

Old Burying Ground

Historical Narrative

Winter 2012

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From about 1645, this area was a quiet farming community that came to be known as Charlestown End. In 1725 the population had increased to 65 male inhabitants who were taxed by Charlestown. "They were so far from Charlestown that they derived none of the advantages of a connection with the parent town, and suffered all the inconveniences attending a community separated from the church and the school by miles of wilderness.", notes local historian, Judge William B. Stevens. (1)

The town fathers took their responsibilities of separating from Charlestown seriously. The December 17, 1725 Act of the General Court required the inhabitants of Stoneham to erect a house of worship, procure a 'Learned and Orthodox minister' and provide for a school-master. By the following summer this process was well underway.

The first quarter acre of the Old Burying Ground (OBG) was sold to the 'Select Men' of the newly incorporated Town on July 11, 1726 by James Hay, a Charlestown shopkeeper. It was part of the purchase of the Meeting House lot (1 ¼ acres) for the princely sum of 13 pounds 5 shillings. (2)

By 1758, James Hay was feeling much more benevolent toward the town and donated an additional three quarters of an acre provided the Town "...*make and maintain all the fence round said Piece of Land forever all upon the Town of Stoneham's Cost and Charge ...*".(3) This 1.09 acre lot was in the line of sight of the first church/meeting house built on Meeting House Ridge at the intersection of Summer and Pleasant Streets and beside the path from the Meeting House to the Parsonage.

The oldest headstone dates to 1728 but Timothy Wright was probably not the first burial. Wilton F. Bucknam, in his '*Stoneham 200 Years Ago*' series (4), reports that a 19 year old child of Jacob Howe was the first white person in the Old Burying Yard on Pleasant Street. Howe was of Stoneham at the incorporation of the town in 1725, but later removed to Ipswich, Mass and died there. Curiously, there is no death record of a Howe child in the vital statistics at Town Hall.

The Town's first and fifth ministers are buried in the OBG. Reverend James Osgood was called from Salem to serve in 1728 and remained until his death in 1746. Stevens notes, "The Town paid him a salary of £110 per annum, £172 for a settlement, and a few years later purchased a wood lot and agreed to furnish him with ten cords of wood each year." (p42).

Rev. John H. Stevens was called from Methuen in 1795 and served Stoneham for the next 32 years. Judge Stevens tells us, "He was tall, had a fine and dignified presence, was a

man of quick feeling and at times preached with marker eloquence.” (62). The Stevens lot was fenced, but only the granite posts remain and the gate that is stored in the Historical Society building for safe keeping.

The OBG holds the remains of many of the Town’s founding families. In rank order they are Gould (45 headstones), Green (42 + a tomb), Hay (24), Richardson (19), Bucknam (15), Bryant (14), Vinton (13), Hill (11 + a family tomb) and Lynde (10). Together these nine families account for 55% of headstones in the OBG.

William B. Stevens, Esq. notes in his 1891 *History of Stoneham* “In 1788 Captain Jonathan Green was sent as a delegate to the convention in Boston, which was called to ratify the constitution.” (5).

The Veterans Graves Registration W.P.A. Project in 1942 was conducted by Dr. H.R. Rock. His map and registration inventoried the graves of soldiers from the French & Indian War (3), the Revolutionary War (31), the War of 1812 (3) and the Civil War (2, one of which was an army nurse).

Fourteen of our Revolutionary War soldiers are listed in the *National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution*. Two have significant histories.

Captain Samuel Sprague, age 56, led a company of Stoneham men to Lexington, reaching there in time to intercept and pursue the British on their retreat from Concord. He was also Stoneham’s representative to the Provincial Congress in 1775. Source: *History of Stoneham Massachusetts*, William B. Stevens, 1891.

Major William Wilson, was a fifer who served in the 19th Continental Regiment (later the 2nd Connecticut Regiment) along with Captain Nathan Hale. In his 1818 pension request, Wilson states that he volunteered to stay with General Washington for six weeks at the close of 1776. His headstone inscription reads: “A tried friend to his country and a Patriot of the Revolution”

Scholarly Research

James Deetz, PhD. (1930 – 2000), a noted American anthropologist, utilized data gathered at the OBG to write a 1967 treatise describing the stylistic changes of headstone symbols over a 100 year period. The article, titled *Death's Head, Cherub, Urn and Willow* by James Deetz and Edwin S. Dethlefsen, was originally published in *Natural History* Vol. 76(3) 1967, pp. 29-37.

The article can be found at <http://www.histarch.uiuc.edu/plymouth/deathshhead.html> . Of particular interest is the excerpt below:

If you were to prepare a graph showing how the designs change in popularity through time, the finished product might look something like three battleships viewed from above, the lower one with the bow showing, the center one in full view, and the third visible only in the stern. This shape, frequently called a "battleship-shaped" curve, is thought by archaeologists to typify the popularity career of any cultural trait across time. Prepared from controlled data taken from the Stoneham cemetery, north of Boston, where the style sequence is typical of the area around this eighteenth-century urban center of eastern Massachusetts, the graph below shows such a curve.

Originally published in
Natural History Vol. 76(3) 1967, pp. 29-37.

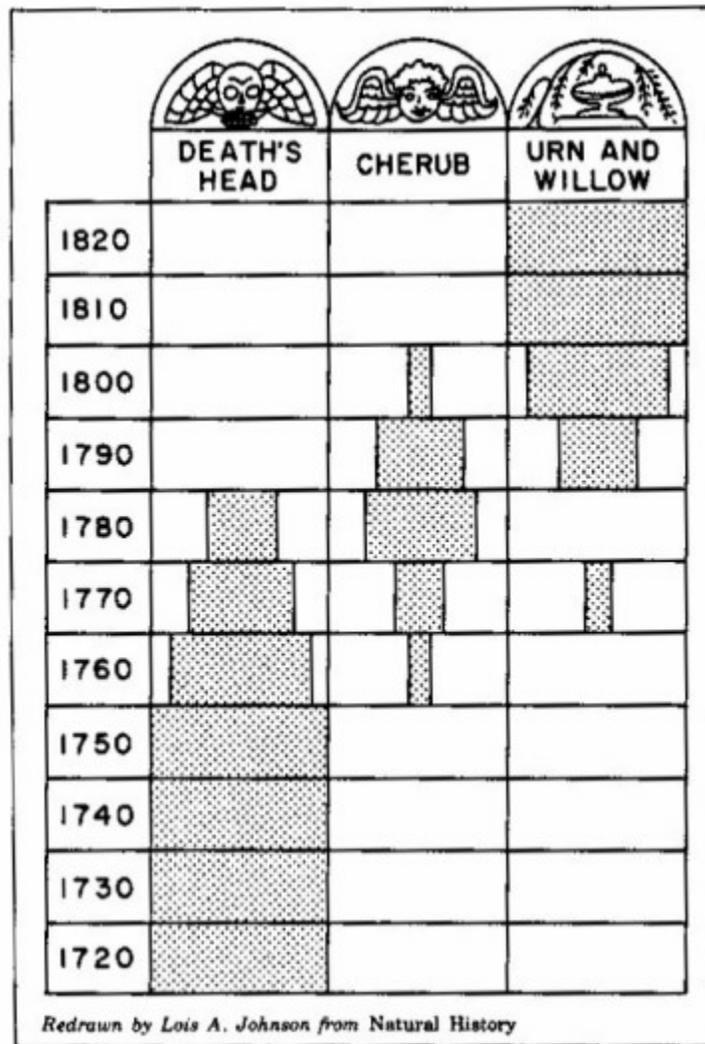


FIGURE 1. Stylistic Sequence from a Cemetery in Stoneham, Massachusetts.

Identified Carvers

The **Lamson workshop of Charlestown** was home to multiple generations of stone cutters from about 1677 to 1824. The headstone of Anna Sprague (d. 1809), wife of Captain Samuel Sprague, is pictured in the on-line Farber Gravestone Collection with the attribution: *Lamson, after 1789 (Joseph, Caleb, David)*. Her headstone is also referenced in James Blachowicz's from SLATE to MARBLE Gravestone Carving Traditions in Eastern Massachusetts 1770-1870. On page 22, he notes. "Because the markers for Aaron Dana, Jesse Hart and Anne Sprague were dated the year following the death of Joseph Lamson III, we can probably give them to Caleb II, who would live to 1824." [Note: Dana is buried in Watertown, Hart in Boston]. Local lore suggests that there are at least ten other Lamson carved stones in our OBG, but Mrs. Sprague's is the only one we have been able to substantiate.

On the headstone of Anna Cleaves and her infant child (d.1843) the words *I.N. Stone-Harvard* are visible just above the ground. We wondered if this was a bad pun and why a headstone would be hauled from Harvard when there were more local carvers. Susan Lee of the Harvard MA Historical Society assures us that **Isaac Newton Stone** came to Harvard in 1827 and is listed as a "maker of monumental stones".

The headstone of William A. Rowe (d. 1850) is signed *I. Fletcher – Lawrence*. Researcher Kathleen Flynn of the Lawrence History Center was able to identify various occupational titles listed for **Isaac Fletcher** as: stone contractor (1848); mason (1850, 1851); marble dealer (1853-4); contractor (1857). These same occupational titles continue, varying within the years, until 1875, when his residence is listed, but with no occupational description for that, or the subsequent years. She wondered, as do we, what connection between Rowe and Fletcher would justify the costs to carve and ship his headstone from Lawrence.

During our research we came across this stone carver's name on two of our headstones, Thomas Gould (d.1848) and Levi Gould, MD (d.1850): **D. Nichols - Lowell**. Thanks to Joan Quigley of the Stoneham Historical Commission, preliminary research finds David Nichols in the Lowell City Directories of 1847, 51 and 53 as a marble manufacturer in an office listed on Dutton near the Lowell Depot. Was the Gould family interested in marble stones and willing to send to Lowell for them? Could they have been shipped via the Middlesex Canal or the Boston and Lowell Railroad?

Within thirty-two years they expanded to OBG from a quarter acre to a full acre and this served their needs until the 'civil war' cemetery open in May 1861. There were a few burials in the OBG in the subsequent decades, the majority belonging to founding families and the last occurring in 1896. And the final occupant is a much loved town librarian who was laid to rest in 1924 in her family plot.

- This burying ground is the resting place for our early settlers, veterans of four military conflicts, activists of the abolitionist and temperance movements as well

as ordinary citizens whose lives are chiseled in stone; an unsolved murder victim, infants who lived a day or two, a mother and infant who died in childbirth, at least two smallpox victims, and survivors who lived well into their nineties and even one hardly soul whose stone acknowledges his age of one hundred.

- Nine families make up 55% of the headstones. They loved their titles of captain, lieutenant, major, deacon, reverend, doctor and esquire. And every day they labored as farmers, carpenters, shoemakers, housewives, town officials, and road menders to make a better life for themselves and the town.

- (1) History of Stoneham, Mass William B. Stevens, Esq. 1891. p.35
- (2) Cambridge Registry of Deeds: Book 66/493
- (3) Cambridge Registry of Deeds: Book 66/497
- (4) Wilton Bucknam
- (5) History of Stoneham, Mass William B. Stevens, Esq. 1891. p.65