

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.