

# Uncovering a bit of buried history

The average cemeteries are not considered top tourist attractions by the general public; they'll never give Disney World nor Yellowstone National Park any serious competition. To most people their existence as final resting places for our dear departed appears as purely utilitarian. However, the many stone memorials standing along their pathways are extremely valuable to historians and geneologists, providing, in some cases, the only "original" records of people, events, and the culture of the past. Without the pyramids of Egypt, (which were royal "cemeteries") our knowledge of that period would be very meager.

Of Chelmsford's several cemeteries, Forefathers Burying Ground behind the First Parish Church, because of its age, gives us the greatest insight into our early history.

Although we have no records to prove it, logic tells us that the very first settlers buried their dead on this slope. No gravestones before 1690 exist, but it was customary to locate the burying ground, as it was then called, on high ground adjacent to the meeting house, which served as both the religious and civic center. (Chelmsford's first meeting house, erected in 1654 or 1655, stood on the site of the present First Parish Church.)

The three oldest identifiable graves are situated close together. Grace Livermoar was interred January 14, 1690. Nearby is Mary Chamberlain, February 8, 1692 and Richard Hildreth, February 23, 1693. All of these markers are remarkably well preserved after nearly three centuries.

Richard Hildreth's was originally just a

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## The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst

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slate slab like the others and faced west, but in 1909 the Hildreth Family Association had it dug up and mounted in granite and, for some reason, turned it around toward the east. While a great deal is known about Hildreth's life, this writer has never been able to find but very little about Grace Livermoar.

Everyone likes to think that they will be remembered after they die. Grace established her niche in history by having a memorial that has outlasted those of many of her contemporaries.

Even a casual stroll among the stones will reveal many interesting facts. For instance, the type of stone used was different during different periods. The plain slate markers of the 17th and 18th centuries, in addition to being durable, readily obtained, and easily cut, typified the intentional austerity of the period. It will be noted that the decorations on the stones followed "fads," stylized flowers at one time, angels, skulls and bones, and human effigies at other.

Early in the 1800's, the popular material changed from slate to white marble and more ornate designs came into style. Gran-

ite became the standard with the dawning of the 20th century. Intricate shapes and ornate designs of the Victorian period gave way to the plainer, but artistically pleasing look that would characterize the new architectural designs. Even a cursory glance at the names reveals the families who lived here at that particular time. The usual lifespan, as well as infant mortality, becomes evident, as do the local professions: military, medical, and ecclesiastical.

Many of the older stones have interesting epitaphs that show both a somber and a humorous vein in our ancestors.

Most of the stones are believed to mark actual gravesites but there are at least two that are purely memorials to men whose gravesites are either elsewhere or are unknown. One was erected to the memory of Rev. Wilson Waters, D.D., Episcopal rector and author of the History of Chelmsford; the other memorializes Rev. John Fiske, Chelmsford's first minister and, incidentally, also our first physician. Rev. Mr. Fiske died January 14, 1676/7 and is believed to have been buried in Forefathers Burying Ground, but the location is not known. The memorial cenotaph was erected by the Fiske family in 1899.

The serious geneologist will find the birth and death dates and spouse's names of greatest interest.

Some people have said they would like to visit the burying ground but lack the background information to fully benefit from what they observe. In view of this, the present writer would be willing to conduct an organized guided tour.

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