

**T**he Ancient Burying Ground is the oldest historic site in Hartford, and the only one surviving from the 1600s. From 1640, four years after the arrival of the first English settlers, until the early 1800s, it was Hartford's primary graveyard. During that period anyone who died in town, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnic background, economic status, or religious faith, was buried here. The oldest gravestone is thought to be that for Timothy Stanly, who died in 1648 (see map between #9 and #10).

Approximately 6,000 men, women, and children are believed to have been interred in the Ancient Burying Ground, which was originally considerably larger than it is today. Over the centuries commercial buildings, as well as the First Congregational meeting house, were erected on Burying Ground land, whittling it down to its present size of four acres.

Since gravestones were expensive, the vast majority of people interred in the Ancient Burying Ground – perhaps as many as 90 per cent – never had one to mark their final resting place. In 1835 there were 563 stones; by 1877, 526 stones were left. Today, approximately 415 stones still stand.

Efforts to preserve the Ancient Burying Ground began with an 1836 campaign led by Daniel Wadsworth, whose father, Jeremiah, was one of the last to be buried here. As part of that project, a concrete obelisk, faced with brownstone inscribed with the names of the first settlers of Hartford, was erected.

In 1896 the Ruth Wyllys Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution significantly improved the site, had it enclosed with a wrought-iron fence designed by the renowned architectural firm of McKim, Meade, and White, and preserved and restored some stones. Emily Seymour Goodwin Holcombe spearheaded the project, which also included clearing away slums along adjacent Gold Street. "The Gold Street Lady," as Mrs. Holcombe came to be known, was honored with the rare privilege of being laid to rest in the Ancient Burying Ground, along with her husband and daughter. The Ruth Wyllys Chapter's interest in and support for the Ancient Burying Ground continue to this day.

In 1985 the Ancient Burying Ground Association, Inc., a private, non-profit group, launched an on-going restoration program. The Ancient Burying Ground has been dramatically improved as a site, while cutting-edge knowledge and techniques have been used to clean, preserve, restore, or entirely replicate more than 100 gravestones to date. The Founders' Monument, as the obelisk erected in 1837 had come to be called, had deteriorated drastically. The Society of the Descendants of the Founders of Hartford replaced it in 1986 with a new obelisk of solid pink granite from Stony Creek, Connecticut, to commemorate Hartford's 350th anniversary.

## Gravestone Art

Gravestone carvings are recognized as important works by folk artists who developed distinctive individual styles. Tombstones were the major form of sculpture produced in colonial New England. The Ancient Burying Ground contains fine examples of stones by many well-known carvers, making it, in effect, an open-air museum.

The size, style, and quality of carving of a gravestone tell much about the status of the person it memorializes. To be able to afford a gravestone was a sign of affluence. The larger and more elaborate the stone, the more prosperous and prominent the deceased. Sometimes stones were erected for children, or for individuals of meager means, by people to whom they had close emotional ties.

The ultimate in gravestones was the "tablestone" – a rectangular slab of stone resting atop four stone legs – costing up to ten times what an ordinary tablet stone did. Most tablestones have little decorative carving; size, not style, was what counted.

Most markers in the Ancient Burying Ground were carved of brownstone quarried in East Middletown (present-day Portland), Connecticut, 20 miles south of Hartford, although there are markers of schist, slate, and marble. Brownstone was favored by gravestone carvers because it is a "soft" stone that can be cut with relative ease. Unfortunately, that very characteristic makes brownstone a poor choice for gravestones. It is extremely vulnerable to the elements and pollution, with the result that countless gravestones in Hartford and beyond have literally crumbled. Portland brownstone became popular throughout Victorian America as a building material for everything from churches to colleges to mansions to rowhouses – including the fashionable New York City "brownstones."



### PLAIN STYLE

The first gravestones in Connecticut were in the "plain" style. The carving consisted of only brief facts about the deceased, with no decoration. The stone for Richard Edwards (Walking Tour No. 10) is an example by an unknown carver of this style, which provided little room for artistic creativity.

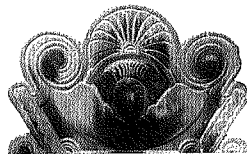


### "DEATH'S HEAD"

Imagery began to appear on Connecticut gravestones late in the 1600s. Stones from this era feature hollow-eyed, grimacing skulls flanked by bat-like wings. These "death's

heads" are believed to reflect Puritanism's grim attitude toward human mortality, emphasizing the specter of death and the decay of the flesh.

The marker for Phenias Willson (Walking Tour No. 7), attributed to James Stancliff of Portland, Connecticut, is one of the earliest Connecticut gravestones to depict a skull.



### "WINGED CHERUB/ ANGEL'S HEAD"

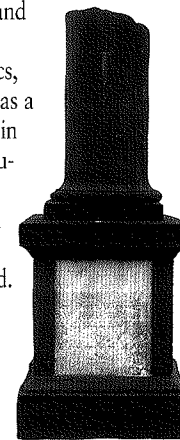
Beginning around 1730, death's heads became more "human" in appearance, more sophisticated in design and execution. The fearsome expression gradually softened into a

sober, even smiling one. These "winged cherubs" are believed to symbolize the soul's flight to heaven, emphasizing the blissful life everlasting that awaited the righteous.

In these stones the individual carver's artistry becomes evident. Each man started with the same symbolic image, then rendered it in his own personal, distinctive style, as demonstrated by the stones for Captain Israel Seymour, by Aaron Haskins of Bolton, Connecticut (Walking Tour No. 8); for Richard Bernham, by Gershom Bartlett of Bolton (Walking Tour No. 9); and for Ebenezer Watson, by Thomas Johnson III of Middletown (Walking Tour No. 6).

### NEOCLASSICAL

Around 1800, angel's heads were displaced by imagery that included urns and weeping willows, or by obelisks like the one attributed to stonemason Isaac Sweetland of Hartford for Jeremiah Wadsworth (Walking Tour No. 3). These neoclassical forms reflect the young United States' identification with the grandeur and nobility of the ancient Greek and Roman republics, as well as a decline in the influence of religion in New England.



### REPLICAS

Two dozen stones in the Ancient Burying Ground, decayed beyond repair, have been replaced with replicas. Based on historical photographs and comparison with other stones by the original carvers, a few dedicated craftsmen re-create these markers that would otherwise be lost, and carry on the gravestone carver's tradition. One of the finest is that for Ebenezer Watson (Walking Tour No. 6) by Allen Williams of Chester Granite Company in Otis, Massachusetts. The black slate marker memorializing African Americans interred in the Ancient Burying Ground (Walking Tour No. 2), carved by Nick Benson of the John Stevens shop of Newport, Rhode Island, was modeled after gravestones made for and by Newport's eighteenth-century African Americans.