

Genealogical News & Notes

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Documenting Rhode Island's Historical Cemeteries



by John Sterling

For the past four years a group of volunteers has been working on the Rhode Island Historical Cemetery Transcription Project, locating, documenting and computerizing more than 3000 cemeteries in Rhode Island. The project database now contains the largest single collection of cemetery records for Rhode Island. The database contains hundreds of cemeteries that have never before been recorded. For many early Rhode Islanders, their gravestone is the only record that they ever existed, making these records critical for genealogical studies. The database is also being used by gravestone carver researchers to identify for further study, gravestones that might have been carved by a particular carver. Revolutionary War and Civil War researchers have used the data to identify gravesites of soldiers. In some cases the location of the battle where a soldier was killed is listed on the gravestone.

The earliest cemeteries in Rhode Island were farm cemeteries, where a single family was buried on a hill behind the barn or at the edge of a pasture. Later church and town cemeteries were created where many families were buried together. Much later, private cemetery associations were formed to manage large private cemeteries. The typical farm cemeteries contain 6-12 burials. The typical town and church cemeteries contain 100-60,000 burials and, in a few cases, more. The East Bay towns in Rhode Island, like Newport and Bristol, were early trading ports and became urbanized in the 1700s. They switched from farm cemeteries to church and town cemeteries early in their history. For this reason, the towns east of Narragansett Bay tend to have far fewer cemeteries but more large cemeteries than the West Bay towns. Bristol has ten cemeteries and Newport has twenty-six.

The West Bay towns, which even today tend to be more rural, have many more small cemeteries. Exeter has 154 and South Kingstown has over 200 historical cemeteries. Large town cemeteries on the West Bay typically were started in the 1850s, more than 100 years later than on the East Bay. River Bend Cemetery in Westerly and Riverside Cemetery in South Kingstown were both started about this time. Most families living near these large cemeteries started using them, giving up their old farm cemeteries. As land was developed some of the old farm cemeteries were moved into these large town cemeteries. This accounts for the very early dates on some of the stones in these cemeteries.

Rhode Island has a historical cemetery registration program that documents the location of cemeteries and places a white sign at the site to identify each cemetery. In 1950 Rhode Island was fortunate when Governor John O. Pastore appointed Ralph S. Mohr to the Rhode Island Graves Registration Committee. He became it's chairman and with his 20 member committee set out to find and register all of the historical cemeteries in the state. They did not record the names on the gravestones in the cemeteries, but they did record the names of all veterans they could identify. When they started, 688 cemeteries had been registered. Eight years later, in 1958, they had found and registered 1,704 cemeteries. From 1960-1970 little more was done with historical cemeteries. In 1970, Ed Connelly joined the committee as a volunteer. From 1973 to 1990, as Director of the RI Veteran's Cemetery, Connelly continued the graves registration project as well as historical cemetery preservation projects. By 1990 1,862 cemeteries had been registered.

In 1990, a small group of genealogists came together with the idea of gathering up all of the Rhode Island cemetery transcripts and imputing them into a computer database, so that they would be easily accessible. Rhode Island is fortunate because a number of cemetery transcriptions exist in libraries and historical societies throughout the state. In 1977 David Dumas (RIR v3,#4) published a list of all the transcripts that he could find, but it probably only documents half of the transcripts that exist. You would have to visit 26 or more locations to see them all. In 1867, George Dennison recorded the cemeteries of Westerly. Turner and Richardson recorded Portsmouth, Middletown and Newport at the end of the 19th century. George Harris recorded North and South Kingstown and part of Exeter in 1880. James N. Arnold recorded many of the cemeteries throughout the state in the 1890s and early 1900s. Benjamin Wilbor and Waldo Chamberlain Sprague recorded Little Compton and Tiverton in 1923 and 1959 (NEHGR Vol 115-117, 1961-1963).

Edward Doubleday Harris recorded the old gravestones on Block Island in 1883. Charles and Martha Bennis recorded 1,000 cemeteries throughout the state in the 1930s. Ethel White recorded many cemeteries containing Revolutionary War veterans in the 1930s. Several historical organizations and individuals had worked for many years on whole towns and made their data available to this project. Among them are the Foster Historical Society,

The Burrillville Historical Society, The Middletown Historical Society, Blanche Albro (West Greenwich), Marjorie Pendleton (Charlestown), Carl Stoner (Richmond), Irene Nebiker (No. Smithfield), and the DAR (Scituate). This is a sampling of the 70 plus transcripts we have found.

In 1990, the group was naive enough to think that all of the historical cemeteries had been registered, and, that with all the transcripts available, most of the cemeteries had been recorded. It is now estimated that 3,240 cemeteries exist in Rhode Island; 1,380 more than were registered when the project started. For some towns, transcriptions were found covering 90 percent of the cemeteries. For other towns, transcripts covering only 10 percent of the cemeteries could be located. Only one cemetery transcript could be found for Woonsocket.

The biggest problem was totally unanticipated. There are errors in the transcripts. The best are the George Harris and James Arnold transcripts, that both are 95% to 98% accurate (if you ignore George Harris's spelling of names. He spelled Champlin 'Champlain', Stedman 'Steadman' and he didn't distinguish between 'Gardner' and 'Gardiner'). Benn's records, typed from the original, are about 85% accurate. Some of the transcripts are as poor as 30% accurate. There is a transcript for a small farm cemetery that contained an error on every stone. To solve the accuracy problem, each cemetery is recorded in two phases. Phase I is to put whatever information could be found on a cemetery into the computer. Phase II is to go to the cemetery with a print out and verify the transcript, note the condition, material and shape of the gravestone and update with any stones added since the earlier transcript.

Another problem that was not anticipated was the difficulty of locating cemeteries with 100 year old descriptions. Arnold and Harris typically described cemeteries as, 'on the Knight Farm' or 'a short distance from the burnt mill at Fisherville'. Good use has been made of the 1870 and 1895 Gazetteers to locate some of the farms, but many are in areas that have been heavily developed in the last 100 years and all traces of early farms are gone. This requires finding old timers who remember a locale from 40, 50 or 60 years ago. Charles and Martha Benns generally only give the town where a cemetery is located in their transcript, although they have located some on a map located at the RI Historical Society Library. Many of these are put on a list of cemeteries for which a transcript exists but the current location is unknown. There are currently about 300 of these.

Today (1994) the project has grown to 25 volunteers working in all areas of the state. An additional 470 cemeteries have been registered, bringing the total to 2,431. Transcripts have been found for an additional 300 plus cemeteries that have not yet been located. Over 212,000 burials are listed in the database. If each name were put on an index card, the stack of cards would be 142 feet high. The best estimate now is that there are 3,270 cemeteries in Rhode Island containing 500,000 burials. The

database is on computers at the RI Historical Society and the East Greenwich Public Library where anyone can search for a gravestone anywhere in Rhode Island. In the future the entire database will be put onto a CD ROM disc so that researchers anywhere in the country will be able to get a copy of the full database. The computer database is now approaching 100 megabytes.

Many of the cemeteries have been abandoned for years and the gravestones are covered with lichens, fungi and dirt. Techniques have been developed that allow volunteers to read gravestones where, at first glance, even the name cannot be seen. To read the older stones they are brushed with a stiff natural bristle brush and plain water. This cleans the surface and puts some of the surface dirt into the letters making many of them easy to read. A 10 inch by 48 inch mirror is also used to reflect sunlight at a raking angle across the surface of a gravestone, giving shadows that make reading the stones easier. In some cemeteries, the stones have toppled many years ago. Some are covered with up to six inches of dirt and roots. A steel probe is used to locate these stones. Most fieldstone markers have settled so that much of their surface is hidden. The dirt is carefully removed from in front of these stones to check for any crude lettering. Cemetery #75 in Exeter has many crudely inscribed fieldstones. Half a day was spent removing them from the ground, brushing them, recording the inscriptions and making sketches of the lettering. They were then reset to the height they were originally. These crudely inscribed fieldstones were rarely transcribed in the past. They are the grave markers for the earliest settlers and since fieldstones are sometimes not recognized as gravestones, they are in the most danger of being obliterated.

There are probably 100 of the 3200 cemeteries in Rhode Island that have records. These vary widely in completeness and accuracy. Many have burned or been lost. Some contain little more than names and burial dates. Swan Point Cemetery in Providence contains birth and death dates and places as well as spouse and parents names. If you are lucky enough to have an ancestor buried here you will find excellent data. About one third of the people buried in cemeteries that contain records do not have a gravestone. To record one of these cemeteries, it is generally best to record the gravestones first, then compare this data to the records and add people who do not have gravestones. Undertakers records can also yield burial locations. Some use has been made of these records and they often contained information that does not exist elsewhere.

In the 1700's, roughly 60 percent of Rhode Islanders were Quakers. Many Quakers did not mark their graves or marked them only with an uninscribed fieldstone. There are, however, many good Quaker records. In the Newport Historical Society is the 'Death of Friends Book' that documents the death date and burial location of Quakers starting in 1647. These records are being added to the database. They document, for example, many of the fieldstone marked graves in the Coddington Cemetery in Newport. Thomas B. Hazard (Nailer Tom) lived in South

Kingston and kept a diary from 1778-1840. He documented births, deaths and marriages as well as every day events. 1463 death records were extracted from this diary. Since he was a Quaker, his diary contained many Quaker death records and gives us the names of many of the unmarked graves in the two South Kingstown Quaker cemeteries, as well as Richmond, Hopkinton and surrounding towns.

To date, 2431 cemeteries have been recorded or 75% of the 3272 cemeteries we estimate exist. 212,000 burials have been recorded or 43% of the 494,000 estimated to exist; however of the pre 1900 gravestones, probably 70% have been recorded. Most of the 39 Rhode Island towns and cities are being actively recorded now, but there is very little work being done in Bristol, Warren, East Providence, Johnston, Cranston, and Pawtucket. Anyone who would like to work on this project should contact the R.I. Historical Society Library for more information.

New Accessions

Family Genealogies:

- A Carey Family History \ Clifford Marion Carey (*Donation*) CS71 C332 1992
- Corsair-McDonald Family History and Genealogy Addition \ Pauline Corsair Hoyt (*Donation*) CS 71 C826 1983
- Farnham/Farnum Families in America vol. 1 by Antoinette Farnham Stepanek (*Donation*) CS71 F236 1993
- Hazard Genealogy \ Harry W. Hazard (*Donation*) CS71 H428 1993
- Genealogy of the Kemble(Kimble) Family in America \ Kemble Stout, 1992 (*Donation*) CS 71 K49 1992
- The Lillibridges of the World \ Donna E. (Rupchis) Lillibridge and John L. Lillibridge (*Donation*) CS71 L728 1994
- Tallman Genealogical Record \ Virgil Burdette Tallman (*Donation*) CS71 T15 1993
- The Wightman Ancestry \ Wade C. Wightman (*Donation*) CS71 W659 1994
- Descendants of John Wilson of Woburn, Massachusetts vol. J. (*Purchase*)
- Descendants of Jacob Wilson of Braintree, Massachusetts Vol V. (*Purchase*)
- Five Families from Hartford Country Connecticut (vol. R. (*Purchase*) CS71 W75 1988

Rhode Island:

- Washington County Cemeteries (*Donation*) (available on computer)
- Rhode Island in the Colonial Wars \ Howard Chapin (*Purchase*) E199 C46 1994
- Baptisms of St. Joseph's Church, Pascoag, R.I. 1893-1991 (*Purchase*) F89 P27 B36 1993
- Marriages of St. Joseph's Church Natick, R.I. 1875-1989 (*Purchase*) F89 W4 M37
- Marriages of St. Theresa's Church, Nasonville 1923-1986 (*Purchase*) F89 B9 M37 1993
- Rhode Island Veterans Index (*Purchase*) HA612 1890 Index

Massachusetts:

- Microfiche of Wellfleet--Births, Marriages and Deaths 1763-1859 (*Donation*) F74 W39 H6
- Vital Records of Chatham, Massachusetts 1851-1900 \ Anna Lowell Tomlinson (*Purchase*) F74 C43 W47 1994
- Vital Records of Plymouth, MA \ Lee D. Van Antwerp (*Donation*) F74 P8 V35 1993
- Marriages of St. Theresa's Church, Blackstone, Mass. (*Purchase*) F74 B42 M37
- Births Recorded in the Town Reports of Swansea, Mass 1879-1973 \ Robert Charpentier and Armand and Mary LeTourneau (*Purchase*) F74 S995 B5
- Marriages Recorded in the Town of Blackstone, Mass. 1845-1900 \ Paul DeLisle and Robert Charpentier (*Purchase*) F74 B43 M3

New Hampshire:

- Vital Records of Londonderry, N.H. \ Daniel Annis (*Donation*) F44 L8 V57

General Sources:

- Finding Italian Roots \ John Philip Colletta (*Purchase*) CS754 C62
- The Famine Immigrants vol. 2 -7. (*Purchase*) CS44 F35 1983
- Black History: A Guide \ Debra L. Newman (*Purchase*) Z1361 N39 N57
- French Canadian Surnames \ Robert Quintin (*Purchase*) CS2700 Q56
- Genealogical Guide to the Catholic Churches of New England by Robert Quintin (*Purchase*) BX4601 N5 Q56
- Genealogical Abstracts of Revolutionary War Pension Files abstracted by Virgil D. White (*Purchase*) #255 W55 1990
- Guidelines for Genealogical Writing \ Margaret f. Costello and Jane Fletcher Fiske (*Purchase*) CS16 C6
- The Search for Missing Friends vol. III, 1854-1856 (*Purchase*) F73.9 I6 S43
- 10,000 Vital Records of Eastern New York 1777-1834 by Fred Q. Bowman (*Purchase*) F118 B6

Bits and Pieces

The material in the Reading Room of our Library is being shifted to accommodate new books we acquired with donations from our glass elephant. The Arnold Vital Records are no longer in aisle 15, they are now on top of one of the card catalogs. Patrons can now reshelve the Arnold records themselves. The new location provides better access to the books.

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