

Maple Hill Cemetery

The Oldest and Largest Cemetery in Alabama

It seems a strange place to find joggers, mothers strolling their babies, business people sitting on the park benches eating lunch, children having a class, and tourists gathered for a walking tour--but Maple Hill Cemetery is a popular site in Huntsville for residents and visitors alike. Many find the green spaces and park effect of Maple Hill comforting, and come back often to take advantage of this unique place. The hand-carved monuments by prominent artists, the unusual artwork, the magnificent statutes, the dogwoods and maple trees, and the interesting stories that the headstones tell all combine to make the cemetery a must-see for anyone in north Alabama.

Maple Hill Cemetery was established in 1818 when Leroy Pope sold two acres of land to the City of Huntsville for \$200. Over the years, the city added to the original two acres until the cemetery now covers nearly 100 acres.

It had no official name and was known only as "the burying place." Today Maple Hill is the oldest and largest cemetery in the state of Alabama. There are between 80,000 to 100,000 burials in the cemetery with about 350 to 400 new graves each year. All the plots are sold in Maple Hill; however, individuals who own plots with clear titles can transfer them. In the early days, families would buy plots in groups of 6 or 12 lots to be used by their family, children, and grandchildren. Some of these plots have not been used and cannot be resold because of the problem of locating all the heirs and getting a clear title. There is also a small section of the cemetery that is owned by a private corporation and is not maintained by the city called Maple Hill, Inc. A few plots are still available in that section.

Many rare trees and plants are found in Maple Hill Cemetery. Henry B. Chase (1870-1961), president of Chase Nursery and a former mayor of Huntsville, assisted the garden clubs in a massive planting effort to make Huntsville the "City of Dogwoods." One of the most gorgeous sights in town is Maple Hill Cemetery in the spring with the hundreds of dogwoods in bloom. The city has planted over 150 trees still year to replace those that have were wind damaged or just old.

Maple Hill Cemetery is also an outdoor classroom for the children. Third graders are brought to the cemetery and taught environmental education, map reading, math skills, history, and beautification. The school system is trying to start early to teach the students about cemetery etiquette, appreciation for the beauty and art on the grounds, and respect for the laws protecting cemeteries. Mrs. Connell's class at the Academy of Science and Foreign Languages received a National award for their project of researching the black history of Glenwood Cemetery, interviewing and collecting data from seniors, and beautifying the grounds and tombstones.

In addition to Maple Hill Cemetery, the city of Huntsville oversees eight other cemeteries: Sivley Cemetery, Dallas Mills Cemetery, Marrimack (Old Mill) Cemetery, Glenwood Cemetery, Northside Cemetery on Jordan Lane, Brandontown on Jordan Lane, Brandontown 2, and Number 4 Hall on Sparkman Drive. Some of these cemeteries are abandoned and the city has stepped in to maintain them. Brenda Webb is the director of the Cemetery Department of the City of Huntsville. It is her job to oversee the nine cemeteries and make them safe for the public.