

# Valley Conservation Cemetery Project

## Frequently Asked Questions

*Updated April 7, 2021*

### **GREEN BURIAL AND CONSERVATION BURIAL**

#### **Q. What is green burial?**

**A.** A green burial is one in which everything going into the ground is biodegradable. The cemetery will not accept bodies that have been embalmed with toxic embalming fluid. Vaults or concrete graves liners will not be used. In most cases, a backhoe or a similar type of machinery will be used for digging the grave. According to the Green Burial Council, a national certifying organization, green or natural burial is a way of caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact that furthers such legitimate ecological aims as the conservation of natural resources, reduction of carbon emissions, protection of worker health, and the restoration and/or preservation of habitat.

#### **Q. What is conservation burial?**

**A.** Conservation burial is a cemetery classification designated by the Green Burial Council. Conservation burial cemeteries utilize green burial techniques and go a step further to define the management of the land and cemetery operations with specific ecologic and conservation principles including: the protection of important natural and sensitive areas, conservation management of the property, limits to burial density and the guaranteed preservation of the cemetery by deed restriction or conservation easement overseen by an independent conservation organization in perpetuity.

#### **Q. Is conservation burial legal?**

**A.** Yes. The Valley Conservation Cemetery (VCC) will operate in compliance with all cemetery laws and regulations of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and local communities, complete with the establishment of a perpetual care trust fund. Massachusetts currently has 25 cemeteries that permit green burial that operate in the Commonwealth.

### **ENVIRONMENT**

#### **Q. Will burying people without vaults and without embalming hurt water quality?**

**A.** Conserved landscapes are a time-honored tool for protecting and improving water quality. Careful site selection will be made to ensure the VCC will comply with or exceed state and local health codes pertaining to water quality protection. VCC will not bury immediately adjacent to streams or wetlands (buffered by at least 200 feet), and the density of burials will be a fraction of conventional cemeteries. By restoring areas to natural vegetation, we expect an improvement of adjacent waterways and greater biological diversity over time.

Upon burial, the decomposition of the human body proceeds rapidly. Bacteria and viruses typically die with the body or will within days, almost all become inert within a year. The earth's soil and organisms facilitate the decomposition process and slow the exchange of bacterial and viruses, and act as a giant filter to prevent the contamination of ground water.

A conservation cemetery's reduced burial density also limits the number of viable germs that could enter surface water or groundwater flow. International studies have demonstrated the low risk for germ transmission from green burial techniques. No known transmission of germs from a green burial ground have been recorded in the US.

**Q. Bodies per acre**

**A.** In order to protect ecological conditions in a conservation cemetery, the average density should not exceed 300 burials per acre according to Green Burial Council standards. In designated burial areas within the cemetery, that number may increase to 400 burials per acre. The VCC plans to be certified by the Green Burial Council as a Conservation Cemetery; therefore, will abide by their burial density guidelines. Contemporary municipal cemeteries bury at a density of approximately 1,000-1,200 plots per acre.

**Q: What soils are most conducive for green burial?**

**A.** Soil that is well drained, but not too coarse, not subject to flooding, not saturated seasonally within the depth of excavation, very deep to bedrock, lacking a perching layer, and on relatively level land are best for green burial. The VCC has worked with a soils scientist to identify soils that are suitable for a cemetery. This research will result in finding suitable land and approvals at the State and Local levels.

**Q: State regulations**

**A.** State regulations for cemeteries can be found in Massachusetts General Law Chapter 114. A city or town's Board of Health has jurisdiction over cemeteries and the authority to approve a new cemetery in their municipality. The Regional Department of Environmental Protection, responsible for drinking water protection, provides final approval. Local planning and zoning boards, Selectboards, Cemetery Commissions, and Conservation Commissions may also be involved in the vetting process.

**Q. How is green burial better for the environment?**

**A.** Green burials limit the introduction of nonbiodegradable materials into the earth. Conventional burial practices introduce metals, cement, finished wood products, synthetics and formaldehyde into the subsurface soil layers. Over time these items, particularly when concentrated in compact density, have the potential to leach into nearby subsurface waters. Green burial encourages rapid decomposition which reduces nearby water contamination risk and decomposition supports soil health and biotics. Conservation burial enhances the environment by additionally supporting ecological health and restoration of the property.

**Q. Is cremation a green alternative to conventional burial?**

**A.** Nationally, cremation is the most widely used burial choice. While burying cremated remains uses less land area than full body burial, the process of cremation requires over 30 gallons of fossil fuel per body, which is equivalent to a 600-mile vehicle trip. Additionally, the cremation process emits mercury, carbon and other toxins into the air.

**GREEN BURIAL PROCESS**

**Q. Who can be buried at Valley Conservation Cemetery?**

**A.** Burial at Valley Conservation Cemetery (VCC) is available to all people. Burial is not limited to Massachusetts residents.

**Q. How are the graves prepared and what will they look like?**

**A.** The burial site is prepared by the VCC staff. The ideal burial depth for a grave is 3.5 – 4 feet from the bottom of the grave to its surface. The grave will have been dug (using equipment such as a backhoe) and prepared for the service prior to the family and friends' arrival at the cemetery. Upon completion of the service, the soil that was removed from the grave will be replaced in the grave either by the participants or cemetery staff. Flowers, wreaths and/or other natural biodegradable materials may be used to cover the burial mound. Over time, the soil will settle into the grave and the cemetery's natural features will surround the site. This settling process can take a year or longer.

**Q. What are the burial choices at Valley Conservation Cemetery?**

**A.** Valley Conservation Cemetery will support full body burial, the interment of cremated remains and the scattering of cremated remains at specific locations, if suitable, on the property.

**Q. Are family and friends allowed to take part in the burial ceremony?**

**A.** Yes. Valley Conservation Cemetery encourages family and friends to be a part of the service. In Massachusetts, families can care for their own dead (acting as the funeral director) with the required paperwork. Participation can include transporting the body, lowering the body into the grave, and closing the grave. Valley Conservation Cemetery staff will be present at each burial to help guide the burial process and ensure the safety of the participants.

**Q. How are the graves marked and located?**

**A.** Every grave will be located and identified with plot markers per Massachusetts General Law Chapter 114. A global positioning system (GPS) coordinate will also be recorded for each grave and provided to family and friends for independent visits to the grave site. The individual or family may choose to also mark the grave site with a simple flat headstone upon approval from the VCC staff.

**Q. Who provides funeral services?**

**A.** Families have the choice of working with a funeral home, with a home funeral guide, or they can manage the pre-burial preparations on their own. The staff at Valley Conservation Cemetery will help support the planning of graveside services, which may be held at the time of interment. The service can include as much support or as little as the family chooses; however, it will be overseen by cemetery staff, including both lowering the casket and closing the grave.

**Q. Are caskets required at Valley Conservation Cemetery?**

**A.** Valley Conservation Cemetery will permit any biodegradable burial product appropriate for green burial. Burial products can be unfinished wood caskets, wicker or woven caskets, or cloth shrouds. A shroud is simply a piece of fabric (quilt, blanket or sheet) that is used to wrap a body. For shrouded burials, a shrouding board may also be required to support the body during the lowering process, and it may be buried in the grave underneath the body.

**Q. Will a wild animal dig up my body at Valley Conservation Cemetery?**

A. This is a common worry for people considering green burial. We can report that in the 40 years that green/natural/ conservation burial has been in operation in the US, there have been no cases of animals digging up bodies. Each grave at VCC will be significantly deep enough and intentionally prepared to deter any wildlife curiosity.

**Q. Is embalming required by law?**

A. Embalming is unnecessary and not required in any state. Embalming is a practice that was initially instituted to preserve a body for transportation from their place of death to their place of burial. The chemical used in embalming is formaldehyde, which the EPA has defined as a carcinogen. In keeping with green burial standards, the VCC will not allow the interment of bodies embalmed with a toxic fluid. If there is a need for embalming, there are other alternatives. Ask the VCC for more about this topic.

**COSTS**

**Q. What will it cost?**

A. The cost of a full body burial is \$3,000 and burial of cremated remains is \$1,700. In addition, opening and closing fees range from \$500-\$1,000. Pricing is subject to change.

**Q. Are you pre-selling plots?**

A. Plots will be sold once the Valley Conservation Cemetery is approved.

**Q. Can interment rights be resold?**

A. Currently, if a plot is sold that will not be used, it may be sold back to the cemetery at the original price. This policy is subject to change.

**CEMETERY OPERATIONS AND MANAGEMENT**

**Q. Who will operate and staff the cemetery?**

A. Green Burial Massachusetts Cemetery, Inc. (a 501C13 IRS Cemetery entity; a non-profit, private cemetery) will own and operate the Valley Conservation Cemetery. The staff will be assisted by a group of dedicated volunteers interested in green burial and land conservation.

**Q. Will there be a land steward?**

A. The cemetery will include a Conservation Restriction and trail easement that will be placed on the property and held by [Kestrel Land Trust](#) (KLT). Conservation Restrictions are legal agreements that prohibit certain acts and uses, while allowing others, on private or municipally owned property in order to permanently protect conservation values present on the land. KLT will conduct annual monitoring visits to ensure compliance.