



The Old Burying Ground in Huntington, where early American gravestones may be found

Stories Told in Stone

By JONATHAN COHEN

WHEN early Christian settlers on the Island buried their dead in the 17th- and 18th-century graves behind a church or, perhaps, in woods overlooking the sea, they marked the graves with carved stones reflecting how they viewed life and death. The beautiful, curious designs cut in the stones show a unique cross section of thought, carving and history from all over the Northeast of colonial America. The old graveyards throughout the Island are a kind of living museum and, with information only they can tell us, an important cultural resource now badly in need of attention.

The early American gravestone is a form of folk art as valuable as any now collected and preserved. It also has historical, genealogical, graphic-art and anthropological significance that makes it important to record. As with other bas-relief, this can be done by photography, rubbing and making molds.

Throughout the Island, especially in the North and South Forks of Suffolk County, are scattered public and pri-

vate cemeteries with the old brownstone and slate gravestones, often badly cared for, if cared for at all. The oldest known stone, on the North Fork, dates from 1671. The number of these early stones on the Island may total 10,000, according to Gay Levine, a well-known expert, graduate student in anthropology at the State University Center at Stony Brook and adjunct instructor at Dowling College, who is making a complete photo-archive so she can study and record the old gravestones. Her work is likened to "salvage archeology" by Dr. Phil Weigand and Dr. Dolores Newton of the Stony Brook anthropology department, who are supervising the project.

The popular designs are the death's head, the cherub, and the urn and willow, carved at the top of the stones. Two noted anthropologists, James Deetz and Edwin S. Dethlefsen, the authors of "Death's Head, Cherub, Urn and Willow" in *Natural History* (1967), say the earliest of the three is the winged death's head, with blank eyes and a grin. Earlier versions are quite ornate, but as time wears on, they become less so. Around the Great Awakening of the mid-18th century, the grim death's head designs are replaced by

winged cherubs. And by the late 1700's or early 1800's, depending on where you go, the cherubs are replaced by stones decorated with a willow tree overhanging a pedestaled urn.

If the cemetery you visit is in a rural New England area, there is a chance you may find indigenous designs, which completely replace one or more of the three primary designs. So far as is known, this did not happen on the Island.

Why should death's heads be popular at all, and what cultural factors made them disappear, giving rise to the cherub design? What can be seen is a changing attitude toward death, with the emphasis shifting from mortality—a popular epitaph, "As I am now, so shall you be/Prepare for Death and follow me"—to immortality and resurrection. With this breakdown of early Puritan values comes not only religious change but also great social change, as increasingly comfortable America

turns from orthodox Puritanism and starts to take over the wilderness, expanding its towns and factories.

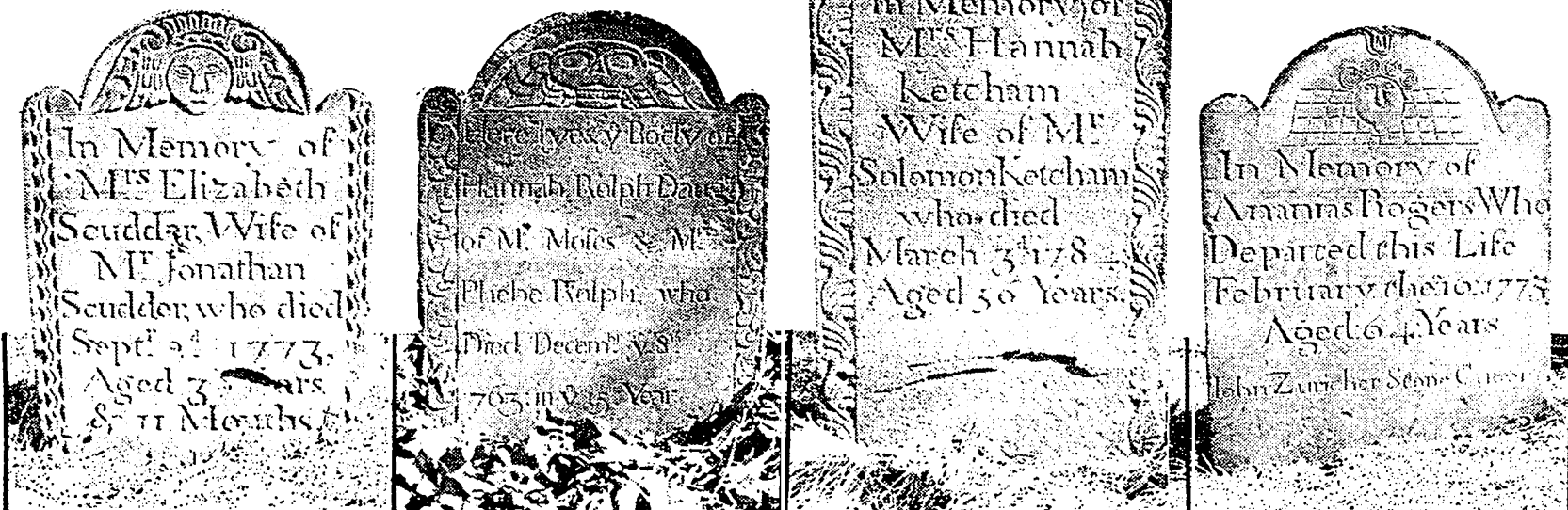
The winged skulls, sometimes with an hourglass and crossbones, have cold rows of teeth, a heart-shaped or triangle nose and hollow eyes. There are many different versions. In time, the stern winged death's head becomes a cherub's head with curls and wings, with flowers, fruits and vines carved in the optimistic border panels.

And then, toward the end of the 18th century, the neoclassical willow-shaded urn appears, reflecting a less awestruck, more intellectual eye on life and death.

In his book on the symbolism of New England gravestones, "Graven Images," the art and religious historian Allan Ludwig points out that the "iconophobic" Puritans found the carving of gravestones a compromise. While the use of cherubs might have verged on heresy, since they are heavenly beings whose portrayal might lead to idolatry, the use of a more mortal and neutral symbol—a death's head—would have served as a graphic reminder of death and resurrection.

And given the more liberal views

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Two popular 18th-century designs, the skull with wings and the cherub, one proudly signed.

Gravestones as Folk Art

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concerning symbolism and personal involvement preached in the 18th century, the idolatrous and heretical aspects of cherubs would have been more fitting to express the sentiment of that period.

The old gravestones on the Island were made for Christians of various sects, from Puritan Congregationalists and Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, Anabaptists and Dutch Reformists to Quakers, who never put designs on their stones. It is known that the stone-carvers were not full-time specialists, but workers of other trades. They made stones on request, and shipped these "folk" monuments to the Island.

Not having sandstone or slate or marble quarries of their own, Long Islanders almost always imported their gravestones from such places as New Jersey, the Hudson Valley and New England.

Since the Island was on the crossroads of many water-trade routes, the work of carvers whose different styles are rooted in their own communities shows up here. One known carver, John Stevens Jr., of Rhode Island, who signed some of his work, made many of the gravestones throughout eastern Long Island. He liked to use a large piece of slate on which he drew, with a finely pointed chisel, an aristocratic head, intended at times to portray the deceased, with borders of flowers and scrolls and other conventional patterns. The grave of Esther Halliok of Mattituck has one of his exceptional stones dated 1773.

In 1781, Stevens put an ad in *The Newport Mercury* that said: "The stone which I work is allowed by the best of judges to be superior to any commonly found in America." Yet perhaps the best publicity came from word of mouth passed around once families learned about a good carver.

Another well-known carver, Joshua Hempstead of Connecticut, kept a diary of his days spent "blocking gravestones," "cutting Letters" and "engraving gravestones." Where he lived, boats of all kinds were coming and going, which made it easy for him to send his stones to their Long Island destinations.

In 1723 a Rhode Island sloop, coming from Martinique, was wrecked on the South Shore near East Hampton, and among the bodies washed ashore was that of John Christophers, an only son destined never to reach his home in New London. He lies buried in the village burying ground in East Hampton, where the stone that Joshua Hempstead put on board a ship for him still marks his grave—a stone like hundreds of others that he made from schist spotted with quartz crystals.

Unfortunately, the old gravestones on the Island are disappearing. They are constantly in danger of attack by vandals, weather and lichens. The enzymes in the funguslike lichens cause surface exfoliation, and frost action creates hollows inside the stones until



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One place to find old gravestones on the Island

they eventually weaken and crumble.

It may be up to local cemetery associations, town governmental agencies and groups such as historical societies to assume the responsibility of taking better care of the stones. As a beginning, maintenance crews could start putting rubber bumpers on lawnmowers, which are now scraping and breaking stones.

The cooperation of these groups would be welcomed by the new Association for Gravestone Study, whose purpose is to recognize and preserve this rapidly disappearing cultural resource. The group is made up of all kinds of people whose interests vary from professional to avocational. Prospective members can get in touch with the association at the anthropology department of the State University Center at Stony Brook or at the Dublin School in Dublin, N.H. Gay Levine, one of the founders, says that a new era of study has begun to broaden the previous genealogical or historical approach, with anthropological perspectives as means of understanding the stones—which also can be enjoyed as folk art.

Books on the subjects of gravestones are reportedly becoming more and more popular. According to Gay Levine, the bible in the field is Harriette Merrifield Forbes's "Gravestones of Early New England and the Men Who Made Them."

These 200- to -300-year-old gravestones need attention if they are to be saved from destruction. Methods for preserving stone by chemical means have been developed at Brookhaven National Laboratory, where Meyer Steinberg and Jack Fontana of the department of applied science are researching ways of making better con-

crete materials—polymerized concrete. They have developed a polymerization process that impregnates the sandstone or slate while preserving the original color and form and may be used for cosmetic repairs.

Another researcher in this area, Dr. Edward Sayre of the Brookhaven chemistry department, has developed a preservation treatment for the more numerous white marble stones. And Barbara Millstein, assistant curator of sculpture at the Brooklyn Museum, is now comparing methods of preserving the various types of stone. According to Gay Levine, the only absolutely safe way to preserve the stones is to bring them indoors and keep them in a well-ventilated place.

Anyone curious enough who wants to look around the old graveyards can find many of them on the North and South Forks of eastern Long Island, in village greens, on highways and near churches. There are little private family plots hidden in rural wooded areas, too. But remember: The stones are old and delicate. Those with crumbling surfaces—or those that sound hollow when tapped lightly with a knuckle—should never be rubbed.

Anyone who wants to make rubbings of the old gravestones—which is a lot of fun—should first find out how to do it without harming the stones further, since certain materials and methods should not be used. There are books and workshops available to learn how to do it properly. For more information, write to the Association for Gravestone Study. ■

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