



The
Stone Carver's
Art
in the
Old Yard

Columbia, Connecticut



The burials in the Old Yard date from the early 1700's to the mid-1800's. The purpose and design of the stones erected to mark these graves changed considerably during this period.

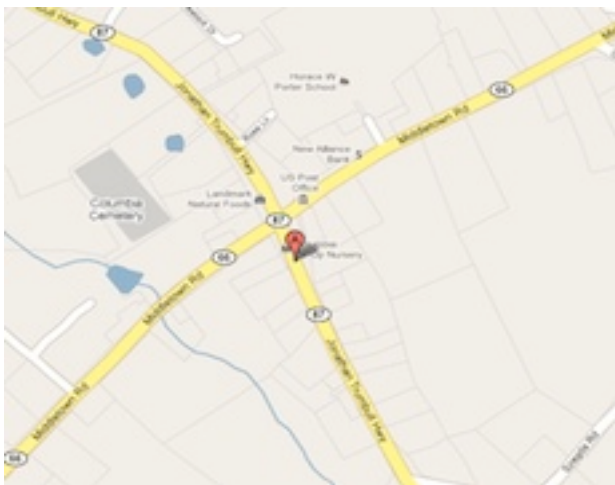
The earliest gravestones were an expression of Puritan theology as much as they were a memorial to the person who had died. The stones often contained instructional verses that indicated what virtues and achievements were valued by the community. They also emphasized the omnipresence of death and the need to live life in preparation for the Judgment Day.

Because literacy was less common in those times, images were often used to express these religious beliefs - a Grim Reaper cutting life short, an hourglass with time running out, or a soul winging its way to the reward for a righteous life. Rosettes within circles stood for eternal life (because a circle has no end), and vines, fruits, and flowers stood for life that is renewed.

These early stones show none of the uniformity of the stones from the 1800's. Using local granites and schists, the early carvers were likely to be local craftsmen such as masons, cordwainers (workers of leather) and woodcarvers who created gravestones as a sideline. They each had a unique style which is easily recognized by the careful observer.

After 1810, this unique form of primitive art began to disappear. Stones became uniform in shape, and simpler in their message which was largely one of "remembrance". Symbols were inspired by classical themes and most featured the weeping willow (sadness) or the urn (death). The personal style of the carver is no longer evident.

Enjoy this virtual tour of the carver's art in the Old Yard, or if you can, visit in person.



For an interactive map:

<<http://j.mp/Old-Yard>>

An Old Yard map locating some of the stones mentioned in this article may be found at the end.

Obadiah Wheeler (1673-c.1749) of Lebanon is considered by many to be the finest craftsman of the early rural carvers of eastern Connecticut. He usually carved on stones with three lobes across the top. The central



lobe had a framed face (soul effigy) with a long straight nose. His early stones often had curls beside the face while his later ones had different styles of wings. He is also recognized by the horizontal panel between face and inscription which had a central heart or triangle flanked by circles or stemmed rosettes.

His work is found on 3 stones in the Old Yard. One of the best examples is the stone for Annah Lymand (1737).



Benjamin Collins (1691-1759) of Columbia crafted 41 stones in the Old Yard. He was unusual in that he occasionally signed his stones. He often used a signature blue schist that was quarried on his farm on Johnson Road, and shaped the stones to have a rounded or pointed top.



He was trained as a cabinetmaker which influenced his stone carving in several ways. It led to his fine tracery-like carvings that made his work seem delicate compared to others of his time. However, it also inclined him to a light touch that made his carving so shallow that much of his lettering is now illegible.

His designs share some features with his contemporary Obadiah Wheeler: six-rayed rosettes, face with projecting wings, and central heart in the horizontal panel below the face. However, his work is distinguished by a rather bulbous nose, and feathers that are rounded or triangular-tipped rather than pointy.

Superb examples of his work are seen in the gravestones of Richard Lyman(1746)



and Zerviah Buckingham (1748) the latter with elaborate floral designs as well as the sun, moon, and stars in the horizontal panel.

