," she said. "It ended up meaning a lot to me."

Although cemetery weddings make up a nominal fraction of the unions in Canada and the United States (queries at several cemeteries for this story elicited responses from a bewildering "Never heard of it" to an indignant "We're a cemetery, not a wedding hall"), growing interest in them has spawned a cottage industry. Cemetery weddings, like other non-traditional theme weddings, have sprung up in part because the rules of marriage are no longer imposed by custom, said Stephanie Coontz, a history professor at Evergreen State College in Washington State and author of *Marriage, a History*.

"I think what we're seeing now are people feeling free to do exactly what they want and saying, 'Who cares what people think?'" Ms. Coontz said.

It's only in modern times that cemeteries have become taboo as a gathering place for anything other than a funeral. Picnicking among the dead was a popular weekend custom in the Victorian era.

Still, many believe that graveyards are hallowed ground, and that weddings there cross the line into sacrilege.

That was the initial take of at least one public official in the St. Louis suburb of Pacific, Mo., who earlier this year threatened to push to outlaw weddings in the town cemetery after a couple was granted permission to marry there.

"I never went through with it," the alderman, Bill Hohman, said in a telephone interview. "I don't think people should be restricted in their own city cemetery."

Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, Calif., is a popular wedding venue, as are Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Lake View Cemetery in Cleveland, Ohio.

City of Kitchener Cemeteries, which oversees Williamsburg, has begun advertising weddings on its website as a way to "return to a time forgotten" in a "charming setting."

In addition to the 100 or so burials and cremations that the cemetery hosts each year, it has scheduled five weddings this year and three next year.

"It's just in the last two years that it's become popular, and it's only in the last year that we've become comfortable with it," said Trisha Bradshaw, supervisor of City of Kitchener Cemeteries.

In an age in which cemeteries are turning to paid historic walking tours and summer concerts to stay in the black, moonlighting in the wedding trade is something other cemeteries are watching closely.

"It's something we want to explore," said Peter Lockyer of Glenwood Cemetery, a historic graveyard about 80 kilometres west of Kingston on Lake Ontario.

"All of these little cemeteries have been largely abandoned. Funeral homes have people for a matter of days; we have them forever. Where's the revenue?"

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