

# THE OLDEST CEMETERY IN PROVINCETOWN

By Gary Chefetz

Most people don't think of a cemetery as a place to go exploring. Aside from those who periodically visit the grave of a loved one, curious youngsters, and an occasional moonlit rendezvous, the average cemetery doesn't get much action. This need not be because, despite what you might think, a cemetery can be a beautiful, tranquil retreat as well as an adventure back in time.

The oldest cemetery in Provincetown, a hill that rises from the junction of Court and Withrop Streets, is one such cemetery. Most of the names on the gravestones are those of the original families that settled here. The majority of these graves predate 1850; however, some are fairly recent.

The oldest cemetery wasn't always the oldest cemetery in Provincetown. "An older cemetery, with a few stones, and evidently unmarked graves, existed on Franklin Street, until fifty years ago," wrote Nancy W. Paine Smith in *The Provincetown Book*, in 1922. According to Grace Collinson, who has spent much of this past winter researching the history of the oldest cemetery, the site of the first cemetery was where Bradford Street now intersects Franklin. She says it is very likely that the cemetery was moved to accommodate the construction of Bradford Street.

The oldest known grave in the now-oldest cemetery would probably have been moved from that original site. The grave of Desire Cowing is dated 1798. She is an ancestor of the John Cowing family living here today.

More than 600 persons are buried at the oldest cemetery, and there are many names of people, mostly men, lost at sea. There is no way to verify the accuracy of much of what's recorded, and many records are nonexistent. In fact, there are at least seven identifiable grave sites that were never recorded.

More than 146 of the approximately 600 gravesites belong to children aged 5 and younger, many of whom died in infancy. The causes of death entered into the records through the years reflect the growth and evolution of medicine. The chronological progression is fascinating.

Only three Portuguese family names appear in the records, among them, three children of Emanuel Caton who is believed to be the first Portuguese immigrant to Provincetown. He is said to have been landed here by a ship which had been seized by pirates. According to the story, Caton was a boy at the time, which was shortly after the turn of the 19th century.

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The other Portuguese buried there are Captain Andrew Crawley, who drowned in 1840 at the age of 27 1/2, and Joseph Sears, aged 50, and his infant daughter, Olive P., who is listed on the stone with Joseph.

During the past few decades very little maintenance has been done on the cemetery property. The last time an effort was made to clear the overgrowth from the headstones was in 1978 when, for a short period, a CETA program had a number of young people working on that project. The job was completed, but nothing has been done since save for a not-always-annual mowing.

For years school children have used the cemetery as a short cut to and from school. The most commonly used pathways have become severely eroded. In some areas the surface has suffered as much as three-foot-deep erosion. It's easy to imagine how the dunes became dunes once you've seen these spots.

The 1976 Town Meeting appropriated \$20,000 for the restoration of headstones and for the installation of a fence. The project and funds were to be administrated by the Historical Commission. Headstone restoration was begun and about \$2,500 was spent, but disagreements among Commission members as to what kind of fence should be built eventually led to a period of inactivity for the Commission. During this time, of course, nothing was done.

Recently, though, the Commission has become active again. Two years ago Preston Babbitt, owner of the Rose and Crown Guest House, was appointed to the Commission and elected Chairperson. Shortly afterward, he and the other members of the Commission began an effort to get the restoration work restarted. Commission members worked for two years to get the recently erected chain-link fence installed. The addition of the fence is a key to preventing further erosion.

"The process of getting the fence built," explained Preston, "was very time consuming. I wrote the first set of specs wrong, and we had to scratch the first bids and start all over again. We ended up needing to survey which Billy Rogers did, and he wrote the second set of specs. 'They were,' Preston said with a chuckle, 'a little better than mine. Also, it was about then that Assistant Town Manager Tom Conklin stepped in; he provided a lot of help.'

Since the completion of the fence, Preston and Barbara Rushmore have planted 200 trees and shrubs which Barbara got for only \$200. "All Barbara and I did for a week was lug water and dig holes," said Preston. Together the two planted chestnut trees outside the fence, and forsythia, dogwood, tulip, sycamore, sweetgums, honeysuckle, and white birch inside the fence.



The Historical Commission has also contracted for a \$3,600 landscaping project aimed at stabilizing the most severely eroded areas with railroad ties. Most of this work will be done on the Court Street side where the incline of the hill is steepest and the erosion most severe. The Commission plans to spend additional funds on gravestone restoration. The estimated cost of the headstone restoration project is \$8,000, and the commission estimates that it needs to do an additional \$1,000 in landscaping to stabilize the cemetery and make it more accessible and attractive to visitors.

Current members of the Historical Commission are Mary Avellar, Claude Jensen, Helen Rogers, Carol Westcott, Grace Collinson, and Preston Babbitt. There is one vacancy, and anyone interested can apply at Town Hall. The Commission accepts donations from the public which can be made for specific purposes.

The Winthrop Street Gate behind the Shank Painter Parking lot is supposed to be open regularly each day, but often is not. Please respect the fragility of the stones as you enjoy their various art forms, and be wary of poison ivy. Long sleeves and pants are a safe bet.