

Berkshire Gravestones and their Carvers

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By the 1890's, the Old Dutch and Indian burial ground in West Egremont had become part of George Bradford's farm. To prevent his young stock from tripping over the old gravestones and breaking their legs, Bradford pulled up all the old stones and markers and threw them away. Thus tidied up, the location of this historical burial site, Egremont's first, remained forgotten until 1954, when a gravel operation on what had been Bradford's farm unearthed a skeleton, which made more headlines of *The Berkshire Eagle* on July 1.

Then Ruth Benjamin Sinclair recollected her grandfather, Andrew B. Karner, and Egremont assessor, telling her, as she drove the horse and buggy for him on his rounds of the town, about Bradford's clearing off the cemetery and pointing out where it had been. By the time the skeleton showed up in 1954, the site had been almost totally excavated for gravel. Thus were lost forever, along with the dust and bones of the Indians, the vital statistics and other historical and genealogical information the cemetery had preserved of the Van Guilders, the Karners, the Spoors and other early Dutch settlers of the town.

But even when Bradford made his "improvements," such disturbance of a burial site was against the law in Massachusetts (Chapter 175, Statutes of 1814.) Today old burial grounds are by law (General Laws, Chapter 272 Sec 73A) under the protection of the Massachusetts Historical Commission, which depends heavily on the continuing vigilance of local historical groups in safeguarding this irreplaceable historical resource.

The gravestones of earlier times preserve the "soft" parts of a culture – its mental habits, social relationships, everyday assumptions – that don't show up in buildings, furnishings and writings. Their size, the quality of their execution, their artwork and epitaphs are all revealing to the social historian.

The great amount of marble quarried in Berkshire County suggests there must have been numerous gravestone cutters and carvers active in the county. David Dudley Field in the first *History of Berkshire County* (1829) observes that there are "great quantities of marble scattered over the county. It is now quarried in West Stockbridge and Lanesborough and New Ashford and wrought in most of the towns."

Berkshire marble came in white, brown, blue-gray, dove, ash, striped and variegated and went into constructing such buildings as the Old City Hall in New York, Girard College in Philadelphia, the Customs House in Boston and the State Capitol in Albany. Around West Stockbridge were the Boynton, Fox and Crocker, Hinman and Morgan quarries. In Alford, Sanford Fitch opened a quarry on the western slope of Tom Ball Mountain soon after 1799. Chester Goodale and Phil Upson operated the Goodale White Marble Company in South Egremont in the 1820s and 1830s. In Lanesborough and New Ashford quarries were opened on property of Deacon Elijah Phelps, Able Platt, Bethuel Baker and the Honorable Judge Savage. The Kellogg Quarry in Sheffield was opened in 1804.

Inventorying in Berkshire gravestones has confirmed that gravestone carvers were often associated with these quarry sites. Some of these carvers can be identified by the designs they habitually used, some by references of their work in local histories and some occasionally signed their work. (Although it was considered immodest to sign stones in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the better designs were occasionally signed by 1795. The practice had become quite prevalent by the 1830s and 1840s.)

The earliest known Berkshire carver was Abraham Collins, who lived and operated a quarry on the old road between the Beartown Road and Brett Road in Monterey. He began his trade about 1757 and died March 14, 1816. He carved tombstones with cross-eyed angels or spirit figures. In the Wood Cemetery below Old Center Monterey are several of his angel carvings, each a little different, some with wings extended from the egg-shaped faces, some with closed eyes, some with crossed eyes. His angels are also found in Lee, New Marlborough, Tyringham, Great Barrington, Otis and Sandisfield.

Another design attributed to Collins is a simple Tree of Life, but this may be the work of Oliver Grapen, who took over Collins' business.

A West Stockbridge carver, Andrew Fuory, operated a prosperous quarry, a sawmill and a stonemill on the west side of the Williams River, a little south of Alford Road Bridge off Route 41 in Rockdale, West Stockbridge, beginning in 1810 when he was 18 years old. When he married seven years later he built a large Federal brick house at the corner of Dugway Road. His marble cutting shop and smithy stood directly opposite the house on the bank of the Williams River.

The Stugies of Lee supplied gravestones for most of Southern Berkshire. Thomas and William came to Lee from Sandwich in 1795 and set up stone-yards, Thomas on Cape Street, East Lee, on the banks of Greenwater Pond Brook, and William on the hill road between Lee and East Lee (now Maple Street). Thomas' son Edwin continued the gravestone cutting business in his father's yard, carrying on, even though the yard was severely damaged by the flood of 1886, well into old age. Edwin died in 1901 at 93.

In Pittsfield, Garret Volk had a stone cutting shop on North Street at Fenn, where the Agricultural Bank stands today. His two sons, John and Leonard, learned the art from him. The two known signed stones by John are dated 1816 and 1836 and the subscription "Egremont" on the earlier one suggests he may have worked for a while in that town, possibly for H.J. Joyner or R.P. Brown. According to Gerard Chapman in an "Our Berkshires" column in *The Eagle* for November 1, 1982, the Volks' tombstones were sold in Stockbridge, Pittsfield and Lanesborough as well as in western New York.

Leonard (1828-1895) John's younger brother, (he must have been a great deal younger) worked for him after he set up his own shop. But in 1848 Leonard went to St. Louis to study art. In 1857 he opened a sculpture studio in Chicago and specialized in statues of Lincoln and Douglas, portrait busts and military monuments, one of the leading sculptures of his day.

These seven carvers are the only ones for whom recorded information is known of, but in the two hundred cemeteries and burial grounds in Berkshires 36 carvers have been identified. Further research in manuscript records, account books, newspapers and diaries is needed to uncover more information about them. And systematic photographing of early stones throughout the county is needed as a safeguard, because untraceable gravestones bring very high prices on the New York folk art market.

Acid rain is another threat to the country's marble stones. Some already show deterioration and impaired legibility. While the records and indexes made between 1925 and 1950 by DAR and SAR Chapters and interested genealogists, and more recently by the Massachusetts Historical Commission, are invaluable, still, however, the surface has only been scratched of the large problem of preserving the information of Berkshire's old burial grounds.

What can be done? Local historical societies can actively intervene to protect cemeteries and burial sites. Existing gravestones can be inventoried and all genealogical information, epitaphs and designs collected. Cemeteries can be accurately mapped. The marking of rubbings, which damages frail stones, can be prohibited. Brush can be kept cut back to the cemetery's boundaries. Moving equipment can be handled with greater care to avoid damage. Some simple repairs like raising tilted stones can be made, but anything more complicated, like repairing broken stones, requires a permit from the MHC and, most likely, their professional expertise. The time-honored use of iron bands and clamps to reassemble the pieces of broken stones is unacceptable today, now that there are preferable techniques, such as epoxy cement, of stone conservation.

Vandalism is a perennial problem; the best defense against it is frequent supervision by interested individuals and general upkeep of the burial site. And with widened appreciation of the importance of old cemeteries and the uniqueness of the links to the past which they furnish, we are more likely to be spared any more "improvements" like those Farmer Bradford made in West Egremont.