

Foreword

To write a foreword to this collection of essays on cemeteries and grave markers is rather daunting, since the excellent introduction serves this purpose quite well. On the other hand, the introduction permits a certain freedom which I shall now indulge by touching on several subjects that otherwise, for better or worse, might never have appeared in print. I suppose it is natural that when our careers stretch further behind us than before, we look back on how it all took place, and what, if anything, it all meant. In my case, the period of the early sixties stands out particularly as a time of great excitement and pleasure, for it was then that Ted Dethlefsen and I discovered cemeteries. The four years we spent studying the grave-markers of early New England were for me the most enjoyable time of my professional life, and one of the main reasons for this is the ephemeral, anecdotal context in which the more disciplined research took place. One was always encountering the unexpected; local folks had wonderful tales to tell; and, on occasion, something would happen that defied rational explanation. It is this aspect of gravestone studies that deserves attention, and I hope that my freedom of subject might allow me to indulge in the anecdotal.

It all began for Ted and me one steamy July afternoon in Somerville, Massachusetts, where we were both teaching archaeology at Harvard summer school. Sitting on the porch of Ted's top-floor apartment in a classic Boston tripledecker, we were finding it very hard to keep cool, in spite of the two quarts of Ballantine Ale we had consumed. Prior to coming east from California, I had read an article in *Time* magazine (I think that Muhammad Ali's picture was on the cover) on Neal and Parker's gravestone rubbings, and having lived in Concord, Massachusetts, some years before, I recalled the gravestones along the street by the Catholic church. I suggested that perhaps Concord would be cooler than Somerville, and that we might drive out and take a look at the "quaint" gravestones as well. It wasn't that much cooler, as it turned out, in spite of two more quarts of ale

that we consumed while sitting in the cemetery, looking at the stones with no particular purpose in mind. It was then that Ted, his associative powers perhaps somehow enhanced by the Ballantine, said “Look, you don’t really have to read the dates to tell roughly how old the stones are, the designs are different at different times.” We were sitting in the midst of *orderly stylistic change* (thunderclap, trumpets), so beloved of archaeologists and art historians alike. This realization was so exciting that we spent a couple of hours checking every stone in the cemetery—a rather large one—and when we had finished, we knew that there was immense research potential in these old cemeteries, if all the others worked the same way as the one in Concord. They did. By that evening we had roughed out a proposal to the National Science Foundation, which was subsequently funded, providing support for our first two years of study.

This work took us through hundreds of cemeteries, and since the only significant work on the subject at that time was Harriette Forbes’s (Allan Ludwig’s *Graven Images* not yet having appeared), it truly was a voyage of discovery. Aware that these stones showed stylistic regularity over space as well as time, it was exciting to encounter the edge of a particular design’s distribution, and see it increase as we moved toward the center, and then fade out as another one replaced it. Finding the cemeteries—all of them—was not all that easy, but with USGS maps and my children, whom I paid first five cents and later fifty cents a cemetery as they searched the maps spread out on the living-room floor, we managed to account for them all, and then go into the field and record them. We may or may not have been the first to demonstrate stylistic regularity in such a well-controlled context (I think we were, though), but when we presented a paper on gravestones and seriation at the Society for American Archaeology at Chapel Hill, Jim Ford led me, almost at a run, to the editor of *American Antiquity* to urge publication.

Ford’s work on stylistic seriation in the Mississippi Valley was of course a classic, but until then, the basic premise, that of the “battleship” shape of stylistic frequency curves, had never been so explicitly demonstrated using hard data with remarkable chronological control. Radiocarbon dating was hardly called for when the date of each artifact had been so conveniently inscribed upon it. Out of this grew other studies and other papers, including one with the most curious and esoteric title in all of the archeological literature (“The Doppler Effect and Archaeology: A Consideration of the Spatial Aspects of Seriation”), which I think now perhaps should not have been written, since I don’t like the idea of cultural behavior being quite that regular and predictable. The Doppler paper also wound up discussed in David Clark’s *Analytical Archaeology* in a section entitled “Doppler Models,” but it was the only one mentioned. But it was all fun, and I like

message on the banner, in this one case, was intended for the deceased. We will never know, but this little stone certainly makes one wonder. . . .

Yankee Frugality

As one goes about doing research on old cemeteries, tales emerge from the local folks about certain stones, the people buried there, or about grave-stones in general. Old cemeteries capture the popular imagination, as witness the frequent mention of gravestones in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, including the drawing of a wooden grave rail in South Carolina that, according to local lore, is supposed to be the head of the deceased woman's bedstead, or the three stones in Little Compton, Rhode Island, marking the graves of a man, his wife, and a woman who was "supposed to be his wife." In the course of our work in Massachusetts, we were told a story about a gravestone that never made it to the cemetery. It is not likely true, but too wonderful not to recount. When the Lamont Undergraduate Library was built at Harvard, an old frame house was razed on the construction site. Under the front porch, workers found a slate gravestone with the inscription "Sacred to the memory of Hezekiah Warren." There was no date, only the name. A local history buff heard about the discovery and set about trying to find out how the stone came to be beneath the porch. The story that was unearthed goes as follows. The Warrens had a small daughter named Hepzibah, who tragically fell ill and died. The distraught parents went to the gravestone carver's shop and ordered a stone for little Hepzibah. When they called back a day later, the stone had been carved and the name inscribed, but not the right name. Either the parents had not spoken clearly, or the carver was hard of hearing, but the name on the stone was Hezekiah. Upon a little reflection the parents hit upon an ingenious solution to this little problem. They commissioned a second stone properly inscribed, which was duly placed on their daughter's grave. But they paid for the first stone, took it home, and when their second child, a boy, was born, they named him after the stone, a brilliant example of colonial "pre-need" provision, perhaps the first instance of a practice so common today in the selling of grave plots. However, Hezekiah ran away to sea at an early age and was never heard from again. The stone stayed beneath the porch where it had been stored for Hezekiah's eventual demise, to be found almost two centuries later. This story has some of the earmarks of modern urban legends, and there could well be other versions of it from elsewhere in New England, an area which prides itself in frugal management of worldly assets.

John Stockbridge and His Tree

The iconography of New England colonial gravestones is by now well understood and forms a powerful component in the study of the worldview of those who made and were buried beneath them. The broad stylistic trends shown by the stones give testimony to a complete transformation of attitudes toward this life and the one after death. Our earlier work suggested that the decline in popularity of the death's head motif was a function of the decline in New England Puritan orthodoxy, and while the two occur simultaneously, this explanation now seems a bit too narrow. Rather, as I suggest in my minibook, *In Small Things Forgotten*, both are functions of a major change in worldview that occurred in America during the later eighteenth century. The death's head is a powerful, emotional, and natural motif that finds its structural counterparts in hall and parlor houses, colorful ceramics, and shared objects and spaces.

The wonderful spirit faces that animate so many of the mid-eighteenth-century stones in Plymouth County are slightly more cryptic. Peter Benes's important book, *The Masks of Orthodoxy*, treats the designs in great detail and corresponding competence, and we can see that they represent a slow drifting of the death's head design toward a more human form. But the drift is sufficiently slow to give us almost a freeze-frame sequence of the change. I have always wondered what these faces might have looked like in profile, and if such a thought ever occurred to the men who carved them. Could it be that their two dimensionality is just that, and they were conceived as flat entities, given that they had no counterpart in the real world? This seems to be an aspect of these carvings that will forever remain in question.

Perhaps the most detailed analysis of the symbolism of New England gravestones is Allan Ludwig's *Graven Images*, in which the various elements of the design are discussed in terms of their symbolic significance in a theological context. One such symbol is the tree, chopped down, symbolizing death. Ludwig illustrates this design, and one of the most graphic is the Elizabeth Norton stone in Durham, Connecticut. Here we see not only the felled tree, but also the hand and arm of God emerging from the clouds, holding the axe that did the job. There is no doubt of the symbolism here, it is very explicit and graphic. But, as Freud supposedly said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. The John Stockbridge stone in Haverhill, Massachusetts, is a case in point. Here, as on the Durham stone, is a felled tree, lying beside a tree still standing. In this case, the axe is on the ground beside the trunk of the felled tree. But under the fallen tree, we see a face peering out at us, not looking particularly distressed. When we read the lengthy epitaph, we learn that the unfortunate Mr. Stockbridge was killed when a tree he was cutting down fell on him. This stone is a quiet

cautionary statement to those who might on occasion overinterpret the symbolism that they find on the stones. Were it not for the inscription, a very different reading of the design might have been in order.

Such, then, have been only a few of the many wonderful things one encounters when one undertakes to study cemeteries and their monuments. Certainly all of the contributors to this collection would have similar anecdotes to relate, and even the most detailed, disciplined, and rigorous analysis of cemetery data cannot mask the underlying thrill of discovery that invariably accompanies this work. Reading this volume will make this quite clear; it is an important contribution to gravestone and cemetery studies.

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