

THE OLD BURYING GROUND

IN the settlement of early towns provision for a burying ground was of necessity among the first requirements. Custom and convenience had it situated close by the church and this convention was observed here in Jaffrey.

The original grant of the township—at first called Middle Monadnock No. 2—was made in 1749 and among the stipulations was “that a good Convenient Meeting House be Built . . . as near the Center of the Town . . . and Ten Acres of Land reserved for Publick Uses.” The Burying Ground qualified as such a use and so too the Common for military training and reviews. Later, a petition to the Township proprietors noted that before incorporation in 1773 a burying place had been reserved on the Common “. . . and some persons interred there.”

The Town History mentions Captain John Groat who died in 1771. He is said to have been the first permanent settler in what is now Jaffrey, having arrived in 1758. According to local legend he was laid to rest on the spot over which the Meeting-house was raised four years later.

The present form of the Burying Ground reflects the work of a committee appointed by the Town in 1784. Of the four members, three—**Roger Gilmore** (A), **Daniel Emery** (B) and **Adonijah Howe** (C)—are buried within. No trace remains of the earliest gravesites, but at least eight marked graves pre-date the laying out of 1784, the oldest being that of **Mrs. Jaen Harper** (D) who died in 1777.

The claim favoring Captain Groat as the Town’s first resident is not without challenge as **John Davidson** (E) is recorded as settling in August of 1753 (or 1749 if a complicated technicality involving altered township lines is overlooked). Certainly of the earliest settlers Davidson is one of the few who is without question buried here and whose headstone survives to the present.

His eldest daughter, Betsey Davidson, is referred to in some sources as the first white child born in Jaffrey. On the other hand, Simon Stickney is sometimes accorded similar status, while his younger brother, **Moses Stickney** (F), who was born in Boxford, Massachusetts, has carved on his

headstone, *He was the first child who trod the wilds of Jaffrey.*

Captain Samuel Adams (G) of neighboring Rindge, under contract to the Town, oversaw the building of the Meetinghouse. It was erected in 1775 on the day of the Battle of Bunker Hill, and it is often related that the far-off rumble of the cannon could be heard by the laboring townfolk. The Jaffrey contingent at the Battle numbered thirteen—an impressive turnout for so small a community—of which at least one lies here, **Lieutenant Jacob Pierce** (H).

Veterans of other conflicts may be found within. No fewer than sixty marked graves are of those who fought for Independence during 1775-1781; and unmarked graves may hold more still. At least five Civil War veterans and several who served more recently, in the World Wars and in Viet Nam, are likewise resting here.

The Pastors of the Congregational Church preached first at the Meetinghouse and after 1831 a few steps away at the brick church. Three have followed the many they themselves had buried, the most revered being **Laban Ainsworth** (I), the first permanent minister of the Town. His Jaffrey ministry spanned nearly seventy-seven years—a period of Christian service that must stand out as unique—and he died in his 101st year. Only in the most recent of times, and only once, has a person of greater age been interred here.

It was The Reverend Ainsworth who composed the inscription on the headstone marking the grave of **Amos Fortune** (J). The epitaph admirably and succinctly sums up the man:

*. . . AMOS FORTUNE, who was
born free in Africa, a slave in
America, he purchased liberty,
Professed Christianity, lived
Reputably, and died hopefully.*

Amos Fortune lived to age 91, having been born, it is thought, in 1710, a birth date shared with **Mrs. Mary Wright** (K). None whose resting places are marked were born earlier.

Hannah Davis (L), affectionately called Aunt Hannah, was well known in the region in the early 1800s, and she remains so today amongst collectors of antiques. She devised and manufactured wooden band boxes, the colorful but sturdy trunk and satchel of those days, a receptacle dear to the feminine heart. Upon her wagon loaded high with wares she would make the rounds of Lowell and Manchester where the young mill girls proved eager customers. Many examples of her handiwork are in local collections including that of the Village Improvement Society in nearby Melville Academy. Aunt Hannah is buried alongside her mother.

The grave in the shaded southwest corner of the Burying Ground is perhaps the one most visited. Here lies **Willa Cather** (M), so long a prominent figure in America's literary life, author of *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, extoller of western prairie values and sometime Jaffrey resident. She first came here in 1917 to visit friends and returned each summer or fall during the ensuing twenty years, staying high up in a dormer room in the old Shattuck Inn. Her Pulitzer Prize novel, *One of Ours*, made use of the wartime diary of the local doctor, Frederick Sweeney. Alfred Kazin said of her: "As an indigenous and finished craftsman, she seemed so native, and in her own way so complete, that she restored confidence to the novel in America." Close by her is buried **Edith Lewis** (N), her companion and confidante for so many years.

At another corner of the Burying Ground lies **Talcott Parsons** (O), for upwards of fifty years a member of the Harvard faculty and founder of the Department of Social Relations. He was one of sociology's great pioneering theorists.

Interesting headstones are scattered here and there, made interesting by design or motif, circumstance or epitaph. That of **Sarah Averill** (P), who died at 89 years of age, nearly always elicits a chuckle. Her epitaph reads: *She done all she could.* **Isaac Stratton**'s marker (Q) has a suggestive air to it. Could he have been a "Forty-Niner" seeking his fortune in the goldfields? His headstone reports his drowning at Yuba River, California, in 1853. Of artistic interest is the rough yet charming memorial sculpted by Count Viggo Brandt-Erichsen for his wife, **Dorothy Caldwell**, and their infant daughter (R). Miss Caldwell's bas-relief face is at top with scenes of the Ascension depicted below. He was the sculptor, as well, of the War Memorial by the Town Offices.

Epitaphs abound and clearly the sentiments expressed have followed distinct fashions over the years. The most ubiquitous in one or another version has occurred throughout the English-speaking world for centuries and is said to have had its origin in lines appearing on the tomb in Canterbury Cathedral of Edward the Black Prince (died 1376):

*Behold my friends as you pass by
As you are now so once was I
As I am now, so you must be
Prepare for death and follow me.*

Designs and motifs followed fashion, too. The winged death's head representation common on early Puritan headstones had been eclipsed by the more humane cherub face by the time Jaffrey was first settled. A few such faces may be found by the diligent searcher: **Moses** and **Isaac Spofford** (S), **Sarah Howe** (T), **Oliver Bacon** (U) and a particularly pleasing one on the headstone of **Jaen Harper** (D), whose death in 1777 is the earliest here documented.

The cherub, in turn, gave way to the urn and willow tree motif which was immensely popular in the early 1880s. Nearly half of the stones here display either the urn or the willow or, usually, both. The earliest is dated 1783; the latest, 1871. The symbolism of the urn and willow "was borrowed from neo-classicism and the taste for Roman archeology that became the vogue in art and architecture in 18th century England and Europe ... The rise of the motif in New England was the result of significant changes in the attitude toward nature as well as toward death." The urn depicts the repository for earthly remains while the willow is symbolic of mourning.

Most of the early headstones are of slate or a similar form of schist. Marble later became stylish but is now little used because of its susceptibility to weathering and pollution. Headstones of granite, solid but hard to carve, are mostly of this century. Fashionable in recent years have been rough fieldstone markers and the occasional modern slate headstone inspired by those of the past.

The large mounded crypt at the west edge of the Burying Ground is the **Town Tomb** (V), built in 1800. Until recent times those who had died during the winter months were placed here until spring softened the ground

allowing proper burial.

One might suppose that the hard winters would have taken a greater toll than other seasons, but over the years deaths seem to be pretty evenly distributed by month. October offers an exception, however, with substantially more deaths than other months. November, April and May have seen the fewest.

The Burying Ground is principally of the 19th century: Of the nearly 900 marked graves, upwards of 800 are of that century, 38 of the 18th century and the remainder of the 20th. The peak decade in terms of death date is 1840-1849, with an increase in every decade up to that time and a corresponding decrease after until the 1930s. In only 30 of its over 200 years of history has the Burying Ground witnessed no burials, 22 of these being in the present century.

Statistics of a grim sort perhaps, but they say a lot about Jaffrey and about this Burying Ground. Not only do these stones tell of growth and decline, war and sickness, they also speak of joy and sorrow, hope and resignation. Martin Booth, an English poet, recently visited here and wandered past these markers and memorials. The presence of the place is reflected in his poem *Grave Faces*:

suddenly, they seemed to show
themselves, like children playing
in a copse of
trees: the
breeze stirred leafy
in the full, green maples and
the mountain ash and
the dappling light, sheer
off Monadnock, caught
their brows
and cheeks

mostly in dark gray slabs of
stone, the bare
earthbones of the
mountains thereabouts, someone
had carved the
epitaphs and topped

them off with face, innocent as
babies', primitive as a
clown

some glowered down
upon the scant, scorched
grass: some looked
up, wore a
ring of wings about
their ears: others saw
the place as
sad—and yet others of
this stony host verged
upon a smile to lighten
the gloom of ground, tree
shade and sepulchre

each was oval, egg-like
simple in every
way (—the grain of
stone, the colour,
the uniform of carvings upon
headstones—) save
in emotion

never have such
faces shown such
love, hate, fun or
mockery; reflected the
fates of the settlers sown
below
the visages caught at
me, took my breath
away

the rest of that
day they followed me eighty
miles north across New
Hampshire and,
that night, try as I might,

they would not
quit me

the town—the grave
faces of Jaffrey
have me

© Martin Booth

This Burying Ground is a place of beauty and repose: please treat it with respect. Many of the stones and markers are very old and in a delicate state. They should not be sat or climbed upon or otherwise abused. Stone rubbers should exercise care while practicing their craft.

Written and made by Robert B. Stephenson, 1981-82.

Later revision:

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