

**Town of Provincetown, MA**  
**Cemetery Commission**

**Natural Burial – Frequently Asked Questions**

**What is a Natural Burial?**

- “Natural Burial,” also known as “Green Burial,” is a means of burial that allows the body to decompose naturally, returning all elements to the earth through environmentally sound practices. The interment occurs without embalming or a grave liner. The term “Natural Burial” is used throughout this document (except for some references in the Information Resources section).

**I. Basic Requirements for Natural Burials in Provincetown:**

- Natural Burials may only occur in the Upper section of the Alden Street cemetery.
- The body must not be embalmed.
- The body may be:
  - wrapped in a biodegradable shroud (cotton, wool, silk, hemp, etc.) and buried on a natural burial shrouding board (wooden tray with handles, also known as a trundle), or
  - placed in a casket made solely of biodegradable materials (cardboard, wood, willow, bamboo, seagrass, felt, etc.) *and* free of any varnishing, metals, or other toxic or non-biodegradable materials, or
  - placed directly onto the earth without a shrouding board or a casket.
  - **See more details below in Section IV about biodegradability requirements for shrouds and caskets.**
- Given the sandy nature of the cemetery grounds, all burials require the use of mechanical lowering devices, operated by cemetery staff, and the use of a vault with cover, which shall be placed only by cemetery staff. **Bottomless vaults must be used for Natural Burials.**
- If a Natural Burial cannot be prepared due to practical constraints and the body must be cremated, cremated remains within a biodegradable container may be placed in a grave that has been designated for a natural body burial.

**II. Managing the Arrangements for Natural Burials:**

- **A funeral home may handle all arrangements.**
- **Alternatively, families and others may care for the deceased.** In Massachusetts, it is legal to care for the deceased without using a funeral home. The deceased may remain in the home. Family may handle the administrative tasks, may transport the deceased to the cemetery, and may conduct a service without a funeral director. If not using the services of a funeral director, at least 24 hours in advance of interment, arrangements must be made to have Provincetown Cemetery staff present at the graveside service to oversee cemetery procedures.
- **A hybrid, or combination, may be used** (where the funeral home provides some services, and the family provides others). For example, a funeral home may be asked to take care of administrative tasks (the “paperwork”) and the family handles other arrangements. Any funeral

director in Massachusetts may be used. Funeral homes should be contacted to determine the services they provide and the costs.

**IV. Natural Burial Procedures when a loved one dies (to be handled by a funeral home or family):**

- **Death certificate:** A family designee or funeral director will need to obtain a disposition permit (“burial permit”) prior to moving a deceased person. Obtaining a death certificate entails working with the medical certifier and the Town Clerk (burial agent) to facilitate the entry of the death record into the Electronic Death Registration System (EDRS). Death certificates should be filed as soon as possible so that the deceased's remains may be properly interred.
- **Disposition/Removal permit:** Once the Death Certificate is initiated in EDRS, a Disposition/Removal Permit (a permit to transport a body and dispose of it by burial, cremation, or donation to a medical school), is issued by the Burial Agent in the town where death occurred. In Provincetown, the Burial Agent is the Town Clerk.
- **Provincetown DPW arrangements:** Arrangements must be made with the Cemetery Superintendent (Brian Cowing, Office: 508-487-7008) at least 24 hours before the interment. Opening and closing of the grave must be done by Town Cemetery staff; family or friends of the deceased may not open and close the grave.
- **Preparing the deceased for burial:**
  - If home funeral care is chosen, certain funeral homes may be willing to offer education or guidance, as do home funeral guides. Care of the deceased may include natural, non-invasive procedures, and keeping the deceased cool with dry ice, Techni-ice, cooling blankets, open windows, or other methods. Families and friends may choose to bathe and dress the deceased at home and provide care for one to three days, depending on what the family wants and the burial schedule permits.
  - A funeral home may prepare and shelter the deceased until burial. Some funeral homes have refrigeration facilities and allow visitation of un-embalmed bodies. Contact funeral homes for options and fees.
- **Shrouds or Caskets:** Containers or shrouds for burial in Alden Street Cemetery must be biodegradable. They can be homemade, made by a carpenter or cabinetmaker, or purchased from funeral homes, retail stores or online. The container holding or wrapping the deceased must be free of visible bodily fluids for burial.
  - **Shrouds and Shrouding Boards:** A shroud is a cloth used to wrap and cover a body after a person has died. Natural Burial shrouds must be made of natural, biodegradable materials such as wool, cotton, linen, bamboo, or hemp. A shrouded body may be placed inside a biodegradable casket, but a casket is not required. A shrouded body without a casket must be entirely wrapped and placed on an untreated softwood (such as white pine) or wicker shrouding board, which meets the same biodegradability requirements as requirements for caskets (see below). The board will help stabilize the body while being transported and lowered into the grave and will remain inside the grave. Plywood and particle board are not acceptable. A board with carrying handles that is at least as wide and as long as the body is recommended; please notify the Cemetery Superintendent if a board will exceed 28-inches in width and 84-inches in length. Some shrouds have carrying handles sewn into the cloth and sleeves sewn into the bottom in which a narrower board can be inserted; the narrower board is

acceptable since the body and board are held snugly together with ties, providing stability.

- **Biodegradable Caskets:** Caskets may be constructed from untreated softwood, wicker, cardboard, or other natural, biodegradable materials, and must not be painted with toxic paint or varnish. They should be of sufficient strength to support the weight of the body. Wooden caskets should be held together with wooden dowels and non-toxic glues rather than metal fasteners. To minimize environmental impact, we recommend obtaining locally made caskets. Some people prefer to make their own, using locally sourced or repurposed materials. Handmade caskets should conform to standard casket size (7 feet by 2 feet); please notify the Cemetery Superintendent if an oversized casket will be required.
- **The obituary or death notice:** Print or online publications should be contacted to determine their requirements and costs.
- **Transportation of the deceased:** The deceased may need to be transported from a health care facility, to and from a home or funeral home, and to the cemetery. If crossing city or town lines, you must obtain a Disposition/Removal Permit prior to transporting the deceased.

#### **Additional information:**

- **Scheduling:** Some nursing homes and hospitals have schedules for removing the deceased that might make it challenging for families to manage the necessary paperwork themselves, especially on weekends or holidays. In these instances, it can be helpful to hire a funeral director to handle the administrative requirements and transportation.
- **Home funeral guides:** Home funeral guides can assist a family with certain arrangements but are not licensed funeral directors and do not do the work of preparing the deceased for burial or providing transportation.

#### **Information resources:**

Mass.gov: *Issues to consider in preparing for disposition of decedents* [www.mass.gov/guides/issues-to-consider-in-preparing-for-disposition-of-decedents](http://www.mass.gov/guides/issues-to-consider-in-preparing-for-disposition-of-decedents)

Mass.gov: *Funeral Directors Consumer Fact Sheet* <https://tinyurl.com/ConsumerFactSheet>

Green Burial Massachusetts: [greenburialma.org/](http://greenburialma.org/)

Green Burial Council: [www.greenburialcouncil.org/](http://www.greenburialcouncil.org/)

National Home Funeral Alliance (NHFA): *How Funeral Directors Can Support Home Funeral Families* [www.homefuneralalliance.org/what-funeral-directors-can-do.html](http://www.homefuneralalliance.org/what-funeral-directors-can-do.html)

Funeral Consumers Alliance: [funerals.org/](http://funerals.org/)

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#### **Text credits:**

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Cemetery Commission, Town of Brewster, MA