

Vermont green burial advocate dies, settles for cremation

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(Photo: JOEL BANNER BAIRD/FREE PRESS)

Jack Griffin settled for ashes two weeks before he died last month.

His public request for a green burial — one in which a body is allowed to decompose and nourish other organisms — was ultimately snarled in red tape.

Griffin acknowledged that his timing was bad.

“I doubt I’ll make it,” he said in mid-February. “I’m not getting any stronger.”

EARLIER: [Griffin: Let me decompose in peace \(/story/life/2018/01/25/green-burial-plans-elude-vermont-](#)

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Cremation, Griffin decided, would be the next best thing — and at a thousand bucks or so, several times cheaper than a full-blown casket-and-vault burial.

Pancreatic cancer outpaced the efforts of fellow green-burial advocates to secure Griffin a final, earthy berth.

Legally, the groundwork has been laid. [Vermont burial laws \(https://www.sec.state.vt.us/media/886632/digging-deep-2017.pdf\)](https://www.sec.state.vt.us/media/886632/digging-deep-2017.pdf) were amended last year to allow for shallower-than-usual interments in public graveyards.

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Cemeteries, however, have been slow to adapt to the new rules, said Carl Anderson, a West Berkshire-based wildlife biologist and co-founder of nonprofit [Green Burial Vermont \(https://www.greenburialvermont.org/\)](https://www.greenburialvermont.org/).

Anderson worked closely with Griffin in his final month. He chased down offers from cemeteries in New York, Ohio and Massachusetts and researched several promising in-state plots.

A Vermont man offered to adopt Griffin, in a last-ditch effort to allow lawful access to a family cemetery, beyond the reach of cemetery commissions and their operating rules, Anderson said.

“We did all we could,” said Anderson. “Ultimately, though, the end of life is no time to be working through all these complexities.”

Gaining ground, slowly

Anderson and others say they have redoubled efforts to simplify Vermonters’ access to simple, shallow burials.

Anderson is on the agenda to pitch the idea at the Vermont Cemetery Association’s annual meeting in May.

The complexity of Griffin’s request prompted Tom Tailer, an Essex-based earth-science educator, to explore the creation of a green cemetery on land he owns.

It can’t happen overnight, he discovered.

Tailer hopes to form a co-op that would buy the land, which has room for 150 – 350 burial plots. Some of the land would be set aside as a preserved natural area.

Self portraits: The many faces of Jack Griffin

Fullscreen



An undated photograph of Jack Griffin, who died at age 83 on Feb. 20, 2018. (Photo: Courtesy Lee Griffin)

But first, Tailer wrote in an email, "we will need to get an engineering plot analysis after the ground thaws."

'Hang in there until things improve'

Progress of this sort encourages Josh Slocum, executive director of South Burlington-based nonprofit [Funeral Consumers Alliance](https://funerals.org/) (<https://funerals.org/>).

But, Slocum cautions, green burials risk sliding into the realm of a "boutique" or "social-virtue-signalling" purchases.

"The only thing that's new about green burials is the name," Slocum continued. "Human beings have been placing bodies directly in the earth for more thousands of years than have ever been recorded."

Slocum's advice: Face up to our society's reluctance to treat death as a common, physical phenomenon; and "shop before you drop."

Lee Griffin, Jack's widow, needs no such reminder. Her deceased husband's late-blooming fascination for green burials steers her own, final plans.

"It changed my mind. Now I'll try to hang in there until things improve," she said.

On Monday, Lee Griffin emailed a short poem that her husband had written.

It reads: "Man of modest verbs/ He puttered, he dithered/ He moseyed and considered/ Then going as a ready guest/ Of an ever-roiling world/ He ripened/ He withered."

Jack Griffin's cause, even against daunting odds, was typical of the man, Lee said.

"He loved publicity. And he loved to be right," she said.

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