



Old Lyme Historical Society
Duck River Cemetery 1676 – 1735

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History is based primarily upon the interpretation of written records. For our particular town of Lyme or Old Lyme these can take various forms. Housed in our public repositories are town and church records, land or more accurately property records, tax records, treasurers' ledgers, estate inventory and probate records, and court records. There are also personal diaries or journals, business ledgers, ships' logs, and sometimes personal letters either in the possession of relatives, or maintained in public archives. Of equal importance to the aforementioned, are the artifacts carved in stone and erected in our cemeteries. These are *gravestones*.

This paper investigates and attempts to place into historical perspective the first half century of use for the Duck River cemetery. This investigation represents an initial inquiry, fully recognizing my own limitations as well as the diverse nature of the relevant documentation.

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The first written document that relates directly to the Duck River cemetery is dated from March 6, 1720 when "at a town meeting it was voated that Thomas Enis shall have 4 pounds for clearing the land for the burying place by Duck River" (Burr,1968). However, it is clear that there are already a significant number of burials within the burying ground as attested to by various dated gravestones. Therefore, it is unknown at this time whether or not there is written reference to the initial and formal establishment of the burial ground at Duck River.

The Renold Marvin headstone is the oldest dated monument in the Duck River cemetery. It is situated in the ancient portion of the Duck River cemetery on a subtle rise near the river. The gravestone marking Marvin's place of burial is nestled in with the later burials of Joseph Sill and Sill's wife Sarah as well as other members of the Sill family.

The Marvin Family genealogy states the date of death as August 4th 1676, however, on June 22nd 1676, a month and a half earlier, the Lyme society is already discussing the distribution of his estate. The document in the society records (Burr, 1968) states: "At a towne meeting it was agreed that 30 akers of land wch is due to the *estate* of R. Marvin". Clearly, Renold Marvin had passed away prior to the writing of both documents. The gravestone does not clarify the question as the precise date is not evidenced. At this point in the research we will have to settle for the stone documenting an interment in all likelihood for the first half of 1676. The records for Renold Marvin also indicate that he left behind his second wife. Sarah Marvin who he had married in 1663.

In the same year as Renold Marvin's death, John Huntley passed away. The will of John Huntley was recorded in Lyme on November 16, 1676. In it he called himself "very sick and weak of body" (Burr, 1968). Both men had dwellings at "Sunkapog" or Duck River and we know that Marvin who died earlier was buried at the Duck River cemetery.

I would suspect that Huntley is also buried at the Duck River cemetery, however, a headstone for him is unknown. During the early period in the Puritan colonies, it was not common to pay much attention to the individual. Rather, it was the congregation that mattered. Burial was not usually elaborated and marking of the site of interment was often inconsequential.

It is highly probable that Renold Marvin's grave was at the time of interment inconsequential as well, therefore, unmarked. Upon research it was discovered that the headstone for Renold Marvin was produced by the stone carver James Stanclift. At the time of Marvin's death, Stanclift was still in England. He didn't start making headstones until 1684 when he came to East Saybrook or Lyme. Marvin's gravestone is therefore postdated and was made at least 8 years after his death, thus supporting the inconsequential nature of his initial interment.

The gravestone was undoubtedly placed there by Marvin's family. As noted before, Renold Marvin's stone is adjacent to Joseph Sill and Sill's wife Sarah who died in 1715. Upon further research it was determined that Sarah was the wife that Renold Marvin left behind and referred to as "relict" in the Marvin estate document. She subsequently married the famous Indian fighter of King Phillip's War, Joseph Sill. The inclusion of Renold Marvin's grave within the Sill family burial plot of the Duck River cemetery was a result of Renold being interred next to his wife.

The Marvin gravestone also likely marks the end of the most rigorous and conservative period of Puritanism in Lyme. In the beginning years of Puritan settlement across New England most of those who came over were totally devoted to the "*society*" or congregation. Their own welfare and importance was insignificant in comparison to that of the corporate group. Settlers were part on a religious community that could only function if everyone lived, worked, and prayed together. The Puritan New England colonies were organized around a combination of church and state. Nonconformity was an unthinkable crime and those who dared to attempt to live outside the norms of Puritan society were unmercifully harassed and punished. The Individual was virtually inconsequential. As a result there was little tolerance of self expression. Those of the congregation, dressed alike, wore no personal adornment or jewelry, and had no private lives. Dwellings were one open room accessible to everyone. Those in the household ate, slept, and lived together beneath the watchful eyes of God. Even in death those who had passed away were viewed as being unimportant. They were interred reverently but without attention to their individual lives. Therefore, grave markers were not erected. John Huntley's 1676 burial is probably a good example of this at Duck River cemetery.

This repressive and strict cultural lifestyle begins to break down in the mid-1680's. Important families from this point in time onward begin to engage stonecutters to make gravestones for their deceased relatives. Gravestone design at Duck River continue to document the gradual change of society's view of the individual. In the latter years of the 17th century and

early decades of the 18th century the individual becomes more important and as a result gravestone design as well as domestic architecture becomes more personalized and embellished.

Gravestones that illustrate the first period or stylistic phase of design are those of Renold Marvin postdated to 1676, Ruth Noyes 1690, Joseph Sill 1696, and Phebe Marvil 1707. These clearly represent the style of stonecutter James Stanclift.

His stones are distinguishable by the peculiar elongate roof-like line (tented) that he placed at the top of his letter "A." He carved in large capital letters on stones that usually have evenly rounded tops rather than lateral shoulders" so characteristic of most New England gravestones (Slater, 1987).

The Stanclifts were one of the earliest and most influential of the carving families of the lower Connecticut River Valley. Their work extends from the late 1600s into the nineteenth century and includes five generations of carvers. The various Stanclifts worked in a red – brown Triassic sandstone that came from their quarry in Portland.

James Stanclift was apprenticed as a mason in the West Indies before arriving in Lyme, Connecticut about 1684. He received permission from the selectmen of Lyme, to make "*a clamp of bricks*" on town land along side the River at a Town Meeting on Feb. 1, 1686. At the same Town Meeting it was ordered that the "*land of William Waller Jur being the 21 Lott, was to be laid out near to the Jeames Stanclift farme*" (Burr,1968). This farm was at the North End of "The Great Pond" or to what we now refer as Rogers Lake. On Oct.10, 1689 James Stanclift conveyed to Joseph Rogers of New London, New London County, CT for the sum of £40-00-00 a parcel of land in Lyme (LLR: book 2,p.460). Soon after that Stanclift moved from Lyme to the eastern shore of the Great River across from Middletown in what was referred to as Chatham, now Portland. He worked as a mason and stone cutter there until his death in 1712 (Stanclift & Stanclift, 1995).

His eldest son carried on the tradition of stonecutting and William Stanclift's work is evidenced at both Duck River and Meeting House Hill cemeteries. There is a period when both cutters are working jointly on gravestones. In Duck River cemetery the Walston Brockway's stone of 1707 is in the overall rounded top form of James, however, the lettering is probably that of William. The tent over the A is missing. This is the same case for the John (1696) and Sarah (1702) Lay's stones at Meeting House Hill cemetery. After his father's death William establishes his own style which still employs the lettering to be done in Upper Case letters. However, the stone itself has three arches at the top, the large central arch flanked at the shoulder by two lower and narrower arches. A precursor to this overall form may be the Ruth Noyes gravestone of 1690 with the more developed style being witnessed in William's Sarah Sill's 1715 stone.

William's later works illustrate the placement of a rosette in each of the shoulder arches and occasionally a stylized death's head. John Lay junior's 1723 gravestone at Meetinghouse Hill exemplifies this approach. However, the Duck River cemetery's Alger plot of, John 1735, Mary 1729 and Temperance 1727 are very stylized and strikingly individualized. Clearly, the stonecutter is accentuating the significance of the individual.

In conclusion Lyme's Duck River cemetery shows an evolution of early American colonial thought. At its inception the cemetery is a reflection of how Puritan values and morality tempered everyday life, and death. In the beginning with the passing of members of the society in Lyme there were no markers indicating the placement or significance of those deceased. It was the congregation not the individual that mattered. This was a time of corporate living. All aspects of life centered about the church and the congregation. The church and state were intricately intertwined. The center of the community or *society* was the meetinghouse. It was the social, economic, and ideological foundation of colonial life.

While burying grounds appear immediately upon settlement, by the mid 1680's gravestones start to appear. Their design, while plain, begins to identify and recognize the individual who has passed away. This is followed in the early 18th century by progressively more elaborate and stylized gravestone forms and equally individualized epitaphs.

Simultaneously, colonial America begins to shift away from an ultraconservative cultural stance. During the early 18th century society begins to acknowledge the importance and value of the individual. Over the course of the ensuing centuries this trend has continued and has helped create a nation that today prides itself as a haven for individual rights, thought, and initiative.

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