

# On The Road

[Savannah, Georgia]

## Mapping Through History

In 2014, Michael Karpovage was visiting the historic Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah, Georgia. He used a map supplied by the cemetery office and soon got lost. That frustration gave him an idea. *Stan Goldstein reports*

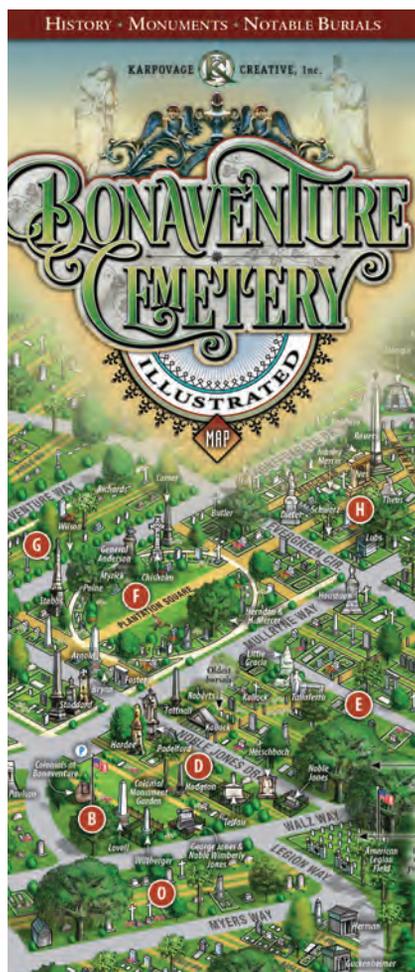
“The cemetery is worthy of a real good illustrated map,” said Karpovage, 51, of Roswell, Georgia. “It is such an historical attraction, and it’s worthy of something much better than the map the cemetery had. I had already put out two maps of Savannah and knew I could do this for the cemetery.”

Karpovage, an author, designer and cartographer, in 2012 put out an illustrated double-sided map of Savannah’s Historic District. The map features pictorial depictions of popular landmarks. It’s printed 4 inches by 9 inches folded and unfolds to an 18 inch by 27 inch poster. He followed that up in 2015 with a Haunted Savannah illustrated map.

“The Savannah map is highly detailed. It includes historical factoids, and I condensed them down to little blurbs. They are geared toward the tourists,” Karpovage said. “I then did the Haunted Savannah map; many tourists there take a ghost tour, so I knew there was a market.

“I just love visiting there. The historic district has so much to do and the riverfront,” he added. “The maps they give out are filled with advertisements, and I saw a marketing opportunity to do better.”

His Haunted Savannah map was filled with ghost stories, many associated with Bonaventure Cemetery, which was founded as Evergreen Cemetery in 1846. It features 44 haunted locations plus museums and attractions, top-ranked ghost tour companies, and information on free public transportation and docking regulations.



The cover of the Bonaventure Cemetery Illustrated Map. (Photo courtesy of Michael Karpovage)

Karpovage had already visited Bonaventure Cemetery four times by 2014. The map he had used that got him lost was in a brochure that sold for \$5 at the cemetery office. He approached the Bonaventure Historical Society with his idea of putting together a better map. The historical

society is responsible for the preservation and conservation of the cemetery.

### Making His Pitch

“I pitched to them in 2015 that I could improve so much on the map and put out something like I had done with my previous two maps,” he said. “I told them I would sell the maps to them at my wholesale price and they could use it as a fundraising tool.

“I had the Savannah maps under my belt and I could tout the success of that. The first map has sold more than 20,000 copies,” Karpovage added. “They could see the quality I would bring to a Bonaventure Cemetery map. My maps sell themselves because of the visual quality to them.”

Karpovage received permission from the historical society and the director of The City of Savannah Cemeteries Division to proceed.

“Lee Maltenfort, who was chairman of the Bonaventure Historical Society, championed my map proposal. Lee, who died in 2018, really backed me and helped me out quite a bit,” Karpovage said. “I gave the historical society final say on content, so everything is accurate. Some of the tourist guides I see make stuff up and that is so disrespectful to the families.”

In 2016, the Bonaventure Cemetery Illustrated Map was printed. It sells for \$7.95 with Karpovage keeping \$4 and the historical society \$3.95 for every map sold.

“The key is to keep it under \$10, that’s a tourist’s price. We have sold 14,000 of them so far,” Karpovage said.



**Michael Karpovage, left, with Lee Maltenfort, then-chairman of the Bonaventure Historical Society with the map in April 2016. Above: The Little Gracie Watson statue is the most visited grave at Bonaventure Cemetery, according to Karpovage. (Photos by Michael Karpovage)**

*The map's description reads: Our three-dimensional, birds-eye-view pictorial map gives you the big picture of beautiful Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah, Georgia. Step inside a centuries-old art form of oblique angle mapping and find the hidden gems of Bonaventure's historical residents. View their luxurious funerary art, learn of their past accomplishments and experience the lush floral landscape that makes this charming garden cemetery such a popular tourist destination the world over.*

### **Notoriety from a Book**

The 103-acre Bonaventure Cemetery became an even bigger tourist attraction in 1994 when the cover of the best-selling book "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" featured a photo of the Bird Girl statue that was set up at a family's plot at the cemetery. The family renamed it "Little Wendy."

The nonfiction novel by John Berendt was on the New York Times Best Seller list for 216 weeks following its debut. The book follows the story of an antiques dealer on trial for the murder of a male prostitute in Savannah. It was turned into a 1997 movie produced by Clint Eastwood and starring John Cusack and Kevin Spacey.

The Bird Girl statue was also featured on the movie poster.

People began flocking to Bonaventure Cemetery to see the statue. Some began chipping off pieces at its base for souvenirs. "It got so popular and due to the concern about the amount of traffic at the gravesite, the family had the statue moved out of the cemetery," Karpovage said. "It's now at the Telfair Academy building, part of the Telfair Museums in Savannah's historic district."

The most popular grave at Bonaventure Cemetery is known as "Little Gracie" according to Karpovage.

"Gracie Watson was 6 years old when she died from pneumonia in 1889. She's known as Savannah's most beloved girl," Karpovage said. "Little Gracie was loved by Savannah's elite. Her parents owned a luxurious hotel and this little girl would run around there. Everyone loved her; the street vendors knew her and those who passed by the hotel. Thousands attended her funeral."

Gracie's father had sculptor John Walz carve a monument to honor his daughter. Using a photograph as a reference, Walz sculpted the monument that sits upon Little Gracie's gravesite. It became popular to leave presents for

Gracie, especially around Christmas. That custom still continues.

"She's so popular that they had to put a fence around her," Karpovage said. He points out on his map how "Gracie's name is written with acacia branches symbolizing the immortality of the soul."

### **More Than a Map**

In addition to pointing out all the famous sites at Bonaventure Cemetery, Karpovage's map has write-ups on funerary art and symbols, cemetery etiquette, the history of Bonaventure and the lost art of sculptures in cemeteries.

"I always wondered what the different symbols on graves meant. I did a lot of research and put together my own glossary of funerary art and symbols and that's on the map," Karpovage said. "The symbolic carvings act as visual obituaries to the dead."

He explains the background on close to three-dozen symbols, including a butterfly – "a symbol for metamorphosis, and in time of mourning a butterfly carved onto a gravestone signifies rebirth" and a lion – "symbolizes majesty, strength, courage, honesty and power."

Karpovage also explains the

# FUNERARY ART & SYMBOLS

*Symbolic carvings act as visual obituaries to the dead. Here are some you may find in Bonaventure Cemetery.*



✱ **ALL-SEEING EYE.** The All-Seeing Eye usually appears with rays of light and symbolizes the infinity of God. It is typically a Masonic symbol.

✱ **ANCHOR.** Showing their occupation, sailors and fishermen were buried with anchors. An anchor on a cross carved together is an early symbol of Christ.

✱ **ANGELS.** Angels, messengers of God, symbolize spirituality and protection of the deceased. Cherubs, or baby angels, also portray guardianship under God's power.

✱ **BED.** A bed or a couch, sometimes with pillows, is a Victorian reflection of blessed sleep in the afterlife.

✱ **BOOK.** An open book can mean that the deceased was kind, expressive and well-respected in their lifetime. A closed book signifies a completed life, a metaphor like a storybook. A Bible on a headstone signifies that the deceased was a member of the Clergy or had a human heart open to God, open to life.

✱ **BUTTERFLY.** A butterfly is a symbol for metamorphosis, and in the time of mourning, a butterfly carved onto a gravestone signifies rebirth.

✱ **CHAINS OR LINKS.** Chains or links commonly symbolize bonds, typically familial bonds. A broken link symbolizes a broken family due to death.

✱ **CIRCLE OR SPHERE.** The saying "life comes full circle" is associated with a circle or sphere. These shapes represent eternity and life coming full circle with the instance of death and one's passage into the afterlife.

✱ **COLUMNS.** Columns are often prominent symbols used in celebration of one's past life or a classical means of decoration for the resting place. Broken columns typically signify an untimely death, or the death of a young person.

✱ **CROSS.** A cross universally symbolizes the Christian faith. The Cross of Calvary is a Latin cross that pays homage to three components of life—faith, hope and love—as well as to the site outside Jerusalem where Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross. A Celtic Cross was used before the common Christian cross. Its intricate carving of a circle surrounding the three intersections of the cross itself signifies eternity. The stem of the Celtic Cross is longer. It originated from Great Britain and Ireland. It is also thought to be symbolic of the sun's significance to our mortal lives. Saint Andrew's Cross is an emblem of the Stars and Bars battle flag of the Confederacy and is especially symbolic to those in military service for the Confederate States of America during the War Between the States. 830 thicker heraldic Germanic crosses carved with the letters CSA are placed throughout the cemetery for soldiers who fought for the South.

✱ **DOVE.** Symbolizes eternal life, peace and purity. A dove is both a Christian and Jewish symbol. It also symbolizes the death of a young woman. Doves pointing down or lying dead symbolize a death that was sudden. Typically on graves, doves are pointed upwards towards the heavens.

✱ **FLAMING TORCH.** An upright torch means a soul still burns with immortality, whereas an inverted torch means an extinguished life.

✱ **FLORAL WREATH.** A mourning symbol that represents victory over death.

✱ **FLOWERS AND PLANTS.** Symbolize the beauty and frailty of life. Certain flowers have distinct meanings and are too numerous to list.

✱ **FLYING HOURGLASS.** Depicts the swift passage of time, literally flying away on wings.

✱ **GATES OR DOORS.** Open gates or doors are symbolic of the passage from the land of the living into the mystical realm of Heaven.

✱ **HANDS.** Two hands outstretched is a Jewish "raising the hands" blessing to descendants of the prophet Aaron and to the holy figures of the Temple in Jerusalem. Clasp hands mean the emergence of this life and the afterlife in the moment of death. They also symbolize when one partner in a marriage passes away before the other. Hands pointing downward are meant to show God reaching down to the mortal world. Hands pointing upward reflect the soul's flight up towards Heaven. A hand holding a heart symbolizes love and deep-running faith.

✱ **HEART.** Universal symbol of love. A heart circled with thorns symbolizes the suffering of Christ.

✱ **LAMB.** A lamb is a symbol for innocence and is typically used on children's graves. A lamb is predominantly a Christian symbol for the pastoral sacrifice.

✱ **LION.** Lions symbolize majesty, strength, courage, honesty and power.

✱ **MENORAH.** The lighting of this seven-branched candlestick occurs during the seven nights of Hanukkah symbolizing the seven days of God's creation of earth.

✱ **MOURNING FIGURE.** A mourning figure depicted in statue form is an early 20th century representation of heavy sorrow and grief.

✱ **OBELISK.** An obelisk is a grand, vertical grave typically reserved for someone of power or prominent social status. It was put into practice by Victorians during times of mourning for loved ones who were of socioeconomic stature during their life. It originates from ancient Egyptian architecture.

✱ **ROCKS.** Rocks show strength and stability even when a loved one has passed away. Leaving rocks and small stones on a gravesite is an ancient practice and a form of comfort for visitors of the deceased because rocks do not wilt or die. They metaphorically weigh down the memory of the deceased. Often times, visitors will transport a rock from a location that was once significant to the deceased and leave it on their grave.

✱ **SAINTS.** Statues of saints signify a plea for protection of the deceased.

✱ **SHELL.** A tombstone shell is often of a child's grave. Shells also represent fertility and the womb.

✱ **SKULL.** Symbolizes death. A winged skull represents the fleetingness of life or a soul's ascent into the afterlife.

✱ **SQUARE & COMPASSES.** Symbolizes membership in the ancient fraternity of Masons. Sometimes seen with a letter G in the center, denoting geometry or God.

✱ **STARS.** Stars signify heaven. The number of points on a star indicate a variety of meanings. A four-pointed star is another interpretation for a cross. A five-pointed star signifies epiphany or wisdom. A six-pointed Star of David reflects the Jewish faith of the deceased. A seven-pointed star represents the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.

✱ **SWORD & SCABBARD.** Marks military service in war, usually of an officer. Wreaths entwined in a sword denote how many wars served in.

✱ **TREES.** A tree commonly symbolizes an embracing attitude to life. A stump indicates that the deceased died young or unexpectedly. A willow reflects deep sorrow and mourning. Certain trees have distinct meanings and are too numerous to list.

✱ **URN.** Urn symbolizes immortality, dating back to ancient Egypt where vital organs were stored in urn-like vessels. An urn or a vessel with a lamp of flame symbolizes eternal remembrance or the eternal spirit. A draped urn, very common in Bonaventure, symbolizes a protective shroud for the soul.

✱ **WHEAT.** Symbolizes a long and fruitful life harvested by the reaper only when it was time.

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**Funerary art and symbols are part of the Bonaventure Cemetery Illustrated Map. (Photo courtesy of Michael Karpovage)**

meaning of leaving a rock or small stone on a grave.

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Cemetery etiquette is another topic Karpovage made sure to include. "I've had a lot of positive feedback on that. It's important not to be disrespectful and to keep your children and pets under control in a cemetery," he said.

In the spirit of "Where's Waldo?" Karpovage hides a little drawing of himself in all his maps. In addition to his three Savannah-related maps, he has put out two others – maps of the historic district of Charleston, South Carolina, and the French Quarter in New Orleans.

"I draw myself in my favorite spot to go to," he said. Hint, his favorite spot at Bonaventure Cemetery is the Plantation Square section. "That's where the original plantation home was before this was a cemetery. It's the oldest section of the cemetery," he said.

For the future, Karpovage would love to do a map of Forest Lawn Cemetery in his hometown of Buffalo, New York.

"I love Forest Lawn. I sent them a

proposal and a color poster mockup right before the COVID-19 quarantine in March. They said they would get back to me but they haven't yet," he said. "I am holding out hope that I can do that one."

Also on his radar is to do a map of St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 and Metairie, both in New Orleans.

"I'm one of those people called a taphophile – a person who is interested in cemeteries, funerals and grave-stones," Karpovage said. "I find cemeteries fascinating. They are an outdoor luxurious museum to those who shall live in immortality."

*The Bonaventure Cemetery Illustrated Map is at the cemetery's office and also available at [karpovagecreative.com](http://karpovagecreative.com) and [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).* •