

A LOOK BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE R.I. HISTORIC CEMETERY DATABASE

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This article is based on a talk given several years ago at a RIGS meeting. While transcription of original gravestone inscriptions is the bedrock of the database, there is equally important work to be done in old libraries and historical societies. It also discusses some of the most powerful features of the database.

Introduction

This article is designed to help you understand the background of the cemetery database and how to use some of its bells and whistles. I probably should warn you, however, that there is a definite risk that you may be diverted from your personal genealogical quests into the wonderful world of cemetery studies. I'm the poster child for that. I came to a talk that John Sterling gave in Warwick in the early 1990s, and just recently got back into my own research.

Here is a second, more serious caution. The cemetery database is a great tool for genealogy, in my mind one of the best invented in the last few decades. It's a great tool—but so is a hammer! If you don't use it properly, you can do a lot of damage. It needs to be used constructively and wisely. I am going to discuss in some depth how the database is put together. You may think that you only want to use it—not to know how it is made—but you will use more effectively if you understand what it is and isn't.

Cemeteries by the numbers: state and town records

People who volunteer in the database project usually develop some specialty. Some are great at recording gravestones, others at data entry. My specialty is setting up towns, and that what I'm going to talk you about. You will not be doing this task, but it's worth learning how it is done.

To do this, we use an option that isn't on the screen of computers at libraries with the program: the ADD CEMETERY option. When you click it, a blank cemetery description screen will appear. The first thing you have to do is to give it a number. Numbers can be more important than names as unique identifiers because the names of old cemeteries are fixed only by common usage: what they are called varies from age to age. Any new database should use these existing numbers whenever possible to prevent confusion. So you need to find out what cemeteries have been registered in the town.

How hard can this be? You'd be surprised. Most states have some sort of central registry or semi-official list of cemeteries. No matter how incomplete or out of date, it is the place to start if one hopes to coordinate the database numbering system with numbers assigned by the state.

Each state has different resources. The Massachusetts Historical Commission^[1] has files of "Inventory-Form E—Burial Ground" for each town. The Commission also has USGS maps for each town with cemeteries marked. (Lest you be too envious of Massachusetts, I should explain that the Mass. Historical Commission is the passive receiver

¹ At the state archives building at Columbia Point in Boston (617)727-2816.

of information and makes no effort to verify what it receives as long as the forms are all filled out.)

Rhode Island has an obsolete list of historical cemeteries with veterans' names and a map of each town at the Rhode Island Veterans' Memorial Cemetery on Route 2 in Exeter. We are all familiar with numbered historical cemetery marker at Rhode Island cemeteries, though by no means are all lots marked. Not all the marked signs are correct either. At least in Portsmouth it was (is?) a common teenage prank to switch signs. The Rhode Island Historical Cemetery Database now has quite eclipsed these resources.

In **Connecticut** one should make contact on the Internet with the Connecticut Gravestone Network to learn about their Tombstone Transcription Project. I believe they are using the Association for Gravestones Studies program we use in Rhode Island.

Vermont has no official central system, but the Vermont Old Cemetery Association (VOCA) has catalogued and numbered known cemeteries in its publication *Burial Grounds of Vermont* (1991)^[2].

The **Maine** Old Cemetery Association has been recording cemeteries since 1969 and has published four volumes on York County^[3] with other counties anticipated. These are just a few examples in the New England states of the wide variety of official or semi-official resources.

At the town level, town halls in Rhode Island usually have the map for their town with a list of veterans and whatever miscellaneous information has accumulated there: copies of books, articles, or letters. The local cemetery department should have a list of burial grounds owned by the town; in some places in Massachusetts, such as Swansea, the town maintains some private cemeteries with money allotted for perpetual maintenance. Most active cemeteries will have burial records in the head office.

Cemetery descriptions

Okay, you've set up a working list of numbered cemeteries. The next step is to gather every known cemetery description. The term "description," as used in the database, means any information about a cemetery beyond the inscriptions, from a few scribbled notes on the location or condition of a single cemetery to a book on whole town. The descriptions provide a snapshot of the cemetery in its setting at a particular moment in history.

First, one looks for clues to its history: how and when the cemetery came into being, whether it was a family lot, a church or neighborhood burial ground. At the same time one checks for physical description of the site and its location. Is there a stone wall? Is it on a hill? In a pasture? Dated descriptions give us an idea of whether the cemetery was then in active use or mention that cemeteries have been abandoned or the graves moved.

The descriptions can be vital clues in discovering lost cemeteries. Cemeteries get "lost" in many ways. They are abandoned by the families who once maintained them. They become so covered with brambles and brush as to become invisible. Burial grounds are renamed. The streets around them are renamed. Worse still, individual graves and even whole cemeteries are moved to suit the needs of the period. Without understanding

² Available from VOCA, RR 1 Box 10, Bradford VT 05033.

³ Through Picton Press

where a cemetery was located and the natural order of gravestones, we lose much important genealogical information.

Where does one find these descriptions? Most transcribers noted the location of the cemetery in a few brief phrases at the top of their transcription, though these notes tend to the telegraphic. Sometimes you will find transcriptions that are not even worth entering—they are partial, undated, anonymous—but they may have a clue that solves the whole mystery of where the cemetery used to be. A book or article devoted exclusively to one town's cemeteries is unusual, though not unknown, and commonly involves towns of noted historical interest. Examples are H. T. Tuckerman's article "The Graves at Newport" in *Harper's Magazine* (1869), or Robert Franklin's "Newport Cemeteries" in *Newport Historical Society Special Bulletin*, No. 10 (1913). Cemetery descriptions may also be published as part of a history of the religious group with which it is connected, as in Morris Gutstein's *The Story of the Jews at Newport* (1936). Recently there have been many fine books on Catholic cemeteries in Bristol County, Mass.

A broader source is old town and county histories. These can be found in the local history section of town libraries, historical societies, and university libraries. Victorian town and county historians rarely missed the chance to describe in poetic detail at least the more important cemeteries where cherished forefathers now slept. One thinks of town histories such as Thomas W. Bicknell's *A History of Barrington, Rhode Island* (1898), or John Daggett's *History of Attleborough*. Classic examples of county histories are cited in your handout. County histories often are the best source for small, rural towns that never seemed important enough for their own individual history. Although these enormous books frequently have no index, the table of contents includes detailed listing for each chapter, and cemeteries usually come after other civic improvements, like banks, libraries, post offices, and social organizations.

A final source of cemetery descriptions is available in gravestone studies, a field of scholarship that developed in the wake of Harriet Merrifield Forbes' *Gravestones of Early New England and the Men Who Made Them* (1927). The Association for Gravestone Studies, publishes a newsletter, a scholarly journal, and series of regional guides to cemeteries.^[4] Although the focus is on gravestones and carvers, these publications include many interesting details and photographs to add to the data.

Maps

The next step is to pin down exactly where the cemeteries were located to see whether they were described under a different name or whether they are in fact lost. To make sense of the collected descriptions, you have to compare three types of maps: Victorian maps that show all property owners' names, a United States Geological Survey map of the town for useful landscape features, and a good modern road map for correct current street names.

At first glance the location details provided by the transcriber or Victorian historian might seem hopelessly vague. The author will note that a lot is in Mr. X's field, so many feet behind the house, perhaps throwing in the nearest street. He might mention a school, a church, a windmill, or a road to another town, none of which, even if still in existence, bears the same name.

⁴ 278 Main St., Suite 207, Greenfield MA 01301.

At this point you turn to the wealth of **Victorian maps** available in historical societies and libraries. You can buy some at map centers.^[5] Victorian mapmakers, such as Beers, Wallings, Everett, and Richards, were extremely precise in labeling each person's land and the site of houses and other buildings, sometimes for insurance purposes. Although they only marked the biggest cemeteries in a town, there is usually enough detail to pinpoint the likely site of missing lots. Except in the uncommon cases where the map was made in the same year as the description, one will probably have to compare several different maps to find the owner named and even then it may be actually his heir.

Beyond the owner's name, old cemetery descriptions contain casual mention of physical features, such as streams, ponds, hills, bridges, stone walls, the sea, etc. Here is where a **United States Geological Survey map** comes in. Depending on the state and the date the survey was done, the map may have a dotted rectangle marking the cemetery. More likely, however, one is able only to narrow the search area further by comparing the old map with the USGS map. Although at a comfortable desk this narrowing may seem unimportant, transcribers faced with a field of brambles and poison ivy will be delighted to know where to look first.

Transcriptions

While researching the descriptive material about cemeteries, one should also be building a bibliography of transcriptions, noting who copied the inscriptions, when they did it, and where their material is located. There are an amazing number of transcriptions to be found. Recording gravestones has been a popular pastime in America at least since Ezra Stiles copied a few inscriptions in the 1760s, though the Victorians with their patriotism and love of the picturesque indulged in this hobby with enthusiastic intensity. You can find a list of a few important names in the handout.

Most transcribers The isolation shows also in the lack of any standard methodology. Some copied every word on each stone, while others compiled lists of names and dates. Some unfortunately alphabetized the names, rendering an index unnecessary but destroying the natural order so important as a genealogical clue. Faced with a forest of gravestones, most transcribers limited their copying to stones before a certain date, arbitrarily chosen to suit their own preferences. Deacon Edgar Reed and Ira Peck, for example, only recorded gravestones earlier than 1800; Charles M. Thatcher, 1850; Marian Pearce Carter, 1900. Frederic Denison left out children. Alden G. Beaman in his *Rhode Island Genealogical Register* presented only stones of couples, one of whom was born by 1850, leaving out children and unmarried people. These differences show why it is so important to have a rich variety of transcriptions.

Where are their transcriptions? Mostly in libraries and historical societies. Town and county histories frequently contain a few inscriptions from the gravestones of the more important citizens in older cemeteries. Genealogies sometimes include information on early family plots, often with transcriptions of selected gravestones; in some rare cases, one finds all relevant material, such as in Rev. John Cornell's *Genealogy of the Cornell Family*, 1902 which has a history of the Cornell burial ground (Portsmouth, RI Historic Cemetery #36), a full transcription, and a photograph. While generally skimpy, such records sometimes give stones mentioned by no other source. Fuller transcriptions

⁵ The Map Center, 671 No. Main St., Providence, RI (401/421-2184) for example.

have been published either as books or as articles in newspapers or even on the Internet, or in journals such as *NEHG Register* or *Mayflower Descendant*. A useful source for browsing at home is the Heritage Books catalogue: Heritage offers reprints of many old journals and lists the contents in its catalogue. It also offers reprints of older transcriptions as well as new ones. Although some transcriptions have been published, many more remain in manuscript or typescript, usually in local libraries and historical societies or in research libraries like New England Historic Genealogical Society Library in Boston or the Rhode Island Historical Society in Providence or the Old Colony Historical Society in Taunton, MA.

Checking the catalogue can be a long process because most transcriptions are not indexed under the cemetery name, but under the town name with the heading “cemetaries,” “grave-yards,” “epitaphs,” “inscriptions,” “burial grounds,” and “burying places.” The correct modern reference is “monumental inscriptions,” but many smaller, non-computerized institutions retain the old headings. Remember to check under surrounding towns as well. A cemetery may have been misplaced in another town by the Victorian hobbyist who copied it; because of border changes, it may genuinely have been in another town in 1850 or whenever it was recorded. It would be easy to imagine that Deacon Edgar Reed’s ms at Old Colony Historical Society, “Inscriptions from the Burying Grounds in Ancient Taunton,” covered only the modern city Taunton, Mass. unless one knew that it had originally been a larger town that included many surrounding towns.

Other mortality records

Other mortality records are highly useful for checking on hard-to-read stones. Town and church death records, as well as probate records, come immediately to mind, but there are also diaries kept by men who noted every death (e.g., Elisha Fish, “Nailer Tom” Hazard, Samuel Tillinghast, Daniel Stedman in Rhode Island). Craftsmen in the funeral industry, such as coffinmakers, coffinplate makers, gravestone carvers, and undertakers, all kept records, some of which have survived for different towns in different years. While these records can resolve discrepancies between transcriptions and provide an occasional interesting note, we don’t routinely include them. They are more appropriate to a genealogy than a cemetery database.

At some point one moves from collecting bibliographic references to entering transcriptions in the database. Then you quickly notice differences between transcribers that go beyond methodology to accuracy. Faced with identical gravestones each individual records slightly different data which ranges from 50% to 95% correct. It takes just a minute to come up with a laundry list of reasons. We picture our ancestors’ resting places as looking like this [Newell Cemetery], beautiful, peaceful, well-kept over hundreds of years. It may look like this: [shattered stones] or this: [overgrown cemetery]. We imagine the gravestones as neatly cut, upright, handsome memorials [easy to read 1, 2]. They may look like this: [hard to read 1, hard to read 2] or worse yet [broken stone]. If they are marble, the stone may be fine, but the inscription so blurred as to be absolutely illegible. What we hope is that the early recorders saw the burial grounds in a more pristine state, but certainly in Attleboro (and I suspect this fairly widely true) colonial cemeteries were actually in worse condition in the 19th century than they are now.

If you have ever tried to record gravestones, you will know there are plenty of human factors as well: it’s too hot, it’s too cold, it’s windy, it’s starting to rain, it’s get-

ting dark, you run out of paper or lose your pen, you are hungry, you need to make a pit stop, you are being eaten alive by mosquitoes, drunks are hanging around pestering you with questions.

Beyond these physical problems, there are more fundamental issues. Some people have a better training with old-fashioning lettering. Some people just have better instinctive pattern recognition. John Sterling has this, finely honed by years of looking at stones. Laurie Carpenter, who has been recording Newell Cemetery in Attleboro, has this. I'm OK, but I don't have the same eye.

Some of the very worst transcriptions may simply have to be discarded. If variations are noted in the database, people who use this material to check the actual stones can resolve the discrepancies and innocent users of the database before that happens will be given fair warning.

Conclusion: Setting up a town is fun if you love detective stories: finding clues, figuring out the answer. Here are some examples from the town where I grew up—Newport.

Graves Point Cemetery in Newport

The first involves a story of two men lost at sea, not once but twice. When setting up Newport, I read every old description I could find of the town. One of them was H. T. Tuckerman's article "The Graves at Newport" in *Harper's Magazine* (August, 1869, p. 372). It mentioned the "graves of shipwrecked sailors near Brenton Reef," but gave no clue as to the exact location or number. Then I found a tiny in George H. Richardson's transcription (also names) at Newport Historical Society Library, then looked the G.M. Hopkins' *City Atlas of Newport, RI* (1876) to figure out where on Ocean Drive it was. It showed a "Graves Pt." east of the intersection of Brenton Point and Ocean Drive, just east of Black Rock. Here is another Victorian map. Modern road maps show that it is gone, just as surely as the clam house shown on Richardson's map. The sea took them back.

Another fascinating puzzle in Newport was the **Moravian Cemetery**, now NT 25. Where is that? Well, that's just the point. Tuckerman's article "The Graves at Newport" has the following description: "Thus, in the Schoolhouse Yard, on Church Street two or three up-right gravestones hidden amidst bushes and weeds mark the site of the Moravian Church, since converted into an Episcopal chapel --- the sect having died out in the place" (p.373). Using my maps and histories, I realized that the church and cemetery had been on the site of Kay Chapel, where I spent many a long, long Sunday as a child.

I turned to Arnold's *Vital Record of RI* to get a list of deaths in this church and searched the database. Some of the names showed up in the Common Burial Ground.

Later I found an article in the *Newport Mercury* of Nov. 11, 1882 about the moving of the remains: "At the time the property was sold, [they] were removed by the late James A. Greene, and Samuel Engs, Esq. And were interred in the 'Common Burial Ground' in the family lot of John and Samuel I Greene." It named the individuals moved, but only gave three with full inscriptions. A white marble monument explaining the removal was erected, but it has never been transcribed.

SOME FEATURES TO KEEP IN MIND

Use the index to find people in unexpected places.

When you are researching a family in depth, you can easily find many graves in their main town or the ones around it. What about the people who are not buried there? Well, many of them may not have had gravestones...or they went to New York or Pennsylvania or Indiana. These are very common occurrences that you, the researcher, can do nothing about. However, you can use the database to pick up information on people who were buried away from home in Rhode Island for some reason.

My favorite example is John Rice, firstborn son of Randall and Dinah (Greene) Rice of Warwick. I knew his birth date from Arnold—19 Mar. 1736— but nothing more. I checked the index for all Rices and found John Rice, son of Randall and Dinah, in Newport, buried at Coasters Harbor Island, where the Naval War College is now located. He died 2 Jan. 1758 in his 22nd year. The description for this cemetery tells us that it was used for burials at the small pox asylum on the island. From this information we know *where* he died, *when* he died, and *how* he died. Everyone who uses the database intensively ends up with wonderful surprises like this. People who aren't genealogists might not find such discovery wonderful, but we do.

Natural order—what's so great about that?

Remember when your parents gave you annoying lectures about being known by the company you keep? Later you found out maybe there was something to it? (Well, look at us.) What's true for the quick is also true for the dead. By and large, people are buried beside their closest relatives.

This is really great if you are trying to pin people down, for example to decide whether the Sarah Gorton who married Capt. Israel Bowen in Coventry 5 Apr. 1761 was the same Sarah Gorton, daughter of Samuel and Mary (Rice) Gorton born at Warwick 10 Sept. 1739. The age looks good, but Sarah Gorton was a pretty common name after all. When you search for her stone, you find that Sarah and Isaac are buried side by side in Coventry #102. Her birth year is calculated as 1739. Great, but...Wait a minute, her stone says that she was the daughter of Samuel Gorton of Warwick. Bingo! The fact that her sister Elnathan and her husband Aaron Bowen (yes, he was Isaac's brother) are buried beside them is just icing on the cake.

Here's a somewhat more complex example. One of the Rices I have been researching is Nathan Rice, son of John Rice Jr. of Warwick. I knew that his will was proved at Warwick in 1800 and that he had married Sarah Spencer, daughter of Peleg and Elizabeth Spencer of East Greenwich. He wasn't in the index, alas. However, being complusive and curious I checked all the Rice entries to see who was buried in Warwick. In cemetery #84 I found a daughter "Elez. Rice, daughter of N. Rice." Looking over that cemetery on the computer I noticed stones marked "NR" for someone who died in 1800 at 96 years and 2 months, also "SR" for someone who died in 1783 at age 74. Both the initials and the birth years calculated from the dates at death lined up.

I was thrilled until I realized that Alden Beaman had written that Sarah married someone else after 1755, based on the fact that her father mentioned daughter Sarah Pierce in his will. Emboldened by the gravestone evidence (which was after all mighty

flimsy), I sent a trusty native guide to check the original will. John Sterling found that the original will said in shaky handwriting *Sarah Rice*, not *Sarah Pierce*.

One more point, when I went to the cemetery myself, it turned out that there was another gravestone for one of their sons that had been missed when the cemetery was checked. This is a rare occurrence, but it can happen.

The point of this story is not so much that mistakes happen, but that with small family cemeteries you want to take a good look at everyone buried there. There was some reason why they are there. I have found, for example, many children whose births never made it in town vital records buried next to their parents, not just babies either but adult, especially spinster daughters. You may make significant discoveries.

Customize search—my favorite tool.

One day when I went to Rhode Island Historical Society, there was an elderly gentleman sitting at the computer checking veterans' records in the town of Cumberland, looking them up screen by screen on browse gravestones. He had a long list of men who served in different wars and was laboriously copying each screen. I showed him how to do a customized search by the war, and within an hour he was walking out with a stack printout to check at home.

My particular favorite use of the custom search field is to find women. You can search by maiden name within a town, much faster than with the MAIDEN NAME feature. Sometimes I get desperate to figure out what happened to a daughter. I might have a birth record in Arnold but no other clue. I have been known to go through all Sarahs born in a 25 year period, but that's painful.

My greatest joy with this tool was finding Elvira Bowen, daughter of Wheaton and Sarah Bowen of Warren and Rehoboth. I knew she had married Royal Packard of Providence in 1825, but couldn't find out any more about her. In desperation I turned to CUSTOMIZE SEARCH and filled in only the field for first name. The only Elvira of the right birth year was Elvira Anthony in North Burial Ground, Providence. When I looked up the entry, I found that she was named on her stone as wife, first, of Royal T. Packard and, secondly, William A. Anthony. Not only that, but Royal Packard and several of her children found each marriage are buried beside her.