A Tale of Two Cemeteries: Gravestones as Community Artifacts

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Looking for a way to make the Colonial period in American literature come alive for my students, I stumbled on the idea of using eighteenth-century gravestones that "talked" to students of the twenty-first century. Our community of Wallingford, Connecticut, was first settled in 1670. Families with surnames of Eaton, Moss, Hall, Brockett, Doolittle, and Tuttle made their way north from the New Haven colony to settle lands along the Quinnipiac River. Many descendants of these first settlers currently live in town and countless more are buried in the Center Street Cemetery. This historic burial ground is a rich community resource for students who study early American literature, history, and art. Through a connection with literature, their journey into the study of eighteenth-century gravestone images and epitaphs is a journey into their community, into local history, and, ultimately, into themselves.

Unaccustomed to thinking of a cemetery as a landmark site and gravestones as historical artifacts, students were amazed when they began to study gravestone images and epitaphs for insight into the colonial mind. In their study of genealogy and iconography, students began to understand the connections across time that linked Wallingford to the major movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They began to gain insight into the Puritan mindset that gave rise to the poetry of Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson, the sermons of Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, and the court documents of the Salem witch trials.

In preparing students to study the ethnography of a culture of a particular time and place, I find it useful to bring artifacts to class from an eighteenth-century burial ground other than Wallingford's Center Street Cemetery. In this way, students do not feel that the goldmine of information in *our* cemetery has already been explored through class discussion. Instead, I bring in gravestone rubbings from South Side Cemetery, an old burial ground in York, Maine, and set up a series of "viewing clusters" tacked to the classroom walls. In groups, students wander from cluster to cluster, making initial observations about who the people were, what they valued, where they lived, when they died, and how they were regarded by those who survived them. My classroom viewing clusters replicate the relationship of gravestones *in situ* in the York cemetery. For example, the gravestone of a woman who died at age 42 in 1745 sits next to that of her husband, who died in 1768 at age 69. On the other side of his grave rests the stone of his second wife, who died in 1805. This cluster placement shows students the precariousness of life in a frontier community and the propensity of the surviving spouse to remarry.

In another viewing cluster, the stone of Mrs. Mary Holt reflects her diverse roles and community stature: "wife of Elder Joseph Holt / . . . She was a good Wife / an affectionate Mother / a very kind Neighbour / and exemplary Christian / lived desired, and died lamented" (M. Holt marker). Clearly, Mary Holt's stature in the community derives from her husband's role as a church elder, since his name and

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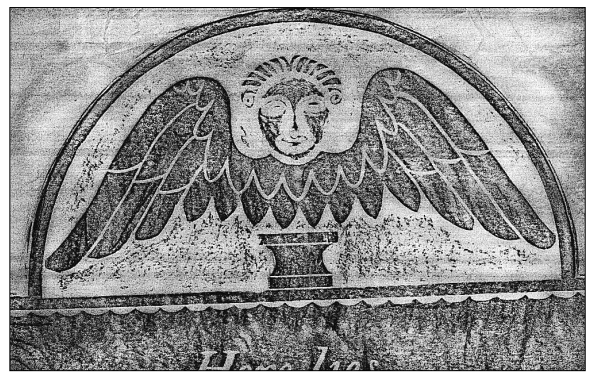
Death's head, Mary Holt marker, 1760. South Side Cemetery, York, Maine.

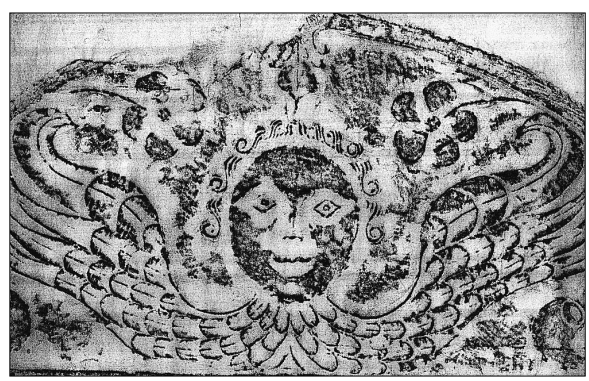


Joseph Holt marker, 1774. South Side Cemetery, York, Maine.

title appear right below her name on the stone. Also, her distinction is that of goodwife, a Puritan title of respect. She fulfilled all the roles expected of her in a colonial society: Wife, Mother, kind Neighbor, and good Christian. Students easily see these four words, with their capital letters, as definitive of a woman's stature and standing in a colonial society that valued a wife's subservience, nurturing, and kindness in the service of God.

The male role in an eighteenth-century frontier town differs considerably from that of the female. Joseph Holt's stone, to the right of his wife's, reflects his position as elder in the church, a title that appears on the same line as his name. Students immediately pick up on this distinction. In fact, a few think that "Elder" is the deceased's first name, until the meaning of the title is explained. Joseph Holt's epitaph speaks of him as "a plain reprover, / And a steadfast Christian; / one who joined the Church / in the first Parish in York, / in which he serv'd as an officer upwards / of fifty years" (J. Holt marker). Students see that Joseph Holt's role in his York, Maine, community was defined quite differently from that of his wife. His stature, purpose, and service in the church dominate his epitaph. Students also ask why the image at the top of his stone is that of a smiling, winged angel, when the icon at the top of his wife's stone is a skeleton's head with wings. They will later learn to identify the skeleton as a death's head and the angel as a soul effigy.

Several other clusters ask students to look at the detailed carvings in both iconography and epitaph lettering. The largest and most impressive eighteenth-century stone in the cemetery belongs to Samuel Sewall, Esquire. The elaborately carved head of a smiling cherub with upswept wings leaves no doubt that Samuel is one of the Puritan Elect, those chosen to be with God. The rosettes alongside the head also symbolize his resurrection (Ulrich 109). The deep, richly carved vines and swirls of the border panels that frame the epitaph, as Knoblock points out, "are symbolic of redemption and salvation to follow" (27). Also, students notice that Sewall's epitaph traces his line of descent from a "some time *Mayor of Coventry* in O. England" through his grandfather, who came to the New World in 1634. They can easily understand that the words on his stone praise him for his sound judgment, wisdom, hospitality, and generosity to widows and fatherless children. His roles as a civil, military, and ecclesiastical leader are also praised. Finally, etched on the bottom of his stone is a statement saying that his seven surviving sons and four daughters have erected this stone in his memory, clearly a testimony to the esteem in which they held their father. When students view the rubbing of this stone, they realize the range of information that is recorded in the epitaph and begin to ask questions about the symbolism in the iconography. This is exactly where I want



Winged soul effigy, Samuel Sewall marker, 1769. South Side Cemetery, York, Maine.

them to be when we turn to the literature of the New World.

Reading Colonial Literature

The first Puritan poem we read is the often anthologized "Upon the Burning of Our House" by Anne Bradstreet. A member of the illustrious Dudley family that helped to settle Ipswich, Massachusetts, in 1639, Bradstreet expressed her Christian upbringing when she viewed the ashes that had once been her home: "I blest His name that gave and took, / That laid my goods now in the dust" (15). Instead of bemoaning her fate, Bradstreet saw this tragedy as a lesson from God: "Adieu, Adieu, all's vanity" (16). She came to value a "house on high" with God in heaven more than all her worldly possessions. Here she is giving evidence of her community role as a good Christian, as the words in Mary Holt's epitaph suggest. Through her poem, Bradstreet is doing God's work in the New World.

Bradstreet's "To My Dear and Loving Husband" also gives evidence of the qualities of a good Puritan wife. In her role as loving consort (111), the Puritan woman, like the biblical Eve, "was to be a help *fitted* to Adam" (Ulrich 107), a mate as well as a companion. Bradstreet makes this apparent in the opening line of her poem: "If ever two were one, then surely we. / If ever man were lov'd by wife, then thee" (59). In the closing couplet to this poem, the speaker looks forward to an eternal life with her husband: "Then while we live, in love let's so persevere, / That when we live no more, we may live ever" (59). Through her poem, Anne Bradstreet reflects the values of the good wife and loving consort that were idealized in Mary Holt's epitaph.

Edward Taylor, a Puritan minister who wrote devotional poetry, helps us to understand the male role in society as reflected in the epitaphs on the markers of Joseph Holt and Samuel Sewall. In his poem "Huswifery," Taylor compares his spiritual devotion to the process of spinning wool, weaving cloth, and making a garment that clothes him in "holy robes of glory" (Taylor 63). Taylor's poetry also helps us understand the Puritan's grim preoccupation with death. The following verse clearly describes the image of the death's head that fills the tympanum, or arch, on Mary Holt's stone: "The Painter lies who pensills [sic] death's Face grim / With White—bare butter Teeth, bare staring bones, / With Empty Eyeholes, Ghostly Lookes [sic] which fling / Such Dread to see as raiseth Deadly groans" (Taylor in Ludwig 17). Taylor's words give insight into the duality of the Puritan mind, on the one hand glorifying God through simple household tasks, yet, on the other, being intensely preoccupied with mortality.

The epitaphs on the Holt and Sewall markers also help today's students understand the themes of the Puritan captivity narratives. When Mary Rowlandson, wife of a minister from Lancaster, Massachusetts, is captured by the Narragansetts in 1675 during King Philip's War, she writes of her eleven weeks in captivity as a test of her faith. In her narrative, *The Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson,* she tells us near the end, "Affliction I wanted and Affliction I had full measure" (47). In captivity, she receives a Bible from one of her captors, who finds it in a basket plundered in a raid on the settlement of Medfield. She is overjoyed to have it and, throughout the remainder of her story, she continually cites Scripture as a solace for the indignities and cruelties she suffers. When the possibility of ransom first presents itself but is denied to her, she turns to her Bible which "stills [her] spirit for the present" (25–26). When one of her captors throws ashes in her eyes or comes at her with a hatchet, she turns to her Bible for comfort: "My guide by day and pillow by night" (29). In this way, her entire narrative becomes a treatise to redeem the sinner and to ameliorate the larger guilt the Puritans felt over their emigration to the New World and their "desertion" of England (Slotkin 107). Just as Dante's sinner journeys through levels of sin and punishment in *The Inferno,* so too do Mary Rowlandson's twenty "removes" (her term for the wanderings of her captors) take her deeper into a hellish trial of faith which she, and by extension all Puritans, must endure to validate herself as a Christian. Thus, the Puritan's spiritual role in the community as reflected in the epitaphs of the Holt and Sewall markers—good Christian, Ecclesiastical, and church Elder—is here reaffirmed in the literature of the captivity narrative.

Mary Rowlandson's narrative also reaffirms her role as Puritan goodwife. In captivity, "gentlewoman" Rowlandson survived by trading her huswifery skills in knitting and sewing for food, shelter, and clothing. As she traveled from one remove to another, she had to carry "only [her] knitting work and two quarts of parched meal" (18), clearly a lighter burden than many of her captors. In another remove, she talks of "Knitting a pair of white Cotton stockings for my Mistress" (19). When King Philip

asks her to "make a shirt for his Boy" (22), she does and receives a shilling in return. She offers the money to her Master who "bade [her] keep it" (22), so she buys a piece of horse flesh. Throughout her captivity she is able to sustain her role as the goodwife, an image so indelibly etched in her being that she perpetuates it as her means of survival, thus reaffirming herself as worthy of redemption. Students are drawn in to Mary Rowlandson's story. Through her ordeal, they come to understand the Puritan mind—intense belief in the supremacy of God's will, devotion to Scripture and family, and an indefatigable spirit in the face of adversity. It is this Puritan intensity that will lay the groundwork for our later study of the Salem witch trial documents and our reading of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible.*

Puritan preachers were quick to use the captivity narratives in their sermons. The most famous and often anthologized sermon, Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," is patterned after the themes and structure of a captivity narrative. The most powerful image Edwards uses that echoes Mary Rowlandson's narrative is that of the pit. Twice Rowlandson uses the pit as a metaphor for hell. She tells us that her captors "had made a pit (in their own imaginations) as deep as hell for the *Christians* [her italics], that Summer" (42) and later, after her release she says, "Thus hath the Lord brought me and mine out of that horrible pit" (46). In his sermon, Edwards electrifies his listeners by describing them as suspended over a fiery pit, sustained by a slender spider's thread, held by the hand of God: "The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire abhors you and is dreadfully provoked;" (Edwards 73). The fate of Edwards's sinners, like that of Rowlandson as captive, is a direct result of God's will. As Slotkin says, Edwards's sermon was all the more effective because his audience was imbued with the imagery and emotion of the captivity narratives (97). Whether in the wilderness or on the pulpit, the good Christian served as an instrument of God in the New World, the new Zion.

When students have spent several weeks reading Puritan poetry, sermons, and captivity narratives, we turn once again to the gravestone rubbings that surround us on the classroom walls. Now it is time to look at the icons carved into the tympanum above the epitaphs. Since we first looked at these gravestone rubbings, students have been curious about the death's head on Mary Holt's marker. Having read the literature, students now understand the Puritan preoccupation with sin and death. The image of the death's head with its vacant eye sockets, rows of teeth, and sloped wings is a visual metaphor for a people and religion fixated on death. Although not as common as the death's head, an entire skeleton might also appear on a marker, bringing death "more vividly to the notice of the passerby than any other part alone could do" (Forbes 116). In one of our viewing clusters, the marker for Mary Bragdon's grave has such an image. Here, a skeleton wrapped in a shroud is holding a dart of death, an arrow aimed at a cinerary urn alongside. All of these emblems—the reclining skeleton, the shroud, the dart, and the urn—point to the grim certainty of mortality for the Puritan.

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Another icon that has captivated students is the "effigy of the glorified soul" (Ludwig 67), an angelic or cherubic face with upswept wings that occupies the tympanum on markers after 1750. Such an icon appears on Elder Joseph Holt's stone. By the time of the Great Awakening (1720–1750), a period of religious revival in the colonies, Puritans focused more on the resurrection and afterlife than they did on sin and death. As a result, their icons changed to reflect this new awareness. As Craig notes, "Such a view remains consistent with the softer, more forgiving cherub's face which all but replaced the death's head by the middle of the eighteenth century (n.p.)." Thus, the soul effigy reflected a more hopeful view of eternal life than did the somber death's head.

In their viewing clusters, students notice that icons on the markers at the very end of the eighteenth century begin to change yet again. Instead of

death's heads and soul effigies, cinerary urns overhung with willow branches or willow trees now dominate the imagery on the tympanum. This imagery appears in several of our viewing clusters when the date of death has occurred after 1790. According to Ludwig, "The growing popularity of neoclassical imagery made it clear that nobody wanted to retain the old sentiments and New England quietly mantled itself in white marble cinerary urns, arching willows, and noble tombs" (424). This imagery also appeared in embroidered mourning pictures, where young ladies depicted the tomb, urn, and willow tree but added family members lined up on either side of the memorial stone (Ring 80). The mourning picture with its urn and willow, embroidered at schools for girls throughout New England, also became part of the culturally accepted iconography for expressing grief.

In one extensive project, two students created a documentary of our cemetery, interviewing the caretaker on camera and analyzing the history of the town through its gravestones.

Gravestone Research

Having journeyed through Colonial America through the study of eighteenth-century gravestone rubbings and Puritan literature, we are ready to explore our Center Street Cemetery in Wallingford. When I hand out the "roots project," as the cemetery assignment has come to be known, students have a number of choices in doing original research using Wallingford's gravestone markers. They might focus on one of the founding families and trace its history through the gravestones or analyze the epitaphs of a husband and wife, much as we did with the Holts in class. If the iconography draws them in, students can photograph representative stones, research the symbolism, and mount an exhibit for the class. Once in a while students will be able to trace their genealogy back to one of the original families, or interview a neighbor about family roots, documenting the genealogy through gravestone research. In one extensive project, two students created a documentary of our cemetery, interviewing the caretaker on camera and analyzing the history of the town through its gravestones. With the help of our AV-TV technician, they edited their footage, wrote a narrative track, and added titles and credits. Their documentary was broadcast to the community over our local access cable channel on and off for several weeks. Now, it is archived in our library as one of a growing number of student productions on Wallingford's history.

It takes my students about a month to complete their study of the Colonial period in American literature, but I consider this time well spent. The understandings they gain, the assumptions they draw, and the processes they are involved in will become the foundation for the rest of their study of the way America came to be. The field trips we take into a small cemetery in Maine and into the larger cemetery in Wallingford are a journey into our New England ancestry and ultimately into ourselves. Students come away from this unit with a sense of empowerment when their project appears on television or is showcased for the entire school. Their research has significance. It matters to other students who will read or view the work as models for future projects, it teaches the community what a valuable historic landmark an old burial ground can be, and it gives students a sense of connection with history. What more could you ask from a tale of two cemeteries?

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