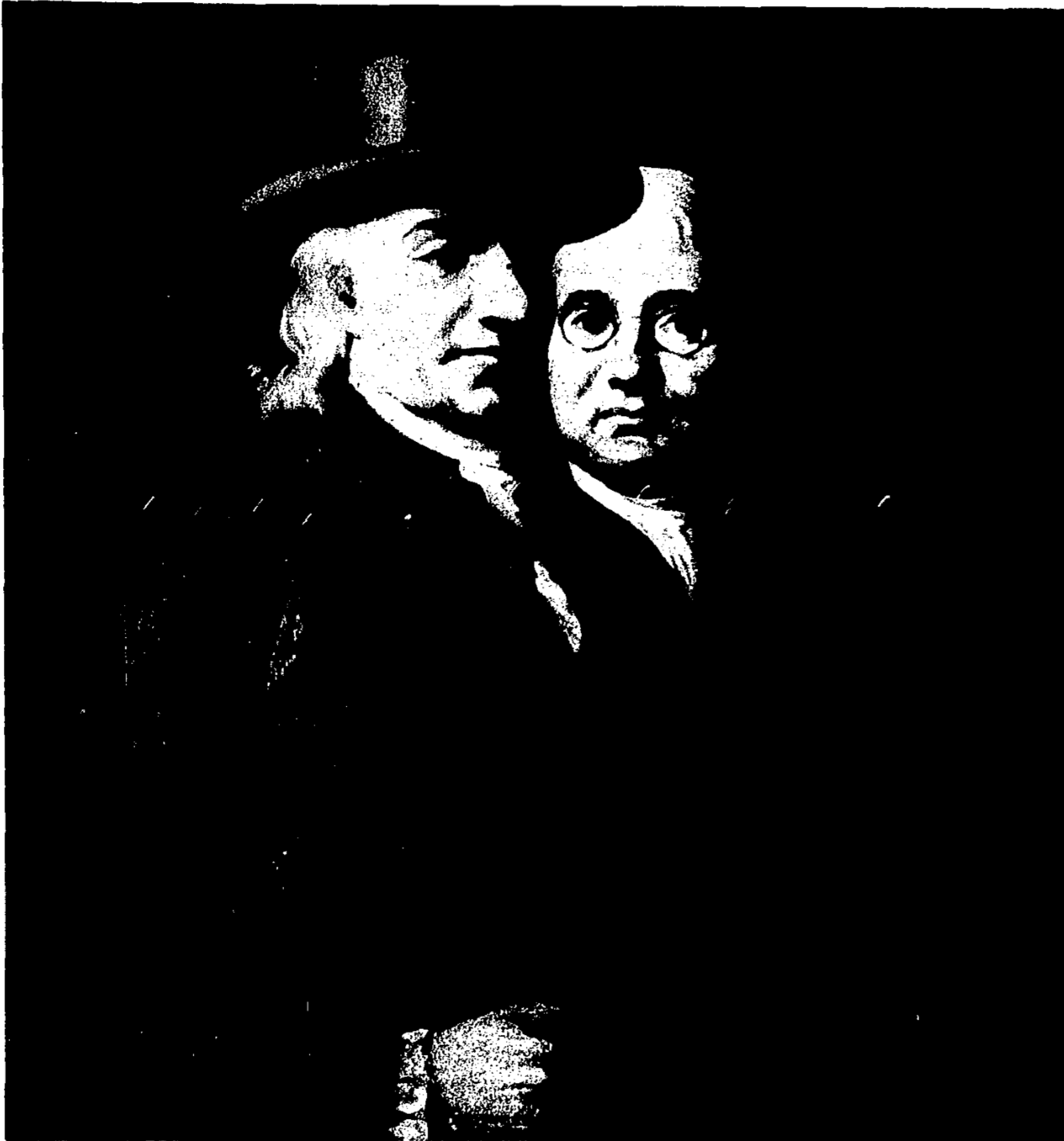


Marking on July 4 will end

# A Search for the Graves of Governors



The **RHODE ISLANDER**  
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SIGNER OF DECLARATION 178 years ago (with William Ellery, background) was Gov. Stephen Hopkins, whose grave in North Burial Ground, right, will figure next Sunday in principal marking ceremony in state.



# Grave Hunters

Finding the resting places of some of our governors took a lot of sleuthing

BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

**L**AST NOVEMBER when Ralph S. Mohr, chairman of the State Graves Registration Committee, began the task of locating the graves of all the departed governors who have served Rhode Island since the 17th century, he possibly failed to realize how elusive a dead governor can get in the course of two or three hundred years. Counting the "Presidents" and "Judges" of the settlement period, upward of 80 chief executives have mingled their dust with the soil of colony and commonwealth, and many of their graves have been exceedingly hard to find.

The project, carried out with support of Governor Roberts, has now been completed. Dedication rites and placement of markers for the graves located to date will take place next Sunday, July 4. The principal ceremony will be held at 11 a.m. in the North Burial Ground in Providence, at the grave of Gov. Stephen Hopkins,

signer of the Declaration of Independence. Governor Roberts will deliver an address. Other dedications will be conducted at the Burnside grave in Swan Point cemetery and by American Legion posts throughout the state.

A striking illustration of the difficulties encountered by Mr. Mohr and his associate grave-hunter, state photographer Leo P. Reardon, is afforded by the case of William Brenton, an early governor under the Royal Charter of 1663. Brenton was a man of varied interests. He grazed 1,500 sheep on the Isle of Aquidneck, and he also had a trading post near Taunton. It had always been supposed that when he died in 1674 he was laid to rest in a family burial lot somewhere in the latter area.

The bones of William Brenton, however, led Mohr quite a merry chase. The lot out Taunton way where he was thought to lie awaiting the Last Trump had neither shaft, slab nor headstone

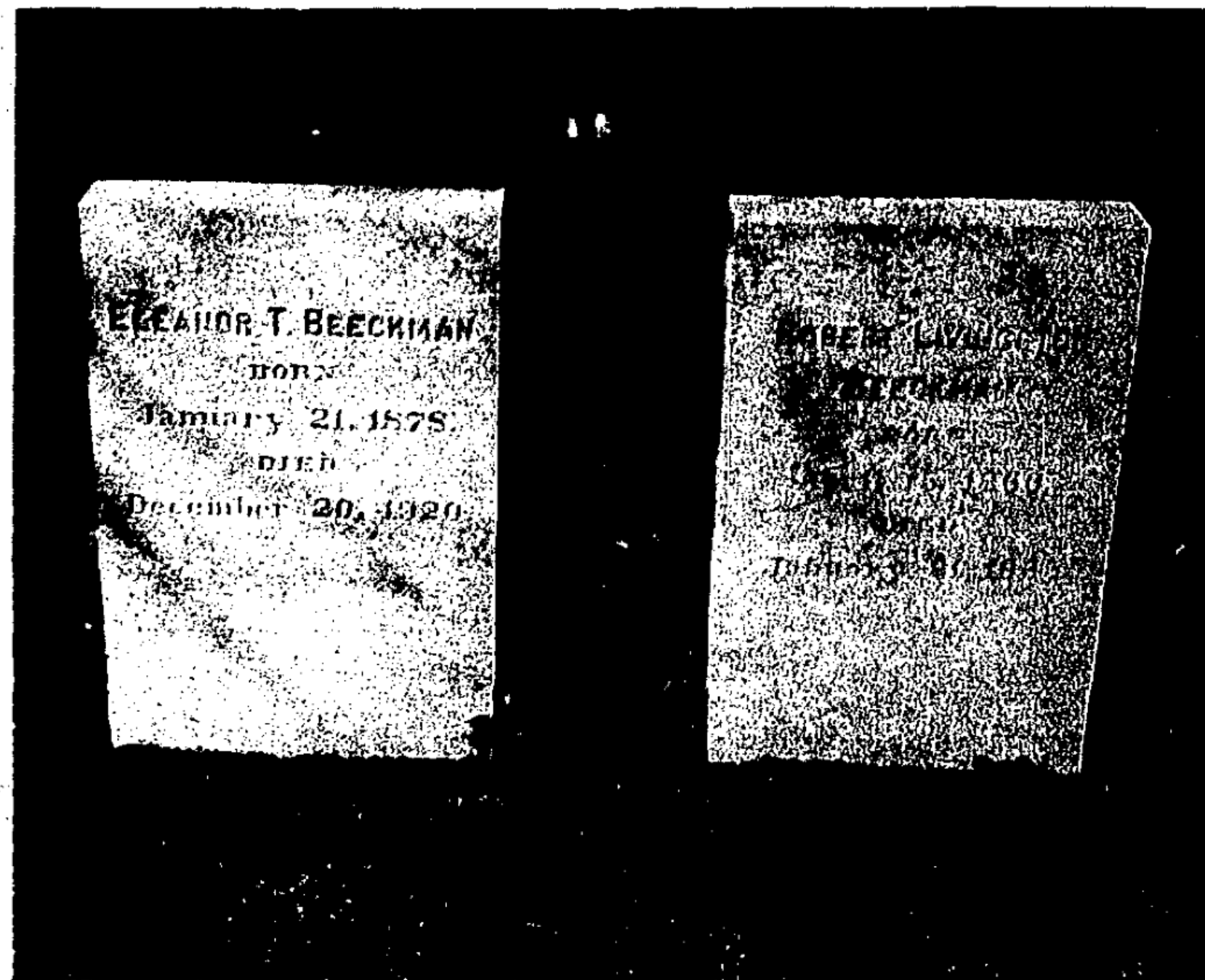


Ralph S. Mohr

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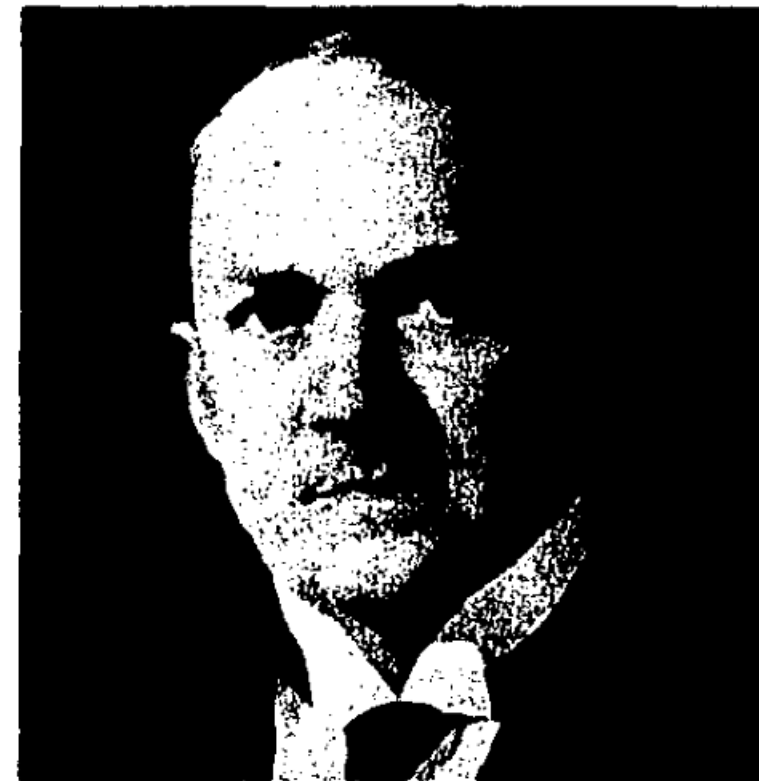


GOVERNOR IN 1861 was William Sprague, who led Rhode Island troops to war. He is impressively and ornately bivouacked in Swan Point Cemetery.



—White Plains Reporter Dispatch Photo

FAR from Rhode Island, in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Tarrytown, N. Y., is buried R. Livingston Beeckman, governor from 1915 to 1921. Portrait, right, is in State House.



Grave Hunters continued

# The Brenton Mystery

bearing his name. The earliest stone Mohr and Reardon found there was placed a hundred years after the date of Governor Brenton's death. But still Mohr could not be sure, for vandalism and neglect have played havoc with the godsacres of Rhode Island and there was no telling but that Brenton's bones might be enjoying a strictly anonymous repose.

In his quandary he had recourse to the Stevens Monument Shop in Newport, whose proprietor is John Howard Benson, the well-known artist and sculptor. The shop takes its name from its 17th century founder, John Stevens, and its records go back to the days when the colony was very young.

Exploring these records, Mohr made a discovery. It was nothing less than the bill which Stevens put in for cutting and inscribing a double tombstone for Gov. William Brenton and his son Jahleel. Everything included, it came to £46, and there was one highly significant item:

*Carting bricks and lime and sand,  
one shilling.*

It occurred to Mohr that a single shilling wasn't much to charge for hauling a cartload of material all the way to Taunton. Remembering the pastoral pursuits which varied Brenton's official duties as shepherd of an infant and precociously unruly colony, he decided to explore the Fort Adams area, where the governor is known to have owned land. And it was there that he found, on what was once the parade ground of that ancient military establishment, a slab marking Jahleel Brenton's grave. If a double tombstone had once been erected there, presumably the remains of William Brenton still rest beside those of his son, bang in the middle of a new service housing development, in a court surrounded by the doorsteps and clotheslines of Navy wives. Mohr plans to have the grave area excavated and whatever he finds there transferred—with the stone—to the large service cemetery at Fort Adams.

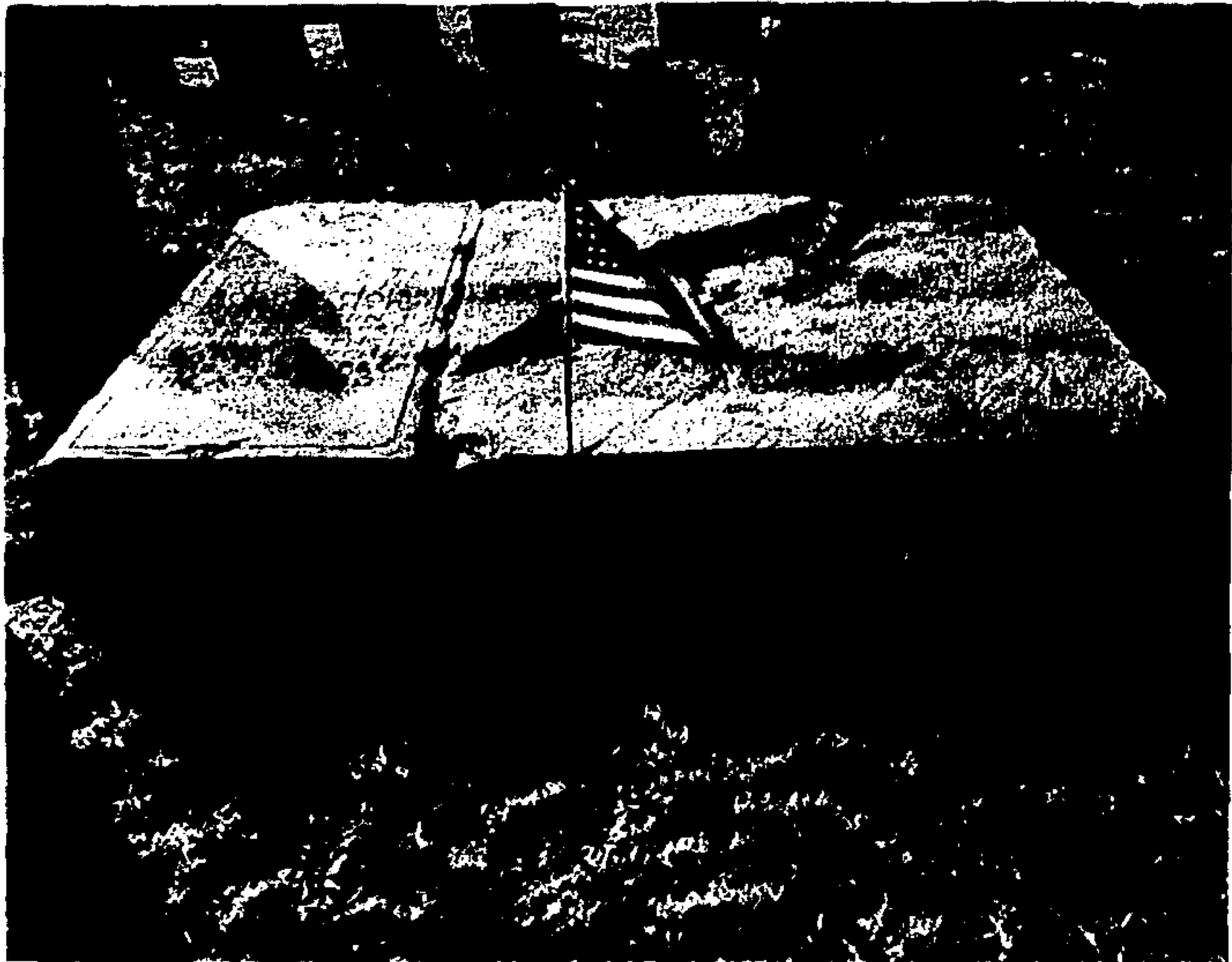
It is now necessary to go back to the beginnings of the project, which really had its inception some three years ago.

Mohr is a real estate man and former civil engineer and sur-



PROJECT of locating and marking all governors' graves started with discovery by Ralph S. Mohr of resting place of Gov. Samuel Ward King (right), last governor of R. I. under Royal Charter, in family cemetery off Hartford Avenue, Johnston.





NEWPORT VANDALS gouged tombstone of Samuel Cranston (1698-1727), spared that of his father, John Cranston, who preceded him as governor, 1678-1680. In Governors' Cemetery, Newport.

*Grave Hunters* continued

## Where Is Jeremy?

veyor, both of which occupations have made him familiar with the byways of Rhode Island and the many neglected cemeteries which dot them. In the summer of 1951 he was approached by a Mrs. Esther Blackenberg, who was then living at the old King homestead on the Plainfield Pike, with regard to the sorry condition of the burial lot on Hartford Avenue where Samuel Ward King, last governor of Rhode Island under the Charter of Charles II, lies buried.

His interest aroused, Mohr visited the cemetery and found it a thicket of bramble and briar. After crawling through the tangle and tripping over numerous half-buried stones he was able to locate the grave of Governor King of Dorr War fame. Later, he personally raised money to clear the lot and make it presentable.

He next evolved the idea of a statewide project having for its overall objective the establishment of a permanent record covering all Rhode Island cemeteries, particularly those in which veterans are buried. Mohr is, incidentally, a past commander of the American Legion, and an old World War I artilleryman.

Mohr and Chester Williams, administrator of veterans affairs (with jurisdiction over servicemen's graves), succeeded in getting Governor Pastore's approval of the project and a law was passed providing for the appointment of a committee of 15 men empowered to locate and map the cemeteries of the state, town by town. Last summer, with the field work of this project well in hand—it is now virtually completed—he had another idea. Why not do the same thing for the graves of all deceased governors of Rhode Island that he had done for the grave of Governor King?

It is this separate project which will climax in statewide ceremonies next Sunday. And it will also bear fruit, sometime during 1954, in the publication of a book, *Three Hundred Years With the Governors of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*, by Ralph S. Mohr, illustrated with portraits of all governors, living and dead, and photographs of all the graves Mohr and Cameraman Reardon have been able to pin-point during their six months' safari.

**T**HE hunt has taken them into every nook and corner of the state—to large and ornate cemeteries and to little forgotten plots swallowed by encroaching woodland. William Sprague, the War Governor of 1861, sleeps in Swan Point Cemetery in a tomb fit for a Pharaoh. Stout old Sam Gorton, the Pawtuxet firebrand, moulders in a back-yard burying lot off the Rocky Point Road in Old Warwick, his grave marked by a rough-cut stone green with age. And in Newport the burial slab over the dust of Samuel Cranston, whose name is borne by a sprawling city, has a deep gouge athwart it, the work of vandals.

Of the 32 men who governed Rhode Island under the Royal Charter of 1663, the graves of 30 have been located. The two "lost governors" are John Sanford and Joseph Jencks. John Sanford and his father, Peleg, original signers of the Compact, are presumably buried somewhere on the extensive Sanford holdings on Black Point in Portsmouth, but the exact location of their graves is not known.

Jeremy Clarke, a "President" of the colony under the Charter



**TWICE BURIED** was Caleb Carr, a governor who was drowned in 1695. Buried in Newport, he was re-interred in Jamestown lot.

of 1643, was one who gave Mohr considerable trouble until the vaults of the Newport Historical Society yielded an old Quaker book, *Record of Births and Deaths of Friends*, containing the following paragraph:

"Jeremy Clarke one of the First English Planters of Rhode Island. He dyed at Newport in said Island and was buried in the Tomb that stands by the Street by the water side in Newport upon the Eleventh Month 1651."

And this note at the bottom of the page:

"Stephen Gould Keeper of Quaker Records about 1810 stated that Jeremy Clarke was buried in the Tomb at the Foot of Marlboro Street not now extant (extant)."

Is Jeremy Clarke under some Newport wharf? Or was his body removed to the lot on Golden Hill? Mohr is not sure. Doubt also exists as to the location of the grave of William Hutchinson, "Judge" of the colony in 1639-1640. Like the Sanfords, he may be buried on his holdings in Portsmouth.

**ALL** of the departed governors under the 1843 Constitution rest in located and photographed graves. Three Rhode Island governors are buried outside the state: Aram J. Pothier in Precious Blood Cemetery, Blackstone, Mass.; Emery J. San Souci in Mt. St. Benedict Cemetery, Hartford, Conn.; and R. Livingston Beekman in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Tarrytown, N.Y.

In the July 4 ceremonies all governors' graves will receive bronze markers set with the Governors Flag of the State of Rhode Island.

Preliminary research for Mr. Mohr's and the state's forthcoming book was done by Mrs. Alice Thompson Smith. The individual biographies are being written by Henry Jackson of the State House Library staff.

Six months of Old Mortality work in sequestered graveyards has had the unusual result of making a photographer history-conscious.

"I wasn't too keen about the job when I started out," Mr. Reardon tells you. "I figured it was just one of those things. Then he got me excited." Mr. Mohr is that kind of a man.

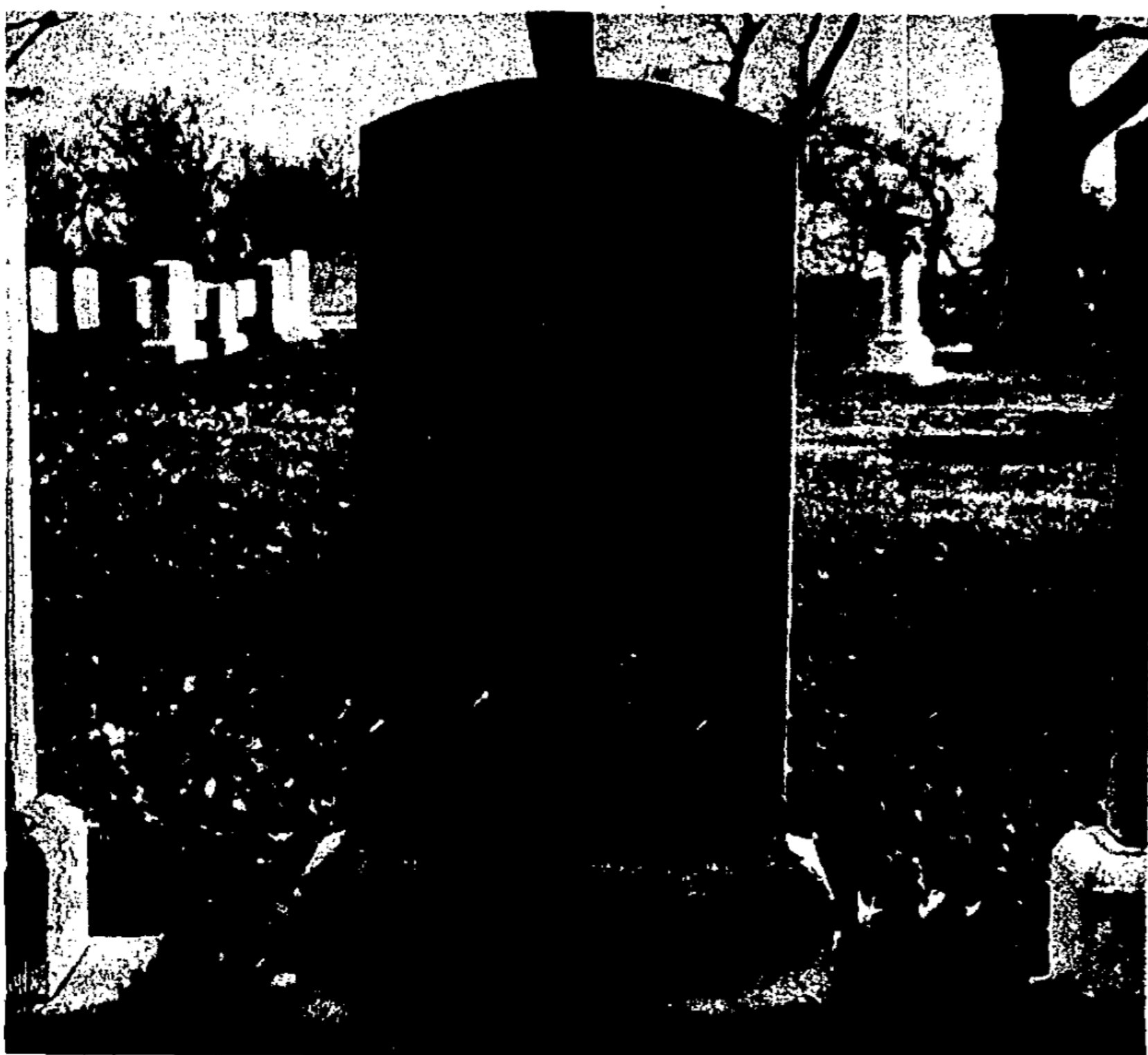
The first governor they went after was a little tough to find. He was Josias Lyndon, who escaped capture when the British took over Newport, only to die in Warren of smallpox. His remains are in the much-neglected Kickemuit Burial Ground, and it took the governor hunters half a day, working up and down the lot and back and forth across it, to locate the two slabs that mark his grave.

In Bristol a local florist located two governors for them in Juniper Hill Cemetery. One was named Diman and the other Diamond. As already stated, John Howard Benson was a great help to them in Newport. William Brenton wasn't the only governor who played hard to get; the four elegant Wantons gave Mr. Mohr rather a tough time. He finally proved, however, that William, John and Joseph are buried in Golden Hill Cemetery. Gideon is in the Friends Burial Ground on White Street.

Gov. John Collins (1786-1790) was finally located in the family



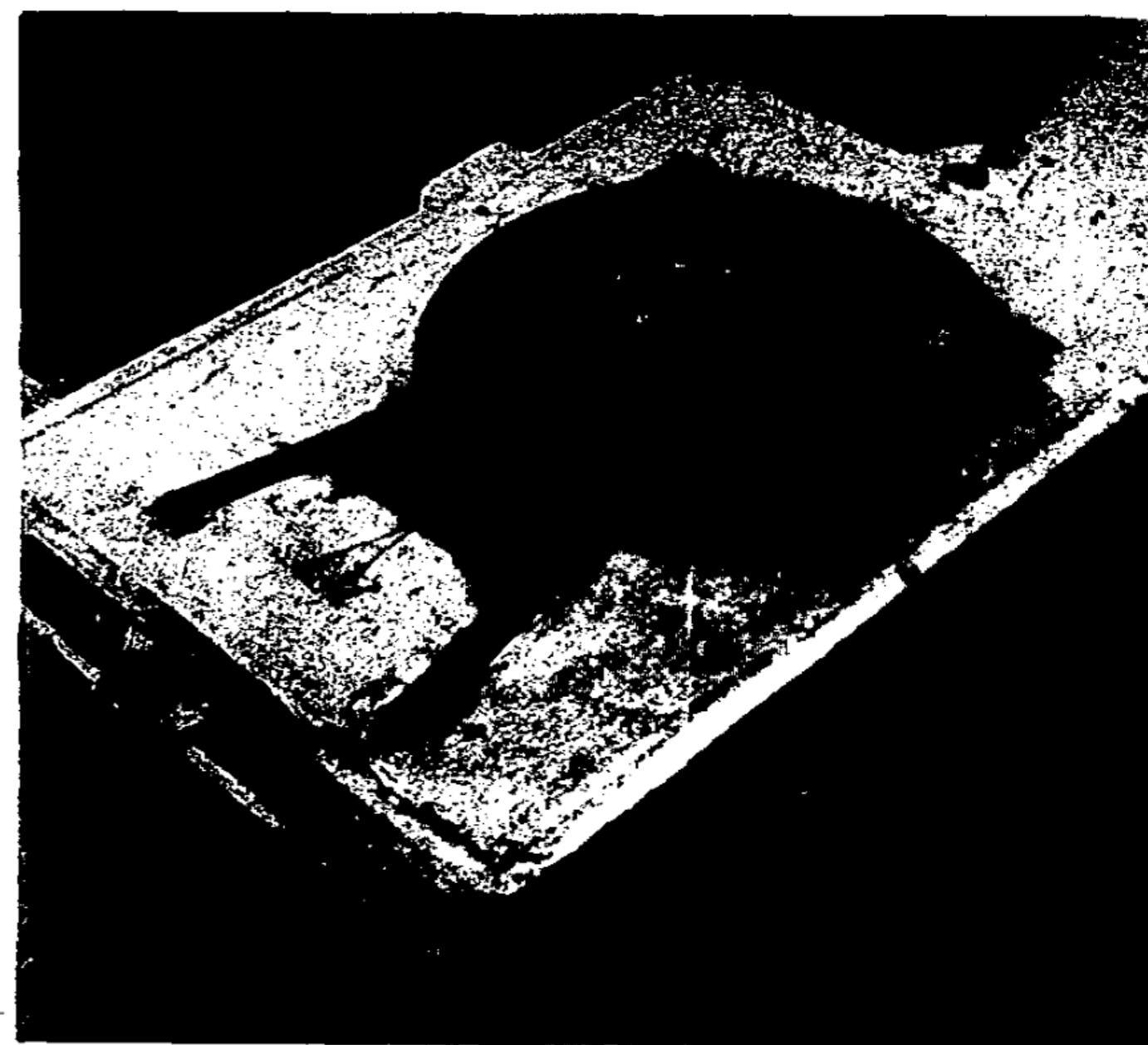
**HIS WAR FORGOTTEN.** Thomas W. Dorr, who raised rebellion against government by Charter of Charles II, rests in Swan Point grave, right.



**POURING** molten metal into mold at Auburn Brass Foundry, Cranston, where the markers were made.



**LOST GOVERNOR.** Joseph Jencks, one of few whose graves have not been located, may be buried in an unmarked grave in Mineral Spring Cemetery, Pawtucket. He was governor 1727-32. Tallest man of his day.



**BRONZE MARKERS**, as above, will be placed on governors' graves next Sunday. This: John Easton's.

Grave Hunters continued

## Joseph Jencks Needed More Room Than Most

lot on Castle Street, once called the "Neck" of Newport. Collins, an early post-Revolutionary governor, was also one of the committee sent to Washington by the General Assembly in 1776 to inquire as to the best means of defending Rhode Island.

Gov. Caleb Carr, an 18th-century governor, was drowned at sea. He was buried ashore—but where? Mohr and Reardon found him on the island of Jamestown under a broken slab, in a misused and neglected lot off the Ferry Road.

The search was greatly helped by public libraries, town halls and elderly people of native stock and good memory. They were also occasionally misguided by people who pretended to know more than they did.

A whole slew of Rhode Island governors are buried—some with considerable pomp—in Swan Point Cemetery. There the searchers received the intelligent co-operation of caretaker Joseph McCarthy. But Mr. Mohr says he found three governors that even the caretaker didn't know about.

The most elusive governor of the whole lot is Gov. Joseph Jencks (died 1740) and you wouldn't think it of him for he was

the longest Rhode Islander of his time, a lanky giant seven feet two inches tall, and a man who had trouble all his life with four-poster beds and doorways. Nevertheless he is still missing.

Governor Jencks was originally buried in seven and a half feet of earth in a lot on the site of the Masonic Temple in Pawtucket. In 1832 the occupants of this lot were dug up and transferred to a cemetery at North Main and Read Streets. Several years later they were moved again, this time to Mineral Spring Cemetery on Mineral Spring Avenue, where no marker or trace of a grave close to eight feet long can be found. Then in 1925 Pierre Begin and Manuel Bernard, who were working on the foundations for a garage in the rear of 84 North Main Street, dug up Governor Jencks' headstone. The Rhode Island Historical Society has it now.

The infrequently baffled Mr. Mohr still sticks to it that Governor Jencks is in the Mineral Spring Cemetery and a marker will be placed there next Sunday. It's all good Rhode Island soil, and anyway, six feet of earth makes us all of one size, except in the case of Gov. Joseph Jencks.



**COVER PICTURES** show, top, tomb of Benedict Arnold, first governor of Rhode Island under 1663 Charter, photographed by Leo P. Reardon in Arnold Cemetery, Newport, and inset of marker. Below, Mohr and Reardon at grave of Samuel Gorton, Old Warwick, photo by Edward C. Hanson.