Carved in Stone ~ A Digital Archive Initiative to Document all Grave Markers in the ABG

*By Ty Tryon*

The ABGA was awarded a grant from the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to fund our Carved in Stone project. This cutting-edge project is intended to photograph every single grave marker in a high-resolution digital format, and archive the photos in an online searchable database. The photos, along with an updated record of the epitaphs and inscriptions on all markers, create baseline documentation of what exists today, serving as a digital repository of Hartford’s oldest grave markers for future conservators. The database also provides an ancestral searchable resource to the descendants of Hartford’s earliest settlers, and a visual record of Hartford’s history.

Elizabeth Correia photographing fragments stored in the Center Church basement. These pieces were set aside during the 1980’s restoration project, for possible repair or replication at a later time.

Stories of Complexity and Connections in the ABG

*By Mary Donohue*

The ABGA and the Hartford History Center of the Hartford Public Library have teamed up to present five workshops and lectures this fall and next February and May. The ABGA is committed to promoting events and experiences that help to connect the greater Hartford community with the stories of Hartford’s earliest residents as well as to share new scholarship.

Through the generosity of CT Humanities, the ABGA received a matching grant of $3,890 to fund these five programs. The first three were virtual, presented this October, and included audience members from across the country: “Genealogical Research in Colonial and Revolutionary Connecticut,” by Carol Whitmer and Diana McCain, gave a comprehensive overview; “Dear Mary, Dear Luther,” by Richard Ross, explored the personal letters and insights of the Reformers; and the last talk was Richard Ross on “The Great Hartford Witch Hunt,” moving from the background of European politics and religion, to New England’s early settlements and challenges, and then focusing on Hartford, and several individuals interred in the ABG who were involved in the trials.

Upcoming 2022 programs include “Researching Your African American Ancestors” in February, with Dr. Kathy Hermes, Project Director of the ABGA’s “Uncovering Their History” (more at https://www.africannativeburialsct.org/); “Saving Historic Gravestones” in May, with Fine Arts Conservator Francis Miller; and the launch of the new ABGA website with the photo database in May. Follow us on Facebook or Instagram to get event details.
Knox provided these planters at the Gold Street entrance to the ABG. One of the City’s new parks signs is at the top of the steps.
Tree Removal Update

By Ty Tryon

Preservation and conservation of our historic and fragile gravestones are paramount to the Ancient Burying Ground Association (ABGA). A complex challenge to burial grounds like the ABG is how to balance the safety of the gravestones and the presence of trees. In urban areas like downtown Hartford, trees add cooling benefits, create oxygen, reduce air pollution, and improve mental health, not to mention how beautiful they are.

As beautiful as trees are, they present a conservation hazard to historic sites by dropping limbs during a storm. One tree in particular has been a real challenge for us. A towering sugar maple was situated in the most densely packed area of table stones and tablet stones. Approximately three dozen grave markers stand where the massive limbs arched overhead. The very large roots growing underneath two box tombs created an unstable situation, putting the box tombs at risk of collapsing into each other. As conservators and stewards of these remarkable grave markers, we could not stabilize the two box tombs until the tree was removed. Because the tree was planted in a tightly packed area of gravestones, getting tree removal equipment into the burial ground was a logistical challenge and simultaneously posed the risk of damage to the gravestones.

We contacted the City of Hartford arborist, Heather Dionne, who scheduled the tree removal with the City’s contractor SaveATree, a licensed and accredited tree, shrub, and lawn care company. The company acquired a highly specialized machine called the Spyder, one of five in the country. A crew of five from SaveATree gingerly cut the limbs and removed the huge trunk of the tree without damaging any of the gravestones. As suspected, the tree was rotten and hollow inside the trunk as well as in some of the limbs. The sugar maple was probably planted about 120 years ago. We will miss the wonderful shade it provided but we will all sleep better at night when a storm passes through Hartford.

The following article, from the Hartford Courant, August 17, 1867, shows that the potential damage from trees is not a new problem for admirers of old cemeteries. The partnership of the City of Hartford and the ABGA is critical in these situations, and has worked well.
The Ancient Burying Ground Association (ABGA) has embarked on an important initiative to replace and replicate three grave markers that belong to American Revolutionary Veterans: Captain Joseph Talcott, d. 1799, John Watson, d. 1795, and Major Daniel Jones, d. 1802. All three grave markers were beyond repair. The Capt. Joseph Talcott grave marker was at risk of toppling over.

The critical challenge we face when repairing and replicating ancient grave markers is finding sources of historically correct stone to be authentic in the replication process. All the original quarries closed years ago. Fortunately, our conservator and sculptor, Randall Nelson, located a privately-owned section of the historic Portland, CT quarry. The owner of that section was gracious enough to sell us an 8,000-lb block of solid brownstone. This block had the tight straight grain that Randall required. The next challenge was lifting the 8,000-lb block onto a trailer to bring it to a mill where it was cut into individual slabs to Randall’s specifications. Weeks later, the cut slabs were ready to move to Randall’s studio.

The Capt. Joseph Talcott replica was the first to be completed and installed. Take a close look at the delicate details on the angelic face of this beautifully carved gravestone. This was hand-carved with only a mallet and chisel. The original stone was carved in the Johnson Shop in Portland, CT.

The John Watson replica has been carved, lettered, and installed in the ABG. The original stone is also brownstone. The layout of this particular stone had an unusual pattern not seen on other grave markers from the Johnson Shop. A member of the ABGA Conservation Team scoured dozens of colonial burying grounds up and down the Connecticut River valley, searching for a similar pattern to use as a model for the John Watson stone, but to no avail. From the remaining original fragments on this stone, Randall was able to extrapolate the rest of the design. Even though the lettering was obliterated beyond legibility, we had copies of the Chas. Hoadley transcriptions from the 1860s to guide the layout of the lettering.

The third replication on our list is the Major Daniel Jones marker. This stone is marble, which is a soft stone that breaks easily, and in addition, dissolves from the effects of acid rain. This gravestone has also been repaired numerous times, making it impossible to repair. We were fortunate to secure a large slab of marble that met our specifications. The replication is in mid-process of rendering the ornamental design and lettering. This stone has a remarkable neo-classical willow-and-urn design that is very striking.

Connecticut played a major part in the American Revolution. More than 40,000 Connecticut men saw military
service, helping to win independence from Great Britain. Twenty-five of these patriots have marked graves in the Ancient Burying Ground.

This is an ambitious project for the ABGA that requires significant funding. When it comes to repairing or replicating gravestones in the ABG, we do not take shortcuts or use power tools. Replicating ancient gravestones is a time-consuming process, from research, to acquiring historically correct stone, to verifying the lettering and the design that is attributed to a single carver or carving shop, and finally to the carving, using nothing more than a mallet and hand chisel. Projects like this take a team of committed individuals from the ABGA Board to work with and support the stone conservator/sculptor.

We Need Your Help

The ABGA is replicating these reminders of Connecticut’s Revolutionary War heroes as we look forward to July 4, 2026 - the 250th anniversary of the 1776 establishment of the United States of America. Each gravestone replication will cost about $10,000. Please consider making a generous donation to help secure this fragile legacy. Donations can be made by check to ABGA, P.O. Box 347, Hartford, CT 06141-0347, or online at theancientburyingground.org/support-us/donations/.
Our Neighbors Get a Tour

On Saturday Nov. 6, a group of residents from the Bushnell Tower building across from the ABG joined ABGA Representative Ruth Shapleigh-Brown for a tour. A group of about 14 residents came out on the cool but sunny day for the visit. The history, information and questions were flowing with great interest. Some had also watched the Hartford Library lecture that Richard Ross gave on the witch topic which also created interest. The visit started at 10:30 am and was still going at Noon time. Ruthie is looking forward to perhaps doing another segment with them in the spring.

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the art and history of the times.

In addition to uploading these photographs to the ABGA website, all photos will also be housed at the Connecticut Digital Archive (CTDA). The CTDA, hosted by the University of Connecticut Libraries in collaboration with the Connecticut State Library, is a program dedicated to the long-term preservation of a wide range of digital resources, for educational and cultural institutions and state agencies in Connecticut.

Through the SHPO grant process, we selected Heritage Consultants of Newington. Elizabeth Correia and Stefon Danczuk captured the essence of the fragile ancient gravestones in stunning high-resolution, high-quality photographs. The scale of this project is incredible. An estimated 1,100 photographs will be included, as a minimum of two photos for each headstone, one for each footstone, and three for each table stone were taken. The project required the use of mirrors to produce strong raking light at an oblique angle across each stone. Raking sunlight across the face of the stone illuminates the faintest of detail on highly eroded gravestones. The completed photography identified a final count of the different types of markers in the ABG: 409 headstones, 197 footstones, 37 table stones, 3 obelisks, and 6 plaques. The team also confirmed and updated the record of inscriptions on all extant stones and markers, and these will be part of the database.

Concurrent with developing the photograph and inscription database, we are overhauling the ABGA website, which is necessary to accommodate the data-heavy photographs. With input from a committee, historian and author Diana Ross McCain has been revising and developing content, and web master and designer Sharon Clapp is bringing it all together and making it work. The ABGA is looking forward to launching the new website next spring.
Creamware: Artifacts from Colonial America

By Elizabeth Correia

Creamware with a clear glaze was first produced by the English potter Josiah Wedgewood in 1762, supposedly as a gift to Queen Anne. English-made creamware was immediately shipped throughout England and its colonies. By 1771 American potters picked up the technique and produced their own, the most successful being John Bartlam of South Carolina. The paste (interior) of the ceramic sherd is a cream-colored refined earthenware. It is dipped into a clear glaze that consists of lead oxide and flint, which has a greenish-yellow tint where it pools. This tint is visible in bends of a ceramic like the edge of a footring. The glaze gives the ceramics their shiny, waterproof surface.

Creamware was most commonly produced as table, tea, and toiletry items, often molded along their edges in various repeating ridged patterns.

In the photo above, the pieces on the left are redware, a red-colored earthenware that was common in American colonial homes because of its cheap production costs. It was most often shaped into utilitarian vessels. The sherd at the top left of the photo is coated in a black glaze, while the one on the bottom has a clear lead glaze. Both were used for a long period of time in the United States between the seventeenth and nineteenth century. The sherd on the top right of the photo is also a redware that has a clear lead glaze. However, it has stripes of white slip that when glazed and fired appear yellowish. Slip is a thin clay that is trailed over the surface of the earthenware body to create contrasting colors of decoration. This shows that the dish was part of a more stylized table ware. It was produced between the mid-seventeenth century and nineteenth century.

The sherd on the bottom right is the rim of a clear glazed pearlware dish that has been molded with a “shell edge” reminiscent of ridged clam shells and painted blue. Shell-edged pearlware was produced between circa 1800 and the 1830s, most commonly as table ware. Similar edging was applied to earlier creamware vessels, and the style continued to be used during pearlware production. Paint colors included either blue or green.

Information gathered from:
https://apps.jefpat.maryland.gov/diagnostic/index-Ceramics.html

https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/typeceramics/types/
Old objects such as glass and pottery shards, or pieces of metal, have turned up in the Ancient Burying Ground, often when straightening and resetting gravestones, which usually requires digging 1-3 feet down. This summer, a couple of interesting items were unearthed, as shown at right.

For more information on colonial pottery, see the article on page 7, by Elizabeth Correia, with photos by Ruth Shapleigh-Brown of sherds she has found over the years. Elizabeth is photographer and historian at Heritage Consultants and has been working in the Ancient Burying Ground over the past year on documentation for the ABGA’s Carved in Stone database. (see p. 1)

This part of a candlestick (above left) came from the front of the Burying Ground. Above right is how the original likely looked.

The second item was a sherd of blueware (left above), possibly from a platter like the one on the right, which Ruthie Brown collected years ago.