



## Fairfield Museum

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## Museum Education Docent Guide V: The Old Burying Ground

### Introduction: Puritan Beliefs & Death

In the 16th century Puritans was the name given to the reformers within the Church of England who thought the English Reformation had not gone far enough in changing the doctrines and structure of the church. They wanted to purify their national church by eliminating every shred of Catholic influence and emphasize Protestant ideals of simplicity, individual responsibility and predestination. In the 17th century many Puritans immigrated to the New World, where they sought to found a holy commonwealth in New England. Puritanism and its heritage was a dominant cultural force in New England into the 19th century.



Puritans, in keeping with their rejection of papal influences, chose burying grounds away from the meeting house, not associated with any specific church. Early Puritans rejected churchyard burials as they rebelled against other "papist" practices, as heretical and idolatrous. Instead, many 17th century New England towns set aside land as common community burial grounds. Typically the cemetery was a plot of land not suitable for farming.

Early colonists did not have the time or money for elaborate gravestones. Later this changed as burial rituals became more elaborate and one of the few times that Puritans could "indulge" in image making (in the form of headstones) and rich symbolism (through mourning rings, processions, gloves and a feast). (Ludwig, page 58). Many of the early markers were made of wood and deteriorated over time. Most people were buried with their feet facing east, so that on Judgment Day, they would rise up, face the rising sun and meet their Judgment. Tombstones were purchased in pairs and placed at the head (headstone) and feet (footstone). Inscriptions were carved into the back of the headstone so they might be easily viewed. The footstone received less attention, and was usually left blank or carved with an individual's initials. Ornamentation on a gravestone was not only a way for the carver to express his own artistry, but also a tool for teaching a lesson or Biblical inscription.



An example of a footstone leaning up against the headstone in the Old Burying Ground, Fairfield, CT.

The New England Puritans feared death for three reasons: they were convinced of their own depravity; of the "omnipotence, justness, and inscrutability of God"; and of the horrors of hell. (Stannard) Although Puritan imagery on grave markers appears morbid, symbols such as skulls represented the natural cycle of life and the closeness of death. They were reminders for the living that death was always near; thus it was essential to live in accordance with God's word. Headstone images from this period also reflect the rejection of formal Christian iconography, such as crosses, in favor of more secular images, such as skulls representing fate common to all men (National Park Service).

## Burial Rituals

Over time, Puritan funerals became increasingly elaborate and expensive. Some attribute this to the death of Governor John Winthrop who died on March 26, 1649 at the age of 61. After his wife of 30 years passed away, he had recently married Martha Cotymore and they were expecting a child. His funeral was declared a public holiday to recognize his work as governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and his impact on Puritan New England through his writings and leadership. He is buried in King's Chapel Burying Ground in Boston, Massachusetts, the oldest cemetery in the city.

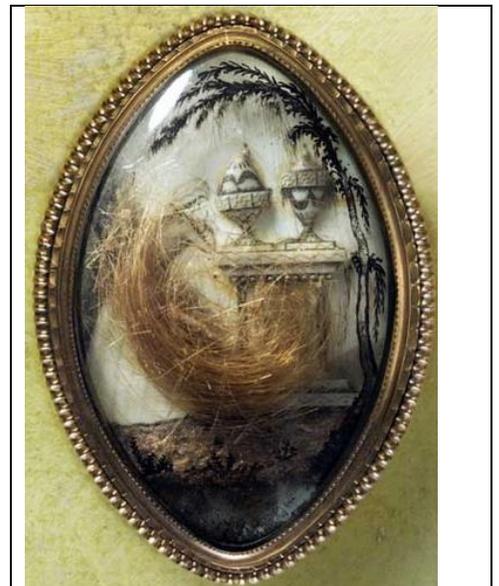
By the end of the 1650s large gatherings of people attended funerals and afterwards appeared at the deceased's home for meals that incorporated social drinking and eating. The short burial prayers of early Puritan tradition turned into a longer ceremony; including eulogies, reciting of prayers, and the occasional psalm.

The dead were usually buried within a few days, since the body was often not embalmed. The body was washed, dressed and laid out either at home or at the meetinghouse. Prayers occurred at the meetinghouse and at the burial site. The burial procession was a grand affair with horses bedecked in "crape," often decorated with symbolism similar to the gravestones. The family walked in front of the hearse and coffin, and others followed behind: mourners wore their gloves as well as mourning ribbons and scarves (Stannard).

The horses pulling the coffin were often draped with cloth painted with the 'scutcheons' of death, probably winged death's heads, crossed bones, picks and shovels, imps of death and coffins ... The mourners were equally resplendent. Many of them wore long black 'Mourning Cloaks' with large white scarfs around their necks, and 'good gloves' on their hands. Often gold rings were worn under the gloves (Ludwig 60).

Invitations to the funeral were accompanied by a gift of gloves: Andrew Eliot, the minister of north Church in Boston, collected close to three thousand gloves over time (the Boston Eliot is the father of Fairfield's Reverend Andrew Eliot, who was born in Boston on January 11, 1743). Gloves were a sign of gentility in Puritan society and were often included in portraits such as that of John Winthrop (1640) and John Freake (1671 and 1674). Gloves also marked a physical barrier between the living and the dead.

Coffins were decorated with funerary verses composed for the deceased, and were often distributed in broadside form at major expense. These verses ... emphasized the presence of divine Grace in the lives of dead and hence reassured the mourners that the deceased was among the saved. The broadsides were often illustrated with iconography similar to that of gravestones with death's heads, scythes, hourglasses, and the like. These icons warned the mourner of the



A weeping woman, two funeral urns, and locks of hair memorialize Mann Page and Anne Corbin Page of Virginia. The gold mourning brooch, with 1792 and the maker's name, "Ro Webb," a Philadelphia jeweler, at the bottom of the glass cover could be worn as pin or pendant. Source: Colonial Williamsburg

passage of time and helped prepare him for his own meeting with death. Funerary sermons were given either at the time of burial or a few days afterwards. (Liebman)

After the coffin was placed in the ground, a feast was held at the church or home. Mourning rings became popular, to remind the living of the deceased and were distributed before or after the ceremony. All these rites helped the mourner envision the deceased as part of a new community and partaking in a new eternal life that, one day, the mourner himself would ideally join.

These rituals and accoutrements became increasingly excessive and costly. In 1723, “it cost as much as 100 pounds for a not immoderate burial in Boston” (Ludwig, 59). In comparison, a Boston schoolmaster named Ames Angier was paid 100 pounds for a year’s work in 1720 (Ibid). This pomp and circumstance amongst the usually genteel Puritan folk caused the colony to pass laws “prohibiting the giving of scarfs, gloves, wine and rum, and rings at funerals.” However, “the law did little to curb the Puritan’s desire to leave this world with fanfare and ritual” (Ludwig 60).

Samuel Sewell, 1652–1730, a prominent Boston judge and diarist, noted the following expenses for the funeral of Bridget Usher,<sup>151</sup>

June 5	To James Williams, Pass. Bells. & c	1	8	6
	To Michael Haverblaton (?) & Compy, Porters	2	15	0
June 10	To John Blake, for three Coaches to Braintree, in service of the Funeral, May 30	3	15	0
June 11	To Elisa. Hatch to 12 Duz. Gloves at 4s	28	16	0
June 12	To Mr. John Edwards, 23 rings	23	2	0
June 15	To Nathaniel Morse, Madm. Grove’s Ring. 2p. wht. 18 grains	1	13	0
June 15	To Aema Salter, service for the funeral		6	
June 17	To William Pain, for the Coffin	3	0	0
June 26	To John Marshall of Braintree for the Grave and Monument	24	10	0
July 6	To Jno. Clark Esq. Embowelling and Ceros	4	0	0
July 11	To Printer Green, for inserting the Advert, three weeks succesively, and 3N Letters		5	9
July 16	To Col Checkley, Recording her Death and Burial		1	0
Aug. 9	To S. Kneeland, printing Mr. Foxcroft’s Sermon, 4½ sheets	4	12	0
Sept. 20	Paid Mr. Edward Bromfield, Junr. particulars out of his shop, for the last sute		17	
Jan 20	To Mr. Samuel Gerrish, for paper to print Mr. Foxcroft’s Sermon. 4 Reams, 4 quires	4	90	0
	folding and stitching 500	4	0	0

Twenty-four pounds for the grave and monument were spent. This was not often the case. Gravestones ranged in price from simple stones at a few pounds to elaborate tombstones at over £40.<sup>152</sup> More usual would be an expense between £3 and £10 outside the urban centers. Nevertheless funerals were neither inexpensive nor simple in ritual as the list of expenditures makes clear. For the 1720’s over £100 was a lot of money to spend on death.

Source: Ludwig, page 61



## Fairfield's Old Burying Ground

According to a historic survey in the Fairfield Museum's library (vertical file), Fairfield's Old Burying Ground is the "oldest cemetery in Fairfield," speculating that it was laid out in 1685. This does not answer the question of where Fairfielders were buried between 1639 and 1685. We can only make educated guesses, speculating that the cemetery was laid out earlier than 1685, or that people were buried on their land before then. The oldest legible stone is dated 1687 and bears the initials S.M., probably for Samuel Morehouse.

In 1896, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) cleaned up the cemetery to preserve the gravestones that had started to show the effect of time. Unfortunately, some of the gravestones that were temporarily propped against the wall did not make it back to their designated spot. Many graves were "rearranged," so today's location may not necessarily indicate their original burying spot. Even the outline of the entire cemetery is in question. Many people ask about the small, unmarked portion of land towards the southern corner. This area may have been for slaves or servants, or perhaps some of the early sites whose wooden markers deteriorated. The gravestones in the Old Burying Ground give us a clear picture of how death was perceived in the early centuries of Fairfield and New England by its residents.

### Preservation Efforts

Many people ask about the preservation of the Old Burying Ground. Over the years, many groups and individuals have helped to save some of the stones, document the stones and clean up the cemetery. The DAR refurbished some of the headstones in 1974. In 2003, a team of Eagle Scouts created a project to survey and document the stone inscriptions. The binders of this work are located in the Fairfield Museum's library collections (929.5 F357d). Melanie Marks, historic house researcher, has also led efforts to clean up the cemetery and conduct additional research on the gravestone makers (see below).

## ICONOGRAPHY

### Early Iconography - *Death's Head*

The winged death's head was the first gravestone design of the colonies (Deetz 69). The death's head stressed inescapable mortality providing "earthly and neutral symbol, serving as a graphic reminder of death and resurrection (71)." Puritans did not depict images of spiritual beings, so there were no portrayals of angels, cherubs, God, or Jesus. Most of the time, the death's head had wings or bones. The style varied based on the carver.

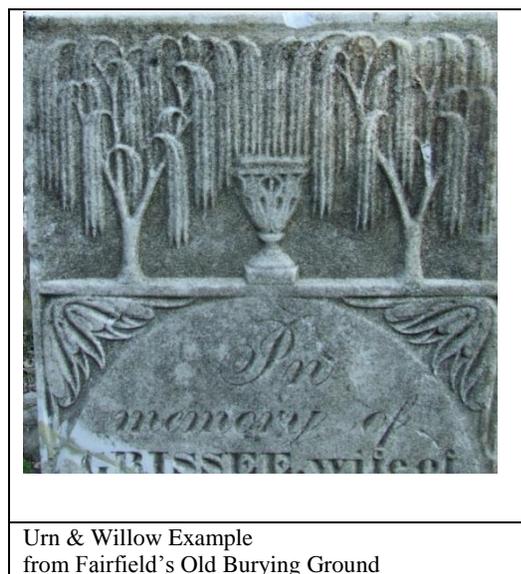


1700's: The Great Awakening  
– Cherubs and Winged Angels

The Great Awakening swept the English-speaking world, as religious energy vibrated between England, Wales, Scotland and the American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s. In America, the Awakening signaled the advent of an encompassing evangelicalism--the belief that the essence of religious experience was the "new birth," inspired by the preaching of the Word. It invigorated even as it divided churches. The supporters of the Awakening and its evangelical thrust--Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists--became the largest American Protestant denominations by the first decades of the nineteenth century. Opponents of the Awakening or those split by it--Anglicans, Quakers, and Congregationalists--were left behind (Library of Congress).

The Awakening brought forth several major changes related to funeral practice; an increase in religious enthusiasm, a shift to seeing death as a welcome release from life's struggles, and eulogies celebrating the individual's life. In the seventeenth century, children were told to fear death. Then attitudes changed and death was seen as a reunion with God. Adults, in turn, were increasingly assured that a life of active piety assured salvation. Death's heads on gravestones gradually were replaced by more pleasant, angelical figures, complete with wings. Tombstones from this period display images of winged cherubs, symbolizing the ascending spirit of the deceased, and reflecting an optimistic view of the afterlife. Inscriptions that earlier began "Here Lyes ye Body of ..." were replaced with "In memory of ..."

Wings and softened features reflected growing belief that there in the promise of resurrection after death. This imagery held a message of resurrection after death. The cherub and the death's head generally appeared around the same time period and started to fade out of fashion around the same time. If the cherub was wearing a crown, this usually symbolized the rewards of heaven.



Early 1800s: Classical Style - Willow & Urn

After the American Revolution, people favored Greek classicism as a symbol of their new democracy. The urn symbolizes the soul and the willow is said to represent the underworld. Another meaning for the willow is to signify mourning as it became more acceptable for those still living to grieve the loss of a loved one.

Grecian urns and lamps of knowledge reflected a national interest in recent archeological discoveries in Greece, and a romantic attitude toward the relationship of God in nature. The reality of death was blunted. Bending weeping willows symbolized mourning and loss. Previous terms such as graveyard or burial ground were replaced by the term "cemetery," a Greek word meaning "sleeping place."

## Gravestone Art Presentation

by Melanie Marks

The spirit of our New England forefathers speaks from their gravestones. Death was the source of their richest rewards and greatest inspiration. A great funeral was a great spectacle for the Puritans. There were no circuses coming to town, no Christmas, no May Day, and no Fourth of July. A good funeral was appreciated by everyone, especially if the wealth and importance of the deceased justified not only the black housing and black stocking upon the horse, but the death head upon their foreheads and glittery armorial decorations upon their flanks.

The deathly trappings of the funeral horses, the pallbearers, embroidered gloves, and the mourners' rings are all gone now. Their gravestones are all that remains today. These gravestones stand shoulder to shoulder in hundreds of New England Graveyards. They are the one unchanged record of the Puritans' reverence for death, and appropriately enough, the most lavish and original of all their artistic endeavors. Their artful gravestones are the only things now remaining which the men and women of more than 300 years ago would recognize were they able to come back to the places that they once knew.

What the totem pole was to the Alaskan Indians, the gravestone was to the first six generations of New Englanders. The Puritans accepted death with such passionate faith in a better world to come that we may believe their fears were quieted. Death was the source of their richest rewards and greatest inspirations. They honored the dead and taught the living.

The Puritans used coffins, skulls, picks, shovels, and hourglasses in their gravestone art. For those of the 17th and 18th century, these symbols held less dread than for us today because for them, the passing away of the flesh was as much a part of life as birth and the renewal of life after the death of the body. These symbols represented their joys of life to come and an attempt to use symbols to express the unity and beauty of the "invisible world" to which they would be going.

Most 18th and 19th century stone carvers were skilled in other professions and carved gravestones as a side business. It was relatively common for a stone carver to also be a blacksmith, as blacksmithing was a lucrative business and also afforded the stone carver a means to maintain his own tools.

Additionally, stone carvers were known to be masons, plasterers, wood carvers, bricklayers, slaters (who made hearths, steps and furnished slate roofs) and cordwainers (who made and repaired shoes, saddles, chair seats and powder pouches). Almost all of the stone carvers had some other occupation which they followed as industriously as that of stone carver.

One stone carver's work can be distinguished from other stone carvers and they rarely copied each other's work. Their carvings were unique and clearly their own designs. Many owned their own shops and had their own distinct style of carving from the icons they chose to the lettering they used.

The very early stone carvers' gravestones show scarcely any ornamentation. A simple rosette, cross-bones, hourglasses, and a narrow border, usually without relief, was all they attempted. It was not many years before the elaborate high-relief scrolls, garlands of fruit, urns, and flowers succeeded these modest designs. Their expression of the death head, the shape of the hourglass and its wooden frame, the sweep of the wings, the lettering of the inscription, the splayed out nose, and sunken eyes were their unique signature.

When we have learned to recognize these various identification marks, we discover that the work of one man is fairly closely confined to a given locality. This is why you will see many of the same carvers' gravestones in a particular cemetery.



### *Child Life: Fleeting Mortality*

Parenthood in the eighteenth century often included the ordeal of watching one or more of your children die. New England was actually a healthier place to live than the English towns and cities from which the settlers came. Nevertheless, the absence of immunizations, fever-reducing drugs and antibiotics meant that illness claimed the lives of many infants and young children. The religious culture of the period assigned every earthly event a divine cause--if a child died, it was God's will. A Puritan minister acknowledged the terrible and inscrutable power of God over life and death as he mourned in 1724 the deaths of New England's children: "O how unsearchable the Judgements of God, and His Ways past finding out. The lamps but just litt up, and blown out again."

This gravestone marks the final resting-place of John Williams. John was only five years old when he died in 1714. The symbols on his stone were familiar to people in the 1700s and expressed the community's hope for John's Christian salvation. Towns generally did not maintain their burying grounds; the notion of mowing and caring perpetually for park-like cemeteries was not typical of the time. Grass and weeds grew up undisturbed in burying grounds save for the livestock that might graze there. Gravestone art and cemeteries have changed over the centuries, reflecting changing religious and cultural beliefs and attitudes (Memorial Hall Museum).

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First published in 1727 under the title ***Indian Converts, or Some account of the lives and dying speeches of a considerable number of the Christianized Indians of Martha's Vineyard, in New-England,*** Experience Mayhew's history of the Wampanoag Indians on Martha's Vineyard provides a rare look at the lives and culture of four generations of Native Americans in colonial America. Although the book has been out of print since the early nineteenth century, scholars have long recognized its importance for understanding the history of New England's Native communities. In an extensive introduction to this new scholarly edition, Laura Arnold Leibman places Indian Converts in a broader cultural context and explores its significance. She shows how Mayhew's biographies illuminate the theological upheavals that rocked early eighteenth-century New England on the eve of the Great Awakening, shifts that altered not only the character of Puritanism but also the landscape of Wampanoag religious and cultural life.

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See also: ***The Dying Ritual***

[http://public.gettysburg.edu/~tshannon/341/sites/Death%20and%20Mourning/dying\\_ritual.htm](http://public.gettysburg.edu/~tshannon/341/sites/Death%20and%20Mourning/dying_ritual.htm)

Another excellent article online can be found here:

<http://www.kellscraft.com/CustomsFashionsNewEngland/CustomsFashionsNewEnglandCh15.html>