

Amherst's Historic Cemeteries: An Overview

by Katrina Holman (rev. Oct. 2021)

Amherst hosts six historic cemeteries, five of them Town-owned and one owned by a church in a neighboring town. Amherst's 6 historic cemeteries comprise:

- 2 municipal cemeteries that served the whole town, located in the Village;
- 2 neighborhood cemeteries, one in the northern-most part of town that started out as a family graveyard and one in the southern part of town;
- the former pauper graveyard; and
- a Catholic cemetery.

The oldest of these six was laid out in 1735 along with other key lots of the planned township called Souhegan West. The youngest of these six, the religious one, was established in 1869.

To put this timeframe in context: The first two settlers are supposed to have arrived in Souhegan West in the Spring of 1735; the first meeting house was erected 1739; the first minister was called 1741 when there were 14 families in all (including those in present Mont Vernon and the northerly part of Milford); and the town was incorporated as Amherst in 1760. Amherst became a county seat, that is home of the courthouse, in 1771 when the division of the Province of New Hampshire into counties took effect. The Declaration of Independence occurred in 1776. The 2nd N.H. turnpike was opened 1802, its southern terminus being in Amherst Village, enabling traffic from Vermont to continue south on the post road to Boston.

Old Burying Ground (behind Town Hall)

Date: Although laid out in **1735**, there are only twelve gravestones dated before 1770 in the Old Burying Ground behind Town Hall. (Carved stones were costly and required expertise to create.)

Motifs: The prevalent motifs before 1800 were winged face (spirit or angel) or winged skull and, commonly for children, face on tiny torso set in niche (sometimes called a soul effigy). After 1800, the typical motif is urn and willow in several variants.

Oldest stone: William Hopkins's gravestone (died 1748, age 17) has earliest date – but carving is in such good condition that one could speculate it was done years later, possibly at the same time as the stone of his parents Benj. (d. 1787) & Hannah (d. 1792). Among oldest are the weathered short stone of Andrew Wilkins (d. 1753) and that of his 2-year-old sister Sarah (d. 1754), children of Rev. Daniel Wilkins.

Notable: The monument for Rev. Daniel Wilkins, first pastor, is unusual, both for its large table form and for the lengthy text all about him, a clear indication of his importance to the early development of the town. (Death year on gravestone is off by one, should be 1784.)

Africans: Experts concluded that skeletal remains that were accidentally unearthed in 2003, during remodeling of Town Hall from beneath foundation at back, were a young woman and child of African descent whose burials likely occurred between 1779 and 1823 (being the date when Town Hall was built) and that they likely died from tuberculosis. They were re-interred in 2007 by the southeast corner of the building. (Yes, there were slaves in Amherst. In 1767, when Amherst had a total population of 858, it included 8 of the 633 slaves in the Province of N.H. By 1777, there were zero slaves and in 1779, 1783 & 1788 there were 0 “negroes and molatto servants from 16 to 45 years of age” in Amherst. But in 1800 census, there were 33 non-white persons (gender not specified) in Amherst, living in homes where the head of household was white.)

Tombs: Under the front stone wall are 10 tombs that were sold at auction 1843/'44.

Last burial (not counting reburial): Dora Narcissa Spalding (1941, age 84) in Atherton tomb.

Meadowview Cemetery

Date(s): In 1827, the Town established a new burying ground on the north side of Foundry street, buying nearly 7 acres with 34 rods frontage along the road for \$171.25 (Hillsborough County deeds 150:625 & 626). (At that time, the only building on that street was the Congregational Vestry, which had been the second courthouse (1788-1823) and had been moved off the Common in 1824; now a private residence at 5 Foundry Street.) But at the very next Town Meeting, in March 1828, the voters insisted that a portion be sold off, so 3 acres on the west side were split off by the Selectmen, thus losing 19.5 rods of frontage, in 1829 for \$46.51, at which time they promised that the Town “will always make and maintain a good and sufficient fence on the west side of the aforesaid Burying Ground and Common” (deed 162:281). In 1852, the “West cemetery” was expanded to the east by 3 acres (with 8 rods frontage) for \$107.45 (deed 271:206). In the 20th century, this cemetery was further expanded: in 1939 the Town paid Martha Hubley \$250 to remove a restriction barring any burial within 20 rods from her home; in 1960 the Town purchased land owned by Elna Howard adjoining Meadow View Cemetery on the Northeast, for \$1500; and in 1977 added a piece from end of Sunset Road for \$1500.

Prior landowner: Practically all the land in the Village west of the Common had belonged to Samuel Dana (Sr., 1739-1798), a Harvard-educated minister turned lawyer then judge, who since 1782 (deed 9:17) had owned & occupied, and enlarged, the house at 19 Main Street. It took his heirs, sons, decades to sell off all the Amherst property, including the Vestry lot in 1824 (deed 196:152); land for the new burying ground in 1827 & 1852; and land for the foundry in 1850 (deed 265:111), all on Foundry Street.

Receiving Tomb: Built in 1857/8 to temporarily, annually store corpses when the ground is frozen too hard for digging graves; at a cost of \$189.45, which included \$42.75 for “drawing stone,” \$20.75 for the tomb door, and \$117.91 for labor.

Special plots & monuments: Included in the original plan were unmarked burial lots for strangers and infants. The Woman’s Relief Corps, female auxiliary of the Grand Army of the Republic (Civil War vets), owned an unmarked lot with apparent burials. Memorial monuments include: one for Unknown Soldiers (in far back area), one to World War II veterans (at east end, since 1945), and one honoring Amherst Firefighters (in center section).

Notables buried here include:

- Rev. Jeremiah Barnard (1750-1835), whose stone is inscribed “the second minister of Amherst.” He resided on his farm at 61 Christian Hill Road until his parishioners built a single-story house for him at 11 Carriage Road where he spent his final 25 years.
- Sergeant Charles H. Phelps, killed at Gettysburg on 4 July 1863 at age 19 in the Civil War. His final resting place, across the street from his father’s house at 18 Foundry Street, is marked with a graceful white marble stone bearing a carved human figure and inscription “A Young Man but an Old Soldier.”
- Abolitionist Luther Melendy (d. 1883, age 90), who was a farmer on Chestnut Hill (now part of Air Force tracking station) but spent his final years since 1866 in the Village at 118 Boston Post Road; his tall monument is inscribed “The Slaves Friend and the colored Peoples benefactor.”
- Daniel Secomb (d. 1895, age 75), author of *History of the Town of Amherst* (1883).
- Lelia (Robinson) Sawtelle (d. 1891, age 41), pioneer woman journalist and lawyer, who was an 1881 graduate of Boston University law school and first woman admitted to the bar in Massachusetts (1882), who practiced in Boston and Seattle as Miss Robinson and lately as Mrs. Robinson-Sawtelle. She had married at age 39 the prior year a 45-year-old piano dealer whose summer home was the former tavern at 6 Mack Hill Road.
- Harrison Eaton (d. 1899, age 82), a self-made man whose even-taller grave monument is an obelisk, who was owner of the formerly-adjacent iron stove foundry 1858-1873, a developer of the elegant Amherst Hotel (1868-'76), Amherst’s rep in the N.H. Legislature 1873-'74 & 1885, and served in the State Senate 1877-'78. Eaton built the house at 7 Carriage Road in 1846 which he owned until 1852; owned & occupied the Vose House at 91 Boston Post Road in the Village 1865-'68, and finally from 1868 owned & occupied the brick Samuel Bell House (now Country Mansions condos) at 135 Amherst Street, to which he added the distinctive mansard roof.

Chestnut Hill Cemetery

Date(s): Began around 1800 as Harvell family graveyard in the northern-most part of their farm in the northern-most part of Amherst, right on the New Boston town line. This farm was created in 1762 by John Harvell (Jr., 1736-1821), husbandman (farmer), when he bought 45-acre Third Division Lot 113 from his father of Litchfield (Hillsborough County deed 10:407) to be his homestead. It would remain in the Harvell family for five generations, passed son-to-son, until sold in 1941. According to lore, their first dwelling was a log cabin until the two-story house at 89 Chestnut Hill Road was built in 1812 by the second generation, Capt./Deacon Joseph Harvell (1774-1853) who had acquired the farm in 1803 in a life lease (promise to take care of his parents for the rest of their lives). In 1808 he sold a piece of his farm, at 97 Chestnut Hill Road, to School District 9 for their first schoolhouse (deed 117:5).

At Town Meeting of 1828, twelve men including Solomon Barron, Isaac Colby, Levi Dodge, Joseph Harvel, John Haseltine, Luther Melendy, and Nathaniel Melendy “were by vote of the town exempted from paying any part of the expense of the new grave-yard laid out west of the vestry” (now called Meadowview). (Names are listed in Secomb’s *History*, p. 441-442, without explanation.) Given that all these taxpayers lived in the northern part of town, the reason for the exemption was that their families were already utilizing the Harvell family graveyard.

In **1830**, the Town of Amherst bought the existing graveyard on half an acre on Chestnut Hill, bounded on the west by the east side of the “road leading to Goffstown” and on the north by New Boston town line from Joseph Harvell of Amherst, “gentleman,” for \$21, on condition that it forever be a burying ground for Amherst residents of the vicinity & residents of three particular New Boston farms (deed 166:134).

Earliest graves: Matriarch Rebecah Harvill [sic] died in 1804; she shares a stone with her husband John so it surely dates to his death year, 1821. Husband & wife were given equal treatment on their grave marker, which is a fairly large slate with a semicircular top with shoulders typical of early stones, with urn and willow motif in vogue in early 19th century. Next to it, a much smaller slate stone in a similar style commemorates “3 children of Capt. Joseph Harvell & Mrs. Egnés [sic],” namely Benjamin (d. 1816, age nearly 4 years); John (d. 1805, age 9 months); and Martha (d. 1809, age 2). Next to that stands another small slate stone of similar style for “Nancy J. dau of Capt. Joseph & Mrs. Agness Harvell” (d. 1824, age 2 yrs & 8 mos). (Happily, five other children grew to adulthood.) Next in line is stone of “Dea. JOSEPH HARVILL” (d. 1853, age 79) in a different material, marble, and different style, chunkier and rectangular.

Sad story: There is a genealogy-tablet for the Daggett family, one example of New Boston neighbors being allowed to use this graveyard, before and after it became public. Alice Daggett (1771-1852), widowed at age 41, had arrived in New Boston in 1824, buying a house on 50-acre farm which she occupied with the family of her son Carlos Daggett (1793-1871). In the course of a single month, March-April 1837, four young sons of Carlos died of “throat distemper,” ages 15, 9, nearly 6, and 3. Another son died in 1848 in Alabama where he is buried despite being listed on the same stone. In Feb. 1863, a 24-year-old son died at Newport News City, Virginia, serving as a private in Co. H of 10th N.H. Regiment. The following month, the last surviving son died at age 21 in New Boston. Carlos & wife Mary soon left town and sold out, moving in with their only surviving child, married daughter Susan in Weston, Mass. (The earliest and latest deceased family members listed on the family stone are not buried in Amherst, a cautionary note for genealogists.)

Old motif with new style: Isaac Colby (d. 1840, age 59), who owned & occupied 180-acre farm on Chestnut Hill Road, & wife Eunice (d. 1859, age 79) have handsome side-by-side gravestones – both slate with typical urn and willow motif of the era, but with then-modern straight/flat top edge and striking geographical border design, especially hers. Her stone is larger than his and signed by carver in lower right: N. Davis. (Her children must really have appreciated her!)

Cricket Corner Cemetery

Date: Curiously, in Nov. 1831 the Town “voted not to receive land proposed to be given for a burying ground by Maj. Joseph Fletcher... the offer [stipulating] that Fletcher and others should have liberty to build tombs therein and that it should be fenced at the expense of the town” (Secomb, p. 442). A year later Town Meeting agreed to the same conditions, so the Town in Dec. **1832** bought a different parcel for this purpose, wedged between Boston Post Road and Merrimack Road, next to the Cricket Corner District 3 Schoolhouse, for \$10 from Levi Adams (Hillsborough County deed 172:96).

Prior owner: Levi Adams Jr. (1795-1834), who had come from Temple where he had been an innholder, in 1829 had bought 369 Boston Post Road with 125-acre farm. (His father, Sr., had been a tavernkeeper at 107 Ponemah Road at Danforth’s Corner in the SW corner of Amherst from 1802 until he died in 1805 from a kick to the gut by a horse.)

Earliest gravestone: Ironically, it belongs to Levi Adams (d. 1834, age 39), from whose farm the graveyard was split off, and is a combination stone with his daughter Lydia Maria who died a month later (age 2), the only members of this family buried there. It is a typical rounded-top slate stone with urn & willow motif.

Showiest plots: Luther Coggin (Sr., d. 1877, age 75), who ran the Fletcher tavern at 382 BPR which he had bought in 1853, has a family-size plot enclosed by a fancy black-painted wrought-iron fence, its gate embossed “L. COGGIN / 1860.” (His son Jr. (1835-1890), who owned & occupied the farm at 369 BPR from 1866 till his death, has a separate lot and stone.) The Fletcher family have two family-sized plots in the center on opposite sides of the central walkway, with chunky granite monuments listing multiple family members. Buried there is Maj. Joseph Fletcher (Sr., d. 1843, age 78), who since 1824 had owned the tavern at 382 BPR, which he leased to his son Daniel, and 2 Thornton Ferry Rd 2, occupied by another of his sons but inherited by three daughters, and in 1825 bought the farm of 377 BPR as his own homestead. Daniel Fletcher (d. 1873, age 77) is also buried there even though he had moved to the Village when he retired from the tavern-inn.

Pauper Cemetery

Date: In **1840**, nine years after the alms house was opened, a small piece of ground belonging to the pauper farm was set aside and fenced for a burial place, located on Route 122 a short distance north of the intersection with Route 101A and the railroad line. When Amherst sold its town farm in 1898, the deed stipulated “reserving the burial lot on the premises situated on the west side of the highway leading from Amherst Station to Amherst Village.”

Number of burials: No one now knows how many persons were buried there (the records probably went up in flames with the alms house in 1892) but tallying up the numbers given in annual town reports, at least 40 paupers died at the poor farm since 1840, 23 of them in the 1840s and 12 in the 1850s. Not all of them were buried there, but probably most of them.

Name: In the annual town report of 1924, it was called Poor Farm Cemetery; in 1932, Town Farm Cemetery. Clarence H. Hagar (1892-1965), elected sexton for 28 years until his retirement in 1960, felt those appellations were disrespectful, so instead he called it Ponemah Cemetery. In schedules of town property, into the 21st century, it has been called Potters Field (lot 1-1-32).

Monument: In 1938, sexton Hagar erected a small plain marker made of cement, with a guess at where it should go. A few years after 1982, under the direction of Amherst’s road agent Richard G. Crocker, Richard Medlyn of Medlyn Monuments in Milford created and placed the granite marker with the inscription “Pauper’s Cemetery, Town of Amherst” that stands there to this day.

Sexton

Since 1961 when Amherst did away with the elected office of sexton, maintenance of the town-owned cemeteries falls under the highway department's purview.

Saint Patrick Cemetery

Date: In 1869, the Right Reverend David W. Bacon, Bishop of Portland, Maine, bought 4 3/8 acres on Merrimack Road, intended as a Catholic cemetery, for \$218.75 from four Milford men (deed 387:157). At that time, the original Saint Patrick's Church (erected 1859, sold 1895, burned 1902) was also located on Amherst soil, on Souhegan Street in the Irish immigrant district called The Acre. Since 1884, when New Hampshire was split off as its own diocese, this cemetery falls under the purview of the see of Manchester and is the cemetery associated with Saint Patrick's Church of Milford.

Prior owners: These four men were in business together in the lumber firm of Howison & Marvell, and as such owned various real estate. In the 1870 census, they were listed as: Marvell John, 54, farmer, real estate \$7000, personal estate \$7000; Marvell James, 54, brick mason, \$2000/\$1000; Richardson William, 50, farmer, \$5000/\$3000; and Howison Robert R., 55, express & stage owner, \$30,000/\$30,000 [sic].

Civil War graves: As of 1878, when Milford's G.A.R. post included this cemetery in its "Decoration Exercises," there were three graves of "fallen heroes" there.

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Further Reading: If you are interested in the symbolism of the carved motifs and who the carvers might be, see Prof. David H. Watters' lecture and tour of the Old Burying Ground, "New Hampshire Gravestones: Art and Life in Colonial Times" (June 1991) in the Amherst Town Library as audiotape and transcript.

ABOUT THIS FILE

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Comments: are welcome to HistoricAmherstNH@juno.com