Elmwood Cemetery
Tales of the Dead in Charlotte
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I'm not sure what it says about me, but I think cemeteries are the most relaxing places in the world to explore. Actually I don't think it's that weird, and I know I'm not the only one. If you go through Elmwood-Pinewood Cemetery in Third Ward on a nice day you'll find scores of people strolling, running, walking their dogs, eating lunch, and peering at tombstones. I've spent many nice days wandering around there myself, and it's even better (and a bit deliciously creepy) at night. Elmwood is a peaceful shady green oasis in the middle of downtown Charlotte, and it's got some really amazing funerary art to feast your eyes on. Also, it serves as a great history lesson about our city, the people who shaped it, and the segregation that once threatened to tear it apart.

The Elmwood-Pinewood Cemetery was created because Charlotte had simply outgrown itself. The discovery of gold in 1799 and the arrival of the railroad in 1852 had made the city an important regional trading center and a magnet for bankers and cotton merchants, and more people began to live (and die) here than ever before. The Settlers Cemetery on West 5th Street was the first and only municipal burial ground in town at the time, and it was rapidly reaching its capacity. In 1853 the city purchased the first of several tracts of land that would eventually make up the twin cemeteries of Elmwood for whites and Pinewood for African Americans. In 1855 the first person was buried there, and after the Civil War lots began to fill rapidly as Charlotte continued to emerge as an important New South textile manufacturing region.



By 1947, all of the plots in Elmwood and Pinewood had been sold, and the cemetery had become the final resting place of several important citizens who had necessitated its creation with their contributions to Charlotte's 19th century expansion. While the Settlers Cemetery contains the bodies of Charlotte's oldest families including Revolutionary War heroes and signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, Elmwood is the home of Charlotte's New South industrial pioneers. Buried in impressive above-ground mausoleums are perhaps the two men most responsible for Charlotte's explosion in growth: D. A. Tompkins, engineer and builder of a cotton mill empire and owner of three Charlotte newspapers, and Edward Dilworth Latta, father of the electric streetcar and the prominent suburbs such as Dilworth that grew up around it. Also residing among the 50,000 souls buried in Elmwood are former Charlotte mayor S. S. McNinch, former U.S. Congressman John Motley Morehead, former N.C. governor Cameron A. Morrison, and scores of local political, religious, military, and business leaders. If you don't look closely in Section R you will miss the grave of Randolph Scott, who instead of joining his father's local textile manufacturing firm became a star of Westerns in Hollywood and the roommate and best friend (and rumored lover) of Cary Grant.



Several of these tombstones, from the obelisks and ornamented crypts of the rich and well-known to the simpler monuments of those forgotten to history, are marked by sometimes elaborate and often beautiful funerary art. Baroque headstones usually carved from marble or granite are the most common types of grave markers, particularly in the Eastern portions of Elmwood. Often the shape, decoration, and inscription of a headstone can reveal much about the person buried beneath it. The graves of small children are marked by lambs and cherubs, blooming roses indicate the death of a young person in the "bloom of life," and crossed swords decorate the stones of those killed in battle. Many graves feature impressive statues, among the most affecting and beautiful of which are the effigies of women in mourning often erected by grieving widowers. The most striking of these in Elmwood kneels on the verge of apparent collapse atop the grave of Mary Norcott London, who died in 1919 at the age of 24. Her left hand covers her face, while her right hand grasps a bouquet of roses as a symbol of her youth. Every time I go to Elmwood I find this statue, and it's still amazing; to me it's the most impressive grave in the cemetery. It's really arresting in its ability to bring to life the grief of a husband for his young bride ago to a total stranger almost a hundred years later.

Elmwood is designed in a way that visitors entering the Sixth Street gates are first greeted by the cemetery's most impressive grave markers shaded by its most beautiful trees, and are gradually guided eastward by curving pathways that give way to an almost grid-like pattern. This methodical landscape design also tells the story of strong racial divisions within Charlotte, which came to a head in the cemetery at the close of the 1960's. In contrast to the elaborately designed and decorated section for whites, the African American Pinewood Cemetery is a much simpler and more organic burial ground. The plots are laid out seemingly at random and, since many African Americans could not afford expensive stone markers, many of the graves at Pinewood cannot even be seen or identified. While a Potter's Field for whites who could not afford a cemetery plot was placed on the edge but still within the boundaries of all-white Elmwood, Pinewood was designed as a completely separate burial ground. No roads connected the two cemeteries, and Pinewood could not be accessed by the main entrance to Elmwood on Sixth Street; African Americans used a separate entrance on Ninth Street to enter Pinewood. To emphasize these boundaries, a fence was erected between Elmwood and Pinewood in the 1930's with a "No Trespassing" sign. Years after Charlotte voted against discrimination in the sale of cemetery plots, the fence continued to stand as a symbol of racial discrimination in the Queen City. In the late 1960s, empowered by the successes of the Civil Rights movement, black Charlotteans began a crusade to finally have it removed. Leading the fight was Fred Alexander, Charlotte's first black city councilman and the one of the foremost political voices for local African Americans. Mayor Stan Brookshire broke a deadlock vote on the City Council, and the fence was finally taken down on January 7, 1969; Alexander often spoke of its removal as his proudest achievement out of the many he is recognized for. Roads now connect the two cemeteries, which have essentially become one burial ground.

Recognized as a local historic landmark by the Charlotte City Council in 2003, Elmwood-Pinewood is a significant reminder of the narrative of our city, with over 150 years of funerary art and countless tales of Charlotte's political,

cultural, economic, and racial history to tell among its beautiful stones and lush trees. If you haven't been, go enjoy your lunch or walk your dog there sometime, it's absolutely worth your time.