



## A Closer Look...

# WINDHAM'S PUBLIC CEMETERIES

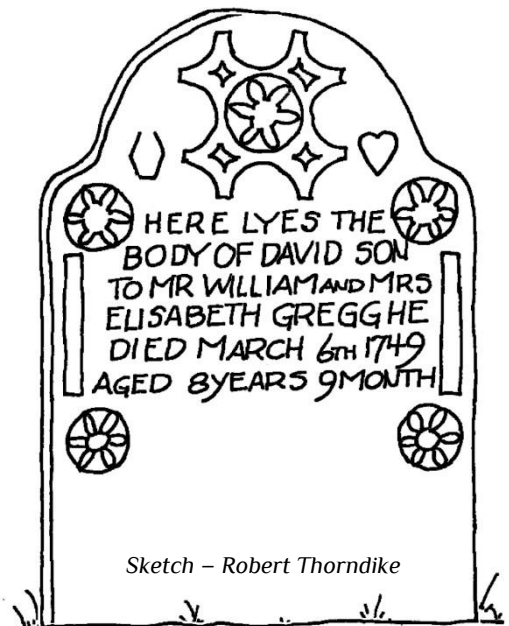
WENDI DEVLIN, CEMETERY TRUSTEE. COPYRIGHT 2011. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Though incorporated in 1742, the Town of Windham did not have its own “burying ground” until seven (7) years later, after the death of eight year old David Gregg on March 6, 1749 (*monument 138 in the “Old Plains”*). Young David’s parents buried their son in a small wooded area and, shortly thereafter, the Town voted to set apart one acre (only half of which was actually laid out and walled in) as a “Burying place Where William Gregg hath Buried his son.” Prior to this vote to lay out the Cemetery on the Plain, residents of Windham would make the long trek to Derry Upper Village and the burial yard there.

In 1753, when the Town’s first meetinghouse was built, Windham’s second cemetery, approximately three fourths of an acre in size, was laid out. The Cemetery on the Hill overlooked Cobbett’s Pond which, unlike now, was fully visible from the summit. The first known interment was that of Agnes Smith, aged 83, in 1753 (*lot 127 in the “Old Hill”*). Although the meetinghouse itself has been gone for over a century, it is said that its location can still be pinpointed by way of Samuel Senter who rests beneath “his” pew (*lot 182*). L.A. Morrison’s History of Windham also notes that Reverend Simon Williams (*lot 172*) is buried beneath the location of his pulpit. However, given the distance between the lots... it is likely that one or the other of these gentlemen is not, in fact, resting in the cited area of his beloved church.

Up until 1827, the Town provided a “mort cloth” for use by the family. This cloth was used to cover the simply-made coffins as they were carried, on foot, to the cemetery. The cloth was purchased by the Town in 1758 at a cost of \$150... quite an expense at the time. In 1827, the Town approved three landmark items for the cemeteries: construction of a hammered granite Receiving Tomb, purchase of a hearse, and construction of a house for the latter.

Given that, for over 80 years, the Town had available only an acre and a half of land for burials, it is highly likely that as time went on un-marked lots were re-used. While not an altogether pleasant thought, this was not an uncommon practice in New England. Those who could afford them, erected durable stones of slate as grave markers; and a good number of these remain legible today even after centuries of exposure to the elements. Most common amongst the symbolism used in Windham seem to be the death’s head and willow carvings. The former, a winged skull or face, represents the soul of the deceased, and the latter is a sign of mourning of those left behind. Although the old sections appear to have no order in their layout, one will find that nearly all have the head of the grave laid to the west. This, too, was common practice so that the interred would face the rising sun to the east.



In 1835, like most New England cemeteries, the Town designated a pauper lot, also known as “potters field”, to be centrally located in (then new) Cemetery on the Plains, west of the main Tarbell Gate. Interment in the potters field was available free of charge to those who could not afford to purchase a lot, for transient residents, or for unidentified individuals. Today, interments in lot 183 are very rare.

Modern technology, in the form of ground penetrating radar surveys conducted in the 1990s, has provided some evidence that there may be several, unidentified individuals buried “beyond the pale”; that is to say outside the cemetery walls. Whether intentionally laid to rest there or not is unknown as, like most old burying grounds, Windham’s records can never be 100% complete and accurate. Ancient records are lost or destroyed through the passage of time and countless hands.

The Cemetery on the Plain is home to two, somewhat unknown memorials. In 1913, Mrs. Horace Berry established “Garaphelia Sylva”, in memory of her sister, Harriet Garaphelia Hughes. A marble monument stands quietly outside the split-stone wall in a heavily shaded area and reads, in part: “The woodlands were gay and beautiful, for nature had clothed them in all her surpassing loveliness.” In 1924, Mrs. Berry then erected a memorial stone wall in the area, and installed a bronze plaque thereon reading, in part: “Love endures beyond the tomb...” The plaque can be viewed just to the right of the Cobbett’s Pond Road entrance.

Over the years, thankfully, the Plain and Hill cemeteries were enlarged through the addition of adjacent Town land, the purchase of private property, and gifts of land from area residents. In 1872, for example, three quarters of an acre of land was purchased for \$55.39; and in 1957, owner of the Windham Playhouse Everett “Chick” Austin donated a sizeable piece of property to the Town, which was incorporated into the Cemetery on the Hill. In the 1970s several pieces of property were purchased and combined to form the New Plains Cemetery, which was dedicated in 1977. The latter encompasses just over 8 acres of land, however, only two acres or so is currently used for burial purposes. Many are unaware that the adjacent ball field, and the playground in the rear, are actually cemetery land and, in the future, will certainly be needed for its intended purpose.

In total, the Town now has approximately 17 acres of cemetery land available and 2,675 lots have officially been staked out. To date, there are over 2,400 known burials, 300+/- of which are Veterans. The oldest known Windham-ite at rest in the cemeteries is Mrs. Maria Webber, who passed away in 2011 at the age of 102.

In more recent years, as shows such as TAPS become more and more popular with the young residents of Windham, the same question is posed time and again... “Are the cemeteries haunted?” As far we can tell, they’re not. In 2008, the Cemetery Trustees allowed two Salem High School students to conduct a supervised, nighttime investigation of the “Old Plains” cemetery, where strange lights have reportedly been seen by passers-by.

*No evidence of paranormal activity was found.*