



MARTHA ALLEN, 1697-1719/20

One of the oldest in the old burying ground, this stone illustrates decay in several forms. A crack runs down the center, a large chip has fallen from the right side, patches of lichen have corroded parts of the lettering, and the entire stone is leaning to the right. In years to come this stone may become unreadable or broken.

All photographs by author unless otherwise noted.

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Preserving a New England Burying Ground A Community Improvement Project

By AMELIA F. MILLER

ON December 16, 1807, David Hoit of Deerfield recorded in his diary, "Today, My son Elihu Took up his 2 Babes from the old Burying Ground & Carried them to the New."¹

Having received the dead of Deerfield for over a century, the old burying ground at the end of Albany Road was replaced in 1801. Thus, over one hundred and fifty years ago, it became a part of the history of the town.

As evidenced by an article in a local newspaper in 1863, those concerned with history were aware of the importance of

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mrs. Russ A. Miller, the author, a graduate of Smith College and wife of the Dean of Studies at Deerfield Academy, has become one of New England's leading antiquarians. This article represents an abridgment of an illustrated report entered in a competition sponsored by the National Federation of Women's Clubs for community improvement. In preparing the original report Mrs. Bartlett W. Boyden and Mrs. John H. Suitor worked closely with Mrs. Miller.

the old burying ground at least by the time of the Civil War. "At the town meeting in Deerfield on the 3d, it was voted to re-set and re-letter the ancient monuments in the grave yard in that town. This yard is every year visited by scores curious to see some of the most ancient graves in the valley of the Connecticut, as well as some of much historic interest."²

Through the years spasmodic attempts to preserve the stones and the general appearance of this small plot of land have frequently had beneficial results. In 1872 the women of Deerfield organized a fair and donated its proceeds for the upkeep of the burying ground.³

Today, the old burying ground is once again in need of care, and today, once again, it is the women of Deerfield who have sensed the need to protect it. In 1963 the Deerfield Woman's Club sponsored a project that undertook to photograph individually all of the 493 stones in the burying ground, thereby not only provid-

ing the town with a permanent record of the present appearance of each stone, but also inaugurating a sustained program of preservation.

That the women of Deerfield should recognize the value of such a project is not surprising. Although Deerfield today is an agricultural and an educational community, it is also an historic town. Fields

ground. Settled in the late seventeenth century, Deerfield was a frontier outpost when it was sacked and burned by French and Indians in 1704. In a corner of the old burying ground a grassy mound commemorates the massacred dead of 1704 who share this common grave. By the time of the Revolution Deerfield had become a leading town of the northern

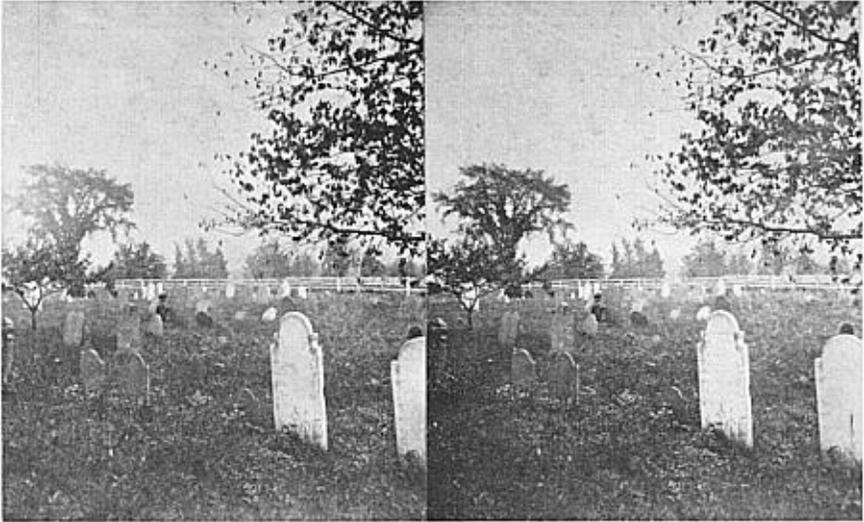


FIG. 1. STEREOSCOPIC VIEW, PROBABLY TAKEN BEFORE 1875
Earliest known view of the old burying ground in Deerfield.
Collection of Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association.

that are plowed each spring were laid out in 1671. There exists in Deerfield a sense of history and time. Pride in the past is accompanied by the acknowledgment of an obligation to the future. The Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, the local historical society, was founded in 1870, and more recently many eighteenth-century houses have been restored and opened to the public.⁴

Deerfield's history is nowhere more poignantly felt than in the old burying

Connecticut River Valley. Those who fought for Independence lie in the old burying ground alongside others who fought for the king.

Each year on Memorial Day virtually the entire town of Deerfield gathers in the old burying ground for a brief service. Rifle salutes and echoing taps pay tribute to the Revolutionary War dead. The idea to photograph the gravestones was the direct outgrowth of this annual town event, for shortly before Memorial Day of 1963

a casual conversation between three women of Deerfield revealed that each was concerned about the unkempt and overgrown appearance of the burying ground. They agreed to try to improve these con-

ditions. But, more important, it was soon obvious that the need in the old burying ground went far beyond a simple clean-up. The gravestones themselves, whether sandstone, slate, or marble, required at-

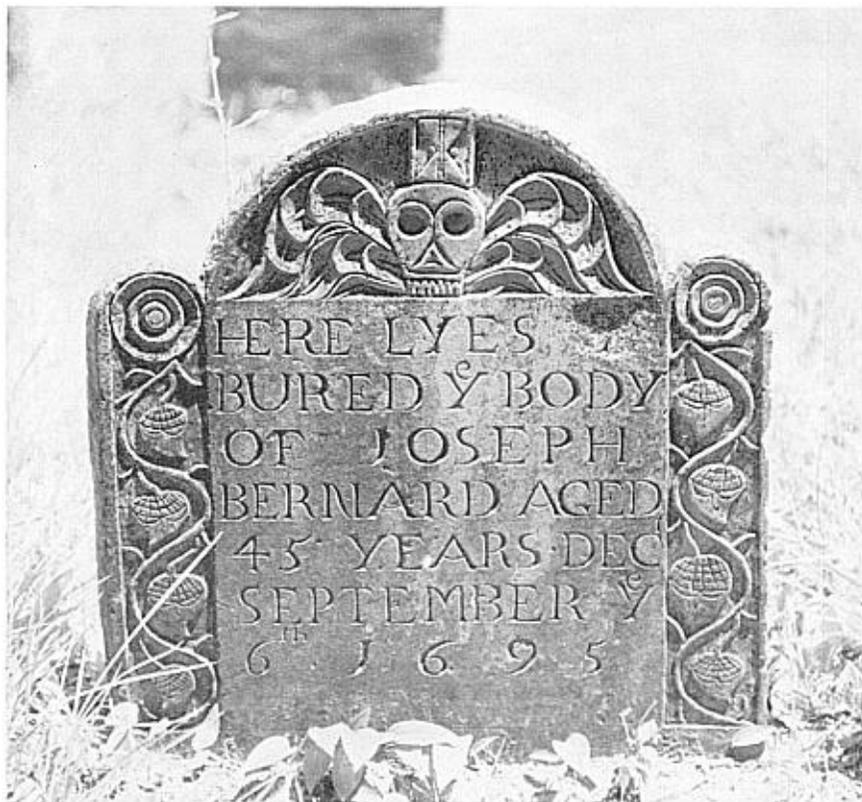


FIG. 2. JOSEPH BARNARD, 1641-1695

The earliest dated stone in the old burying ground marks the grave of Joseph Barnard, a tailor and surveyor and Deerfield's first town clerk.

ditions before the coming town ceremony.

After estimates from a professional shrubbery firm proved far beyond existing means, Deerfield Academy consented to prune the dense cedar trees, and the town agreed to mow the grass. By Memorial Day a marked change in the landscaping of the burying ground had oc-

curred. Many stones were chipped, cracked, sunken, or leaning at weird angles. Some stones were completely broken and there was real danger that they might become shattered and lost.

Not until after Memorial Day, however, was there time for serious thinking about these decaying gravestones, what

could and should be done about them, and what, in terms of long-range planning, was the logical first step. Early in June it was decided to approach several groups and individuals to ascertain what funds, if any, were available, before any concrete plans could be made.

funds from the town was explored. It was found that only at the annual town meeting, then ten months away, could such funds be voted. Furthermore, general feeling indicated that there was little hope for help in this direction. Several individuals, when acquainted with the problem,



FIG. 3. MERCY ALLEN?

Crudely carved by an unidentified but probably local carver, this red sandstone boulder bears the second earliest date in the old burying ground. It is thought to be the stone of Mercy Allen. If so, it marks the grave of the first woman who was interred in this plot of land.

Since the old burying ground is the property of the town, first the selectmen were contacted. When they explained their problem of maintaining fifteen cemeteries in the township with a meager yearly budget of \$1,117, it was clear that no help should be expected from this source. The possibility of obtaining special

expressed great interest. None, however, felt justified in becoming involved in what they felt should be a town or community affair. The Cemetery Association, whose assets were extremely limited, wisely felt that remaining funds should be conserved for repair of only the most badly broken stones.



FIGS. 4 AND 4A. HANNAH HAWKS, 1703-1736

Perhaps broken and lost for generations, the stone (shown at top) is an extreme example of destruction. Only conjecture can suggest the original appearance of this headstone. Names on other stones nearby and the accompanying footstone (bottom) permit the identification of the grave as that of Hannah, wife of Nathaniel Hawks.



FIG. 5. ELIZABETH HAWKS, 1712-1779

Until after the Revolution stones in the Deerfield burying ground were carved by stonecutters who lived in other towns in the Connecticut Valley or in coastal areas. This stone was carved by Solomon Ashley, Deerfield's first known native stonecutter. The photograph clearly shows how rain and snow can wear away the lettering on a stone and in time render it unreadable.

Although it appeared impossible at this time to begin a full-scale restoration of the burying ground, it was at this point suggested by the writer that in any event

visual record for the future. Though not a professional photographer, the writer volunteered to do the job. Previous research had enabled her to identify many



FIG. 6. ABIGAIL HINSDELL, 1733-1739

Superb example of the genealogical value of gravestone inscriptions. Probably because her parents lived alternately at Deerfield and Hinsdale, New Hampshire, at the time of her birth, no notice of this birth has been discovered in church or town records. This gravestone offers the only known evidence that Abigail Hinsdell, who died when a child, ever existed.

the logical place to begin was by photographing each stone before any more became unreadable, broken, defaced, or stolen. While a photograph cannot prevent damage, it can provide a permanent

early stone carvers of Deerfield and neighboring towns, and had, in addition, brought the widespread problem of preservation to her attention.

To photograph the stones in the bury-

ing ground was a relatively inexpensive process and yet money was needed for film, developing, and mounting. An un-

aesthetic value of the burying ground, and because they had confidence in the author's ability, the Woman's Club, when



FIG. 7. AMARIAH CHANDLER, 1774-1775

Grimly realistic, this black slate stone of the infant, Amariah Chandler, is one of only eight presently known in New England which picture the deceased lying in a coffin in this manner. Having broken in two pieces, this rare example of early sculpture might easily have disappeared entirely had the Deerfield Cemetery Association not had it restored. The repair was achieved by fastening both pieces to a newly cut slate backing.

solicited contribution to the Cemetery Association was given over in order to start the photographing, and this led to increased efforts to raise the total amount. Because they appreciated the historic and

approached, enthusiastically voted money for the project.

In preliminary discussions with members of the Woman's Club, the specific importance of photography was carefully

considered. It was pointed out that in the event of damage or the ultimate disappearance of a gravestone, there are three major areas where a photograph can be priceless.

were taken from published sources, occasionally original verses composed by a village poet can be discovered. Thirdly, the decorative carvings on gravestones represent the earliest sculptural endeavors



FIG. 8. ELIZABETH HAWKS, 1790-1791

The headstone of Elizabeth Hawks stands alone. The footstone has long since disappeared. Originally much taller, the headstone has been broken and reset in the ground so that much of the inscription is now buried. Eventually, as leaves and grass accumulate, it may be entirely covered.

First, the inscriptions on gravestones are invaluable in genealogical research. Early written records in many towns have been lost by carelessness or destroyed by fire. The data supplied on gravestones is, in many cases, the only means of tracing family history. Secondly, many today are interested in the poetical epitaphs which often appear below statistical information. Although the majority of early epitaphs

of New England settlers. Ancient gravestones have long been treasured for this alone, but lately great interest has developed in identifying the men who actually carved the stones. Clearly, for genealogy, for epitaphs, and for the study of early art, gravestones offer valuable records, and in case of damage to the original stone, the importance of the photograph is undeniable.

Likewise, the major causes of damage to gravestones were investigated and categorized. It was found that there are two main classifications: accidental and willful.

The weather is the greatest factor in accidental damage. Rain erodes the in-

mowing machines, which can easily chip a stone, and by well-intentioned but careless people who, when taking rubbings of headstone designs, leave tape, chalk, or ink. The first are unsightly, the last is difficult or impossible to remove, especially from porous red sandstone.



FIG. 9. THOMAS WELLS, ABOUT 1678-1750

The lettering which once covered the top of this tablestone, long exposed to the elements, has been obliterated for many years. During the photographing the discovery of a record in an early account book made possible the identification of this tablestone as that of Thomas Wells who died in 1750.

scriptions, frost causes cracks, heavy roots under a stone will cause it to shift and lean, thick grass and weeds can eventually cover a considerable portion of the bottom, settling earth can cause a stone to sink into the ground, and in time lichen will form and grow. Other accidental destruction is caused by power-

Willful destruction occurs most frequently when writing or other illustrative markings are intentionally scratched on a stone. In some towns there have been cases of deliberate breakage or outright theft.⁵

Neither accidental nor willful damage can be entirely stopped, but each can be

controlled as preservation is emphasized. In any case, the value of photography is plain.

The entire summer and part of the fall of 1963 were spent in photographing all of the stones, for only on sunny days could pictures be taken, and then, to bring out the lettering, only between eleven and two when the sun shone obliquely across and not squarely at a stone. Before each picture was taken grass had to be cut from around the stone, and most stones needed cleaning. To prevent duplication it was necessary to keep careful records. Stones in the center of the burying ground, where the sun shone unobstructed, presented no more than routine problems. But some stones standing near the periphery were continually shaded by trees and bushes and were therefore more difficult to photograph.

During the summer the writer also continued to collect and correlate information relating to the history of the old burying ground. In previous research account books and family records in the manuscript library of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association had permitted the identification of several early stone carvers whose work is in the burying

ground. County land and probate records had proved an equally valuable source. Now, as the work of photographing progressed, the writer discovered old photographs of the burying ground and consulted Greenfield newspapers for early references to former attempts at organized preservation.

By mid-October, 1963, the 493 headstones and footstones had all been photographed. Following this the photographs were mounted on heavy paper along with transcriptions of each epitaph, and filed in durable leather notebooks. The negatives were indexed alphabetically for convenient reference, and then the completed work was placed in the fireproof library wing of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association.

Thus an effort simply to clean up the Deerfield burying ground for Memorial Day led to an awareness of the whole vast and unending problem of preserving all early burying grounds. The ultimate solution to this problem has yet to be found, but the Deerfield Woman's Club hopes to have stimulated deep and sustained interest, and is confident that with this photography an important initial step toward preservation has been taken.

NOTES

¹ David Hoit, account book, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.

² *Greenfield Gazette and Courier*, November 16, 1863.

³ *Ibid.*, May 13, 1872. The full notice reads, "The Fair held by the ladies of Deerfield, on Wednesday evening, to improve the Cemetery, was a success. There was a large variety of beautiful articles for sale, excellent refreshments served up and a good attendance. The receipts were about \$500."

⁴ The work of Mr. and Mrs. Henry N.

Flynt, who have restored and refurnished many houses on the street of Deerfield, is well known and appreciated by those who live in Deerfield and by those who visit this historic town.

⁵ An item in the *Greenfield Gazette and Courier*, September 2, 1871, shows that willful destruction is not new. After describing damage that had been done in Deerfield the article ended with the statement that "desecration of a graveyard is viewed by the law and by society as among the basest offenses that a person can commit."