



# BEYOND THE GRAVE

Reading Colonial Gravestones ... 1698-1810  
Presented to the Westport History Group  
April 7, 2016  
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Remember me as you pass by  
As now you are, so once was I.  
As now I am, soon you will be.  
Prepare for death, and follow me.

A common seventeenth century epitaph.



## WHY STUDY 17<sup>TH</sup> & 18<sup>TH</sup> c. GRAVESTONES?

Think of burial grounds not as a final resting place but as an accidental “public museum” that provide us with gateways of learning and important windows into past.

The mortuary art carved into the gravestones within these colonial burial grounds reflect cultural, social, and religious beliefs of the producer *and* the consumer.

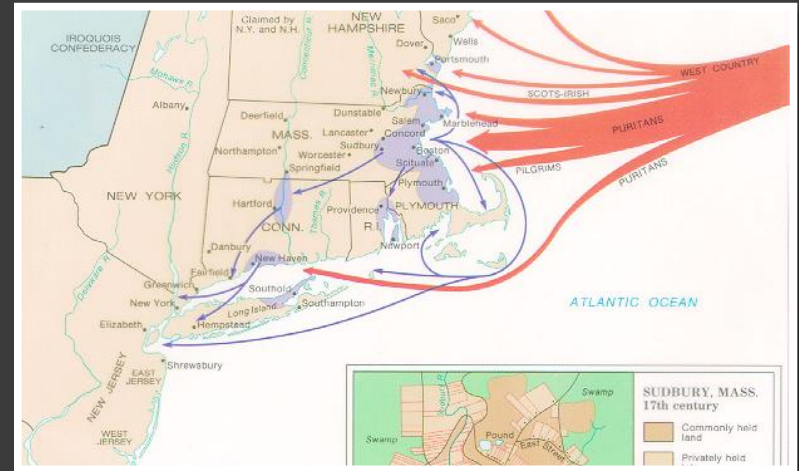
How these were portrayed in gravestone carvings begins with an understanding of Pilgrim and Puritan beliefs.

# Puritans were not Pilgrims

Puritans and Pilgrims were both by-products of the Protestant Reformation in England during the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Puritans were not Separatists, they were Reformers; and many if not most wished to retain Anglican teachings within the Church, but reform the political structure within the church. They believed that the Church of England was the one true church. And they believed in and wished to continue their “Englishness.”

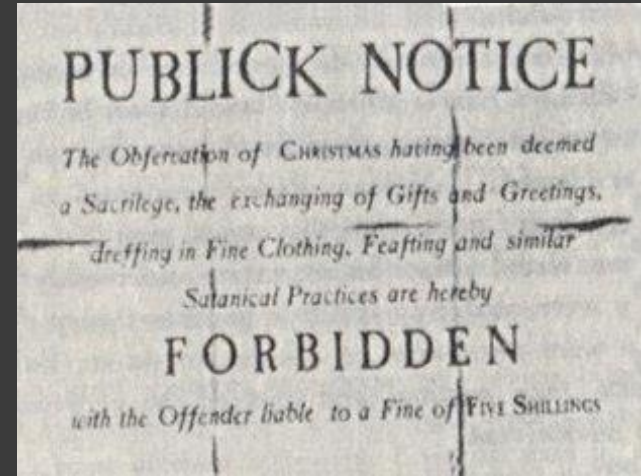
At the root of Puritanism was an overwhelming belief in the divinity of God; that pre-destination by God determined who were to enjoy eternal bliss in Heaven and who were not.





# Puritans were not Pilgrims

To sum it up, Puritans believed in religious piety, social and cultural hierarchy, intolerance for other religious beliefs, and communal obligation. Their actions certainly suggest that they were less than tolerant of views that differed with their convictions.



Not everyone who came to Massachusetts Bay as Puritans held rigid belief systems; Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson being two good examples. These dissenters were “invited” to leave. Winthrop’s “City on the Hill” would continue in some form for almost 100 years.



# Pilgrims were not Puritans

Pilgrims were Separatists, the radical element of the English Reformation. Their belief was that the English system was fundamentally broken and corrupt to the core ... unfixable in other words.

Not feeling welcome in their home country, they “retired” to Leyden, Holland, forming a close knit, though essential separate religious community that lasted for approximately 11 years.



# Pilgrims were not Puritans

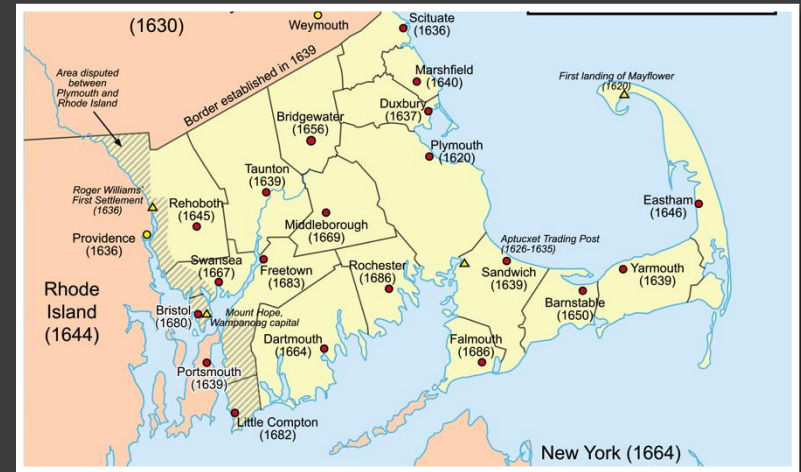
Fearful that they would lose their “Englishness” and that the “more liberal” Dutch society would corrupt their children, the decision was made to travel to the New World via England, first on a leaky scow named the Speedwell and then on an equally squalid, but not so leaky ship called the Mayflower.



# Pilgrim Myth and Reality

The majority of the 102 passengers on the Mayflower were in their 30's and younger.

- 69 adult passengers mainly in their 30's
- 14 young adults between 13 -18
- 19 children 12 and under



Deetz and Deetz, *The Times of Their Lives: Life, Love, and Death in Plymouth Colony*, 2000. Pg. 36.







*"Religious freedom is my immediate goal, but my long-range plan is to go into real estate."*

CN  
COLLECTION

Religious freedom is my immediate goal, but my long range plan is real estate.

New Yorker cartoon – 1960's

I suggest that while the Puritans came to the New World with the clear intention of establishing a pure form of cultural and religious “Englishness”, ...

The Pilgrims came to live as relatively tolerant Separatists and to gain the economic success that eluded them in their home country and in Holland.

Tolerant, for by and large, they were not from the English elite class; tolerant from their time in the liberal Dutch culture, and tolerant because many of the passengers were driven by opportunity and not strict religious orthodoxy.



But Here's the Dirty Little Secret ...

They were medievalists!



“partook of an age old tradition which saw nature, man and all of what William Bradford once called the “mutable things of this unstable world” as intimately linked in a cosmic dance ordered by a pattern beyond man’s ability to comprehend. Nature was part of a unified cosmic totality and not glorified with its own discrete position as it is today.”

Robert Blair St. George, *The Wrought Covenant*, Washington, D.C.: Lebanon Valley Offset, 1979.

In other words, both Puritan and Pilgrim alike were all products of a late medieval world full of unexplained phenomena; where witches and warlocks lurked and thunder and lightening was a message from God.

“With nature spinning its way toward the Last Judgment, seventeenth-century man confronted daily life as a nerve-wracking process of finding pattern amid chaos.”

Robert Blair St. George, *The Wrought Covenant*, Washington, D.C.: Lebanon Valley Offset, 1979.

# Iconography

## Definition of iconography

- 1: pictorial material relating to or illustrating a subject
- 2: the traditional or conventional images or symbols associated with a subject and especially a religious or legendary subject
- 3: the imagery or symbolism of a work of art, an artist, or a body of art





Commons Burial Ground ~ Little Compton, Rhode Island





Overview

Photo - Cindy Lees



# Tripartite Gravestone

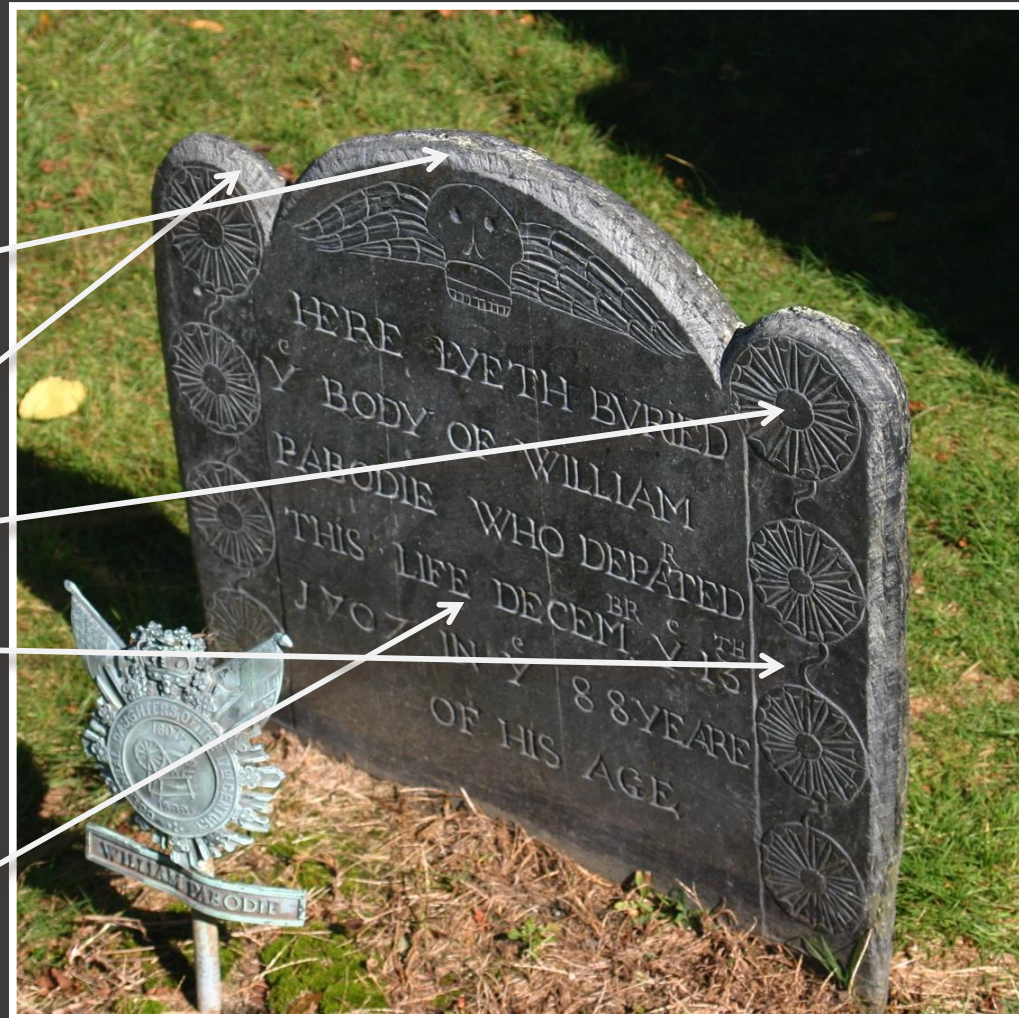
**Tympanum** – The semi-circular upper middle part of the stone.

**Shoulder** – The rounded upper edge.

**Finial** – An image within the shoulder.

**Border** – The rectangular edge below the shoulder that frames the sides of the epitaph.

**Epitaph** – Personal information and possibly a saying or phrase in the center of the stone.







Earliest Gravestone

Photo – Cindy Lees



# Death's Head



Photo  
Cindy Lees





Photo  
Cindy Lees





Photographs – Cindy Lees



# Southworth Tablet Casket



Here  
lyeth Interred  
the Body of Rebecca  
the wife of Capt.  
William Southworth  
who departed this  
life Decemb<sup>r</sup> 7 23  
in the 43<sup>rd</sup> year of  
her Age. 1702

Here  
lyeth Interred  
the Body of Capt.  
William Southworth  
sq. who departed  
this life June 7 23  
1710 in the 60<sup>th</sup>  
year of his Age.

# Transition to the Cherub





# Cherub















Here lyeth y<sup>e</sup>  
Body of Rebekah  
y<sup>e</sup> Daughter of  
John and Rebekah  
Church, dyed June  
y<sup>e</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> 1722 in y<sup>e</sup>  
18<sup>th</sup> Year of her Age.



# Transition from the Cherub















In Memory of  
Nathaniel Searls  
died Feb'y 3  
1749 in V  
88th year of  
his Age









IN MEMORY of  
Pattence y Wife  
of Richard Grinnell  
died March  
y 10<sup>th</sup> 1749 in  
y 68<sup>th</sup> year  
of her Age







# Portraiture







IN MEMORY

OF ARAI DAUGHTER

OF THOMAS

CHURCH

BORN

WIFE OF

17

18



IN Memory of  
MISS DEBORAH

Daughter of  
JOSEPH WOOD

ELDER MARY

Wife, who Died

July 25<sup>th</sup> 1783.





IN Memory  
of  
Mr. THOMAS BAI  
LEY who Died  
Dec. 20<sup>th</sup> 1792.  
In the 78<sup>th</sup> Year  
of his Age



In Memory of

Lieut. THOMAS BURGH

who died May 19<sup>th</sup> 1902





Photograph – Cindy Lees

# Willow and Urn







IN  
Memory  
of  
MR. JOSEPH W. THACHER  
of *Boston, M.*  
Who  
died March 10<sup>th</sup> 1809  
E. 54.





IN  
Memory  
of  
MR. JOSEPH W. THACHER  
of *Boston, M.*  
Who  
died March 10<sup>th</sup> 1809  
E. 54.



Photograph –Vincent Luti



# Just Unexplainable



Photograph –Cindy Lees



Photograph –Cindy Lees



# Recap

We've seen the progression of gravestone symbolism from the medieval view of death to individual redemption and to a Grecian motif that ignores the body and is representational.

The iconography follows the pattern of social thought throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The Death's head symbol was in vogue during the early 1700's when many of the people who passed away were born in the 1600's, a medieval time of thought.



The early 1700's into the mid 1700's saw the move from death as an unknown to putting flesh rising to heaven, a time of hope and redemption.

By the mid to late 1700's after the Revolution, more hope for life on earth and after death is apparent in the iconography.



And then it's the early 1800's, when democracy and all things Greek prevailed.



Thank You !