

**5 Steps
To Starting A
Green Burial Cemetery**
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Introduction

Green burial is a funeral practice that has the ability to protect an environment, help heal our grief and transform an industry. -Sarah Wambold

In 2014, after working as a conventional funeral director for nearly 10 years, I shifted my focus to green burials. Like so many of our funerals are today, my work had become impersonal and rushed. It left me distraught at not being able to offer families more. In searching for a better way to serve families, I met the owner of green burial cemetery in Bastrop County. I immediately fell in love with the setting. The land was left to regrow and reshape itself after a burial with minimal care, creating an ever-changing place of memory. In the coming years, I witnessed many final goodbyes among the live oaks trees that were more touching than any funeral I had seen before.

Since then, it has become clear to me that when talking about death, people are uncomfortable with the ways in which the funeral industry stands between them and the earth. In a ten acre cemetery, nearly 1,000 tons of casket steel, 20,000 tons of concrete burial vaults, and enough coffin wood to build 40 homes contaminates the soil. One cremation uses the same amount of energy as a 4800 mile road trip. People want to die as they lived: mindful of our resources and gentle on the earth.

I imagine people reading this wish for a green burial for themselves or a loved one but have not found a place that will accommodate it. Established cemeteries are not quick to dedicate space to green burial for fear of loss of revenue. At the same time, starting a cemetery from scratch is a long process and access to land is cost-prohibitive. However, I believe that if people are given the basic knowledge about this practice they may also be inspired to seek the resources to see it happen. My hope is that this booklet gives you the necessary knowledge to do so.

Step 1: Locate Your Land

[Texas Health and Safety code 711.008](#) discusses the location of newly established cemeteries. In short, it requires that cemeteries be located a certain distance outside of the local municipality based upon population.

If the parcel of land you are seeking to preserve as a cemetery does not meet this first level of criteria, you can't move further with the next four - at least, not with that parcel.

Based on the size of the closest municipality to your land, use this chart to determine if your land falls into the appropriate distance requirements.

1. Population of 5,000 to 25,000: Must be located one (1) mile outside the municipal boundaries.
2. Population of 25,000 to 50,000: Must be located two (2) miles outside the municipal boundaries.
3. Population of 50,000 to 100,000: Must be located three (3) miles outside the municipal boundaries.
4. Population of 100,000 to 200,000: Must be located four (4) miles outside the municipal boundaries.
5. Population of 200,000: Must be located five (5) miles outside the municipal boundaries.

If you live in an area where the boundaries of the city are hard to determine, you can visit the County Clerk or contact the Department of Development to find out where they are.

Step 2: Survey and Subdivide

Once you have determined that your land meets the location requirements, you can start planning how the cemetery will be laid out.

[Texas Health and Safety code 711.034](#) states that you must survey and subdivide your acreage into gardens or sections and make a map or plat that specifies where the plots are to be located on the property. This is called a **Master Plan**.

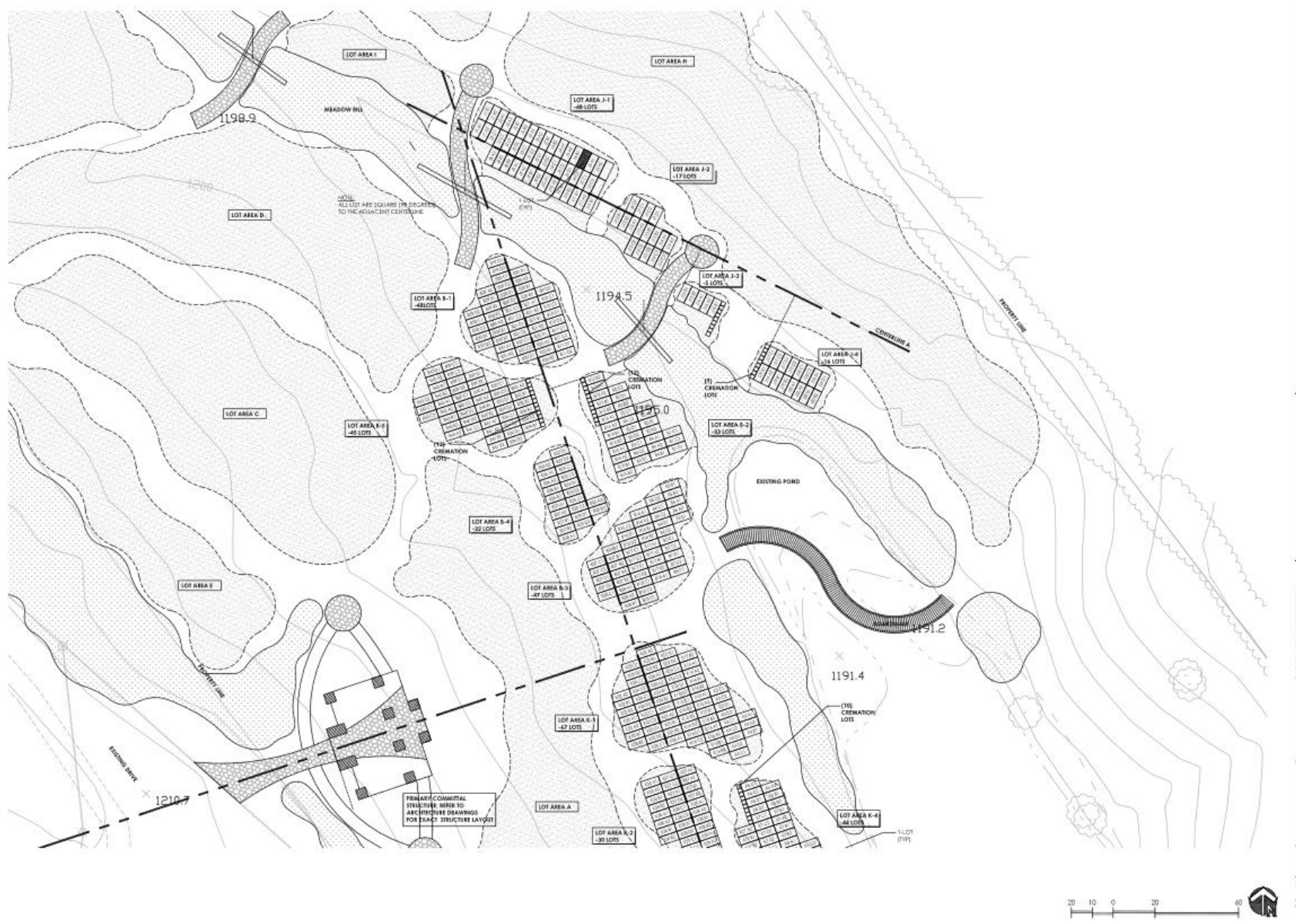
Begin by determining the type of green burial cemetery you are planning:

1. **Hybrid burial ground:** A cemetery that has a mix of conventional burials as well as an acreage used only for green burials. If you are restoring an old cemetery, this may apply.
2. **Natural burial ground:** A cemetery that prohibits the use of non-biodegradable outer burial containers, markers, and chemicals anywhere in the park.
3. **Conservation burial ground:** A cemetery that works to preserve land at the highest levels by working with an established conservation organization for long-term stewardship and by regularly performing ecological assessments to determine the conservation impact on the land.

Next, you will need to perform:

1. **GPS mapping:** To survey and subdivide your acreage into gardens or sections.
2. **Ecological impact assessments:** To determine where the plots are to be located on the property that do the least amount of environmental damage.
3. **Documenting the results of each:** A map or plat that includes the GPS coordinates and specifies the location of plots. This is called a **Master Plan**.

This is one of the more labor- and thought-intensive steps. It can be done independently or with the help of a team of professionals. Either way, the Master Plan is what you will have to adhere to now as well as 100 years from now. Once you have your plan in place, you will submit it to the County Clerk for the cemetery dedication, which is what legally establishes your cemetery with the state.



Step 3: Keep Records

Record keeping will be your life's work once you have completed the first burial. Accurate cemetery records are essential, not only in order to meet state requirements, but also because they are essential in settling land ownership disputes, preserving the history of the cemetery, and of course, identifying where people are buried.

[Texas Health and Safety code 711.003](#) states that you must keep records of all burials performed in the cemetery. These records must include four facts:

1. Date the remains are received
2. Date the remains are interred
3. Name and age of the person interred if those facts can be conveniently obtained
4. Identity of the plot in which the remains are interred

This step is particularly important in green burial cemeteries where physical markers are not always present. Because of this, you will find your burial records become as valuable as the land itself.

Find a record keeping system that works well for you now and will also withstand the test of time. While you can do this with a pen and paper or in an Excel spreadsheet, the end goal is to keep records as secure and accessible as possible for generations to come.

Investing in cloud-based software and/or fire-proof physical vaults is a good idea.

In conventional cemeteries, photographs of the markers could also be used as an identifying resource. However with green burial, land is subject to change over time and photographs will need to be retaken to stay accurate.

Memorial Marker Exercise

"There are three deaths. The first is when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. The third is that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time."

David Eagleman, Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives

Marking a grave is a sacred act that establishes a place to remember those we have lost. In green burial cemeteries, a small, flat fieldstone is typically used in place of a large granite headstone. As the stone wears away over time, it is not replaced by another one. Eventually, the weeds and grasses that have been allowed to regrow on the grave will be all that is left.

As intentional as this practice is, you will surely have families who desire more than just a flat stone or GPS coordinates to mark their person's grave. It goes against the grain of our society to let a grave remain unmarked. Making families comfortable with this can be a long process.

Spend some time thinking about how you will build trust with families about the location of their loved one. In the space below, come up with ways to memorialize a place without damaging the landscape.



Step 4: Cut a road

After you have mapped out your land and determined where you are going to store your documents forever more, it's time to designate a path in and out of the cemetery.

[Texas Health and Safety code 711.041](#) states that any person who wishes to "visit a cemetery or private burial grounds where there is no public access shall have the right to reasonable ingress and egress over your property to visit the cemetery during reasonable hours."

"Ingress and egress" means the pathway in and out of the space, indicating that you need to establish an entrance and exit point on the property. You also need to make sure the graves are accessible to visitors. Depending on the size of your land, you may be able to have one main road with just a few footpaths to the graves. Others may need a few drivable roads and several footpaths.

In green burial cemeteries, work to ensure the routes you are choosing do not cause more damage to the environment. However, it may be necessary to remove certain trees and bushes from the area. In these cases, you can use the assessments you procured in Step 2 to mark a road along areas that will cause the least amount of impact and will also serve the largest group of plots.

You can hire a lawn care service to help you remove any underbrush or trees that need to be cleared if you lack the means to do it yourself. [These roads will mostly likely be dirt](#). Mulch or woodchips made from any cleared brush can aid in firming up the road or setting paths.

Step 5: Dig a Grave

According to the depth of grave requirements outlined in [Texas Health and Safety code 714.001](#), all graves need to have an 18 to 24-inch soil barrier.

Legally, it says:

“The body of a decedent may not be buried in a manner so that the outside top surface of the container of the body is:

1. Less than two feet below the surface of the ground if the container is not made of an impermeable material. (Shroud)
2. Less than 1 ½ feet below the surface of the ground if the container is made of an impermeable material. (Rigid container, such as a wood casket)”

Historically, this depth has proved sufficient to protect small cemeteries from being inadvertently exposed by future farmers in the area. The 18-inch penetration of a plow might unexpectedly uncover graves if it was unknown that someone was buried there.

Environmentally, the shallow grave is where the real work of green burial lies. A grave of 1 ½ to 3 feet places the body in the most active ingredients in the soil, where the oxygen, insects and microbes are. This allows for a body to decompose more quickly and to nurture the soil around it.



Final Thoughts

Green burial is one of the most deeply healing and satisfying practices you can undertake in grief. The previous five steps are intense, but the reward is long-lasting. You will have protected a vital piece of land that can thrive for generations. You will have not only created space for yourself but given others a place to become something larger than themselves.

In order for green burial to become a more accessible option, we need to make our voices heard. While we don't 'need' the industry's approval, they are often the first place people turn when looking for help in death. If the industry does not see a need for green burial in their community, they are not going to be compelled to explore it further. By asking for green burial, encouraging others to ask for it, and making choices at death to lessen our footprint on the earth, we can impact how the industry operates. It might be a long process, but it can be a successful one.

I hope you will join me in putting your body where your beliefs are.

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Resources

Books on ecological restoration and cemetery management:

[The Sunflower Forest](#)

[A Cemetery Should Be Forever](#)

Legal:

[Texas Health and Safety Code Chapter 711 General Provisions Relating to Cemeteries](#)

Cemetery surveying and mapping:

[WebCemeteries](#)

[Cemetery360](#)

Cloud-based cemetery records:

[PlotBox](#)

Cutting a road:

[How to Build a Dirt Driveway](#)