

## Hillside Cemetery

### Description

#### Introduction

While its name implies existence of picturesque characteristics of the Rural style cemetery design movement inspired by construction of Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge in the 1830s, the landscape layout, appearance and gravestone art of Hillside Cemetery adhere more closely to design characteristics from the Colonial Period. Acquired by the town from local farmers as a burial ground in 1753, it was originally called the North Burying (also Burial) Ground. Many of those interred here are significant in the history of the Town of Westford. War veterans, mill operatives, farmers and business people occupy the approximately 300 visible burials. Members of the Wright, Bates, Nutting, Keyes and other families influenced the town's history and appearance and continue to do so by virtue of their artfully carved gravestones. The landscape is nearly flat with some grade changes to accommodate the slightly rolling topography. The burial ground is located at the northwest corner of Nutting and Depot Roads and remains in use. Markers, oriented in north-south rows, are made primarily from slate although other materials are present. Colonial and Federal Period grave markers appear in the form of shouldered-arched and flat-topped tablets. Granite and marble also exist.

#### Landscape

Land comprising the old North Burying Ground belonged in the Colonial Period to Ebenezer and Thomas Wright, local residents who were probably farmers. The appearance at the time was likely that of a field of grass with a few small slate gravestones, a description still largely applicable.

Boundaries of the cemetery are lined on the south edge with a granite slab retaining wall capped with split coping stones and on the east by a granite fieldstone wall, also with split capstones. West and north boundaries are low dry-laid fieldstone walls. Entrance to the cemetery is thorough openings in the stone wall along the Depot Road (east) side and in the southern stone wall along Nutting Road. The Depot Road entrance is articulated by round piers built of cobblestone about five feet in height. Additional entry is via stone steps in a gap in the wall at the southern side. A modern flagpole occupies a site just inside the east entry.

Plot definition occurs in approximately four instances with simple granite curbs that are located either flush with the ground or as much as 18 inches in height. The Smith family plot has granite curbing approximately a foot in height with granite steps to access the slightly elevated plot. Single steps on the east and west are flanked by low octahedral piers. The step is inscribed "T. Smith" in memory of Thomas Smith (d. 1829 at 91 years of age). The William Chandler Family plot has slightly taller curbs with tooled edges. Curbs enclose square and rectangular parcels of from eight to twenty feet per side. A single asphalt path traverses the cemetery from east to west near its northern edge.

#### Markers

Hillside Cemetery reflects trends in gravestone development in its variety of slate, marble and granite markers. Slate is the oldest surviving material used for marking burials and is carved in shouldered-arched and flat-topped stelae (rectangular slabs or tablets). Ranging in height from one foot to five feet, this type of marker can demonstrate a relatively crude, hand cut appearance, a well-designed and possibly machine cut sharpness and several levels of workmanship in between. Quality of workmanship of the slate marker is sometimes obscured by the fact that the stone has deteriorated or been broken. Inscriptions also vary in quality and detail. The simplest have fine, narrow letters with little relief or depth. Later slate stones from the 19th century are more likely to demonstrate clear, deep, stylized letters with a pronounced serif and well thought out organization relative to the shape of the stone.

Markers appear in a variety of shapes. Those from the earliest period are most commonly cut in a rectangular form with an arched top, representative of the figurative portal between life and death. The shape is also considered an

abstraction of the human head and shoulders. This form of marking the passage from life is a Puritan concept brought from Boston and elsewhere during the region's period of first settlement. Eighteenth century stones are typically carved with one of a variety of motifs. The earliest marker in Hillside, the slate double arched marker of Jacob and Abigail Wright, husband and wife who both died in 1761 at the age of 65, exhibits winged death's heads with the legend "Momento Mori", an encouragement to the living to remember that death is imminent. The Thomas Wright slate marker from 1769 is edged with floral trim flanking a central panel with name and dates. The arched top bears the image of a winged death's head. The symbol of winged death, in the form of either a skull or abstracted human head flanked by a pair of feathered wings spread wide, occurs frequently on stones carved in the 18th century. This is a representation of the belief that the human spirit was released at the time of death for the flight heavenward. Henry (d. 1793 at 78 years of age) and Priscilla Richardson (d. 1776 at 63 years of age) are remembered by arched stones with death's heads in portals. Representative of the spirit of the deceased glancing back into the world of the living while simultaneously offering the living a preview of the afterlife, the portal is rich in Puritan symbolism and attitudes toward the transcendent nature of death. In addition to the portal and death's head on the Richardson stone are abstracted leafless trees, also symbolizing death.

Based on classical influences exerted by the spreading glow of the Enlightenment, new images for gravestone ornamentation rapidly made the older Puritan themes seem outdated. Urn and willow designs appear frequently on gravestones from the Federal through the Victorian Period (c. 1775-1830). Both slate and sandstone markers exhibit this late 18th and 19th century motif that is an icon of sorrow and grief. Change from the Puritan death's head to the classically inspired urn and willow marked a change in the way death was viewed by New England society. Previously, the event was considered a common reality whose dim portent reflected the stern view of life as a struggle for survival. The Post-Puritan view of death adopted a sentimental quality that spoke more of the emotional state of those left behind than of the journey of the deceased, causing the replacement of darkly spiritual carvings with abstract sorrowful imagery. The use of columns in gravestone design, frequently of the Doric order, is evidence of the pervasive influence of classical imagery popularized by the Enlightenment. Thomas Smith's (d. 1829 at 91 years of age) and his wife Molly Smith's (d. 1835 at 92 years of age) arched slate markers are two of the several that have urn and willow designs with Doric columns at the borders of the inscription panel. Approximately 43 gravestones have dates before 1830. Most are shouldered arch-topped forms carved from slate.

Additional marker types in the form of obelisks and tablets with biblical and other symbolism appeared during the Victorian Period. Obelisks are made mainly from gray granite with one example exhibiting only three sides. This example, commemorating the death of Asia Nutting in 1880, is of split granite without ornament and is around six feet tall. Others, from the late 1800s, have capstones and smooth, polished granite faces. The 1871 William Chandler Family pedestal, a stouter form resembling an obelisk, is cut from granite and has an inlaid marble inscription panel. Religious symbolism appears on the marble slab of Jacob Wendall (d. 1809 at 45 years of age) in the form of a hand with finger pointing heavenward recessed in an oval. Oak leaf clusters serve to articulate the markers for James M. Wright (d. 1867 at 67 years of age), and his wife Sarah (d. 1897 at 91 years of age). Carved ballflowers appear on the stone for their daughters, both named Mary (one who died in 1839 at three years of age and one in 1853 at 13 years). Sarah (d. 1870 at 36 years of age) and Hezekiah Cummings (1828-1904) were husband and wife and have oak leaf clusters on their marble stones. Victorian Period designs include other biblical references. Occupants of the Chandler Family plot have matching scroll tablets carved from marble. These low tablets are otherwise unadorned.

Two examples of zinc grave markers from the late 19th century exist in Hillside Cemetery. One Monumental Bronze marker commemorates posthumously the lives of Imla Keyes (d. 1861 at 68 years of age) and his son Edward (d. 1865 at 38 years of age). The second is for their relative George Keyes (1817-1898). This unusual marker type is the product of the Monumental Bronze Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut, which operated from the 1870s until after WW I. The two-foot high imitation stone is made to resemble quarry-faced granite in the form of an arched tablet. These are the only known zinc monuments in Hillside Cemetery but they are commonly found in small numbers in cemeteries across the nation.

At least three 20th century military stones exist in Hillside. A small rectangular marble marker with cambered top marks the resting place of Elbridge Reed (d. 1908) who served the country in the Civil War in Company G, 7th Vermont Infantry. No dates are inscribed on this stone. Harry E. Nixon Jr. (1920-1969) served during World War II in the U.S. Naval Reserve and is remembered with a marble marker carved with a cross inscribed in a circle. The

stone is flush with the ground. A similar stone commemorates the life and military service of Wendell L. R. Perry (1916-1968) who was a private in the U. S. Army in World War II. Both World War II veterans have separate civilian gravestones for themselves and their families.

### **Gravestone Carvers**

Gravestone carvers who signed their work in Hillside Cemetery include the Lowell, Massachusetts craftsmen Andrews and Wheeler who created the arched marble tablet for Joseph W. Keyes (d. 1879 at 58 years of age). D. Nichols also worked as a gravestone carver in Lowell and made the arched marble stone for Rebeccah (d. 1848 at 70 years of age) and Samuel Tenney (d. 1863 at 89 years of age).

Information about communities with which Westford residents maintained trade relationships can be learned from gravestones. Stone carvers signed their names at around ground level on some markers, occasionally including the name of their towns. By far the most frequent community noted on signed markers is Lowell, city of origin for stones carved by Andrews & Wheeler and D. Nichols, the only carvers to sign their work in Hillside. Newspapers from the end of the period support the assertion that, when traveling out of town for commercial purposes, residents of Westford usually went either to Lowell or Ayer, typically on the Stony Brook Railroad.

### **Statement of Significance**

The Hillside Cemetery retains integrity of materials, design, workmanship, feeling and association. It is eligible for the National Register under Criteria A and C at the local level and meets Criterion Consideration D as a cemetery which derives its significance from age, distinctive design features and association with historic events. The cemetery is significant under Criterion A for its association with events in the community such as epidemics of illness and military service in the Revolution. It is eligible under Criterion C as an example of a Colonial Period burial ground containing examples of gravestone carving representative of techniques commonly used in the period. The period of significance for the cemetery begins at its establishment in 1753 and extends to 1952. It has been in continuous use.

### **Introduction**

Westford's North Burying Ground first came into use as a public burial ground in 1753 when the parcel was given for the purpose to the town. Approximately a dozen stones survive from the 18th century. Burials at that time were conducted in the Protestant vein with a minimum of ceremony. Gravestone ornament was restrained and the surrounding landscape was allowed to appear as a grassy plot marked by slate headstones. Treatment of burial places in Westford remained austere until the mid-19th century when townspeople began efforts to improve the burial ground landscapes. This appears to have been motivated by the popularity of more exuberant funerary ornament as at Mount Auburn Cemetery founded in Cambridge in 1831, and by the antiquarians' interest in recording and stewardship of historic artifacts.

While other local cemeteries, including Fairview on Main Street in Westford, show signs of imitation of Mount Auburn Cemetery in their complex plot plans, curving circulation paths and ornate entrance gates, the North Burying Ground acquired only a picturesque new name, "Hillside". It was not the subject of any structural improvements or pathways among burial plots. Slate markers from the 18th century remain largely unchanged, although they are surrounded by Victorian and later period markers of granite and marble.

The most basic maintenance schedule has allowed the cemetery to retain much of its historic appearance by virtue of the densely grouped slate markers near the southeast corner, the small scale of markers and the simple landscape unencumbered by modern paths and furniture.

### **1753-1830**

The North Burying Ground occupies land that had belonged in the 18th century to the brothers Ebenezer (b. 1693) and Thomas Wright (1707-1769). Ebenezer's name appears on a list as one of the town's 89 original taxpayers.

Ebenezer resided on Chamberlain Road and served in 1726-1727 as treasurer for the West Precinct of Chelmsford which became the town of Westford in 1729. Thomas Wright is buried in Hillside Cemetery beneath a slate marker. The parcel was accepted by the town on March 5, 1753 according to town meeting records from that date. Those at the meeting voted to accept for a “Buring Place a Peace of Land att a Place Called Tarkil hill Being one acer more or less Bounding near where Two Rodes meet...”, thereby creating the North Burying Ground, the town’s second. The first, originally called the East Burying Ground, is now called Fairview Cemetery and came into use around the turn of the 18th century.

Burials whose markers do not survive may have occurred before the official establishment of the North Burial Ground. Gravestones from the 1700s and early 1800s are typically located very close together in the southeastern portion although some gaps exist. Family members tend to be adjacent to one another, frequently aligned in the order in which they died. No segregation based on ethnicity, occupation, military service or wealth is apparent. Most stones are around the same size, two to four feet high by one to three feet wide. Maintenance of the burial ground during this period was the responsibility of a nearby resident. Duties consisted of mowing grass, which was remunerated by the town on a yearly basis, and digging graves for which the caretaker was paid piecemeal. Approximately 50 markers from the period exist in the cemetery.

Eighteenth century residents of Westford who are buried in the North Burying Ground include industrialists, Revolutionary War veterans, local politicians and farmers. Around 1725, a miller named William Chandler (b. c.1690) built a fulling mill in nearby Brookside Village and began its 200-year history of industrial activity. The senior William Chandler is buried in Westford’s Fairview Cemetery but his son and grandson, who both continued to operate the fulling mill according to the 1883 town history, are interred here. His great grandson who is buried beneath an 1871 marker worked as a farmer according to the 1855 census. The Chandlers made a large impact on the town by engaging in industrial activity at Brookside and maintaining a family interest for several generations. William Chandler (d. 1826 at 71 years of age), grandson of the town’s first fulling miller, was a Revolutionary War veteran who served as a private in Captain Timothy Underwood’s company that marched on Concord in April, 1775 and later on Bunker Hill according to the 1908 publication *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War*. He served intermittently through 1778 in several other units and is buried beside his wife Joanna (d. 1842 at 87 years of age). The Chandlers have matching marble stelae carved by D. Nichols of Lowell. Private William Chandler’s son is interred here and was a Westford selectman in 1836 and 1837. Captain Oliver Bates (1721-1775) is interred in the old North Burying Ground and is another of its occupants who served in the Revolutionary War. Captain Bates died as a result of wounds shortly after the battle of Bunker Hill in June, 1775. He commanded companies of men in the regiments of Colonel James Prescott and Colonel William Prescott. He also served as selectman in 1764, 1774 and 1775.

Five additional veterans of the Revolutionary War are interred in the North Burying Ground including Sergeant Solomon Spaulding who marched on Concord and Bunker Hill, Pelatiah Wright who marched on Concord and Fort Ticonderoga, Ephraim Wright who marched on Concord and Daniel Nutting who marched on Bunker Hill. Joseph Wright Jr. marched on Concord and White Plains and died in the service of his country in New York according to the inscription on his gravestone. This is also the final resting place of Roswell Reed and Imla Keyes who both served in the War of 1812. Roswell Reed died in 1856 of consumption according to Marilyn Day in *Westford Days*.

Farming was the most common method of earning a living in Westford throughout the 18th and well into the 19th century. As a result, many of those interred at the North Burying Ground worked the land including Thomas and Ebenezer Wright who gave the town the land for the cemetery. Thomas lived on the opposite side of Nutting Road approximately ¼ mile west of the cemetery. Their relative Jacob Wright worked a farm at the corner of Groton Road and North Main Street with his wife Abigail, both of whom died in November 1761 at 65 years of age. The Wrights share a double slate stele with carving of a death’s head.

Three grave markers have poignant ability to reveal potential hardships of 18th century existence. A slate double gravestone with a single arched top marks the burial place of children of Ephraim and Abigail Wright, Hannah and Jotham, who died on August 23rd and August 22nd, 1775 at the ages of five and seven years. A nearby stone marks the burials of Thomas and William Smith who died on September 13th and September 19th, 1775. An additional shouldered arched slate marker commemorates the lives of three children of Joseph and Dorothy Wright. Rebecca,

Stephen and Joseph Wright died between August 30th and September 1st and were between the ages of 10 months and four years. The proximate dates of the deaths of these children is the more saddening when one considers that buried in Westlawn Cemetery are two children of Colonel John Robinson who died the same year, also in the late summer, and that there may have been an epidemic of disease throughout the town. Evidence exists of burials of victims of smallpox during the 18th century. Anonymous hand written notes added to a map specify no date or names but suggest the northwest corner of the cemetery as the site of such burials, although no documentary evidence is available. Nearly all of those interred here belonged to the First Parish Church until 1829, the time of the founding of the Congregational Church.

## **1830-1900**

Changes in the appearance of the cemetery began to occur after 1830 when slate was less frequently used for gravestones. Marble and granite gradually replaced slate, probably for their improved resistance to delamination and exfoliation. In addition to their superior durability, these materials present a very distinctive appearance in comparison to slate. Previously unavailable colors, shapes, inscription types and increased scale were all possible with the new materials. Also, the art of the gravestone carver was advancing in the face of modern imagery drawn from Victorian period biblical and iconographic sources.

Improvements to the grounds occurred on several occasions in the North Burying Ground. The first to be recorded was in 1844 and notes that Oliver Woodward was paid a small amount for a gate and a pair of stone posts. The gate and posts do not survive but their installation marks the beginning of cemetery maintenance chores documented in town reports. In 1846, Asia Nutting was paid \$98 for re-building 26 ½ rods of stone walls (approximately 430 feet). This length corresponds roughly to the length of the existing walls along the south and east sides of the cemetery. Mr. Nutting lived across the street from the cemetery and cut grass and brush in the burial ground from around 1846 until 1878 when he was 82 years old. In 1868, he was paid \$101.50 for “stone work” in the East Burial Ground (now Fairview Cemetery), suggesting he had some skill as a stone cutter or mason. Mr. Nutting’s sons Stephen and Benjamin were largely responsible for maintaining the cemetery from 1878 until the turn of the 20th century. The local surveyor Edward Symmes was retained by town officials to create a plan of the North Burial Ground in 1871. This has not yet been located.

In 1893, the town voted to adopt the provisions of the state law regarding selection of a Cemetery Commission. The first members were the industrialist Allan Cameron, the mill owner George Heywood and the Westford Academy headmaster William E. Frost. Their goal was the improvement of the appearance of the town’s burial grounds which they effected at the North Burial Ground by re-setting head stones and tidying the grounds in 1895. Markers for gravesites were purchased to commemorate military service in all conflicts up to that time and avenues were laid out. In the North Burial Ground this amounted to a handful of marble stones for veterans of the Civil War such as the undated low arched tablet of Elbridge Reed. Landscape improvements consist of a single straight path along the north edge. Improvements of a more picturesque nature took place at the former East Burial Ground, now Fairview Cemetery. Changes there included construction of curving avenues, a summer house (gazebo) and large gateways which attracted most residents of the town in search of a burial plot including all three original Cemetery Commission members. During the period 1894-1897, Hillside was the site of only 12 burials compared to 103 for Fairview. A similar relationship existed between Fairview and Hillside in terms of the growing number of funds established for perpetual care of burial plots. Hillside was not entirely neglected, however. According to town reports from 1900, the south wall along what is now Nutting Road was re-laid, pointed and improved with a course of split granite capstones which formalized the previous dry-laid stone wall. The wall continues to exist in this condition.

The concept of Perpetual Care came into use in Westford in 1893. For a deposit of \$50-100 to the perpetual care fund, Westford residents could provide themselves with a permanent program of plot maintenance. Also around this time, residents were requested to pay an amount of one to five dollars per year to defray maintenance costs. Rising expenses may have been due to increasing numbers of plot-defining features such as granite curbs and the several types of fence that may have been in use in the Victorian period. No plot-defining fences survive.

Interments during the period include that of the farmer William Chandler who died in 1874 and is buried with his wife Rhoda beneath a stout granite pillar with cap. He was the great grandson of the miller William Chandler who

began fulling woolen cloth at Brookside in 1725 according to the 1883 town history. He is buried with some of his family. James Wright (d. 1876 at 67 years of age) and Sarah Wright (d. 1897 at 91 years of age) are interred beneath matching marble stelae with pointed arched tops. Both are articulated with clusters of oak leaves recessed in an oval. Children of the Wrights interred in adjacent plots include two daughters, both named Mary, who died in 1839 and in 1853.

Civil War veterans include Edward Keyes who died in 1865 while serving in the military at Sumterville, South Carolina. He was 38 years old serving his fourth year in Company C of the 30th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. Other Civil War veterans include R. W. Cummings, also of Company C, 30th Massachusetts Infantry, Charles M. Cummings (1838-1910) of Company C of the 16th Massachusetts Infantry, and Elbridge Reed who served in Company G, 7th Vermont Infantry and died in 1908.

## **1900-1960**

Interments in Hillside slowed during the period from 1900-1960. The larger, more refined Rural style Fairview Cemetery on Main Street in Westford imbued the smaller Hillside with the more primitive character of a Colonial Period burial ground. No curving avenues or were built, although Charles Farrow improved or rebuilt the existing granite east wall in 1901. Cemetery superintendent Albert P. Richardson called for suggestions to rename the burying grounds something "more euphonious" in 1895 and again in 1903 with the suggestion that Hillside be the name applied to the old North Burial Ground. There was only one respondent who apparently concurred, thus changing the name. Lack of interest on the subject is in marked contrast to the campaign to rename the former East Burial Ground. New walls, gates and avenues inspired avid voting, ultimately in favor of the name Fairview. Since Hillside lacked the Rural style improvements of Fairview, it received a new name but little of the enthusiasm for reserving plots.

Expenditures for maintenance nearly doubled after World War II, possibly due to mechanization of maintenance procedures. The 1937 town report includes a sample contract for purchase of burial plots that indicates no walls, fences, curbs or projecting corner posts were allowed, probably to simplify maintenance. This regulation, instituted by Cemetery Commission members Sebastian Watson, Fred Blodget and Axel Lundberg, served to stem the profusion of Victorian ornament in cemeteries. These volunteers served the town from at least 1937 though 1949. Mr. Lundberg operated a gravestone manufacturing and sales operation in Westford's village of Nabnasset from c. 1910-1940.

World War I and World War II veterans are buried in Hillside, two of which have military markers. Harry E. Nixon served in World War II and is buried under a white marble tablet mounted flush with the ground. The legend "Main AMM2 USNR World War II" and dates 1920 - 1969 appear below a cross inscribed in a circle. Wendell L. R. Perry (1916-1968) resides under a white marble marker whose top is flush with the ground. He served as a private first class I the army in World War II. The stone in the south wall with the inscribed name "Hillside" was given to the cemetery by the family of Claire Westwood in 1991.

## **Conclusion**

Colonial, Federal and Victorian period historical associations in Hillside are largely intact despite interruptions by the small number of modern markers and by the removal of some historic cemetery furnishings. However, it continues to be possible, by observing the rows of arch-topped slate stones carved with cherubs, classical columns, urn and willow designs, and by recalling names so important to the development of the community, to get a strong sense of how Colonial Period residents of the Town of Westford viewed their burial places.

## **Geographical Data**

### **Verbal Boundary Description:**

Hillside Cemetery comprises all of the land within the boundaries of the cemetery. It is bounded by Depot Road on the east and by Nutting Road on the south. The cemetery encompasses 1 acre, described by the assessor's office as parcel 35 on map 36.

**Boundary Justification:**

Boundaries of the cemetery were determined by the Westford Historical Commission and by the consultant. Boundaries include all gravestones, burial-related buildings, structures, circulation paths and ornamental plantings. Stone walls encircle the cemetery and mark all boundaries.



**SKETCH MAP**

**NORTH TOWARD TOP**



SKETCH MAP

NORTH TOWARD TOP

*Go to next section*