



# Angels, Skulls and Hourglasses

By CONSTANCE MUSSELLS

WHERE THESE DAYS can you find early American art in its original setting? In the old graveyards! Rhode Island has thousands of examples of the stonemason's art awaiting a discerning eye.

What's out there? Exuberant and staid, humorous and serious, schmaltzy and aesthetic . . . wonderful carvings in stone. The old gravestones are a potpourri of angels and skulls, hourglasses, weeping willows, scythes, urns and portraits. The carvers were sometimes sophisticated, sometimes folk artists; they were influenced, like the painters of the day, by new trends from Europe.

Visiting the old burial grounds has become increasingly popular. These quiet places have stories to tell, memories to evoke, and a curious way of taking you into the past.

Every place has its rewards. I have yet to explore a graveyard where I didn't find something worthwhile. Sometimes I discover better carving, sometimes a personal interpretation of format, a sophisticated portrait or a primitive view of people or places. There's always a surprise.

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We Rhode Islanders are particularly lucky in our heritage. There are fine stones throughout the state; in fact, 1,865 historic graveyards are registered. Rhode Island has launched a program of restoration of significant burial grounds with local help. Through the efforts of Edwin Connelly, the project's director and founder, the Documentation and Restoration of Rhode Island Historic Burial Grounds is preserving the marvelous work of our ancestors.

Something of a puzzle to historians is why these carved stones were tolerated by the early churches. General religious thought frowned on "graven images" because they smacked of "papish" influence. The prevailing theory is that the churches were concerned only with the soul's welfare. Death marked the departure of the soul to a heavenly or hellish end. The church was not responsible for the vessel that had housed the soul; that was disposed of by civil authority. This idea is supported by inscriptions on early stones which emphasized the mortality of the body:

*"He that was sweet to my repose  
Now is become a stink under my  
Nose*

*This is said of me  
So will it be said of thee."*

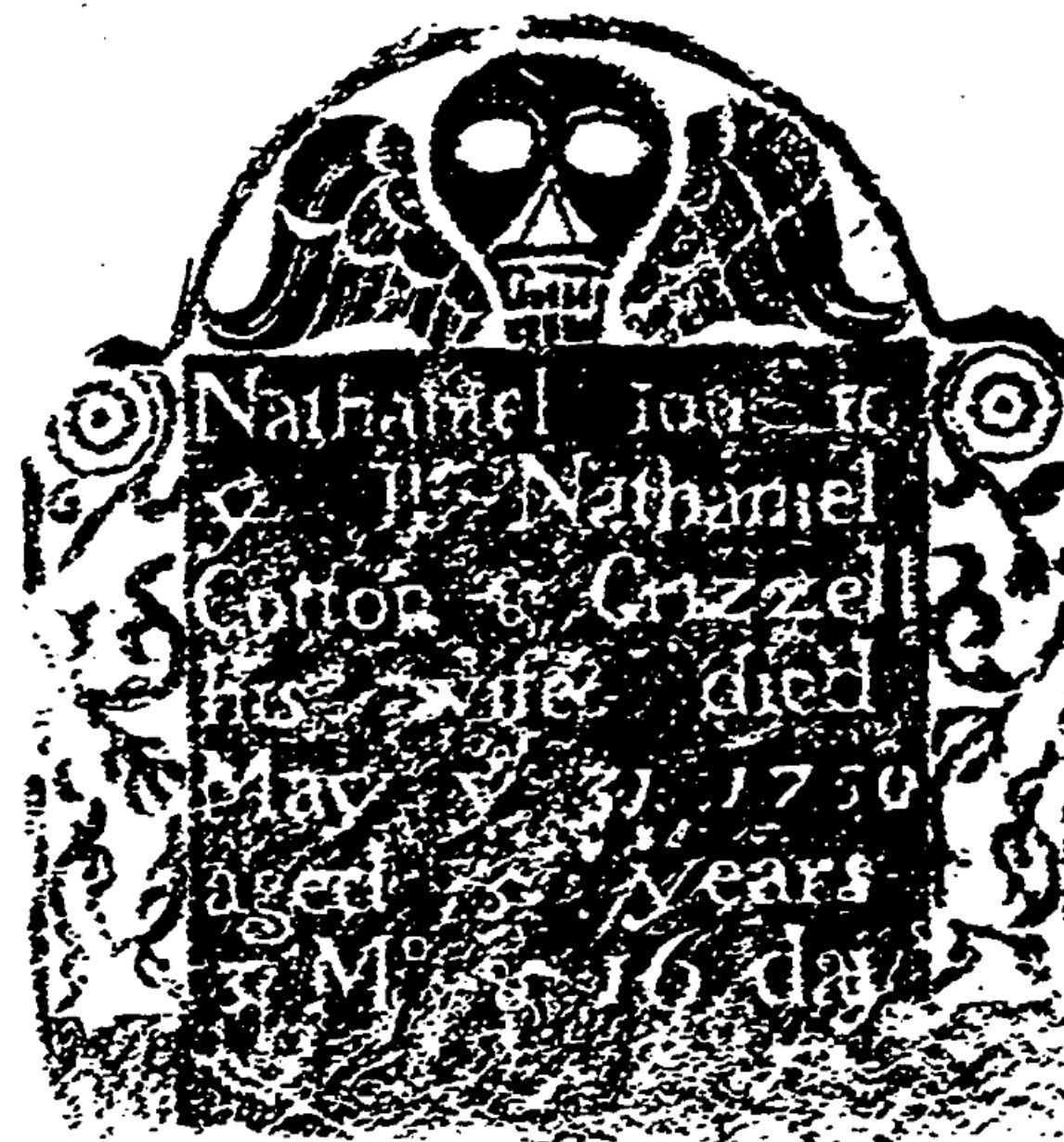
Dr. Isaac Bartholomew  
Cheshire, Conn. 1710

*"Behold and See  
For as I am Soe shalt Thov Bee  
Bvt as Thov Art  
Soe Once Was I  
Bee Sure of This  
That Thov Mvst Dye."*

Josiah Lyndon  
Newport, R.I. 1709

In addition, the gravestone was commissioned by the bereaved, not the church, and the ritual after death was not very church-like in a religion which frowned on individualism. At death a person was remembered, however briefly, for his time on earth. The bereaved sent mourning rings and kidskin gloves to friends and relatives. Broadside eulogies were distributed among acquaintances and plastered to the coffin. After the burial the mourners

→6



Nathaniel Cotton Stone  
Bristol East Burial Ground — 1750

This is representative of the earliest type of gravestone. The skull has a little flair — note the eyebrows!



The Job Harris Stone  
Providence North Burial Ground

This cherub evidently consists of only wings and head. The unusual carving on the tablet is probably a family crest. It is very nicely composed.

Langley Children's Stone  
Newport Common  
Burying Ground  
— c. 1785

The only multiple headstone of its size, this is 6'9" wide. It is the work of John Ball, a well-known Newport carver.





Capt. Abraham Smith Stone  
Providence North Burial Ground — 1774

Here is a sophisticated little cherub well on its way to becoming a portrait. Note the rising sun at the top of the head. The inscription says "The voice said 'Cry — All flesh is grass.'"



Abigail Smith Stone  
Providence North Burial Ground — 1764

Would you believe time flies? The visual metaphor was aimed at literate and illiterate alike.

BELOW:

Charles Bardin Stone  
Newport Common Burying Ground — 1773

There are many interpretations of the figure on this stone — some say that it is Moses, some that it is Bardin himself. The most controversial idea is that it is God (it does resemble the God in Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling). Notice the cherubs at the tops of the listels.



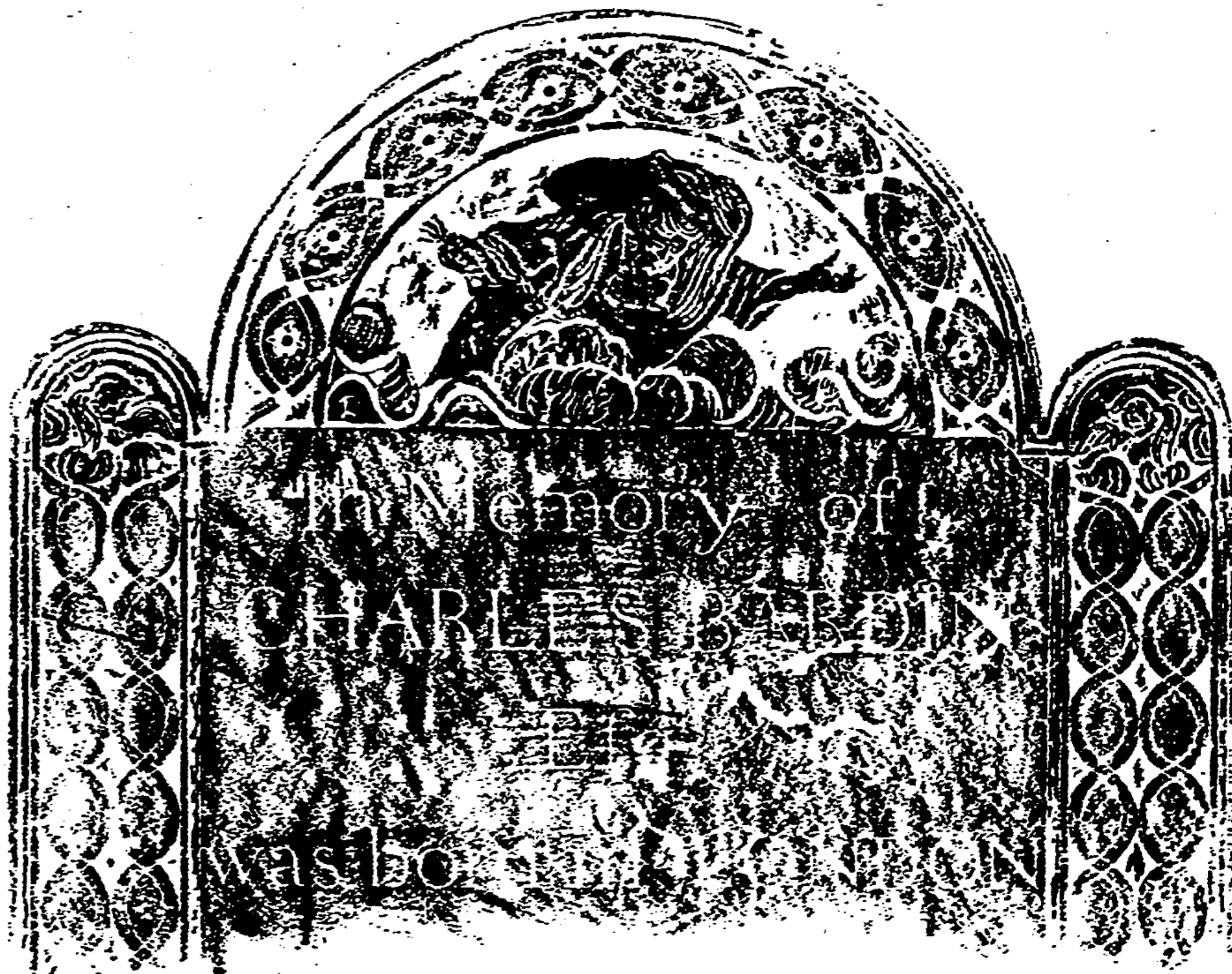
Patty Willard Stone  
Bristol East Burial Ground — 1794

To me, this kind of stone is worth the search. It is a charming primitive portrait. Note the hat around Patty's face and her polka dot dress.



Little Compton  
Old Burying Ground

This is an example of the icon-like carvings whose ancient roots speak of Byzantium to me. The person is seen encircled, perhaps to suggest a locket. The symbolism of the scythe and hourglass is apparent.



# GRAVESTONES

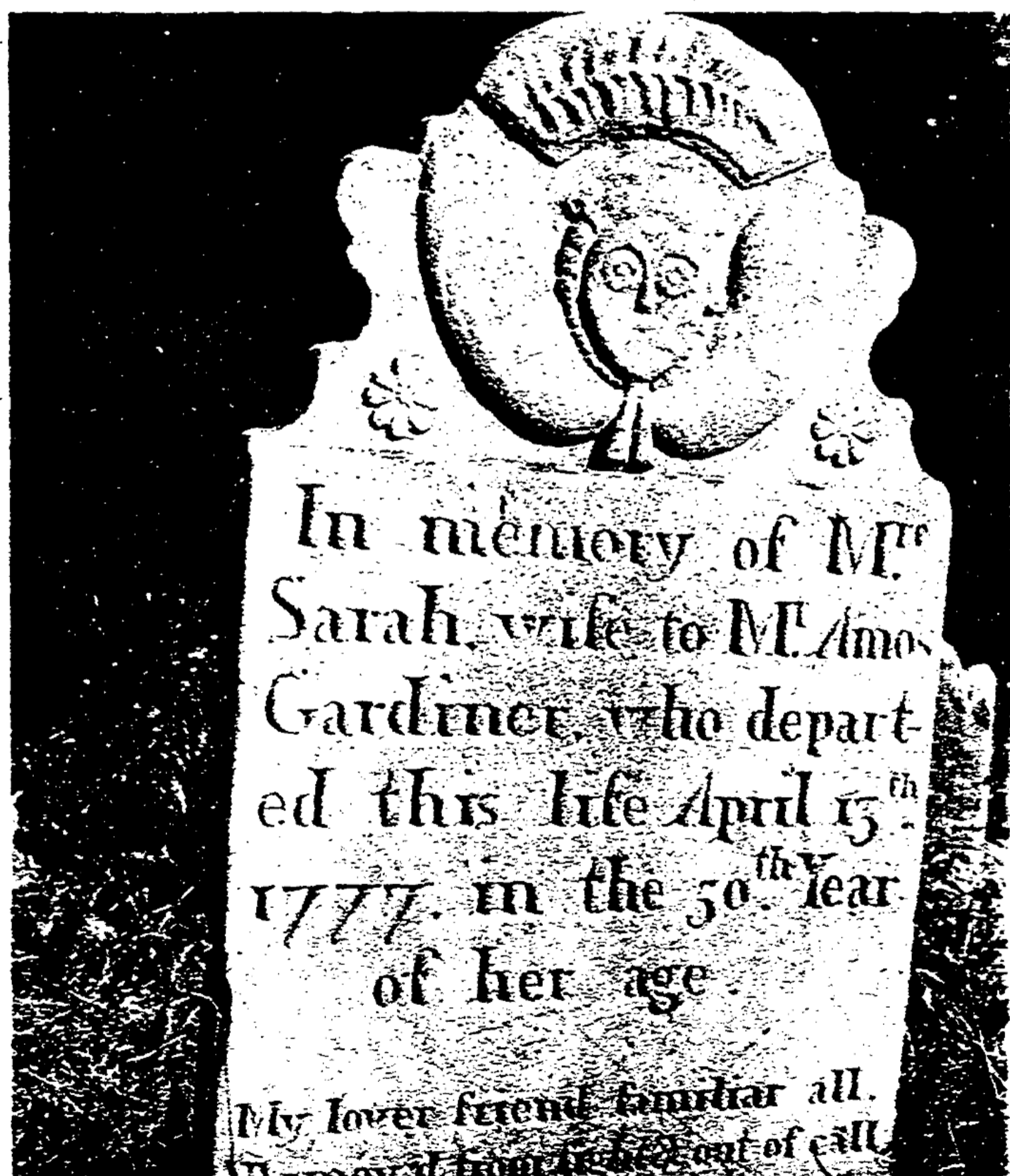
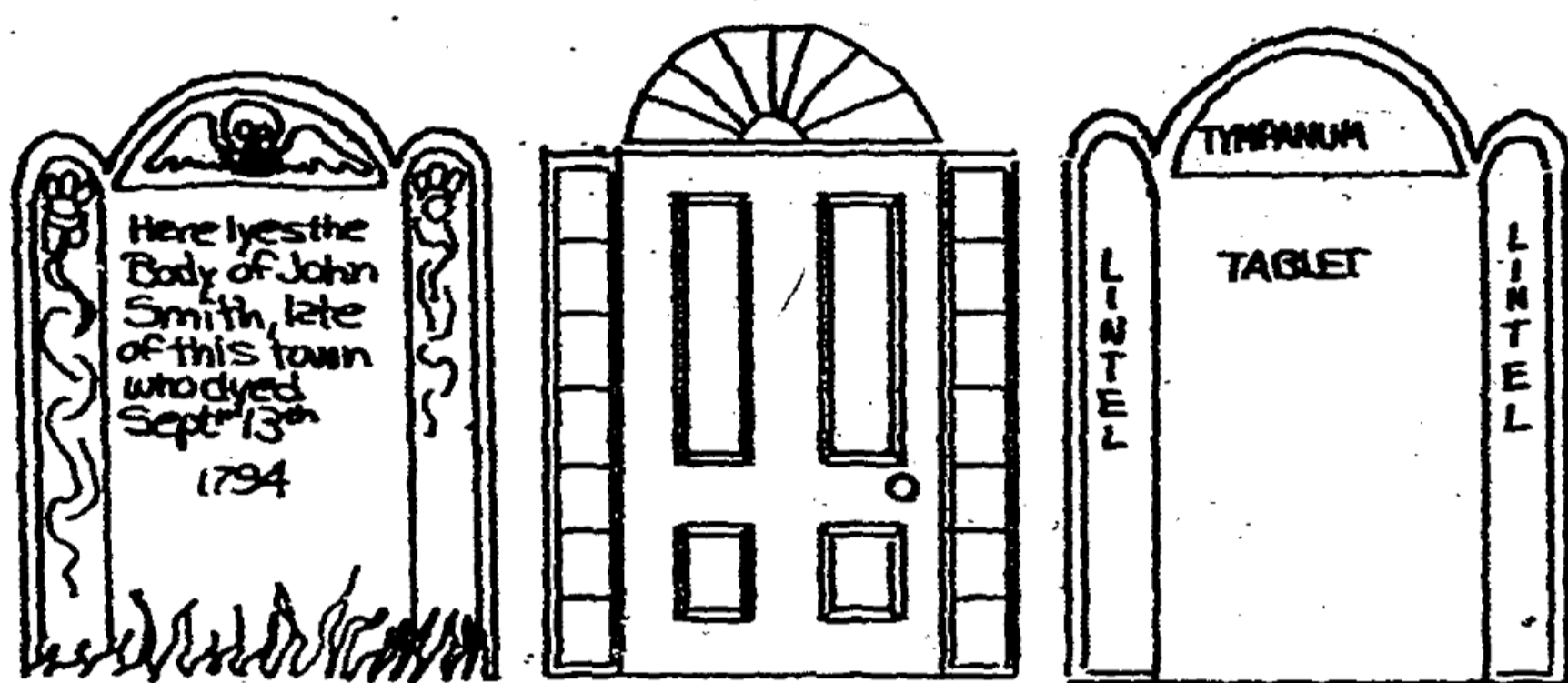
feasted and drowned their sorrows at a well stocked repast.

It's easy to learn to identify the general period of a stone. The shape of the stone, the material and what's on it are the clues.

The oldest stones (from the seventeenth century on) adhered to the doorway shape. The gravestone was the end product of a long line of memorial markers and represented the portal by which the soul entered heaven. If you compare the stone with a Colonial doorway, the resemblance is apparent. After the early part of the nineteenth century, all kinds of shapes appeared — tablets, obelisks and urns are just a few.

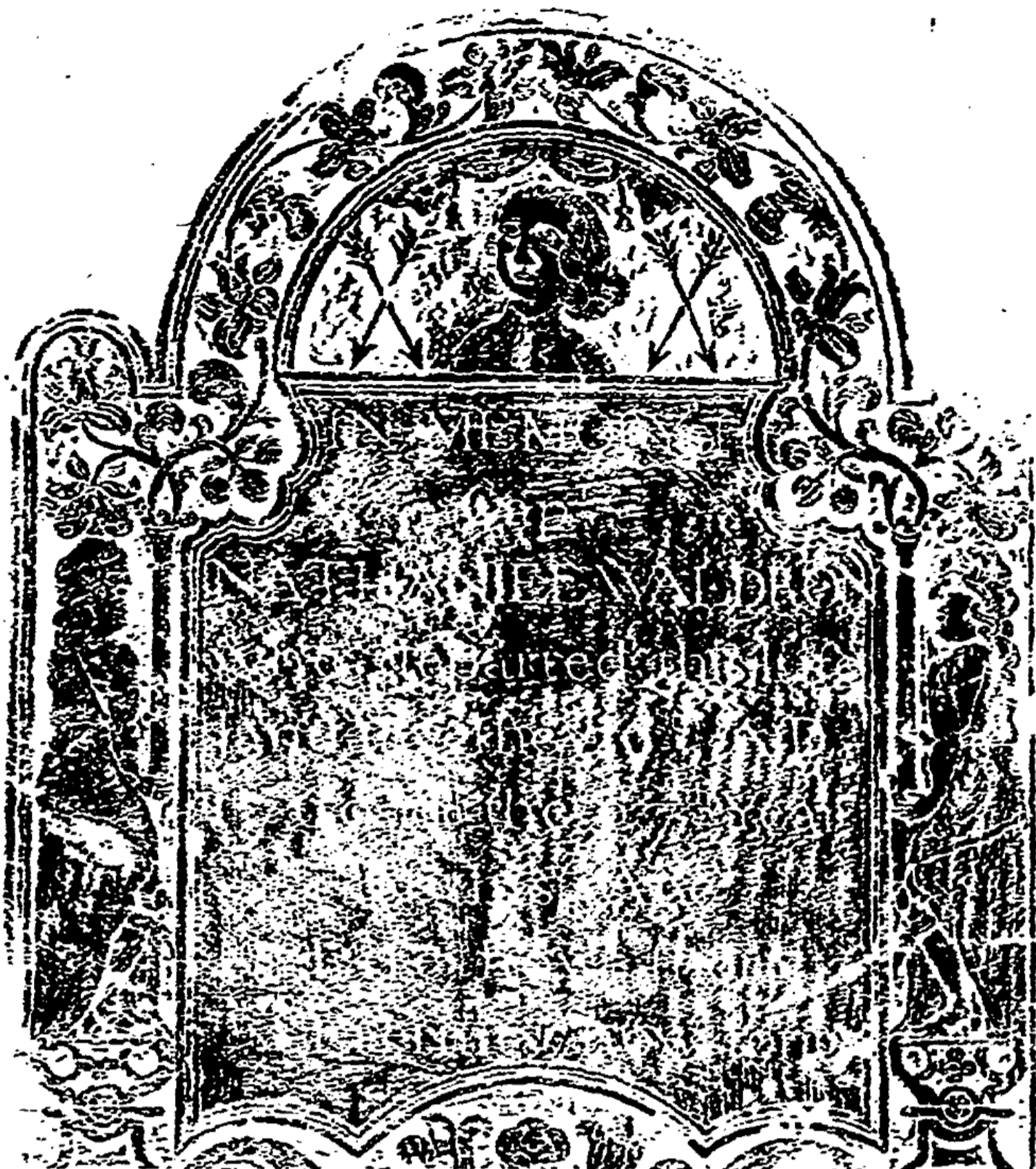
The doorway-shaped stones were precisely laid out and their format was followed until the Victorian era. Each stone had three components: a) the arched area or tympanum at the top where the major symbolism appeared; b) the lintels or sides of the stone, divided from the face, and usually filled with decorative carving; and c) the tablet of the stone which bore the epitaph.

The oldest gravestones are usually slate. This material, available throughout New England, carves easily and stands up well. It lends itself to engraving and to a certain amount of relief carving. In later stones, white marble was used. This grainy sandstone-like stuff is easy to carve in the round. It became especially popular in



Sarah Gardiner Stone, The Platform, North Kingstown — 1777

A charming example of the Connecticut carvers' work, the cherub and attendant symbols are in relief, the inscription is engraved.



**Capt. Nathaniel Waldron Stone**  
 Newport Common Burying Ground — 1769

*This is one of the better known pieces from the Stevens Shop in Newport. It is somewhat overwrought, but charming. Note the broken arrows and the curtain descending on Nathaniel. The Romantic movement was obviously an influence, as the "Greek" figures on the lintels attest.*

the Victorian era and supplanted slate as the favorite stone. White marble and sandstone were used by Connecticut carvers who are responsible for many gravestones in western Rhode Island.

The passage of time saw changes in the perception of death. The earliest symbols on the gravestones were the skull and crossbones (which became a skull with wings). These arose from the Puritan view of the body as something earthly. When attention focused on the passage of the spirit to heaven, winged-cherubs appeared. Hourglasses (with and without wings) and gloomy people with scythes followed. Inevitably, as religious thinking relaxed, more attention was paid to individuals. Portraits appeared. Significant scenes from the Bible and classical works, though less common, sprang from the hands of the stonecarvers. After 1810, imagination waned and individual style disappeared. Stones became quite stylized. They carried weeping willows, urns and fingers pointing to heaven and were extremely sentimental. Periods overlapped in time as changes in style spread slowly from the cities.

The individual interpretation in style is where the American artist took over from the American craftsman. Many early stonecarvers had little or no training. Most did not make gravestones exclusively: they worked in wood, iron, and leather, as well, to fill the needs of a developing country. Some however possessed an eye for shapes which they assembled to create primitive work distinctly American yet with ancient roots. I was struck with the similarity between some of the stones and Byzantine icons of the past. There are particularly charming primitive stones in the Providence North Burial Ground, the Bristol East Burial Ground and in western Rhode Island.

Not all stonecarvers were primitives, of course, and Rhode Island had four of the best-trained artists working in the Newport area. Three were related — John Stevens 1st, 2nd and 3rd. The first John emigrated to the thriving city of Newport via Boston from Oxfordshire, England, and in 1705 opened a shop on Thames Street. John 2nd and 3rd continued the shop. All three were fine, sensitive

# GRAVESTONES

continued



**Pompey Brenton Stone — 1772**  
Newport Common Burying Ground

*Another Stevens Shop stone, this one cut by John 3rd, in the slave section of the cemetery.*

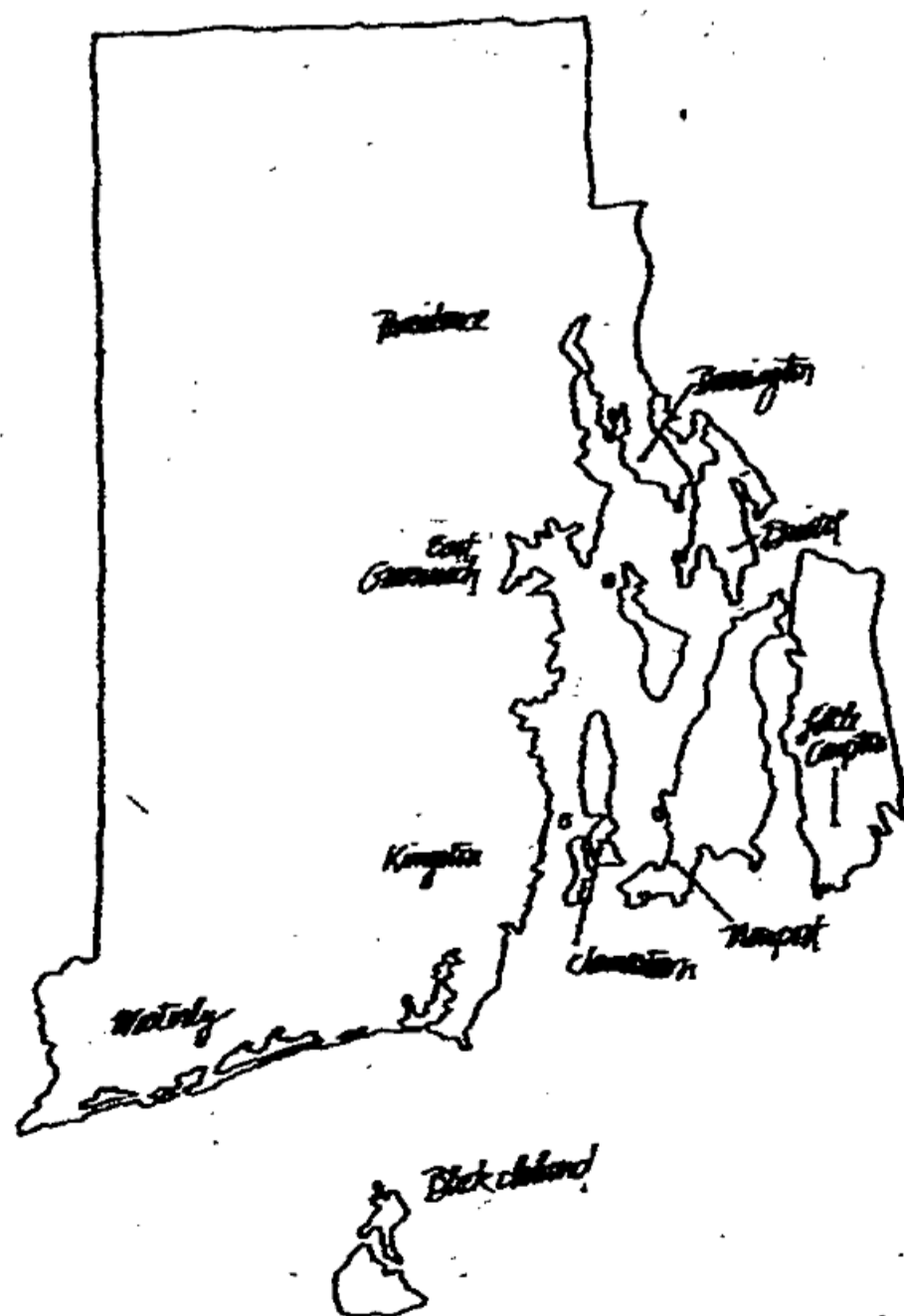
workers who produced comparatively sophisticated pieces. They are especially known for their fine calligraphy. John 3rd, known for his Nathaniel Waldron stone with its figures in Greek garb on its lintels, had trouble staying with the craft traditions of the shop. The Stevens shop ended with him. Today it has been resurrected by the Benson family, who follow particularly in the tradition of fine lettering.

The fourth Newport artist, a con-

temporary of John 3rd, was John Bull. Bull, in my thinking, was the best of the lot — bold, imaginative and unafraid. He is particularly known for his Charles Bardin stone (a possible representation of God) and the unusual multiple headstone of the sons and daughters of the Langley family. You can identify the work of John 3rd and John Bull because they signed their stones.

The Newport Common Burying Ground is filled with their work as well as the intriguing work of many others. Enough cannot be said about the excellence of the stones in this graveyard. One especially interesting area is the north end where the graves of eighteenth-century slaves are located. The markers, though smaller, are beautifully carved.

While researching this article I spent a great deal of time exploring Rhode Island. As I traveled, I saw styles change — the Connecticut carvers whose round, primitive cherubs are in western Rhode Island; the clean, sophisticated renderings of cherubs in Newport; a primitive but powerful heavenly being in Providence; the classical cherubs in Little Compton. Some carvers were obviously popular. I found the Stevens shop work in Jamestown, in Bristol and Providence. Other carvers were local — only speaking in stone a few times.



**BARRINGTON:** Tyler Point Burying Ground, Tyler Point Road.

**BLOCK ISLAND:** Block Island Cemetery, West Side Road.

**BRISTOL:** East Burial Ground, Wood Street.

**EAST GREENWICH:** Old Baptist Burial Ground, at the end of Wine Street.

**JAMESTOWN:** Old Friends' Burial Ground, Route 138.

**NORTH KINGSTOWN:** The Platform, Sherman Road 7/8 mile west of Route 1.

**LITTLE COMPTON:** Old Burying Ground, Little Compton Commons.

**NEWPORT:** Arnold Burying Ground, 70 Pelham Street. Common Burying Ground, Farewell and Warner Streets. The Jewish Cemetery, head of Touro Street at Bellevue Avenue. Trinity Churchyard, Church and Spring Streets.

**PROVIDENCE:** North Burial Ground, North Main Street and Branch Avenue. St. John's Churchyard, behind St. John's Church, North Main Street.

**WESTERLY:** River Bend Cemetery, on Route 1A.

Where in Rhode Island can you find the old gravestones? We have been independent since Roger Williams and others fled here to escape religious persecution. Because of the determination to keep church and state separate thereafter, most of the earliest cities and towns maintained public burial grounds. Providence's North Burial Ground and Newport's Common Burying Ground are examples. In western Rhode Island, which was more sparsely populated, stones are generally found in family plots. People often come upon them while walking in the woods. In eastern Rhode Island (the Tiverton area) and East Providence, stones are commonly found in churchyards because these areas were once part of Massachusetts.

These hints are intended as rough rules of thumb. You will find stones in graveyards of varying types in every area. To help you pinpoint some of the better known burial grounds, I have prepared a small map of the state.

An increasingly popular pastime and the method used for most of the illustrations in this article is gravestone rubbing. You don't need any talent. Just patience.

To make a rubbing, you need thin strong paper (rice paper is ideal); a broad hard crayon; masking tape and scissors. I bought my supplies in an art store where I discovered there are rubbing kits available, too.

After selecting your stone, snip away any weeds clinging to the face. Cut the paper with enough overlap to go onto the back of the stone a half-inch or so. Tape the paper firmly in place, pulling it taut so that it fits the surface tightly (any movement will blur the rubbing). Take your crayon and rub it firmly and thoroughly over the image. Go slowly enough to get every detail. I find a smaller crayon is ideal for touching up. As you gain experience you may wish to experiment with colors and types of paper. If you are careful your rubbing will be worthy of framing.

A few words of caution on taking rubbings: Never use pencil or chalk — they smear. Don't attempt a rubbing on a stone with lichen or moss growing on the image and don't attempt to clean the stone — you could damage it. Although I have not encountered any place in Rhode Island where this is true, in some of New England the taking of rubbings is discouraged. If you are doubtful,

inquire.

If you are interested in learning more about the state's gravestones, get in touch with Mr. Connelly through the state Veterans Affairs Office in Providence.

Especially in our bicentennial year, old gravestones have a lot to say to us and the pleasure of wandering through them should be shared by historian, artist and casual visitor alike. □



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