Sweet Auburn

Winter 2002/2003

Newsletter of the Friends of Mount Auburn Cemetery

Bigelow Chapel: Crematory Chapel

On August 27, 1936 Story and Bigelow Chapels were given their specific names, honoring the first and second presidents of Mount Auburn Cemetery: Associate Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court Joseph Story (1789-1845) and Dr. Jacob Bigelow (1789-1879). The granite chapel built in the 1840-50s on the hill had simply been known as "the Chapel" in the 19th century. Upon the completion of the new red sandstone chapel and office building near the Entrance in 1898, the older granite chapel was converted to a Crematory Chapel and it was called by that name. This article describes some of the changes in the building we know today as Bigelow Chapel.

Interest in cremation as a means of disposition for the body grew in the United States during the last decades of the nineteenth century. In 1885 the Trustees of Mount Auburn considered "establishing a Crematorium" but decided since other corporations had already been organized to care for that need Mount Auburn should not build a crematory but should prepare suitable depositories for cremated remains and await "the further development of public sentiment."

In 1896 the Cemetery began construction of a new chapel with an attached office building near the Entrance on Mount Auburn Street. This new building was designed by architect Willard T. Sears, who with Charles Cummings had designed the New Old South Church in Copley Square in 1876 and who worked with Isabella Stewart Gardner on her home in the Fenway, now the Gardner Museum. The new office building was designed to display the four historic portrait statues that had been originally commissioned for the old chapel in the 1850s. In December 1897, Mount Auburn applied to the Massachusetts legislature for an act authorizing Mount Auburn Cemetery to establish a crematory. In June 1898 the new Chapel was used for a funeral service for the first time and it proved very popular with over 70 services held in the first year of use.

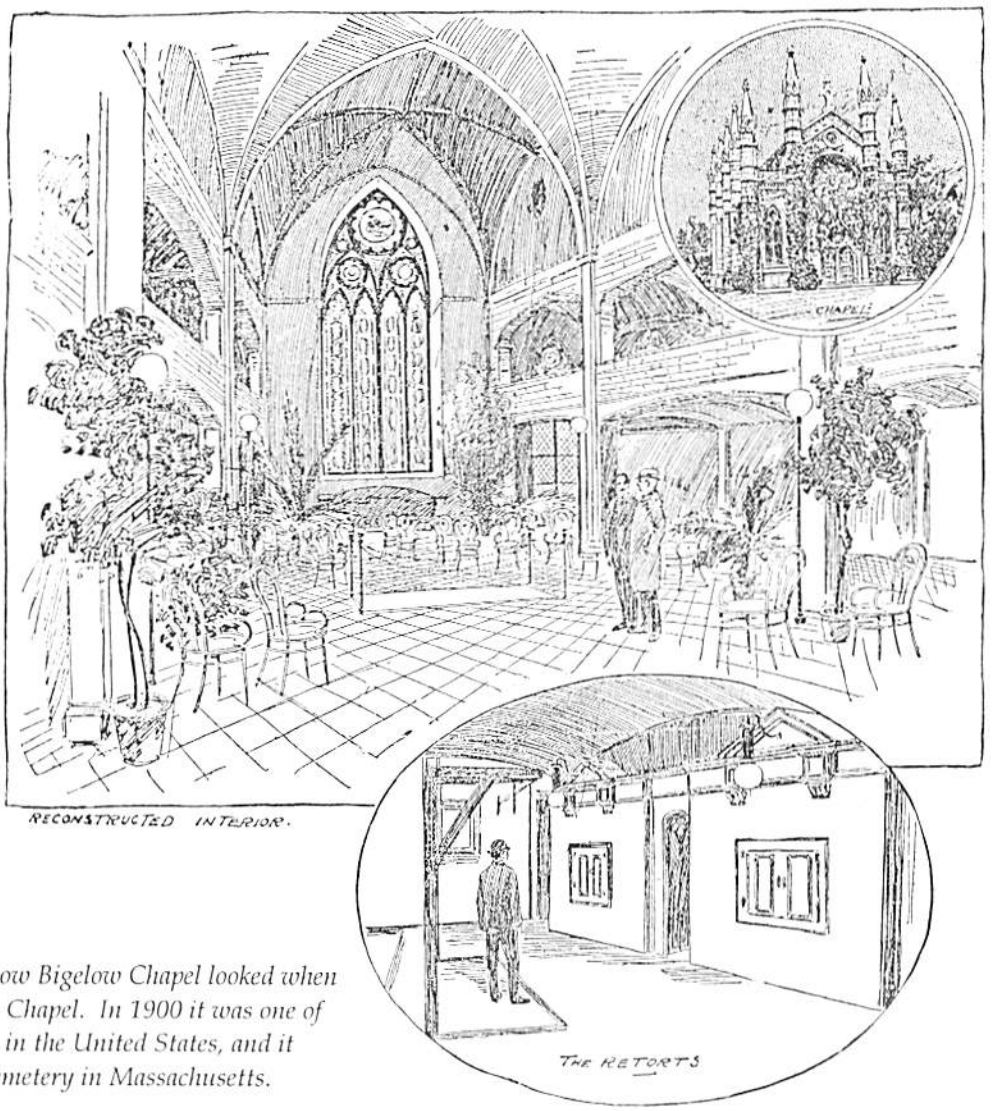
"The New Crematory in the Chapel at Mount Auburn." The September 1899 newspaper story read: "At Mount Auburn Cemetery the finishing touches are now being made to the finest and best equipped crematory in the world."

Rather than build a new building to provide space for the proposed new crematory, architect Willard T. Sears designed the means to reconstruct the interior of the old granite chapel and to use it as a crematory. He presented his designs to the Trustees on April 12, 1899 and a year later the work was completed and the first cremation at Mount Auburn was performed on April 18, 1900.

Mount Auburn's *Annual Report* for 1900 explains the situation: "The old chapel was entirely reconstructed and adapted to crematory uses. Only the outer granite structure, which it was deemed desirable to retain on account of its associations, was preserved. Otherwise, the whole building was entirely reconstructed. The Chapel alterations were made by the R. Guastavino Company, and the retorts and other incinerating apparatus designed and put in by the Engle Sanitary and Cremation Company, of Des Moines, Iowa. Their work was very thoroughly done, and we have every reason to believe that our crematory is now, if not better, fully equal to the best crematories thus far constructed." Professor R. H. Richards of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology gave advice and personal assistance during the construction of the crematory. The cost of the conversion of the old Chapel was around $27,900.

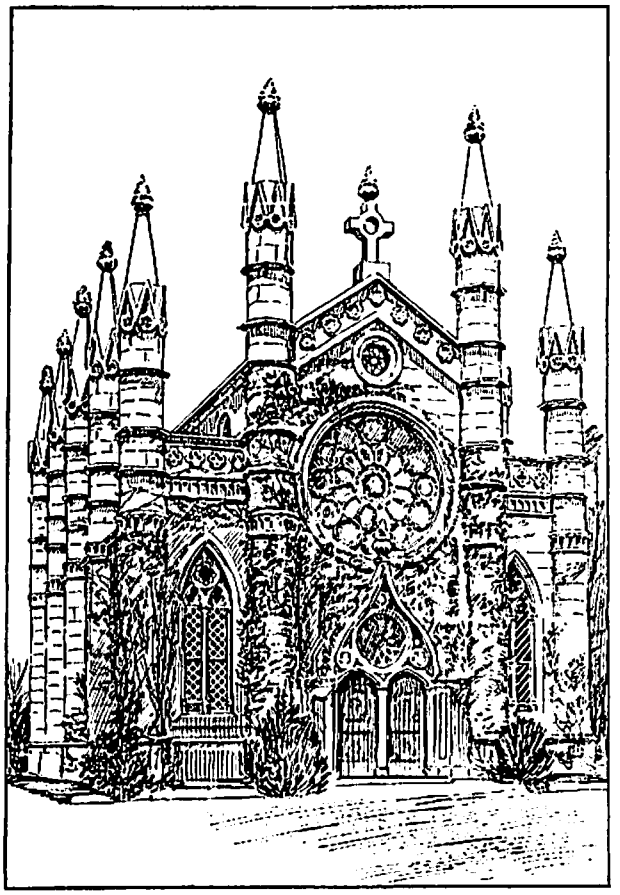
Newspaper headlines read: "Mt. Auburn Crematory: Most Perfect in the World in Some Details." The accompanying article explained: "The especial features of excellence are the rapidity by which bodies are converted into gases and the consumption of the latter, the absolute absence of smoke and odor and the ability to deliver the residium of ashes to the friends of the deceased in a short time."

The opening of the crematory at Mount Auburn was a newsworthy story. Seven years earlier in December 1893 the first cremation had taken place in the state at the crematory built by the Massachusetts Cremation Society but the well-appointed Crematory Chapel at Mount Auburn was a new development. The Boston papers covered the event in some detail. "This afternoon [April 18, 1900] the new crematory at Mt. Auburn, which is the building formerly the chapel, was used for the first time, . . . A specially notable feature is the careful provision for making the ceremony of cremation as impressive and free from any feature objectionable to the friends as possible. The old chapel did not have a basement, and in order to provide one the floor has been raised several feet. The upper portion is finished in brick, . . . it is finely furnished, and tastefully decorated with potted plants. Around the upper part there is a mezzanine story, of brick, which is intended to be used for the deposit of urns containing the ashes of bodies cremated, if the



THE REMODELLED CREMATORY AT MT. AUBURN.

This newspaper sketch shows how Bigelow Chapel looked when it was remodeled as a Crematory Chapel. In 1900 it was one of only 25 crematories operating in the United States, and it was the first built by a cemetery in Massachusetts.



NEW CREMATORY AT MT. AUBURN.

This 1900 sketch shows how exterior of Bigelow Chapel looked when it opened as a Crematory Chapel.

friends desire them placed there. Exactly in the centre of the main floor is the opening for the lift, upon which the casket is placed and lowered to the floor underneath, in front of the furnace. This is intended to be preceded, usually, by the committal service, and the friends can then, if they desire, stand around the opening and watch the consigning of the casket to the furnace."

Other articles speculated on how many cremated remains might be permanently placed in the Chapel. "In the arched and vaulted chapel there is space sufficient for niches to accommodate urns for almost 50,000 bodies, whereas the total number of earth burials in the cemetery up to this time [1900] have been but a few more than 32,000. Thus the chapel will in time become a columbarium of extensive proportions, and as the charge for each urn space in edifices of this sort ranges from $100 to $150, the rentals would doubtless provide a fund sufficient for the maintenance of the building . . ."

During the first year of operation, fifty cremations were performed at a cost of $30 for an adult and $25 for a child. Newspaper accounts carefully pointed out that: "In this country, the movement [for cremation] is very largely among the comfortable classes, who chose this method for themselves."

On June 12, 1900 a committee of Trustees was established to consider the construction of a columbarium, or crypts for cremated remains, in the Crematory Chapel. Architect Willard T. Sears exhibited plans for a system of niches for the reception of urns containing cremated remains. After considerable study, such a columbarium was installed in the eastern gallery of the Crematory Chapel in 1908. There were 288 niches built, and the rights to use these were sold at prices varying from $10 to $130 according to location.

In 1923 the decision was made to remodel the Crematory Chapel and the nationally-known firm of Allen and Collens was hired. The increasing use of the Crematory Chapel for full funeral services inspired the complete reconstruction of the interior and entrance area. Allen and Collens totally renovated the interior at an over-all cost of approximately $37,500, adding a room for the clergy, a family room and a Hook and Hastings organ. Two additional retorts were built in the lower level by employees of the Cemetery.

Allen and Collens were known for their "Gothic Revival" and "neo-Medieval" designs. Their extensive work in 1923-24 gave us Gothic-inspired interior of Bigelow Chapel we know today. In 1969 after nearly seventy years of the use the Crematory in the lower level of Bigelow Chapel was replaced by a modern addition at the western side of the Chapel.

We invite you to join us at the Bigelow Chapel Open Houses presented monthly as part of the Friends of Mount Auburn Cemetery program series. At these events we explore the many changes that have occurred in this Chapel over time and have the opportunity to admire the beautiful stained glass windows originally placed in the Chapel in the 1840s. Mount Auburn's staff welcomes any questions you may have about cremation, burial or memorial choices at the Cemetery.

-- Janet Heywood

New Audio Walking Tours

The Friends of Mount Auburn Cemetery announces that two new audio tours are now available for purchase or rental at the Entrance Gate Office, 8:30 AM to 2:00 PM. *Sweet Auburn – Audio Tour 2*, a 75-minute walking tour, is an introduction to one of the oldest sections of this "garden of graves." *Changing Tastes – Audio Tour 3*, a 75-minute walking tour, offers a sweeping look at the changing tastes of generations who are remembered here. These new audio tours join *Reflections – Audio Tour 1*, a one-hour driving tour. The tours are available on CDs and tape cassettes. Deposits are required for rentals.

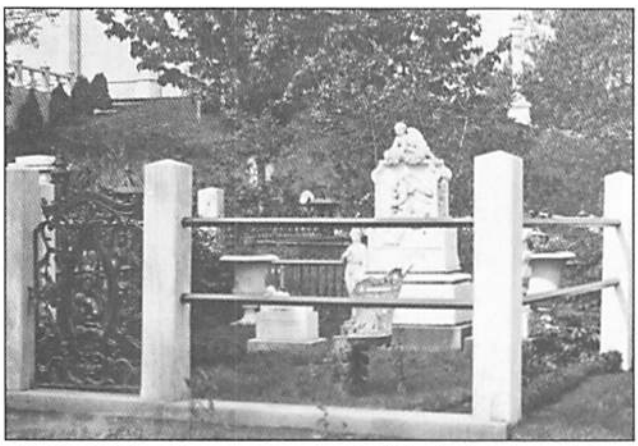
Decorative Urns at Mount Auburn

By Kathy Fahey

In addition to monuments, Mount Auburn Cemetery was once embellished with a wide variety of landscape furnishings and garden ornaments. In the 19th century families often used fences, chairs, benches and urns to adorn their cemetery lots. Decorative urns, similar to those found at country estates, were particularly popular as additions to cemetery lots beginning in the 1860s.

Although urn motifs were common on early neo-classical monuments erected at Mount Auburn, non-commemorative garden urns were new to the cemetery landscape in the 1860s. The mid-19th century heralded a new vision for the landscape at the cemetery. The original ideal was a wooded setting with occasional clearings for lots, but by the 1860s a more ornamental and manicured appearance with fewer trees and smoother turf was preferred. Lot owners and Cemetery workers embraced the new ideal and began adding garden urns to the Cemetery landscape.

Nineteenth-century trade catalogues offered a variety of such garden urns to consumers. Styles and materials included rustic forms constructed of twigs and branches to more classic forms made of cast iron, terra cotta and marble. Rustic urns appear in several historic images of Mount Auburn and some were probably purchased by the Cemetery Corporation itself. Some were placed in Corporation-owned areas, such as The Lawn (later renamed Asa Gray Garden) and Auburn Lake. Unfortunately, none of these urns survives today, probably because as one supplier noted, "these are very ornamental, but not durable."



In the 19th century, owners embellished their lots with a variety of landscape furnishings and garden ornaments. The Jones lot on Central Avenue incorporated iron fencing, two cast-iron chairs, two urns and two garden statues in addition to monuments. Photo, circa 1870.

A young woman admires a lavishly planted rustic urn at "The Lawn" (now Asa Gray Garden). The rustic urn, made of branches and twigs, was a popular design in the 19th century. Photo, circa 1870.

Urns made of cast iron, terra cotta and marble were popular choices and were often placed in pairs on a family lot. Cast iron urns were widely available, affordable and came in a variety of shapes and sizes. Unfortunately, they were also susceptible to corrosion in the form of rust. In addition, as the 1895 trade catalog of the Portland Stone Ware Company of Maine noted the "iron draws the heat of the sun, consequently keeping the vase hot and drying the earth, . . . [and] they require painting every year." Terra cotta urns were also widely available and were considered to be affordable and attractive. One 19th century supplier noted, however, that terra cotta urns could be easily damaged in cold climates because their porous nature allowed the urn to absorb water and then crack in freezing temperatures. Marble urns were also susceptible to the weather and were quite expensive, but marble appears to have been the more durable choice. Although several historic marble urns still exist today at Mount Auburn, there are no remaining cast iron urns and only one damaged terra cotta one.

Despite their disadvantages, cast iron and terra cotta continued to be popular material for urns, partly because they were often available in the form of "reservoir" or self-watering urns. Such urns were constructed with a built-in water reservoir from which plants could continually draw water. The

Stewart Iron Works of Cincinnati catalogue (1910) offered several styles and stressed their convenience:

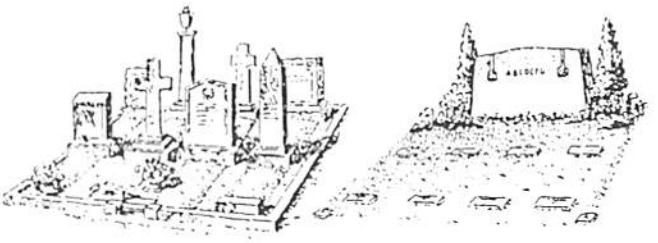
> What is more beautiful, or gives a more finished touch to a lawn, cemetery lot, or stretch of landscape than a beautiful Iron Reservoir Vase of blooming flowers, green foliage and over-hanging vines? . . . Isn't it grand to always have fresh, blooming flowers in the cemetery? You can have this by only attending to them every couple of weeks.

Planting urns with flowers and vines was very popular in the mid- to late-19th century, and many families had perpetual care contracts guaranteeing that the Cemetery staff would fill the urns with flowers every year for perpetuity.

In late 19th and early 20th centuries, urns and other decorative furnishings began to lose their appeal with lot owners and cemetery workers due to both changes in fashion and maintenance concerns. A newer style of cemetery landscape came into fashion, emphasizing a park-like appearance and stressing the uniformity of the landscape over individually decorated family lots. In addition, garden designers started to reject what they perceived as Victorian excesses. In 1903 one garden writer noted that "some of the designs in cast iron are second only to those in rustic work in point of ugliness. . . . they are nothing less than eyesores in the average garden." Aside from fashion, maintenance was a serious issue, as cast iron is susceptible to breakage and rusting. Also, cemetery grounds keepers found it an onerous task to mow around a multitude of urns, fences, benches and chairs.

Urns are often depicted in historic images with lush plantings. Perpetual care contracts guaranteed that urns would be planted with flowers every year by the Cemetery. Many of existing urns today have these contracts and are planted each spring. Photo, circa 1870.

In the early 20th century, the Cemetery was encouraging families to remove lot furnishings. Mount Auburn's superintendent often sent owners a booklet called *How to Beautify Your Cemetery Plot* (1934) that highlighted the new philosophy.



OLD NEW

A central or family monument, with markers of uniform size and design at each grave, together with a setting of evergreen trees and shrubs constitute the prevailing treatment of the cemetery plot today. Enclosures, large corner posts, metal seats and vases all conflict with the beauty of the modern cemetery vista. They are discouraged if not prohibited by all well regulated cemeteries. On larger plots, a simple garden bench or flower vase of stone may be used as accessories to the family monument but as a rule the seat and urn are best made an integral part of the memorial. (from "How to Beautify Your Cemetery Plot")

Monument dealers began to integrate garden ornaments into memorial designs. Consumers could now choose to purchase monuments in the shape of an urn, bench, sundial, pergola, or birdbath from monument dealers, rather than purchasing these accessories from garden suppliers. This development allowed families to incorporate popular garden themes into the cemetery without creating the look of a cluttered family lot.

Despite the trend in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to remove and prohibit decorative urns, today a small number of these historic features remain. Mount Auburn is committed to preserving this collection by careful documentation, maintenance, security and conservation. If you would like to contribute to the care of Mount Auburn's historic garden urns, contributions may be sent to the Friends of Mount Auburn Cemetery.

References:

How to Beautify Your Cemetery Plot, New York State Association of Cemeteries, Inc. (1934)

Ernest Stevens Leland, "Formal Garden Themes for Cemetery Memorials" in *The Cemetery Handbook* (c. 1921).

Charles Thonger, *The Book of Garden Furniture* (1903): 4, 13.

Kathy Fahey, formerly Assistant Curator of Historical Collections, has a special interest in landscape furnishings. She continues research, writing and lecturing on these subjects.

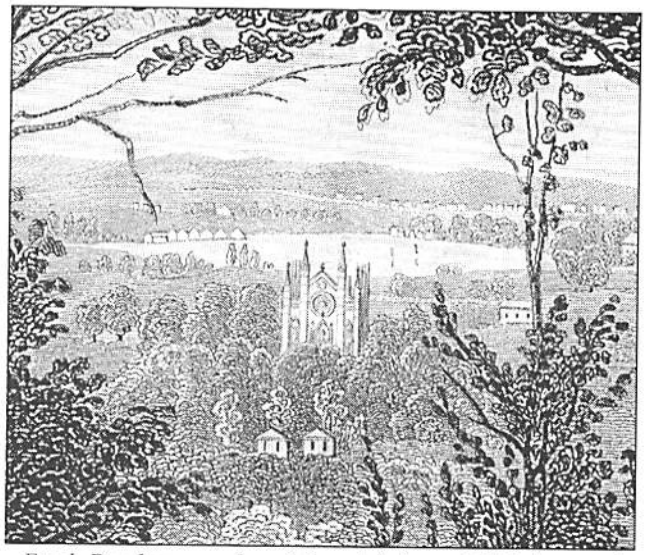
Nathaniel Wyeth
1802-1856

Explorer, Trader and Inventor. Born in Cambridge two hundred years ago, Nathaniel Wyeth was the son of Jacob and Elizabeth Jarvis Wyeth. His father, a descendant of Nicholas Wyeth who settled in Cambridge in 1645, was a graduate of Harvard College and was the owner of the Fresh Pond Hotel. This establishment, built in 1796 on the shore of Fresh Pond, was a popular resort for sailing and swimming in the summer and skating and sleigh riding in the winter.

On his birthday January 29 in 1824 Nathaniel married his cousin Elizabeth Jarvis Stone. In 1827 he became the manager of the ice company owned by Frederic Tudor, who had pioneered the harvesting of ice at Fresh Pond. Tudor, known as Boston's "Ice King," became wealthy exporting ice from Boston to Martinique, Cuba, Calcutta, Canberra and Caracas. Yet it is young Wyeth who is recognized as single-handedly revolutionizing the ice industry.

Wyeth invented the horse-drawn ice plow and a very efficient ice cutter. These tools were reported to have reduced the cost of ice harvesting from 30 cents to 10 cents a ton. With these tools, regularly shaped blocks of ice could be cut that were easier and cheaper to store and transport. Wyeth surveyed and marked off blocks in a checkerboard pattern over the ice. He used the ice plow to cut marks three inches deep and then made deeper cuts with a second plow. He planed the ice surface with a third horse-drawn device to produce even blocks of uniform thickness. Finally, large slabs of ice were cut off with hand tools and then floated to the ice house, a storage building made out of bricks or wood. Near the house smaller squares of ice were broken off and shuttled up a ramp into the ice house where workers arranged blocks layer upon layer. Wyeth found that when standard size blocks were insulated with sawdust they remained frozen for long periods. During the winter season the ice business might employ a hundred men and a dozen teams of horses.

Portrait of Nathaniel Wyeth



Fresh Pond as seen from Mount Auburn,1847. A row of ice houses lines the shore of the pond. Farms and residences can be seen in the distance. Bigelow Chapel and two tombs are visible in the Cemetery. From an engraving by James Smillie.

In the early 1830s Wyeth listened to talk of the great natural resources in the Oregon territory and decided to leave the thriving Massachusetts ice business. He formed a joint-stock venture to explore business opportunities in the West and in March 1832 set out with 21 men in three covered wagons. Wyeth even invented special wagons for the trip, called in Cambridge "Natwyethums." These wagons doubled as boats or gondolas for they had four wheels used when traveling on land that could be detached when crossing a river. When Wyeth learned the wagons could not make it over the Rocky Mountains, he sold them in Saint Louis. Unfortunately Wyeth was disappointed in this business venture because the supply ship that had sailed from Boston to bring the supplies and goods he needed to build a trading station was wrecked on route to the Northwest. Wyeth and his men were forced to return home before reaching the Columbia River.

One member of Wyeth's party was a 19-year-old relative John Wyeth who left the expedition in July 1832. He returned to Cambridge in January of 1833

and published an account of his travels under the title *Oregon; or a Short History of a Long Journey.* Young John was sadly disappointed in his experiences and wrote to warn "young farmers and mechanics not to leave a certainty for an uncertainty, and straggle away over a sixth part of the globe in search of what they leave behind them at home. It is hoped that it may correct that too common opinion that the farther you go from home the surer you are of making your fortune."

Nathaniel Wyeth himself was not discouraged and in 1834 he organized a second expedition, including missionaries and settlers. He planned to capitalize on the fish, fur and timber trade in the Columbia River area. He made arrangements to sell thousands of dollars worth of goods to the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Unfortunately, a competitor arrived first and the company did not honor its contract with Wyeth. He transported his goods farther west along the Snake River where he built Fort Hall near what is today Pocatello, Idaho. The log stockade trading post Fort Hall was located at an important point where two trails divided, one leading northwest to Oregon and the other southwest to California. Wyeth also erected Fort William on Sauvie Island at the mouth of the Willamette. Wyeth's attempts to deal in furs failed because the American Fur Company monopolized the trade in the Rockies and the British Hudson Bay Company did the same in the Pacific Northwest. An attempt to catch, pack and ship salmon to Asia also failed when the fish spoiled while waiting for a supply ship to arrive. In 1836, following an illness, Captain Wyeth sold Fort Hall to the Hudson Bay Company and returned to Cambridge. Wyeth's activities, however, spurred the U. S. Congress to maintain and develop American interests in Oregon.

Wyeth's expeditions also led to new knowledge about the plants native to the West. In 1833 Wyeth collected specimens for Harvard botanist Thomas Nuttall. Nuttall and naturalist John Kirk Townsend joined Wyeth in 1834. Nuttall described 113 species and named a sunflower genus *Wyethia* (commonly called mule's ear) in Wyeth's honor. Townsend praised Wyeth's superb ability and commended his "indefatigable perseverance and industry."

Upon his return Wyeth rejoined the flourishing ice business. By 1836 others had entered the lucrative industry and competition was fierce. An agreement in 1841 divided lakes and ponds into pie-shaped quadrants based on the ownership of the shorelines. In 1842 Tudor and Wyeth constructed an extension of the Charlestown Branch Railroad to Fresh Pond to transport ice to the Charlestown wharves for shipment. During his life Wyeth was a key figure in the development of the ice market to dozens of U. S. coastal cities and foreign ports around the world. The New England ice business continued until the introduction of electric refrigerators in the 1920s.

Captain Wyeth, as he was known throughout his life, died at 54 years of age in August 1856. He is buried in Lot # 3031 on Fountain Avenue with his wife, her sisters and other relatives. Wyeth's marble stone bears the inscription, appropriate for a true pioneer: **"He believed in himself."**

Sources: *Dictionary of American Biography;* The Cambridge Historical Society *Proceedings,* Volumes 2 (1906-7), 25 (1939) & 28 (1943); *Cambridge on the Cutting Edge: Innovators and Inventions,* Cambridge Historical Society publication, 1996; *Motor Travel* article: "New Plans for Marking the Oregon Trail," by Ezra Meeker, March, 1926; **http://websites:** www.xmission.com/drudy/mtman/html/wyeth1.html; www.ttsd.k12.or.us/schools/cft/html/ Explorers/Wyeth.html; www.theleisuresource.com/idaho/southeastoff path.htm; www.ukans.edu/carrie/texts/wyeth/wyeth.htm

-- Judy Jackson / Laura Gosman

Judy Jackson, a volunteer to the Friends of Mount Auburn Cemetery, leads frequent walks to observe the birthdays of selected "Persons of the Week." Laura Gosman, formerly Programs Coordinator at Mount Auburn, now works at the Springfield Art Museum.

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FRIENDS OF
MOUNT AUBURN CEMETERY

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This 1870s stereo view photo shows Alice Fountain near the intersection of Spruce and Mound avenues.