

Cemetery Records in Massachusetts

By Helen Schatvet Ullmann, CG

In pursuing cemetery records, nothing, but nothing, is as satisfactory as finding a rock-solid, clearly carved gravestone. Even one that is cracked, worn, and lichen-covered -- but still mostly readable -- is a triumph. On the other hand, many times we must make do with someone else's view. Yet even finding a written record can mean a giant step back in our family history.

Cemetery Records Come in Various Forms

Obviously there are the stones themselves. Then there are transcriptions of the stones. Thirdly there are records kept by those who maintain the cemeteries. A few words about each:

- If you are planning to visit a cemetery, take along a clipboard and paper, a tape recorder or perhaps your laptop. A folding chair gives you a lap. Bring a camera (black and white film works very well), a mirror, and someone to be company in a lonely place and to hold the mirror so that the light casts shadows in the letters, making them stand out clearly. If you are tempted to bring along shaving cream, chalk, or rubbing materials, read about the subject first (rubblings can be harmful to the stones if improperly done). If there is someone you can contact to help you find the location of the graves, do so. Be sure to ask permission if it is on private property. Ask permission also before cutting briars or digging around the stone. In fact, read a few articles on cemetery research. Marcia Melnyk's is particularly entertaining and informative (see below).
- Transcriptions of headstones vary. It's a good idea to look at several for the same cemetery if you can find more than one. Older is probably better, because stones may have disappeared. But the format and detail may vary. I have photocopies of a very old transcription of a rather large cemetery. Each name is followed by the years of birth and death. When I had occasion to visit the cemetery I discovered that the stones usually included full death dates and that the birth years had been calculated from the age at death. Only the older stones were transcribed. Other words on the stones, usually indicating relationships, had been omitted. But one good thing about the transcript was that the names were listed as the transcriber walked through the cemetery. Alphabetical transcriptions are easier to search, but they lose the relationships within groups, even between husband and wife.
- Cemetery offices, or sometimes town clerks, will have their own records. My experience is that the official will rarely let the genealogist browse through the records, but generally they are willing to search and make copies. Photocopies are, of course, better than handwritten notes. They may ask a fee, which is reasonable because they are employees, and someone is paying for their time. If you can, view the gravestones themselves. I spoke with someone at a Springfield cemetery office on the phone who said they could tell me where the stone I wanted was and advised me to come when the office was open. When I had occasion to be in the Connecticut River valley on a Sunday afternoon (when the office was closed), my son and I walked that huge cemetery for an hour or more and never did find that little child's stone. On the other hand, some years ago I went to a cemetery office looking for my great-grandmother's sister's grave. The office insisted she was not buried there. So I asked about her parents. Yes, they were buried right outside the office door. I walked out around Jeremiah's plot and there was the stone I'd been looking for, as solid and legible as one could wish.
- Cemetery office records will also include information on ownership of plots.
- Funeral home records are another resource that, if located, would be very helpful. Occasionally you will find them on Family History Library microfilm.

Even though you find two or three transcriptions of gravestones, it is still important, if you possibly can, to visit the cemetery itself, or at least get photographs of the stones. Recently I used a very nice transcription, by Esther Whitcomb, listed below. It gave me the maiden name of Pierson T. Kendall's first wife, Lucinda Kilburn. Wanting to know more about her, I checked Worcester County probate records and found a guardianship for a Lucinda Kilburn. This led to Wendell in Franklin County, where her father was a minister and left a nice probate record identifying his daughter. Months later I finally visited the cemetery in Sterling and found to my astonishment that her gravestone not only named her parents but also said they lived in Wendell! The other records were still worth finding, but if she had not inherited property from her grandfather in Worcester County, I would not have found her parents via that route. The

moral of that tale is that if you are compiling a transcription of gravestones, please include all the information on the stone.

The same row of gravestones also confirmed that her son Charles B. Kendall was indeed the man of that name who had died in 1876. Since the transcription was in alphabetical order, I had not been able to tell whether Charles B. belonged in that particular family.

How Does One Find Cemetery Records in Massachusetts?

The answer to that question is about to get a lot easier. David Lambert, an NEHGS librarian, has been compiling his *Guide to Cemeteries Located in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* for about twelve years now and plans to publish this year. This will include not only information about the cemeteries themselves, but also a great many references to published transcriptions and manuscripts. In the meantime, there are other avenues.

To locate a cemetery itself, many of the suggestions below for locating transcripts will be helpful. But it may be a good idea first to locate the land where the person lived. If you discover he lived near the edge of a town or county, it will be a good idea to look in neighboring jurisdictions. Good topographical maps will include cemeteries on them. Newspaper death notices may mention a cemetery. The town clerk, an historical society, or reference librarian can refer you to the cemetery commission or office.

Consider both the time when the individual died and his or her religious affiliation. Early residents will probably be in old cemeteries, but not necessarily. Graves have often been moved. In Massachusetts the most dramatic example is when the Quabbin Reservoir displaced many old cemeteries. Both vital and cemetery records of the extinct towns are at the Dam Headquarters.

Cemeteries may be known by two or three different names. I went into the Athol library one day many years ago, pointed to the name of a cemetery in the published Athol vital records and asked, "Where is it?" No one knew. Try the local historical society or ask until you find a knowledgeable person.

To locate transcriptions of gravestones or other types of cemetery records:

- In the NEHGS library, check all catalogs, particularly a small "Typescript Catalog" behind the desk on the 5th floor. This has a main section and another small section of items that have LC [Library of Congress] numbers.
- In the [Family History Library Catalog](#) look under the category "cemeteries" in three places: town, county, and state. Check also under the Daughters of the American Revolution as author.
- Many cemetery records have been published in genealogical journals. Look in PERSI (the Periodical Source Index) at Ancestry.com. Searching under "Location and Record Type" in the 1999 release on CD-ROM revealed that there are 369 entries for "Massachusetts" and "cemetery" or "cemeteries."
- Try the [Library of Congress](#). Many local town clerks or historical societies have transcripts, often annotated by local historians.
- Town histories and published vital records often contain cemetery records. The "Official Series" of vital records designates a cemetery record as "G.R.," keyed to the list of abbreviations in the front of the book.
- And don't forget David Lambert's book, discussed above.

Some More Helpful References

On cemetery records in general:

- *The AGS Quarterly*, formerly the *Association for Gravestone Studies Newsletter* makes for interesting reading. See their [website](#).
- Chase, Theodore & Laurel Gable. *Gravestone Chronicles I*. Boston: NEHGS, 1990.
- Chase, Theodore & Laurel Gable. *Gravestone Chronicles II*. Boston: NEHGS, 1997. (*Editor's Note: The above are available as a set*)
- Farber, Daniel and Jessie L. "Making Photographic Records of Gravestones" and "Gravestone Rubbing for Beginners," *The Connecticut Nutmegger* 24, no. 3 (1991): 452-54.
- Melnyk, Marcia D. "Understanding Tombstones." *The Essex Genealogist* 18, no. 3 (1998): 123-31. This has an excellent bibliography at the end.

- See PERSI for articles on cemetery research in periodicals you have access to.

Some Finding Aids for Massachusetts Cemeteries

- Berkshire Family History Association. *A Guide to Berkshire County, Massachusetts, Cemeteries* . Jan. 1988. [P.O. Box 1437, Pittsfield, MA 01202-1437.]
- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Family History Library. *Index to United States Cemeteries* . Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1988. FHL film 1,206,475 contains information on Massachusetts cemeteries.
- City directories.
- Essex Society of Genealogists. *A Guide to Cemeteries in Essex County, Massachusetts* . 1991. [P.O. Box 313, Lynnfield, MA 01940-0313.]
- Stemmons, John D. and E. Diane. *The Cemetery Record Compendium* . Logan, Utah: Everton Publishers, 1979. Pages 79-82 contain references to many transcriptions from Massachusetts cemeteries.
- Funeral homes often have directories of active cemeteries for a wide area.

Massachusetts Transcriptions Covering Multiple Towns

- Arnold, James N. Volume 36 of his tombstone records collection, on FHL 1,838,897, item 11. See the Family History Library catalog for the index by entering film 1,819,819.
- Berkshire Athanaeum, the Pittsfield, MA public library, has a large collection of transcriptions of western Massachusetts cemeteries. These are on FHL film.
- Corbin, Walter E. *Corbin Manuscript Collection*. A Microfilm publication of NEHGS, this contains records for many towns, mostly in central Massachusetts. [F63/C8/microfilm/also/LOAN.]
- Daughters of the American Revolution (Massachusetts) in the Family History Library catalog. Enter 859,060 for one film, 859,313 for 39 more films and 1,307,668 for two films on graves of Revolutionary soldiers.
- Dunkle, Robert J. and Ann Smith Lainhart. *Boston Cemeteries* . 2 vol., Boston: NEHGS, 1999. One town, but four major cemeteries.
- Massachusetts DAR. *Inscriptions from Eight Cemeteries in Bristol County, Massachusetts* . 1987. [F72/B8/I57]
- Salisbury, Susan. *Southern Massachusetts Cemetery Collection* , 2 vol. (Bowie, Md.: Heritage Press, 1995), mostly Norfolk but some Bristol and Worcester Co. cemeteries, listed in the order found and indexed in each volume, but the index is defective. [F63/S25/1995. The Family History Library has a corrected index, 974.4/v3s/v.1.]
- Thatcher, Charles M. *Old Cemeteries of Southeastern Massachusetts* . [F63/T63/1995. Index (1995) at FHL 974.4/V3tc index.]
- Townsend, Charles D. and Edna T. *Bordertown Cemeteries*. West Hartford, Conn.: Chedwato Service, 1953. Covers Granville, Tolland, Sandisfield, and Southwick. [F63/T69/1953]
- Townsend, Charles D. and Edna. *Some Cemetery Inscriptions from Various Massachusetts Towns* . Sarasota, Fla.: Aceto Bookmen, 1996. [FHL 974.4/V3tce.]
- Whitcomb, Esther K. *Inscriptions from Burial Grounds of the Nashaway Towns* . Bowie, Md.: Heritage Books, 1989. Towns in the Lancaster area. [F74/L2/I57/1969]