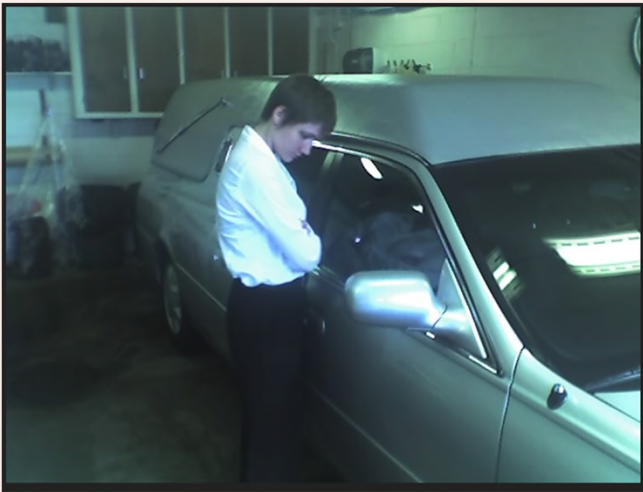


Conservation Burial

More than just a natural burial!



My Conservation Burial Journey



Worked in funeral industry
2005 - 2013



Working in natural burial
since 2014

Principles of Natural Burial

- ◆ No Embalming
- ◆ No Cement Vaults
- ◆ Minimal Grave Decorations
- ◆ Biodegradable Burial Containers





Embalming

Chemical process that injects preservatives such as formaldehyde into the arterial system in order to maintain a life-like presence of the body.

Not required by law or by public safety standards!



Impact on people and planet:

- Toxins seep into water supply
- Causes cancer
- Extra cost





Concrete Vaults

Main purpose is to prevent graves from sinking making it easier for lawn care.



Can add thousands of dollars to the cost of a burial.





Minimal Grave Decoration

Graves can be marked with biodegradable items like flowers or plants. Items made of artificial materials can be placed temporarily.



Use of GPS mapping to ensure location is recorded.



Natural Burial Cemeteries



Conventional Cemetery



Natural/Green Cemetery



Conservation Cemetery





Campo de Estrellas

A conservation cemetery
in East Texas



Land restoration at Campo de Estrellas





Planning for Burial in a Conservation Cemetery



Schedule a visit

Visit the cemetery ahead of time to purchase a plot.



Death certificate

In Texas, this must be filed by a licensed funeral director.



Plan for logistics

Arrangements must be made for the transportation, refrigeration and preparation of the deceased.



Communication

Notify the cemetery at the time of death.





Additional Resources

Funeral Consumers Alliance: <https://funerals.org/>


Nationwide resource providing state-level information about funeral laws and planning.

Funeral Consumer Alliance of Central Texas: <https://www.fcactx.org/>

Central Texas resource for making end-of-life decisions. Includes a price comparison of regional funeral homes and cemeteries.

Green Burial Council: <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/>

Nationwide resource for information about natural burials and lists of certified green burial cemeteries.



Slide 1: I want to start my presentation by talking about the foundation of conservation burial, which is built on the practice of natural or 'green burial'. This type of burial aims to minimize environmental impact and conserve natural resources. The Green Burial Council, an organization founded in 2005 that helps create green burial spaces, defines natural burial as "a way of caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact that aids in the conservation of natural resources, reduction of carbon emissions, protection of worker health, and the restoration and/or preservation of habitat." This includes using non-toxic and biodegradable materials for caskets, shrouds, and urns.

Slide 2: I want to briefly talk about how I came to work in conservation burial as it might help to illustrate how families come to choose this option at the end of their lives.

I grew up in a small rural community where literally everyone knew each other. So when a death occurred it was felt by everyone. Funerals were attended by both adults and children. Death was often openly discussed and processed. I then spent my teenage years working in nursing homes, caring for people at the end of their lives. This early exposure to death and end of life care is why I naturally gravitated toward working in funeral service.

I started working in the conventional funeral industry in 2005, as an apprentice in a funeral home in Milwaukee, WI. I became a licensed funeral director in 2007 and moved to Austin, TX where I continued my career working for a local funeral home. While I loved my work helping families navigate loss and create meaningful memorials, I began to realize that the industry often prioritized its own needs over those of grieving families. Many families wanted to spend more time with the body, questioned the necessity of embalming, and asked if it was possible to be buried without all the 'extra stuff'.

Feeling stuck in a traditional role that didn't address these needs, I left the industry to research and understand alternative death care practices. I joined a group in Austin focused on home funerals and green burials, where my real education began. I learned about the legal aspects of home funerals and the principles of green burial, which set me on my current path.

During this time, I met the owner of a natural burial cemetery outside Austin, who invited me to visit. The serene environment, with winding paths, tall oaks, and simple graves, captivated me. I worked alongside her for two years, facilitating burials and maintaining graves, which eventually led to the creation of my own natural burial space, Campo de Estrellas.

Slide 3: So now that we have some background on the practice of natural burial, let's look closer at what the principles of natural burial are and how they differ from conventional burial.

The four main principles that set this type of burial apart from conventional burial are:

No embalming

No cement vaults

Minimal grave decoration

Biodegradable burial containers

Slide 4: No Embalming: Historically, embalming is a military technology. It was originally used to allow Union soldiers who died on the battlefields of the Civil War to travel home for burial without decaying. However, embalming has essentially become a way to turn the body into a product sold by funeral homes, as noted by Mark Harris, author of an early book about green burial called "Grave Matters."

Today, embalming still involves the injection of chemicals but has some formaldehyde-free formulas. However, the procedure is largely unnecessary and directly harms both the workers and the environment. Despite funeral directors' insistence on its usefulness for sanitizing the body for public display, embalming is not required by law in any state or by public safety standards. Moreover, dead bodies do not easily transmit diseases. The World Health Organization states that the risk of disease from dead bodies is real only in cases of highly infectious diseases. Most microorganisms causing death do not survive long after the host dies or are not readily transmissible. Appropriate protective clothing and good hygiene are sufficient to prevent disease spread. With robust refrigeration systems now available, decay can be prevented, and any harmful microbial matter can be staved off without the need for embalming.

Nature has been breaking down and absorbing dead material for millennia without harming the environment or others. We do not need to drain all fluids from the body and replace them with harmful chemicals. These chemicals pose a greater risk to us and the environment, damaging plant life, soil, and contaminating our water supply. Eliminating these chemicals from burial practices is crucial to protecting our environment.

Slide 5: **No Cement Vault:** Cement or concrete vaults, also referred to as "grave liners," are placed in graves to encase the casket and are sealed before the dirt is replaced. They are marketed as a way to protect the casket and body from the elements, but their true function is to maintain cemetery grounds, making lawn care easier. The production of concrete is resource-intensive, and once in the ground, these impermeable vaults encourage water runoff, potentially causing flooding and allowing toxins like pesticides used in cemeteries to seep into the soil, further degrading it. Additionally, concrete vaults increase the expenses of a funeral, often costing around \$1K - \$5K. They also require grave depth to be deeper than is necessary. The assumed 6-feet underground concept is not actually required by law, it merely accommodates the vaults.

The law only requires a grave to be at a depth of three feet, which natural burial allows for. A shallow grave is where the real work of natural burial lies. This is where the most active particles in the soil are like oxygen, insects and microbes, which allows for a body to decompose more quickly and to nurture the soil around it. In my opinion, the real damage caused by vaults lies in their contribution to our misunderstanding of death. They create a false sense of separation from the natural process of decay after burial, by pretending to keep out the elements like rain and dirt, but as someone who has witnessed disinterments, I can tell you they do not. They perpetuate the notion that nature is our enemy and that uneven land or overgrown grass is ugly, when in fact it is natural and restorative.

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By using vaults, we are blocked from becoming part of the earth, continuing a detrimental aspect of our modern lives: encasing ourselves in boxes that keep us separated from our environment. This distance from the natural process of death and decay further deepens our fear and misunderstanding of death. Eliminating the use of concrete vaults can help us reconnect with the earth and embrace the natural cycle of life and death.

Slide 6: **Minimal Grave Decoration:** The headstone, also known as a permanent marker, is the most iconic part of a cemetery. The absence of a headstone or grave marker is deeply coded in our society as disrespectful and tragic, and for good reason. Many people in our society have not had the agency in death to mark the graves of their loved ones, among many other indignities. I am sensitive to that fact and acknowledge the importance of marking a grave with a symbol of permanence.

Natural burial cemeteries do allow for headstones, but they have different criteria to be as unimposing on nature as possible. Options for headstones include flat stones from the local geological region—such as fieldstone or limestone—that do not include the aluminum or tin oxide powder used to give the stones a shiny finish. Graves can also be marked with temporary, biodegradable items like flowers or plants, or even biodegradable, recycled paper items. Artificial flowers, plastic wreaths, or banners are not typically allowed but may be placed there for a very temporary amount of time.

A unique aspect of natural burial sites is the use of GPS coordinates as permanent markers. These coordinates are assigned to each plot, often stamped on plot caps at the corners of each plot. Each grave and garden has its own coordinates recorded, providing future generations with two ways to determine its location. These methods ask families to consider a new way of marking a grave in addition to establishing a traditional marker. They are, in a sense, more active markers—not just in the plants that grow in and around the grave, but as the stone fades, we are encouraged to brighten our memories of the person.

This approach helps us develop a new relationship with the land where our loved ones are buried, viewing it with curiosity and awe. In this way, their memory helps restore the land's spirit, fostering a deeper connection between the living and the natural world.

Slide 7: Now that we've established an understanding of natural burial, let's look at where this type of burial is allowed. In Texas, we have a few options.

Natural burial can take place in different types of cemeteries:

- **Hybrid Cemeteries:** Have sections for both traditional and natural plots.
- **Natural Burial Cemeteries:** Only contain natural burial plots and cremains.
- **Conservation Cemeteries:** Cemetery that only has natural burial plots and the land includes wildlife protections, exemptions and surveys that have as its goal to rewild and conserve flora and fauna. This is the type of cemetery we are establishing.

Slide 8: Now we're getting into the conservation part of the natural burial practice.

Campo de Estrellas is a 9 1/2 acre swath of former cattle pasture in east Texas, just south of Smithville. It is part of Abbey Grange, a 30 acre farm owned by my partners in this project Cindy and son, Michael Ybarra. Cindy and Michael are environmentalists in their own right and Cindy especially was leading an effort to restore and preserve the acreage using a mix of reforestation and rewilding techniques. I was connected to them through a mutual friend after Cindy expressed interest to them in being buried on her property. When I introduced them to the concept of creating a conservation cemetery, they were immediately on board. Together, we set out to establish a cemetery focusing on ecological restoration and conservation.

The unusual name - Campo de Estrellas - comes from Cindy and Michael's experience walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain, a centuries-old pilgrim's route of hundreds of miles that takes you to the city of Santiago de Compostela where it is believed that Saint James is buried. Scholars believe that Compostela is a combination of the Latin words campus stellae meaning field of stars, a reference to the legend that a bright star led the hermit Pelagius to the site of the burial. Campo de Estrellas in Spanish means Field of Stars. It's also a nod to the gorgeous night sky above the cemetery, where, free of any surrounding light pollution, the starry constellations are clearly visible.

Slide 9: The tract of land that is now Campo de Estrellas was a clear-cut, overgrazed, neglected piece of pasture.

Mesquite trees moved in which make it unsuitable for planting crops, however we actually appreciate this hardy tree's ability to replenish and hold the soil in place.

We follow a 'benign neglect' approach to allow nature to thrive, creating habitats for wildlife and restoring the ecosystem. This includes leaving dead trees or "snags" as they're known and brush piles to create a place for animals to nest and for moss, lichen and fungi to flourish.

As for rewilding, we do this by restoring and protecting wild areas to allow for "apex predators" to thrive, in our case this includes predatory birds, wild hogs and coyotes, and the native species they naturally interact with. Native plants are allowed to regrow. The ultimate goal is to mitigate species extinction and restore balance and function in a healthy, diverse, sustainable ecosystem.

Last year, we began reforestation efforts in partnership with TreeFolks, who planted over 7500 trees, a large number of them on the cemetery itself.

Slide 10: Finally, I want to go over what planning for this type of burial looks like. It can be a confusing and somewhat challenging process if you are not prepared, but knowing what is needed prior to a death occurring helps alleviate some of the stress.

Schedule a Visit: Contact us to visit and choose a burial spot. This can be done on an at-need or pre-need basis.

While we may be the first call you make, we will also be the last part of the burial preparation.

Plan for logistics: Because we are only a cemetery, we do not provide services for the transportation, refrigeration or preparation of the deceased once a death has occurred. This can be handled by the family (also known as a home funeral) or you can work with a funeral home to provide these services for you. We get a lot of questions about this particular part of the process, as it may seem antithetical to our concept to work with a funeral home but I want to assure you that most funerals will assist with being buried this way. It's a lot for a family to manage these tasks on their own, so you shouldn't be worried about using a funeral home for help here.

Death Certificate: This is a crucial step that requires funeral home involvement, in Texas at least. In this state, death certificates must be filed by a licensed funeral director connected to an established funeral home. This process will need to be initiated before the burial takes place.

Communication: After a death has occurred, you can notify us of the death and instruct us on when the burial should take place. We will contact our cemetery service who will prepare the gravesite before the day of the burial. We will remain in contact with you from that point on to coordinate arrival times and any graveside service needs.

Slide 11: additional resources – no notes