COUNTRY CEMETERIES AND CHURCHYARDS:
ENDURING CULTURAL LANDSCAPES IN APPALACHIA

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1 ABSTRACT
The American cemetery is an enduring landscape, both culturally and historically. Americans have created distinct burial rituals and landscapes for the dead that reveal much about the complexity of our evolving culture. Central Appalachia and West Virginia have had little coverage in the literature on cultural landscapes, and scholars have written even less about Appalachian cemeteries and churchyards. West Virginian country cemeteries are snapshots of rural Appalachian life from centuries past that are still visible and often still used. Study of these landscapes increases our understanding of the region’s settlement history and reveals clues about life in isolated, mountainous coalfields and farmlands.

Through the review and analysis of photographs, maps, and on-site investigations of churchyards in the Reno District of Preston County, WV, this paper argues that cultural change happens more slowly in West Virginia than it does in other parts of the U.S., and cemeteries, or churchyards, in this area exemplify this notion. In some cases, the cemeteries predate the churches that are located nearby, and the context in which congregations originally sited and built these places is largely unchanged today. Though these churchyard landscapes reveal cultural information through usual venues — such as site orientation, grave marker styles, and names of those interred — their locations, orientation to the road, surrounding landscape context, relationship to a church (if any), and nearly continual use for over 150 years are equally important factors.

1.1 Keywords
Cemeteries, churchyards, Appalachia, West Virginia, vernacular cultural landscapes
2 INTRODUCTION

The general history and evolution of the American cemetery is well-documented (Baugher & Veit, 2014; Brown, 1994; Eggener, 2010; Farrell, 1980; Greene, 2008; Jackson & Vergara, 1989; Meyer, 1989; Sloane, 1991; Yalom, 2008). From frontier graves to modern day memorial parks, Americans have created distinct burial rituals and landscapes for the dead that reveal much about the complexity of our evolving culture. The American cemetery is an enduring landscape of permanence, both culturally and historically. It is a window into family genealogy, regional history, and cultural values over time.

In Central Appalachia, country cemeteries, or churchyards, and their surrounding landscape contexts are snapshots of rural Appalachian life from centuries past that are still visible now. In Preston County, West Virginia, some cemeteries pre-date the churches that congregations eventually built nearby. ‘Churchyard,’ typically defined as “the yard or ground adjoining a church, often used as graveyard,” may not be technically accurate in all cases referenced in this study (“churchyard,” n.d.; Eggener, 2010, p. 38). However, the term seems appropriate when describing the layered landscapes that this study seeks to illuminate, which often include churches, picnic structures, and cemeteries. This study uses both ‘churchyard’ and ‘cemetery’ to describe the Central Appalachian burial landscapes mentioned above (Sloane, 1991, pp. 17 – 20).

Rural West Virginian churchyards in the Reno District of Preston County are particularly interesting cultural landscapes because the larger site context remains unchanged today, some 150 years later. These landscapes reflect the region’s settlement history and reveal clues about life in isolated mountainous coalfields and farmlands. They provide cultural information through the usual venues—such as gravemarkers, the names of individuals interred and building materials—but the cemeteries’ locations, orientation to roads, surrounding landscape contexts, and nearly continuous use are equally important factors. Crissman (1994) noted that cultural change and societal transformation has happened more slowly in Appalachia. Churchyards in Preston County, WV, where many of my pioneer ancestors are buried, exemplify this notion (pp. 10 – 11).

3 THE CEMETERY AS AMERICAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Historians, art historians, cultural geographers, archaeologists, and others have studied the American cemetery. Scholars have often focused on gravemarkers and tombstones—their religiosity, textuality, forms, and ornament—as relatively complex reflections of the cultural and ethnic heritage of the deceased, or those that are left behind (Brown, 1994; Farrell, 1980, pp. 115-140; Jackson & Vergara, 1989; Meyer, 1993). One example, J. G. Brown’s (1994) book Soul in the Stone sets out to illustrate “the partnership between human expression and the institution known as at the cemetery” through a series of photographic essays of tombstones, particularly those of different ethnic groups, religions, and time periods (p.1). Other books and articles also take this catalog-like approach (Eggener, 2010; Farrell, 1980; Greene, 2008; Jackson & Vergara, 1989; Meyer, 1989; Sloane, 1991; Yalom, 2008).

Some researchers have linked the layout of the cemetery—the layout of graves and plots themselves—to the layout of contemporary cities and towns, or some larger cultural philosophy (Francaviglia, 1971; Voller, 1991). Francaviglia (1971) argued that cemeteries are “miniaturizations and idealizations of larger American settlement patterns” and analyzed cemeteries for both their gravemarker styles as well as their land use patterns, therefore emphasizing both “architectural and spatial elements” (p. 501). In this case, Francaviglia used the word “spatial” to refer to the area within the cemetery. He defined the cemetery as a cultural landscape “having definable visual characteristics based on individual forms, such as tombstones, trees, and fences, and on the placement of those forms in a particular spatial arrangement” (Francaviglia, 1971, p. 502).

Still other scholars have strived to provide explanations, whether practical, cultural, or historical, of a single cemetery such as Mount Auburn in Massachusetts, or of a specific region or period in American history, as in Hannon’s (1989) essay on Central Pennsylvania cemeteries (p. 237-257). Another example is Sloane’s (1991) general historic overview of the evolution of death and cemeteries in American history. J.B. Jackson (1967-68/1997) wrote about the transformation of the American cemetery from a “monument into environment,” elucidating the transformation of American cultural ideals over time (p. 170).

Given these varying approaches, it is important to recall why the cemetery is so valuable a tool in cultural landscape analysis. In concluding his 1989 essay, which uses the cemetery landscape to
reconstruct aspects of a region’s cultural history, Hannon (1989) succinctly describes the value of the cemetery in cultural landscape studies:

The value of the cemetery as a cultural landscape lies in the fact that it is considered sacred or, at least, semi-sacred by the general public. Therefore, the cemetery, though it certainly reflects change, has been resistant to many of the alterations or destructive characteristics of other parts of the built environment. In that light, one can observe a preserved microcosmic representation of the region’s history and characteristics in its cemeteries and gain important insights from which both specific information and informed inferences can be drawn (p. 256).

Rural churchyards and cemeteries (not rural in the sense of the 19th century picturesque style, but rural as in an outlying agrarian area) in remote corners of West Virginia are significant when studying the state’s cultural landscapes for all of these reasons and more. Scholars accept that mountainous regions of the world are generally more isolated and slow to change, and West Virginia is no exception to this (Crissman, 1994, p. 11; Rehder, 2004, p. 301). Rice (1985) says this about West Virginia: “Her confining mountains and lack of broadly unifying river systems discouraged easy communication in early times and fostered a high degree of particularism among her people” (p. 57). This isolation in combination with cultural and contextual information leads to a more informed understanding of churchyards and cemeteries in Appalachian areas.

4 PRESTON COUNTY, WV: AN APPALACHIAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE SNAPSHOT

4.1 Why Preston County?

The subjects of this investigation are churchyards and cemeteries in West Virginia, with a focus on the Reno District of Preston County, WV. I chose this area because at least one of these is the resting place of my distant relatives and pioneer ancestors, Mt. Zion Cemetery. My great grandmother, Susan Bolyard Summers (1882 – 1984), who I knew as a child, is buried there. She was one of thirteen children raised in a tiny rural community called Marquess (pronounced, according to my grandmother who was born there, like “Marcus”) in the Reno District, tucked into the southwestern corner of Preston County.
4.2 Preston County History, Geography, and Economy

Preston County, WV (Figure 1) is located in the northeastern corner of the state, excluding the eastern panhandle. It is roughly rectangular and borders Pennsylvania to the north along the Mason-Dixon Line, and Maryland to the east; Monongalia, Taylor, Barbour, and Tucker counties create its western and southern boundaries. The county is 651.4 square miles and has eight magisterial districts: Grant, Kingwood, Lyon, Pleasant, Portland, Reno, Union, and Valley (Figure 2). Geographically, the Cheat River divides the county from north to south (Morton & Cole, 1914, p. 14; Sisler, 2013, para. 2).

Figure 2. Map of Preston County, WV, not to scale. The Reno District is shaded (2015). Map created from USGS data (2003).

The history of settlement in Preston County dates to the late 1700s. Prior to this time, movement west across the Alleghenies was difficult and dangerous (West Virginia Division of Culture and History [WVDCH], n.d., Early Settlement section). Besides the foreboding topography of the V-shaped valleys inscribed into the Allegheny Plateau, pioneers faced hostile Native American tribes, disease, and uncertainty regarding their land rights (WVDCH, n.d., Early Settlement section). Although travel was challenging, settlement began in earnest in northern West Virginia after the French, Native American, and British claims on the land leading to the Ohio Valley were negated in the 1780s (WVDCH, n.d., Early Settlement section). State records indicate that once the government removed these hurdles, settlement expanded quickly (WVDCH, n.d., Early Settlement section). In 1790, 56,000 people populated present-day West Virginia. By 1810, there were 105,000 inhabitants and by the eve of the Civil War, there were 377,000 inhabitants (WVDCH, n.d., Revolutionary War section).

In 1818, the Virginia assembly divided Monongalia County into two parts thus creating Preston County, named for the James Patton Preston then governor of Virginia (Sisler, 2013, para. 1; Wiley, 1882, p. 53). Wiley (1882) noted, “the citizens of Preston now felt themselves relieved of the necessity of long journeys to reach the county seat” in Morgantown, WV (p. 57). The population of Preston County at that time was 3,000; in 2012 it was estimated at 33,832 (Sisler, 2013, para. 2; Wiley, 1882, p. 56).

Morton & Cole (1914) begin their explanation of the county’s physical geography by saying that “there is a great diversity of surface” (p. 17). Those familiar with Appalachian terrain will understand that this is an understatement. As defined by Lee, Chang & Hill (1976), less than 1% of land in Preston County has a slope less than 2.5% (considered to be flat) (p. 14). More than 45% of the county’s land slopes at 20% or greater (Lee, Chang, & Hill, 1976, p. 14). Put another way, Morton and Cole (1914) describe Preston County’s geography as such:

Here the surface is studded with massive hills, each touching its neighbor save for an occasional ribbon-like fringe of creek bottom. Deep valleys and abrupt slopes are everywhere seen in
Given that the geography of the area was decidedly different from eastern Virginia, it follows that the interests of its people were different as well. In 1861, during the Civil War, Prestonians overwhelmingly rejected Virginia’s proposal of secession from the Union (Wiley, 1882, p. 154). The formation of the new state of West Virginia would be final within two years in 1863 (Wiley, 1882, p. 178).

Early residents of Preston County benefitted from West Virginia’s natural abundance from forests and rivers including wild game, fowl, fish, and numerous nuts and berries (Rice & Brown, 1993, p. 57). My great grandmother said that chestnuts, for example, were an important part of her family’s diet (J. Orr, personal communication, 2001). Even though forest products were readily available, most families cleared land for farming corn initially, and then later moved on to buckwheat (Rice & Brown, 1993, p. 59). While it was difficult to haul highly perishable goods such as these by packhorse and flatboats to eastern markets, it was considerably easier to move products made from farm and forest produce, such as whiskey, brandy, cider, ginseng, furs, and hides. Farmers also raised hogs, sheep, and cattle (Rice & Brown, 1993, p. 59). Due to the rough terrain and the scarcity of sophisticated farming implements, the average farmer in West Virginia before the Civil War cleared and farmed only twenty-five acres (WVDCH, n.d., Rural Life section). While farming at this scale did not generally make use of slave labor, it required the contribution of every family member, including women and children (WVDCH, n.d., Rural Life section). My great-grandmother recalled working alongside her brothers in the fields when she was a teenager and young adult (Preston County Historical Society, 1979, p. 392).

The difficulty in moving farm goods to market was considerable, and moving people was challenging as well. In 1838, however, the government completed the much-anticipated Northwestern Turnpike, which spanned from Winchester, VA to Parkersburg, WV, marking the current route of U.S. Highway 50 (Cox, 2005, p. 23; WVDCH, n.d., Rural Life section). This road goes directly through the Reno District. Its popularity encouraged growth along the route and provided the area’s best links to eastern markets in Maryland and to western markets via the Ohio River (Preston County Historical Society, 1979, p. 9). In 1853, the Baltimore and Ohio (B & O) Railroad reached Wheeling, WV, also slicing through Preston County (Preston County Historical Society, 1979, p. 11; Callahan, 1913, p. 106). After the Civil War and secession from Virginia, the B & O railroad provided West Virginians with the needed transportation infrastructure to support their burgeoning timber and mining economies (Cox, 2005, p. 29).

Even with this industrial growth, the quality of rural life in West Virginia during the 1800s remained essentially agrarian. Rice & Brown (1993) explain that the values of West Virginians “sprang in part from the emphasis of country churches upon righteous living, the role of the common school in undergirding morality and character, and the necessity of maintaining standing with lifelong neighbors by conforming to prevailing customs and norms” (p. 176).

### 4.3 Preston County Culture and Religion

The isolation of the hills and valleys encouraged people to seek religious affiliation whenever possible, for social, business, and religious reasons (Crissman, 1994, p. 108). In the Preston County Historical Society’s (1979) history of the area, numerous long-time residents recall a deep sense of piety in their forebears. Virginia’s Anglican, or Protestant Episcopal Church, was ill suited to life on the West Virginia frontier, which required a more flexible approach (Rice & Brown, 1993, p. 64; WVDCH, n.d., Religion section). In the last decades of the 1700s, the Great Awakening swept through the area with Methodists and Baptists leading the charge (Rice & Brown, 1993, p. 63). Frontier families went to whatever church or revival meeting set up closest to home, and would switch from one denomination to the next depending on which minister was in town (J. Orr, personal communication, 2001.) Church officials often roved from one rural area to the next, always on the move (Rice & Brown, 1993, p. 64; WVDCH, n.d., Religion section). Even so, religion acted as a social glue holding isolated and disparate family groups together (Rice & Brown, 1993, p. 67).

Early settlers in Appalachian had strong familial bonds, and the deceased were usually buried with their closest family members in family cemeteries. Family cemeteries were, therefore, the first kind of burial grounds in this region (Crissman, 1994, pp. 106 – 109). Crissman (1994) noted, however, that once religious congregations built churches in remote Appalachian areas, many established cemeteries as well.
Congregation members formed strong, family-like bonds, and the transition to a church and community-based cemetery was logical. Given the steeply sloped physiography of the area, it is possible that not all families in an area had land suitable for burial.

Data from the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), developed by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) in cooperation with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN), indicates that West Virginia has 3,643 cemeteries and 3,661 churches (USGS, 2013). According to the same data, Preston County is home to 42 cemeteries and 121 churches, which suggests that there is one cemetery per approximately 18 square miles. Based on my own observations, after years of visiting the area, I believe that the number of cemeteries in Preston County is significantly higher. The difficult terrain makes field verification both difficult and necessary. For this study, I have focused my attention on the southwestern corner of the county, the Reno District, where my family has its deepest roots.

5 THE RENO DISTRICT, PRESTON COUNTY, WV: CHURCHYARDS & CEMETERIES

5.1 Overview

From observation, field visits, and study of aerial photography, I have identified 19 cemeteries in the Reno District alone (Figure 3) (Pictometry International, 2010-2012). The district is 100 square miles, bounded on the north by the Lyon and Kingwood districts, on the east by the Cheat River, on the south by Tucker and Barbour counties, and on the west by Taylor County. At its widest point from west to east, the district measures approximately 12 miles. From north to south, it measures about 9 miles (Morton & Cole, 1913, p.32). The population in Reno was once more than any other district in the County, but even so, the population of the county as a whole was just 3,000 in 1818 rising to nearly 12,000 by 1850 (Historical Census Browser, 2004; Sisler, 2013, para. 2). In short, it is not a large area by geography or population, yet it is home to many cemeteries and many more churches – more than would be expected in comparison to other similarly populated areas of the U.S.

Figure 3. Map of the Reno District showing cemetery locations and Rt. 50 (USGS, 2003; USGS, 2013)

Necrogeographic research at the national level confirms this conclusion. Zelinsky (1994) analyzed the USGS’s Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) to plot “the number and relative incidence of these quite special parcels of land across the national space” (p. 31). While acknowledging the data’s shortcomings, especially its incompleteness with regard to “unnamed” cemeteries, Zelinsky (1994) mapped 99,625 items by state and then by county (pp. 32-34). Excluding the District of Columbia, West Virginia had 10.2 cemeteries per 100 square miles ranking seventh among U.S. states in 1992 (Zelinsky,
1994, p. 33). Furthermore, Zelinsky identified that several Central Appalachian – West Virginia, Virginia and Kentucky – states have elevated numbers of cemeteries per 100 square miles, which he described as a "striking phenomena . . . that was scarcely anticipated and overwhelms all the other details" (p. 34).

My examination of the data collated by Zelinsky confirms that it is incomplete, particularly in northeastern West Virginia, when compared with USGS data from 2013 mentioned above (USGS, 2013; Zelinsky, 1994, p. 34). Even though the data that Zelinsky (1994) analyzed dates from 1992, and was incomplete, it makes a strong and enduring point: West Virginia, though small in stature and population, is home to more cemeteries than most American states (p. 33-34). My research suggests that Preston County is a microcosm of this phenomenon, but the sheer number of landscapes requiring study is beyond the scope of this study.

The Reno District of Preston County, at approximately 100 square miles, could provide a more compact sample area for study, but even focusing only on cemeteries in Reno would mean analyzing 19 separate sites, and would exceed the space available for this study. Further examination of this topic at the district, county, state, and regional level is clearly warranted. However, to begin, I have chosen to highlight three cemeteries that exemplify several shared characteristics – a typology – that appears to be unique to the region.

5.2 A Reno District Churchyard Typology: Mt. Zion, Evansville, and Mt. Israel

Initially I devised my theses for this study based on my knowledge of Mt. Zion Cemetery and the adjacent Mt. Zion United Methodist Church, located in Marquess, a tiny hamlet in the southeastern part of the Reno District. Many of my relatives, including my great grandmother, are buried there. After expanding my research, it became clear that Mt. Zion exemplifies a typology that repeats at several other nearby sites. Though several churchyards in Reno fit the typology described below, I will use three of similar age to illustrate my findings: Mt. Zion United Methodist Church and Mt. Zion Cemetery; Evansville United Methodist Church and Evansville Cemetery; and Mt. Israel United Methodist Church and Mt. Israel Cemetery (these are current church and cemetery names).

Records indicate that the Mt. Zion Methodist Episcopal Church (historic name) may have formed as early as 1815, although the congregation erected the existing church building in 1873 (Cox, 2005; p. 188; Preston County Historical Society, 1979, p. 21). Traveling preachers held church meetings on this site or nearby throughout the first half of the 19th century (Wiley, 1882, p. 518). Cox (2005) has noted that "many early churches were formed in meeting houses or homes" (p. 188). Alterations to the 1873 structure have been made over time (Figure 4).

![Figure 4. Mount Zion United Methodist Church (2014). Photo by the author.](image-url)
Local residents established Mt. Zion Cemetery (Figure 5), which is located behind the current church building, in 1848 (Cox, 2005, p. 188). There are currently approximately 825 people interred there, and the cemetery continues to be used (Pierce, 2014). Evidence from western Pennsylvania suggests that, out of necessity, country folks sometimes built their burial grounds before church buildings as may have happened at Mt. Zion (Hannon, 1989, p. 243). In any case, both church and cemetery, together with other landscape and architectural features, are now integral parts of the churchyard at Mt. Zion.
Mt. Zion sits on a hilltop above Sandy Creek (Figures 6 and 7). The hilltop locale is in keeping with other findings on cemeteries in this country and abroad (Greene, 2008, p. 66). The custom may have been adopted from French, Native American, or English burial practices (Hannon, 1989, p. 243). Hannon (1989) suggests that the hilltop site is a “visible instance of our perception that a higher elevation is closer to heaven,” but also is often “the least viable land economically—especially in a period when farming was the mainstay” (p. 245). In addition, since the Reno District is home to numerous streams that wind through its deep valleys, locating a churchyard on higher ground would have been a practical choice to avoid flooding (Cox, 2005, p. 188).

Upon arriving at Mt. Zion, visitors get the sense that they are standing “on top of the world.” My mother has always used this phrase when describing Mt. Zion (S. McLaughlin, personal communication, 2001). The elevation of the site slopes up from 1570′ at the road to 1610′ at the top of the cemetery; it feels significantly higher than the surrounding countryside, and for the most part, it is (USGS, 2003). Deep valleys fall away to the north and south of the site, and several conical hilltops surround the area. Few trees surround the cemetery itself, which heightens the sense of being elevated.

Mt. Zion Church sits back from, but faces, Sinclair Colebank Road (County Route 74). In a land where curves and bends predominate in the landscape, the cemetery plots are in orderly rows, oriented east-west, which appear to line up with the back of the church. Since we know that the cemetery predated the existing church building, we can say that those who constructed the church aligned that newer building with the rows of cemetery plots, rather than the other way around. Rehder (2004) notes that graves are set in this direction so that “when the rapture comes, as in the second coming of Christ, those who are buried in this position will face east upon rising, ready to be gathered up and taken to heaven” (1994, p. 241). There is a large grassy area between the church and the road – an ideal spot for parking whether for a horse, carriage, or car.

The siting of the church on the road promotes a sense of grand arrival. On one side of the road is a large picnic shelter (Figure 7), and on the other is another large open space with the church and cemetery beyond. The road has followed the same path for as long as anyone can remember, with the overall site for the church enclosing both sides. My grandfather remembers having picnics with my grandmother there nearly 70 years ago (J. Orr, personal communication, 2001). If the road had been realigned at some point, and the adjacent land been used for different purposes, it would be difficult to surmise that the church grounds were constructed in this cohesive way.

Figure 7. Site section (USGS 2003) and typological diagram of Mt. Zion. Graphic created by the author.
Figure 8. The picnic pavilion at Mt. Zion (2014). Photo by the author.

The landscape surrounding the churchyard consists of beautiful rolling farmlands and forested hillsides. The view when standing in the cemetery is uninterrupted, for the most part, by anything other than agrarian and forest landscapes. It is arguable that the impacts of modern structures, increased densities, and changing land uses are less visible here than at other American cultural and historic sites. The immediate context is aesthetically pristine and close to its original form. Even the low chain-link fence seems to disappear against the picturesque views beyond.

Perhaps most important is that the church and cemetery are not lifeless historic sites. Local folks use them today in the same ways that their ancestors prescribed decades ago. New burials occur here every year, services are held regularly, and reunions and community events are hosted in the picnic structure. The outhouse just downhill from the church is still in use. While its cultural landscape context remains largely unchanged, it is powerful to note that the churchyard’s function and social meaning are also intact.

An example of this modern day relevance, the caretakers of the cemetery established the Mt. Zion Cemetery Association in 1945. This group manages the ongoing maintenance of the site and keeps detailed records of the cemetery’s history. The association has erected an information kiosk, which includes a weatherproof, enclosed cabinet where cemetery information is available to the public (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Mt. Zion Cemetery Information Kiosk/Cabinet (2009). Photo by the author.
To summarize, Mt. Zion is located at the top of a ridge; the graves are located on a hillside behind the church and face east-west; there is picnic structure and lawn for community gatherings; a cemetery association protects and manages the site and its history. With these characteristics, Mt. Zion exemplifies a typology that repeats at other nearby churchyards.

Construction was completed on the Evansville Methodist Episcopal Church (Figure 10), located about five miles northwest of Mt. Zion, in 1855 (Cox, 2005, p. 146). The residents of Evansville established a cemetery in 1833 (Figure 10) (Cox, 2005, p. 146; P. Clarkson, personal communication, 2015). Similar to the situation described at Mt. Zion, the congregation probably met at other nearby locations prior to constructing the current church building, but the need for a burial area likely happened earlier. Though the history of the Evansville Methodist Church and cemetery require further research, the landscape typology demonstrated by the Evansville churchyard is reminiscent of Mt. Zion (Cox, 2005, p. 146; P. Clarkson, personal communication, 2015).

Figure 10. Evansville United Methodist Church (2014). Photo by the author.

Figure 11. Evansville Cemetery (photo by E. Orr, 2014)
Evansville United Methodist Church, as it is now called, is located on Route 50 in Evansville. The site sits 30’ higher than Rt. 50, and slopes from 1380’ in elevation at the church to 1455’ at the highest point of the cemetery (Figures 12 and 13) (USGS, 2003). It sits at the end of a long driveway that winds up a curving hillside; a grove of trees protects the site from the traffic below. As at Mt. Zion, the cemetery, with 637 graves, climbs the relatively steep hillside behind the small, white church. The view from the top of the cemetery is breathtaking, with panoramic views across the valley to neighboring ridges. The picnic pavilion is located just east of the church entrance, facing a lawn area. The cemetery association erected
an information kiosk with an enclosed cabinet, similar to the one at Mt. Zion. A roof covers it and protects it from the elements (Figures 14 and 15).


In contrast to Mt. Zion, the cemetery is not fenced. In addition, the gravesites do not align with the typical east-west orientation. In this case, the graves are located on a relatively steep slope, and their alignment corresponds more closely with the topography of the land itself. The church was sited in a similar way that aligns with the gravesites that predate it, and to the existing landform. If the church and gravesites had been built to orient exactly east-west as at Mt. Zion, the builders would have faced significant grading and earth-moving challenges during construction and when digging graves. The choice for this layout, in harmony with the landscape context, appears to have been both a practical and aesthetically pleasing one. The Evansville churchyard sits comfortably, elegantly, on land of imposing topography.

The similarities continue at Mount Israel United Methodist Church and Cemetery, located on Marquess Israel Road approximately five miles east of Evansville. It too is an example of the churchyard typology seen at Mt. Zion and Evansville. The exact date of the establishment of this congregation is unknown, but the group erected a wood frame church on the current site in 1853 (Figure 16) (Cox, 2005, p. 241). In 1920, the congregation replaced the old church with the building that is now there (Cox, 2005, p. 241). The Mount Israel Cemetery Association is still very active in maintaining the site, holding regular meetings, and enforcing cemetery rules as seen on the materials and signage posted at the cemetery, but additional research on this history of the association is required. Nevertheless, 1160 people are interred there and records indicate that the cemetery is popular and growing (Figure 17) (Cox, 2005, p. 241). The association added land to the existing cemetery as recently at 1987 (Cox, 2005, p. 241).
Mt. Israel, like Mt. Zion and Evansville, sits on a relatively high ridge (USGS, 2003). The church occupies the lowest area of the site at 1675’ in elevation and the cemetery slopes up behind the building rising to 1735’ (Figure 18 and 19) (USGS, 2003). The site includes a church that is oriented east-west, a picnic structure, a fenced cemetery, an information kiosk, and a relatively new Fellowship Hall that was built in the 1990s (Figure 20). The gravesites also align mostly east-west, although the somewhat rolling topography challenges the rows to be strictly linear. In contrast with Mt. Zion and Evansville, the church at
Mt. Israel is directly adjacent to the road. There is a small, fenced lawn area at the entrance to the building, and a parking area in front. The black metal fence is more ornamental than the chain link at Mt. Zion, and there is a flagpole on site.

**Figure 18.** Mount Israel aerial photograph showing 5’ contours (Pictometry International, 2010-12; USGS, 2003). Site diagram by the author.

**Figure 19.** Site section (USGS 2003) and typological diagram of Mt. Israel. Graphic created by the author.
The church buildings at all three locations have similarities as well. Although I have not conducted a detailed survey of the structures, observers can see that all three have white clapboard siding, a rectangular shape, a single story, and gabled roofs. Aerial photography shows that each of the churches has a footprint of approximately 2,000 square feet (Pictometry International, 2010-2012).

6 CONCLUSION

The resemblance of these three churchyards is not likely coincidental. Established within decades of each other in the 19th century, Mt. Zion, Evansville, and Mt. Israel exemplify a churchyard typology that may be unique to the Appalachian region, or to West Virginia, or possibly to Preston County alone. Further exploration, study, and analysis will be necessary to confirm these observations.

Regardless, this typology is part of larger cultural landscape. The history of Preston County’s settlement through the Civil War illuminates the cultural context of these places. Mt. Zion, Evansville, and Mt. Israel are located on cathedral-like hilltops, commanding views of the surrounding countryside. The similarities in their overall site plans, including the relationships of the landscape and architectural elements, and their continuing functions as living and working churchyards, speak to the richness of these places. The analysis of a churchyard’s contextual heritage is especially powerful when considering similar sites in other areas of West Virginia and Appalachia.

The residents of the Reno District exhibit a strong sense of connection to their history with active church congregations and cemetery associations. Their continual care and commitment to these places spans nearly two centuries. In this way, Prestonians demonstrate a true pride of place, a connection between the dead and the living. Worpole (2003) has explained that “landscapes of the dead are always, simultaneously, landscapes of the living” and that this is what “gives the burial site its salience and emotional power” (p.21). The power of these churchyards as vernacular cultural landscapes remains largely unchanged over time, nestled into the hidden hills and valleys of the rural West Virginia countryside, and protected by the slow pace of change and strong sense of place in Central Appalachia.

The importance of studying cultural landscapes in Appalachia for landscape architects and other scholars goes beyond improving our understanding of regional history and settlement patterns, though these things are important. Jackson (1980) has pointed out that “we can only start to understand the contemporary landscape by knowing what we have rejected and what we have retained” (p. 119). In West Virginia, we have retained a great deal with great purpose. Historic vernacular cultural landscapes allow us to observe the contrast between these traditional landscapes and contemporary ones and to learn from that experience as designers and planners (Jackson, 980, p. 120).
7 REFERENCES


