This paper is an exploration of America’s rural cemeteries established in the mid 19th century. It examines the question of how these sites can deal with the pressures of modern society and meet current social needs and expectations, while keeping preservation and the vision of their founders at the forefront of decision making. It is an exploration of the various roles they have played historically and the roles they play in modern society and how these roles affect preservation and interpretation at these sites. It looks at how the cemetery business and development pressures, both inside and out, affect these sites. Additionally, It examines the history of sites and if and how these cemeteries can honor this history and their original uses as both burial grounds and public retreats. It simultaneously explores the importance of preserving rural cemeteries, and the various methods of interpretation at the sites.

Rural cemeteries were created to meet the social and cultural needs of urban society in the mid 19th century. They were a reaction to the abhorrent state of the over crowded, 19th century, urban burial ground. The rapidly populating urban centers cried out for burial reform, and the rural cemeteries would become part of a larger urban beautification movement. They were intended to provide their cities not only with a place to bury their dead, but also with a retreat from the harshness of urban life. Large-scale, designed landscapes, situated on the outskirts of cities, rural cemeteries were an unparalleled innovation in 19th century America. They were highly popular from the outset, attracting thousands of visitors each year.

In the 21st century rural cemeteries are faced with a number of challenges that affect preservation and interpretation. Presently and historically, they have played several roles, including active burial grounds/businesses, historic sites, and parks open to the public. As both historic sites and active burial grounds, a delicate balance must be struck between honoring the deceased and activity within the cemetery. Additionally, as with many cultural institutions, limited funding makes preservation all but impossible. Unable to survive on burial sales alone, they must look to their communities for additional income. As their cities expand, they lose their original contexts. As these areas surrounding rural cemeteries develop and change, developmental pressures run high, and shifting and declining populations affect visitation and interpretation. Monuments are rapidly decaying due to environmental conditions and neglect. Additionally, changes in burial practices and attitudes towards death and cemeteries have affected both sales and visitation at these sites.

Today the rural cemetery is at somewhat of a crossroads. With space filling up for traditional burials at many rural cemeteries, and the developmental pressures both within the cemetery and surrounding their gates, they must plan for their futures both financially and from a preservation standpoint. The question arises as to how they can continue to meet the needs of their communities, while ensuring their historic, cultural, social and aesthetic viability in the future. These sites are composed of many layers of history and significance, and represent a wide range of values that must be recognized and addressed through innovative and thoughtful planning, planning informed by the history of rural cemeteries.