

# Cemetery Research in New Hampshire

By Sherry L. Gould

Cemeteries can be a fundamental source for genealogical information on several levels. On the surface, the researcher gains important information about the dates of death and often the dates of birth of an ancestor. The inscription of the stone frequently contains additional family information such as the name of spouse(s), parents, or children. In rare circumstances, the place of birth or location of the parents may also be recorded on the stone. Beyond the basic data recorded on a headstone, a visit to the cemetery can provide important information to assist in putting family groups together. For instance, whom an ancestor is buried alongside can give the researcher information not easily obtained elsewhere. As well, the absence of an internment in the last known location of an ancestor gives additional information to add to the puzzle.

The first challenge is that of locating the grave for a given ancestor. The usual place to start is the location where your ancestor was last known to be, and certainly the location of residence at the time of death if known. Often the death certificate will list the place of interment, and published family genealogies and town histories are another source for burial information. Most early New Hampshire towns had a cemetery associated with the church. Burial records are available for some church cemeteries, and helpful in determining burial locations if the individual's church affiliation is known. The simplest procedure is to contact the church directly, but be aware that some early church records are housed in historical society collections, sometimes not known to church officials. Don't give up easily.

Burial customs in the early days did not dictate burial in a cemetery, making family burial plots quite common. Sometimes these family plots are found in deplorable condition. An example, found on the web, is William Meacham's discovery and subsequent restoration of [two family plots](#) in Kentucky. Unfortunately, such conditions befall family plots in New Hampshire as well.

Each town established other burial grounds as needed in the development of the town. The records of the establishment can be found in the early town record books. There is no index to assist in this type of research, but reading the records of a given town will give clues to what cemeteries were established at what time in that locale. Microfilmed copies of these sources are on file at the [New Hampshire State Library](#), 20 Park St., Concord, NH, 03301, or through the numerous [Family History Centers](#) of the Church of Latter-day Saints. The index to the town records is available at the NEHGS Library located at 101 Newbury Street in Boston, MA, 02116, and the [DAR Library](#) located at 1776 D Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006-5303. (See "[Early New Hampshire Town Records](#)," by Edward F. Holden on this site.) Each town was responsible for any records, (or the absence thereof) regarding burials in a town cemetery, and there is a wide discrepancy in cemetery records from town to town.

Obituaries frequently contain the name of the undertaker who handled arrangements for the family. Many old and most of the more recent newspapers have been microfilmed and are available through libraries and research centers across the country, while the early New Hampshire papers are available at the New Hampshire State Library. If the researcher is fortunate enough to have an ancestor who was interred by an undertaker that is still in business, there will likely be burial records available to assist in the search through that source. Refer to the *American Blue Book of Funeral Directors*, available in most public libraries' reference section for contact information. When a funeral home no longer exists, check with local historical societies and libraries to see if the location of their records may be determined. All of this adds to the complexity of finding any given ancestor's resting place!

The US Department of the Interior has a [Geographic Names Information System \(GNIS\)](#), which can be searched on the web. This site allows the researcher to search for all cemeteries in a given town, county, or state. A form is provided that allows the user to enter information via drop down lists to complete the query of the database. All that is needed for this purpose is to select the state, which enables the county to be selected. Next, the user will select the cemetery in the drop down list titled "Feature Type." If a specific town is known, the user can then type that town name into the field titled "Topo Map Name." The results will be a listing of all cemeteries known in a given state, county, and town with links to maps of the location. The latitude and longitude are given for the location that can then be used with a GIS hand-held device (click [here](#) for more information about GIS [Geographic Information Systems]). After a specific cemetery is selected, the most helpful map choice for location by automobile is "Show Feature Location using

maps produced from the U.S. Census Bureau's Tiger Map Server." After selecting this item, scroll down the page and use the zoom-in feature several times to get a street map for the selected cemetery. The information you receive is only as good as the information in the database. In this instance, a search for all cemeteries in Bradford, NH includes one that is actually located in Sutton, NH and the Presbury Cemetery in Bradford is listed under Hillsboro Upper Village, NH. However, one of several family plots located in Bradford does appear on the list.

Transcriptions of the gravestones of many New Hampshire cemeteries have been made and printed copies deposited in various libraries and historical societies. These transcriptions are attributed to members of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), Works Progress Administration (WPA) groups, or other historians. An impressive collection can be found at the [New Hampshire Historical Society Tuck Library](#) located at 30 Park St, Concord, NH, 03301. In preparation for a visit to the library, a [search of their collection](#) for a specific cemetery can be done online. Entering the search word "cemetery" in that search engine produces 327 items. The NEHGS Library also has an [online catalog](#). Using that search, it is necessary to search for variants such as "Gravestone Inscriptions New Hampshire" as well as "Cemeteries NH" to get a more complete listing. The [DAR Library](#) in Washington, DC has many transcription records in their holdings. A [search](#) can be completed online for these as well. The most effective way to isolate your search on that engine is to enter a search for a title as follows: "Cemetery Records {Insert Town Name}, {Insert State Abbr.}." It is also a good idea to check with the local historical society when the researcher has an idea of the location of an ancestor's burial to see if they may have transcription records not published or deposited elsewhere. The benefit of these records is that the researcher can check out a hunch of an ancestor's burial location and if luck prevails, obtain inscription information without an intensive stroll through the many cemeteries of a given locality.

The next step is a visit to the cemetery. You should first check with the town to see what, if any, restrictions and guidelines exist for the cemetery in question. The following items will assist you with transcribing the gravestones:

- writing utensils
- paper
- outdoor clothing appropriate for the weather
- hat with visor
- sunglasses
- bug repellent
- sunscreen
- mirror
- flashlight
- cardboard roll such as an empty paper towel roll
- mild soap
- lots of water
- soft nylon or natural brush
- wooden scraper such as a popsicle stick
- grass cutters, trowel, etc.
- camera

Depending on where the light is at the time, and given the weather conditions on the day of your visit, you may find the inscription difficult to read. By maneuvering the light over the inscription using the mirror, flashlight and tube you will find that readability can be greatly increased. Do not use any chemical ingredients on the stone to highlight the inscription or clean it, as this may damage the stone. You may find that lichen or other organic matter has covered the inscription. In this event soak the debris with mild soapy water and work it off with the soft brush or wooden scraper. Metal and chemicals should never be used. Be sure to thoroughly flush the detergent from the stone when done. If you intend to do plantings, trim grass or clear the base of a sunken stone, be sure you have the tools you will need and know just what the guidelines are for the cemetery.

It is important to record the inscription even if you intend to photograph the stone. It's a good idea to take a thorough look at the stones surrounding that of your particular interest. Take a record of anything that appears remotely related, to avoid repeating a trip when some new evidence makes the remotely possible now probable! Following these

methods should assist researchers in finding valuable information about their New Hampshire ancestors.