

Nathaniel Fuller, Stonecutter of Plympton, Massachusetts

By PETER BENES

NATHANIEL Fuller, a great-grandson of *Mayflower* passenger Samuel Fuller, was born in Plympton, Massachusetts, November 14, 1687, and died in that town April 20, 1750. In addition to his occupations as a stonemason and housewright,¹ Nathaniel Fuller was also a carver of traditional slate grave stones.² He probably cut and inscribed more grave stones than any other stonecutter in southeastern Massachusetts (including his well-known Plympton neighbor, Ebenezer Soule),³ and he may have cut as many stones as any professional cutter in eighteenth-century New England. Over three hundred Fuller grave stones are still standing in old burying grounds throughout Plymouth and Barnstable counties, and this surviving number may represent less than one half his actual production.

One of the hardest-working early New England stonecutters, Fuller was also one of the most inventive. A self-taught, semiliterate, stone craftsman, Fuller developed a rural stonecutting style that was copied by his own and subsequent generations of stonecutters in Plympton, Middleborough, and Bridgewater, who, until the early nineteenth century, worked the same ledge of green Narragansett Basin slate from an outcrop in East Middleborough.⁴

EDITORIAL NOTE: The author, Peter Benes, is a freelance writer and photographer who lives on Long Wharf in Boston. The article presented here is a chapter from a forthcoming book on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Plymouth County grave stone cutters. Photographs by the author.

Unlike many other New England stonecutters, who usually maintained an unchanging design on their grave stones,⁵ Fuller seldom cut two stones alike. This makes difficult the task of identifying his work with accuracy. Nevertheless, his stones maintain enough common elements (notably in their grammar and their lettering detail) to permit a fairly reliable grouping within a context of dates which occur over a fifty-year period between 1698 and 1748. In general, this group is characterized by a geometric heart-shaped skull set in a background of semicircular wings. The skull typically has elliptical eyes, a small heart for a mouth, and a narrow chin (or upper jaw) on which is sometimes cut a grid of crossed lines to denote teeth.

Within these broad limits are almost as many variations as there are stones. If the Fuller group is arranged by date, however, the apparently random design variations take on a curious but logical progression that might otherwise be overlooked in a casual visit to one of the old burying grounds. Except for a major shift after 1726, the progression is gradual and involves improvements in technique as well as changes in design. It reveals that Fuller was a student of his profession in the best meaning of the word. At the same time it also reveals something about the era in which he lived. Seen chronologically, Fuller stones turn out to be surprisingly sensitive to the shifting spirit of the colonial eighteenth century. His early stones are cut with sober, malevolent skulls and primitive diamond borders.



FIG. 1. LIEUTENANT SAMUEL BRADFORD, 1740
Plympton Green Burying Ground.



FIG. 2. ANNE WADSWORTH, 1732
First Parish Burying Ground, Kingston, Massachusetts.

Their appearance is in keeping with the Puritan spirit that still dominated the early eighteenth century, and that only one or two decades previously had countenanced the excesses of witch hunting. As the years passed, however, and the Puritan spirit waned, Fuller stones became by stages milder and more stylized. Skulls that were formerly pious or evil become expressive and seemly. By 1740 they are proud and raffish, and in the end they blossom into unmistakable animation. Fuller's skulls, in effect, come alive just as distinctly as the colonial psyche came alive as succeeding generations of English settlers substituted their Puritan ethos for a mercantile and political ideology. While Fuller did not live to witness the parallel iconographic transformation (it was left to the following generation of Plymouth County stonecutters, notably Nathan Hayward and Ebenezer Soule, to transform Fuller's skulls into stylized, animated faces), he was nevertheless exposed to the influences that set it in motion, and his last stones reflect an open conflict between new and traditional conventions.

Fuller's first stones, which may be termed his early diamond stones, were cut on a thin, dark, stock during a fifteen-year period between 1710 and 1725.⁶ He was about twenty-five years old, married, the owner of a homestead and dwelling house given to him by his father, and already employed as a housewright in Plympton. He probably undertook the work at the request of Plympton farmers and Plymouth tradesmen who were reluctant either to pay the price commanded by fashionable Boston cutters, or to commission the only other available local cutter, a Middleborough craftsman whose skill left much to be desired.

When he set out to design and cut his

first early diamond grave stone, Fuller apparently used as sources both the Boston stones standing in nearby Plymouth, and the local stones cut by this Middleborough craftsman whose decorations consisted entirely of crudely drawn circles, half-circles, and hearts commonly found on New England pine chests of the period. By applying the compass-executed rural ingredients to the traditional Boston winged skull, Fuller created a regional style that was sustained among local cutters for almost a century.

Fuller's compass was apparently essential to him. Lacking the skill or training required to duplicate the classic lines of the Boston model, he probably found it far easier to execute a geometric imitation, the main elements of which he could control with a scribing compass. The result can be seen on the Sarah Soul stone (Plympton, 1716), Figure 3, which Fuller cut for the eighteen-year-old daughter of Benjamin and Sarah Soul of Plympton. The skull outline is circular. The wings are drawn by a series of regularly spaced semicircles whose center is a common point found just below the skull. The eyes are laid out by compass.⁷ A diamond and semicircle pattern decorates the border. However, where his hand was not guided by a straightedge or a compass (namely the nose), Fuller's draftsmanship is noticeably weak.

After 1726, Nathaniel Fuller's grave stones become more professional. The improvement is sudden, and it had every reason to be. He was receiving commissions from nearby Middleborough, Kingston, Duxbury and Plymouth, as well as from Barnstable on Cape Cod. As a result, his stones had to compete directly not only with those of the Boston stonecutters, but also with those of a new Middleborough stonecutter named Seth Tink-

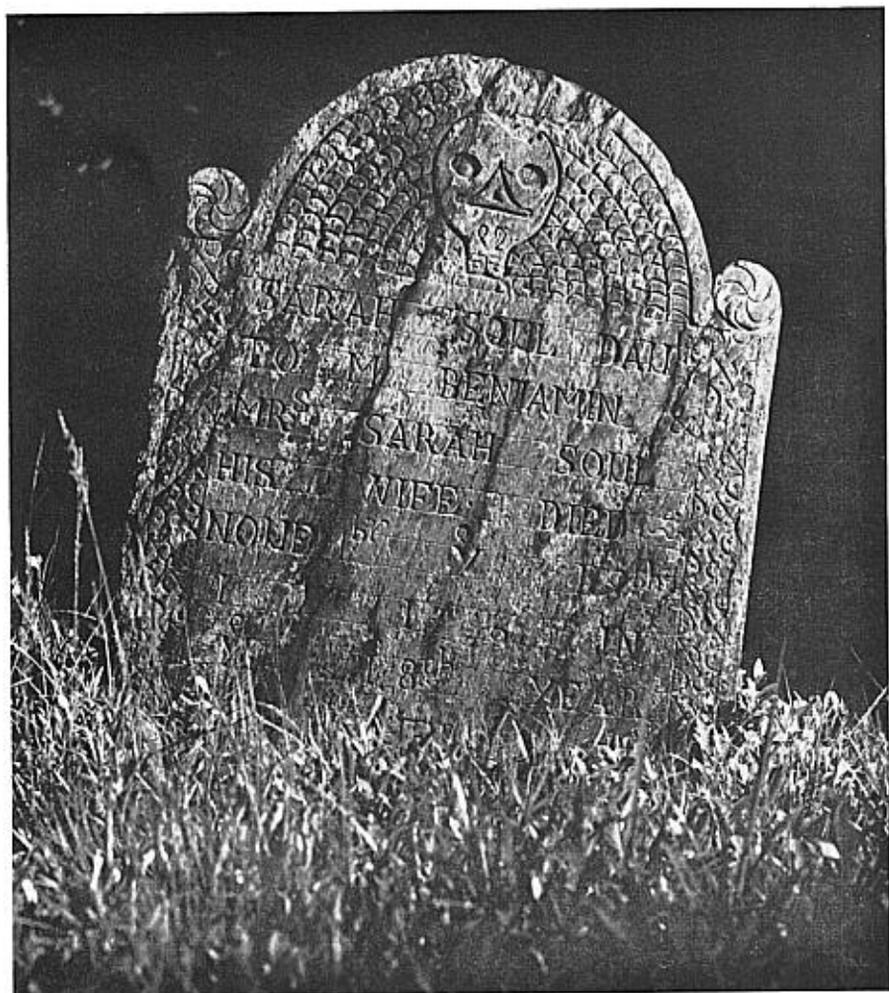


FIG. 3. SARAH SOUL, 1716
Plympton Green Burying Ground.



FIG. 4. EBENEZER LOBDEL, 1748
Plympton Green Burying Ground.

ham whose expertly fashioned grave stones, patterned after Fuller's, began to appear in quantity shortly after 1727.

One important improvement Fuller made was to shape his slabs so that their grain lay at an angle to their vertical axis. Unlike sandstone or granite, which are freestone, slate has a distinct grain and cleavage. This makes it an advantageous slab material, but also exposes it to splitting. Fuller's early diamond stones, whose grain was always vertical, had a tendency to split lengthwise, particularly at the shoulders. By cutting a thicker stock with a slanted grain, however, Fuller reduced the splitting and produced a much more durable stone.

With the thicker cross section came a deeper cutting technique that went a good measure beyond his previous low relief. The deeper cuts for the first time gave his work the appearance of carved stone, and were accompanied by a variety of style changes that radically altered the spirit of his stones. These changes can be readily seen on the Anne Wadsworth stone (1732), Figure 2, which stands in the first parish burying ground in Kingston. The oval skull has been reshaped into the form of a heart; a cleft has been cut at its top; the elliptical eyes are proportionately larger; the nose is broader and bolder; and a simple vine-and-flower pattern, presumably in imitation of prevailing Boston borders, has replaced the previous diamonds.

As on most Fuller stones cut after 1726, a good deal of the time and effort that produced the Wadsworth stone was given to the inscription. The letters are clean, accurate, and attractive. They reveal Fuller's mastery of serifs, taper, and spacing, the main elements of which were probably self-taught.⁸ A major technical improvement also involves the feather

rows behind the skull: whereas earlier feathers were cut on the same plane, those of the Wadsworth stone are depressed up



FIG. 5. LIEUTENANT SAMUEL BRADFORD, 1740 (DETAIL)
Plympton Green Burying Ground.

to one-half inch giving the skull a dimensional quality it lacked previously.

Between 1736 and 1740 Nathaniel Fuller's work went through yet another

phase of changes and improvements. Less radical than the ones that preceded them, they are, however, no less noticeable, and



FIG. 6. ISAAC CUSHMAN, 1727 (DETAIL)
Plympton Green Burying Ground.

they mark the period, when, at the age of fifty, Fuller reached the height of what might be termed his technical and imaginative powers. Perhaps the best example of his work during this period can be found in a pair of stones he cut for Lieutenant Samuel Bradford (Plympton, 1740). With its imposing height (the headstone stands $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet tall) and careful workmanship, the Bradford stone can be ranked among Fuller's best, as well as one of the finest and most elegant grave stones in Plymouth County (Figure 1). The skull is skillfully executed, with great attention paid to symmetry, and it reveals the degree to which Fuller's skulls had become animated by the year 1740.⁹ (Later Plymouth County cutters who imitated Fuller used this skull design as their starting point.) Added to this was a radically changed nose: Fuller not only enlarged it, he also added stylish curls on either side.¹⁰ Placed high in the skull's forehead, the nose all but succeeds in cracking a wide, raffish, grin. It gives the skull the arch, proud expression characteristic of virtually all of Fuller's later stones, and contrasts clearly with the vacant expressions commonly found on his earlier ones.

Fuller's understanding and mastery of stone-detail work during this period is particularly evident on the decorative borders of the Bradford stone (Figure 5). Prior to 1736, Fuller articulated borders with a single chiseled line. When cutting feathers and borders after 1736, however, Fuller made a practice of removing one edge of the line with a sloping, shallow cut about one-half-inch wide. In cross section, this new cut resembled a wide check mark instead of the previous narrow V or U. And while the amount of additional work required to do this was fairly negligible, it produced a far more



FIG. 7. MRS. SARAH BRYANT, 1741/2
Plympton Green Burying Ground.

sophisticated result: in place of the previous line, curved overlapping planes articulated flowers and feathers alike.

Nathaniel Fuller's last group of stones (produced between 1740 and 1750), while not his most skillful, are by far his

Bridgewater introduced geometrical faces derived from Fuller's skull, and they were soon to be joined by Ebenezer Soule. Too established in his ways to embark on a radically new style, and too unsophisticated a craftsman to resist change, Na-

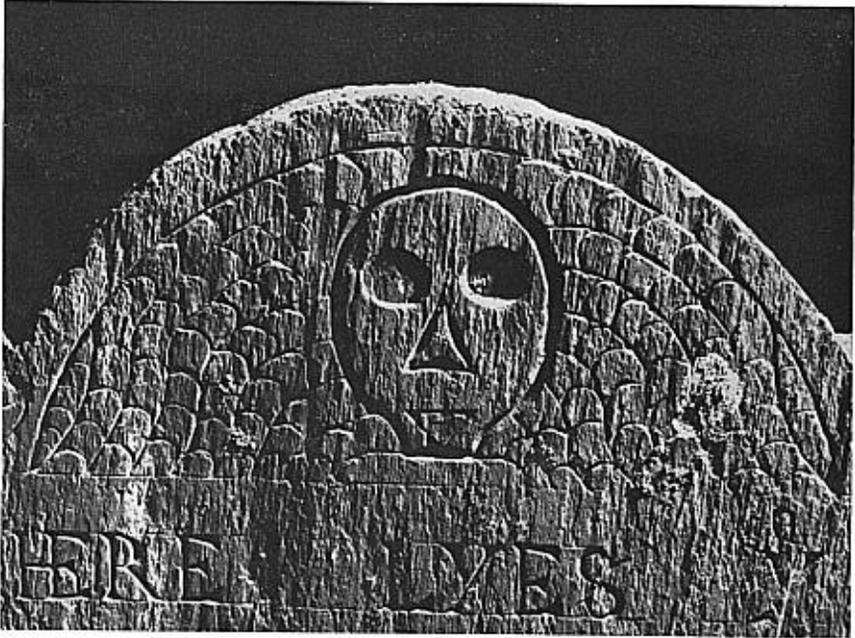


FIG. 8. LYDDA KING, 1711 (DETAIL)
Plympton Green Burying Ground.

most interesting. If many of his stones cut during this final period are overworked and noticeably peculiar, this should not be altogether surprising. They were fashioned by an aging cutter who by now was approaching his sixtieth year and who was living in a decade of colonial wars,¹¹ expanding population, currency inflation and rapid social change. It was a decade, too, that marked a major change in Plymouth County grave stone iconography: both William Cushman of Middleborough and Nathan Hayward of

thaniel Fuller was caught between opposing influences that produced startling results.

One innovation Fuller undertook in these last stones was the use of curious little heads, usually cut in pairs, which appeared in unexpected places on his stones after 1739.¹² One example is the Lydia Rider stone (White Horse Beach, 1740) on which a pair of little heads staring up at the sky are worked into the upper border. Another example is the Samuel Bradford footstone, which is decorated

with a pair of little heads, one slightly larger than the other. Borders and footstones were not the only places, however. On at least a half dozen headstones, dated between 1740 and 1742, a little head

soul escapes through the mouth at the moment of death. On the other hand, it may be that Fuller wished to cut a face somewhere on his stones, and simply had no other suitable place. Unwilling to



FIG. 9. ISAAC CUSHMAN, 1727 (DETAIL)
Plympton Green Burying Ground.

replaces the usual heart symbol cut in the mouth of a skull. And one stone, located in North Carver, has *two* such faces, back to back, in the mouth of a skull, almost entirely displacing the skull's original features.

Why Fuller chose to cut small faces on his grave stones may be seen in terms of his attempt to animate his designs. Why he chose to insert them in the mouth of his skulls, however, is puzzling. It may tie in with the folk legend that the departing

break with his traditional skull and nevertheless wishing to animate his stones, he may have purposely chosen to cut a face in the very same spot where a heart had previously muted the gloomy character of his early diamond stones.¹³

As he approached the end, Fuller abandoned his original geometrical layouts and attempted freehand innovations out of character with his previous stones. Occasionally (but not always) these attempts were out of reach of his talents.

The Mary Kempton stone (Plymouth, 1742), one of the least attractive stones Fuller cut, omitted the winged skull altogether and substituted two little heads cut in a background of scrolls. In contrast

nate, overworked stone, it illustrates the innovations and changes Fuller was attempting to the very end: the border work is doubled; the shoulder rosettes are heavily decorated; the mouth is a



FIG. 10. MRS. JOANNA BRIANT, 1736 (DETAIL)
Plympton Green Burying Ground.

to this is the Sarah Bryant stone (Plympton, 1741), Figure 7, which is one of Fuller's best. This stone retained the background feathers but substituted a pair of whorled faces for the skulls. By adding what appears to be a beak where he usually cut a heart, Fuller carved on this stone two faces that look unmistakably like a pair of peering owls.

The Ebenezer Lobdel stone (Plympton, 1748), Figure 4, is probably one of the last grave stones Fuller cut. An or-

heart within a heart; and the semicircular background feathers are replaced by complex scrollwork fashioned (perhaps unknowingly) to resemble a stylish wig. A similar stone, dated 1748 and also located in Plympton, shares the same characteristics. And had he lived longer, it is likely Fuller would have continued to cut this design on subsequent stones.

He did not have this opportunity, however. He died in 1750, seven months before he was to celebrate his sixty-fourth

birthday. He was survived by his wife Martha to whom he gave the usual "feather bed" and use of the homestead; by five married children; and by seven grandchildren. Among the items in his

neighbors, who looked on stonecutters as "laborers," valued Nathaniel Fuller's legacy much beyond the three hundred pounds that remained of his estate. Seen from the advantage of two hundred and



FIG. 11. DANIEL PRAT, CA. 1740 (DETAIL)
Plympton Green Burying Ground.

£300 estate was a pew in the Plympton meetinghouse valued at £2 which he bequeathed to his eldest son Amos; several hundred acres of land valued at £200 which he divided among his five children; and a set of cartwheels, a cart, and some tackling, valued at £4, which presumably had served to transport and lift the many slate grave stones he had shaped, inscribed and delivered during his lifetime.

It is unlikely that Fuller's colonial

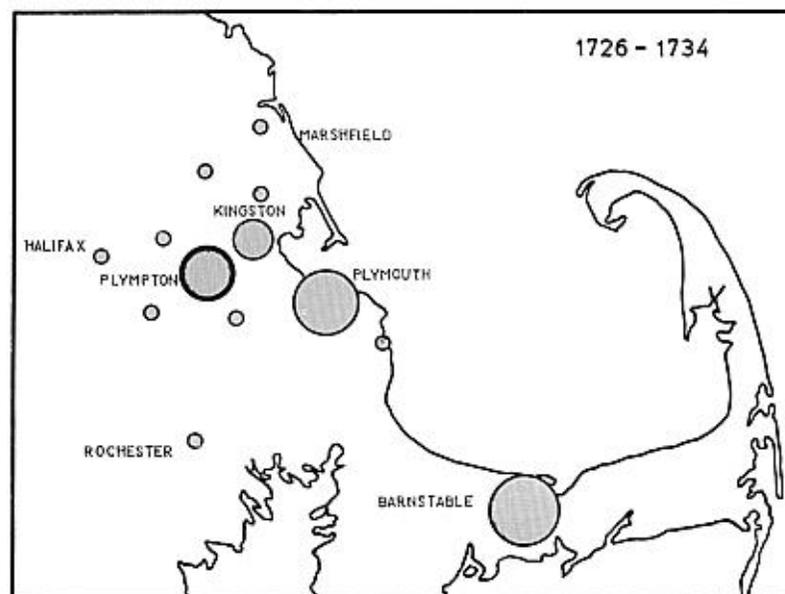
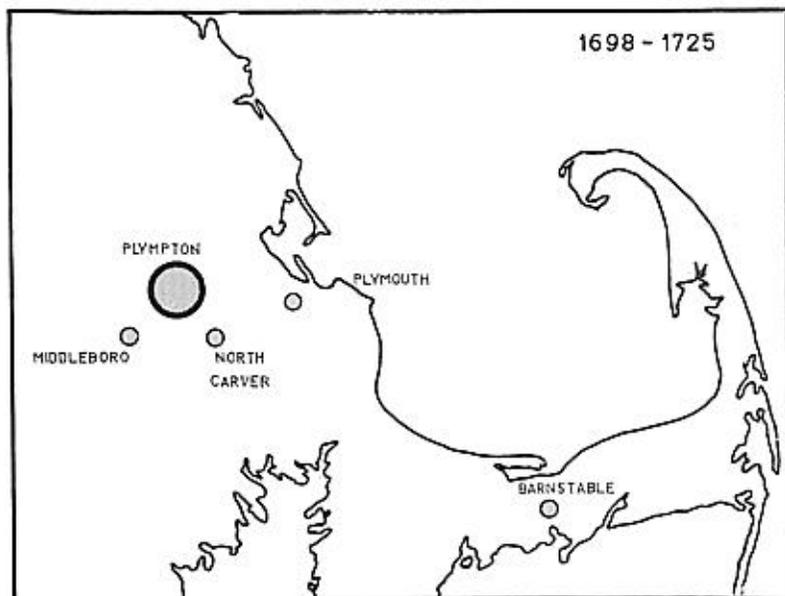
fifty years, however, Fuller's most lasting legacy of course are his slate grave stones. His crude but honest work not only has outlived the narrow views that once inspired it, but reveals him as an eloquent, witty and highly original artist. Perhaps it is a necessary irony that a later age, for which sophistication has displaced the provincial innocence required to conceive and create these stones, should be the one to value and appreciate them.

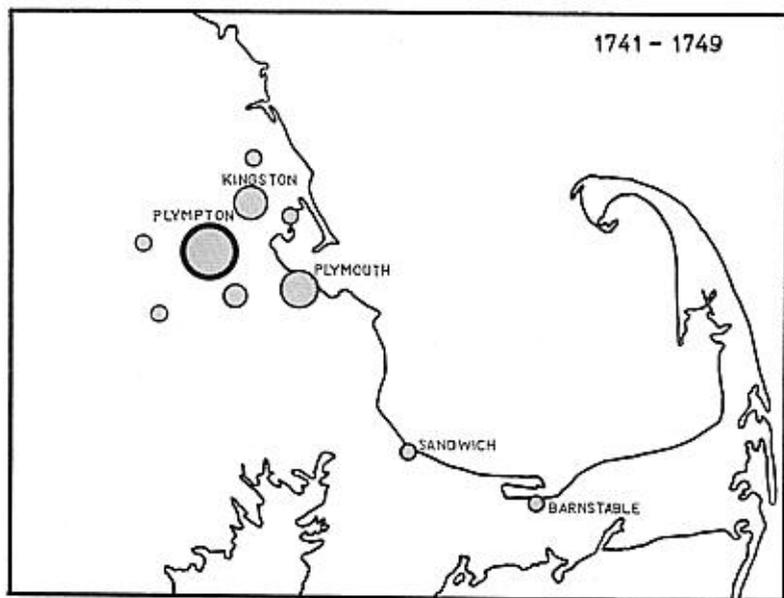
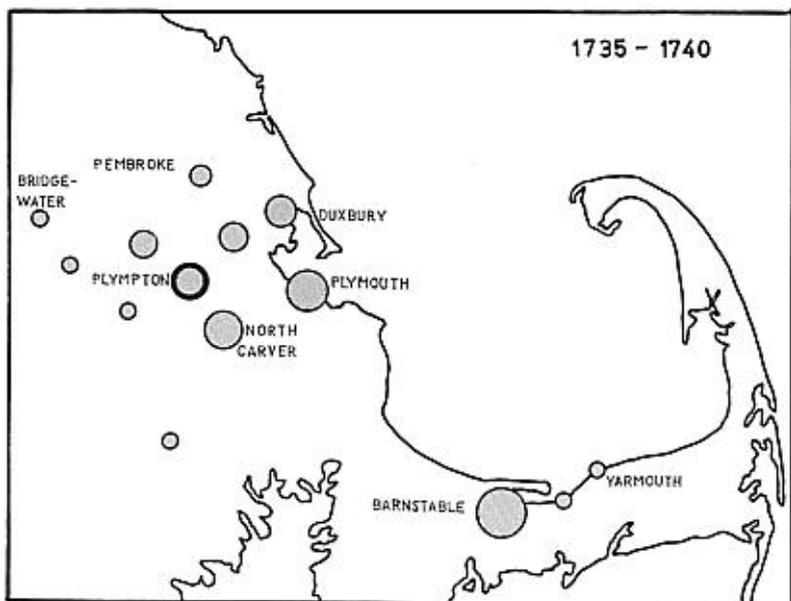


FIG. 12. MRS. ELISABETH BRADFORD, 1741 (DETAIL)
First Parish Burying Ground, Kingston, Massachusetts.

The four maps shown here indicate the distribution of the four major date-groups of Nathaniel Fuller's grave stones. The early concentration of stones at Plympton suggests their cutter lived and worked there, and helps confirm Fuller's identity as the cutter of the grave stones assigned to him in this article. As his stones became more professional, Fuller's services were sought after over an increasingly wide area that included Bridgewater as well as Yarmouth on Cape Cod. Towards the end of his life, however, Fuller evidently became reluctant to journey long distances to deliver his stones, and during the final decade (1740-1750) the distribution again is concentrated in Plympton and its neighboring towns.

The dispersal of the entire Fuller group follows a pattern that coincides with those towns which were founded by former residents of the original settlements at Plymouth and Duxbury. Later stonecutters who imitated Fuller, or derived their own style from his, sold their stones in the same communities.





NOTES

¹ Nathaniel Fuller calls himself a “mason” in his will. (Plymouth County Probate Register, 12:107.) The Plymouth County Deeds refer to him either as a “Yeoman” or a “Housewright.”

² Direct evidence that Fuller was in fact a stonecutter and was responsible for the group assigned to him in this article consists of three entries in the Plymouth County Probate Register. A “Nath^l Fuller” is listed as being paid 9 pounds in 1742 “for Grave Stones” by the estate of Nicholas Drew (9:12), and 2 pounds 8 shillings in 1743 “for Grave Stones” by the estate of Thomas Loring (9:170). The Drew headstone is standing on Burial Hill in Plymouth, and the Loring headstone in the First Parish burying ground at Duxbury. Both stones have the main characteristics of the Fuller group. A “Nathaniel Fuller” also received 3 pounds 17 shillings for the Samuel Bradford stones (Figure 1) in 1744 (9:446). The Bradford headstone and footstone have survived and are standing in the Plympton Green burying ground. A number of circumstantial items support this identification as well, the most persuasive among which are: Fuller’s residence in Plympton; his stated occupation as a mason; and his death in 1750 which coincides with the dates of his last stones.

³ In her classic study of the field, *Gravestones of Early New England* (published in 1927), Mrs. Harriette Merrifield Forbes correctly identified Ebenezer Soule (1710-1792) and his sons as the cutters of a group of “Medusa” stones found throughout Plymouth and Barnstable counties. While the two men were virtual neighbors, and while Soule’s Medusa designs derive indirectly from those of Fuller, Ebenezer Soule apparently was never at any time apprenticed to Fuller. Ebenezer Soule did not in fact engage in stonecutting professionally until after 1754 (when he was forty-three years of age), at a time when his accumulating debts required him to assume a gainful occupation.

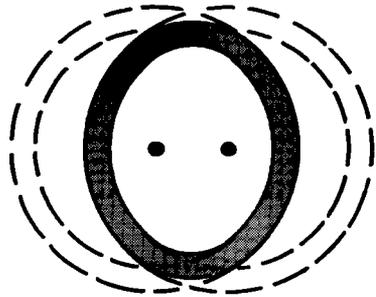
⁴ Narragansett Basin slate, a grey-green sedimentary rock commonly found in open fields and stone walls around Middleborough, is termed a shale by some geologists, a slate by others. More cohesive and durable than normal

shale, it is not as dense and hard as good quality roofing slate. The rock is easily quarried and cut, however, and its former abundance in East Middleborough gave rise to three generations of neighborhood stonecutters who supplied virtually all eighteenth-century grave stones found in Plymouth County and the western half of Cape Cod.

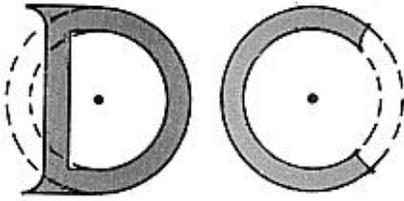
⁵ Uniformity in design characterizes almost all Boston cutters of this period, particularly the professional ones. The Lamson family of Charlestown, for example, cut virtually the same stone for three generations.

⁶ The earliest date found on any surviving Fuller grave stone is 1698. It is found on a large, half-disintegrated, slate slab standing on Burial Hill in Plymouth cut in memory of Reverend John Cotton, a cousin of Cotton Mather, who died of yellow fever in Charlestown, South Carolina. Other early Fuller stones are dated 1703, 1706, and 1709. It is safe to assume that all these very early stones were in fact commissioned and cut a number of years after their indicated dates.

⁷ The degree of Fuller’s reliance on a compass is suggested in the residual cut found below the right eye of this stone. The elliptical eyes were designed by two arcs drawn with a compass from two different centers. Fuller accidentally continued the top arc of the right eye to form a complete circle, and subsequently had no way of erasing the cut. Further evidence can be found on the letter “O” on the inscription of this and all his early stones: where the slate has not worn or scaled off, the compass centerpoints that control the two arc segments making up the letter can be found within the letter itself.



Fuller executed the curved sections of the letters D, C, and G in a similar manner.

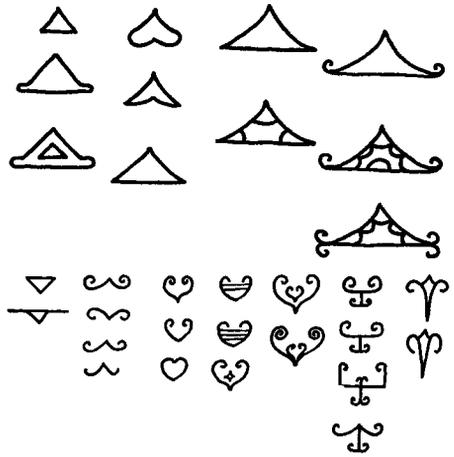


Compass-assisted letters are not unique to Fuller. Many eighteenth-century rural New England stonecutters used this technique on their early stones until they were sufficiently experienced to cut rounded letters freehand.

⁸ The grammar of the Wadsworth stone reveals several Fuller inscription practices. These include the joining of the first two letters of *HERE*; the spelling of *LYES*; the thorn character *Ye* symbol; and Fuller's odd but consistent omission of the plural on *YEAR*. Grammar and lettering provide the most reliable measure for identifying his stones. Other common Fuller practices included the substitution of lowercase b's and d's for the more usual capitals (see the Ebenezer Lobdel stone, Figure 4); superimposing double L's; and occasional use of the old-style S.

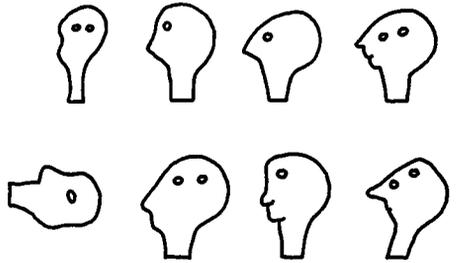
⁹ A curious exception to this development can be found in the increasing rather than decreasing frequency that Fuller cut a row of teeth into the chins of his skulls. This runs contrary to the chronological direction of New England grave stone iconography in which accessories of death are replaced by softening or animating features. Fuller may have been trying to compensate for what had obviously become a stylish, fashionable, skull.

¹⁰ These curls were frequently even more elaborate. Fuller's noses and mouths vary considerably, as may be seen by the following examples:



¹¹ King George's War, fought by the English colonies against France, lasted from 1743 to 1748, and appreciably involved men and money from Massachusetts Bay due to the exertions of Governor Shirley.

¹² Fuller's little heads, which vary in size from an inch to three inches, reveal his almost complete lack of sketching talent and graphic training. The following are some examples found on his stones:



¹³ On his first, or early diamond stones, Fuller cut a heart-mouth only on stones commissioned in memory of minors and juveniles. After 1726, he made it a general practice.