

# The Rhode Island Cemetery Database

By Maureen A. Taylor

For more than a decade, genealogist and computer professional John Sterling worked with about forty volunteers to create the Rhode Island Cemetery Database. The result is a wonderful tool for finding the burial places of Rhode Island ancestors who died in the state prior to 1900. Sterling's involvement in the project stemmed from a simple personal quest: "My earliest ancestors were in Little Compton in 1742. They appeared in the church records, but not in any of the town records. What I was looking for was gravestone records to see if I could locate information on my earliest ancestors. I'd been looking for the parents of Joseph Starling for thirty years."

What he found was far more compelling. "As I began looking, I started finding cemetery transcripts in every library and historical society, over one hundred in all. My original concept was to computerize the transcripts into a huge database and the job would be done." Sounds like a simple project to someone with computer experience, but Sterling soon discovered that not all of the cemeteries in the state had transcriptions. Only about 2,000 transcriptions existed out of what is estimated to be 3,200 cemeteries. Additionally, those transcriptions usually only listed a vague location such as a town name or an out of date description. To a detail-oriented person, it made sense to update both the descriptions and locators so that the cemeteries could be easily found.

After checking the transcripts against the gravestone inscriptions, it was discovered that the transcripts were only about ninety percent accurate. The most accurate collections, such as James Arnold's *Vital Records of Rhode Island*, were nearly one hundred percent accurate while others had only a fifty percent accuracy rate. One of the primary goals of the project was to improve these percentages. Starling's team decided to break down their plan into two phases: The first phase involved entering all of the early transcript data into the computer, while the second phase entailed going to the cemetery, checking gravestones, and correcting any errors found. They also measured the height and width of the stones and noted the material, condition, shape, status (up, down, or broken), carving, and legibility. When all of the cemeteries of a town were recorded and checked, a new book was published. Eight books have been published so far and are available through the NEHGS online bookstore. To date, data on over 3000 cemeteries has been entered into the database and over 2000 cemeteries have been physically checked.

Sterling developed a computer program for his Rhode Island project in 1990. In 1995, he refined it for regional variations using suggestions from readers of his regular column, "Gravestones and Computers" in the *Association of Gravestone Studies (AGS) Quarterly*. The software now sold by them is known as the AGS Computer Database, and is the AGS standard. He is aware of at least 400 groups busily cataloging gravestones in the United States and in several foreign countries. The fact that they all use the same program with standardized formats enables the seamless merging of these databases into a nationwide repository of cemetery information. See the AGS [website](#) for more information.

Sterling and his group of volunteers decided to concentrate only on pre-twentieth century cemeteries for two reasons: After 1900, death certificates were issued for nearly everyone in the United States, and secondly, while modern gravestones are made of durable granite that should be readable forever, the older marble gravestones are fragile and susceptible to the elements. At the present time, two to four percent of the older stones in Rhode Island are unreadable. They set out to save the older information before it is lost forever. Prior to civil registration of vital records in 1853, a cemetery inscription may be the only data you can find on that person.

In addition to creating a valuable genealogical research tool, Sterling's research has given insight into the probability of an ancestor's grave getting a gravestone. The earliest records for the North Burial Ground in Providence are dated 1848 to 1850 and document one thousand interments. Twenty-five percent of these have gravestones. Of the total count of interments, one third were adults, of which fifty percent are marked; another third are children, of which twenty-five percent are marked; and the last third are unmarked burials in the Free Ground. If your ancestor died prior to the American Revolution, the probability of their having a gravestone drops to a mere five percent.

Librarian, genealogist, and author Deby Jacoy Nunes has worked on the Rhode Island cemetery project from the beginning. She has been instrumental in placing copies of the database in libraries throughout the state. Currently, the [Rhode Island Historical Society](#) (121 Hope St., Providence, RI, 02906) has the most up-to-date version of the

database, which features a flashing red "P" to indicate stones with poor legibility. Nunes's Rhode Island Cemetery Database [website](#) contains a " [Tips for Using the Cemetery Database](#) " page which everyone should consult prior to conducting a search. After looking in the [online index](#) (containing 414,000 names, on RootsWeb) you can contact one of the libraries listed below for a printout of the record. Please contact the library in advance of your request to find out their policy for requesting the full citation. Bear in mind, there may be a fee for this service. The website also lists [complete descriptions](#) of how to find each of the cemeteries.

It will take some time before the cemetery database becomes available on CD, as there is still work to be done to improve the accuracy of the data. However, published volumes of eight towns are accurate and currently available through the NEHGS bookstore . The cemetery database [website](#) is also the best place to find out what towns are included in the books.

While John Sterling is ending his eleven-year involvement with the project, Deby Jecoy Nunes will continue. Sterling estimates that over ninety-five percent of the pre-twentieth century gravestones in Rhode Island are in the database. When he began the project in 1990 there were 1,862 registered historical cemeteries in the state. In eleven years, forty volunteers have found and registered an additional 1,171 cemeteries (over one hundred per year), bringing the total to 3,033. They have recorded 414,000 inscriptions and entered them into the database.

When I asked Sterling about the future of the project, he told me about using a global positioning system (GPS) to find the coordinates to locate the cemeteries. This will take a while since only one hundred cemeteries have been found so far using this method. What this means is that you can use the coordinates to navigate to within ten meters of a cemetery located three-quarters of a mile from the nearest road, using a GPS instrument, or in the future, a cell phone. You'll even know how many feet you have to walk to reach it. After an incredible amount of time and effort spent over the last decade, Sterling's team of dedicated volunteers have almost completed a monumental task. Researchers no longer have to search in vain for cemetery information. The volunteers have even located many of the small family plots that were overgrown and in many cases lost. There is no question that John Sterling and his team of volunteers made a valuable contribution to Rhode Island genealogy. Keep up the good work!

If you are interested in volunteering for the Rhode Island Cemetery project, contact [Deby Jecoy Nunes](#) .

## **Useful Addresses**

### [American French Genealogical Society](#)

78 Earle Street

Woonsocket, RI 02861

Mailing Address: P.O. Box 2113

Pawtucket, RI 02861-0113

### [Rhode Island Historical Society Library](#)

121 Hope Street

Providence, RI 02906

(401) 331-8575

### Family History Center

1000 Narragansett Parkway

Warwick, RI 02888

(401) 463-9350

Hours: Wed, Fri 10am-2pm, 7-9pm; Th 7-9pm; Sat 10am-4pm

(Lacks Swan Point Cemetery and the name index.)

### [East Greenwich Free Library](#)

82 Peirce Street

East Greenwich, RI 02818

(401) 884-9510

[Warwick Public Library](#)

600 Sandy Lane

Warwick, RI 02886

(401) 739-5440

[West Warwick Public Library](#)

1043 Main Street

West Warwick, RI 02893

(401) 828-3750