

# HISTORIC BURYING GROUNDS INITIATIVE NEWSLETTER

## Preserving Boston's 16 Historic Burying Grounds



BOSTON PARKS & RECREATION DEPARTMENT

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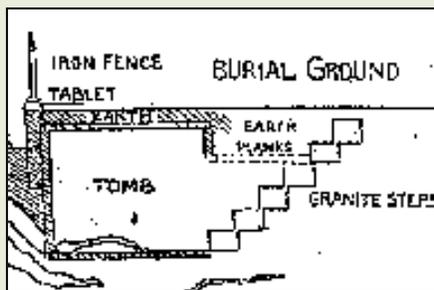
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## EVERYTHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT TOMBS (BUT ALWAYS WANTED TO FIND OUT)

When most people think about Boston's historic burying grounds, they visualize Colonial-era carved slate headstones, with death's heads and winged angels. However there are around one thousand tombs, both above and below ground, scattered through these burying grounds. There are some basic difference between in-ground burials (what we refer to as "graves" and tombs. In a grave, the body is placed in a hole in the ground and then the hole is filled in with earth. In a tomb, the body is placed in a previously constructed masonry room, which is designed to hold several (or sometimes numerous) bodies. The tomb is sealed off from outside access.

Within the category of tombs, there are several variations in the construction, mostly concerning the relationship to ground level and the type of entrance. Tombs can be completely underground, partially underground,



A diagram of an underground tomb in the Granary Burying Ground an 1897 *Boston Herald* article.

or wholly aboveground. A tomb entrance can be unmarked and completely underground, marked with a plaque or a stone box indicating the underground stairway, or with a cast-iron door on hinges allowing above-ground access into the tomb.

The vault or burial chamber is the central feature of a tomb. Although dimensions and materials can vary, the tombs in Boston's historic burying grounds are frequently of similar construction. The chamber is a brick or stone room approximately 8 feet by 12 feet in size. The ceiling is vaulted and is approximately 8 feet high.

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# Letter from the Director

Welcome to the inaugural issue of the Historic Burying Grounds Initiative Newsletter. This newsletter will appear on a quarterly basis and will have articles about current projects in the Boston's historic burying grounds, historical topics, and an interview with someone in a relevant field. Since I started managing this program in 2000, I have had the occasion to learn many fascinating things about our history, both local and national; to meet many interesting people, both alive and dead; and to lead numerous unique restoration projects. This newsletter is an attempt to share some of the things I have learned and experienced.

Many of you have contacted me while searching for the grave of an ancestor. I receive calls and e-mails from all over the country and even from abroad. Although I am not a genealogist, I have been impressed by the level of dedication, knowledge, and courtesy that you have shown in your interactions with me. I have made the assumption that if you were motivated enough to seek me out, you would enjoy reading our newsletter. If you like it, please pass it on; if you don't please, feel free to unsubscribe.

The exciting theme of our kick-off issue is **tombs**. Although dealing with tombs has always been an integral part of taking care of the historic burying grounds, my interest was piqued after a series of "tombcentric" happenings: a planned tomb renovation project in Bennington Street Cemetery, the appearance of several holes and "spongy areas" near tombs in Central Burying Ground, and the back luck of a tourist who stepped in the wrong place at the wrong time and fell into a tomb in the Granary Burying Ground (thank goodness no one was hurt!). I have included articles featuring a historical look at tombs, information on the technical aspects of the Bennington Street Tomb Repair project, an interview with a structural engineer who specializes in historic preservation, and a general history of the Bennington Street Cemetery, one of our sixteen sites.

I hope you enjoy the newsletter.

Kelly Thomas



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### *Historic Burying Grounds Initiative*

Our mission is the comprehensive restoration, on-going conservation and heritage interpretation of Boston's historic burying grounds

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# FIELD NOTES

## STABILIZATION AND REPAIR OF BENNINGTON STREET CEMETERY TOMBS

Last year the Historic Burying Grounds Initiative repaired the above-ground tombs in Bennington Street Burying Ground in East Boston. The design for the project started in late 2007 and the construction took five months.



West tombs before restoration

There are two sets of tomb structures in Bennington Street Cemetery: a large one with nine “rooms” abutting the 80-foot front wall on the west side of the cemetery and a smaller structure with three tombs on the east side of the cemetery. The west tombs are built up against an eight-foot tall brick wall on busy Bennington Street. The east tombs are built against a low brick wall on a side street. The tomb walls are made of brick and are covered with stone slabs and a layer of earth. The individual tombs were accessed by cast-iron doors; all of the doors have been removed and the tombs bricked shut. The dimensions of the individual tombs vary, but in general they are approximately eight feet wide, nine feet deep, and six feet tall. There is a portion of the tomb “room” which is approximately 2 feet below ground level. The west tombs were in worse shape than the east tombs, particularly because the abutting west wall was leaning out over the sidewalk, and had deteriorating

masonry thereby constituting a danger for pedestrians.

The Boston Parks Department bid out this project in February 2009. We had initially hoped to be able to do repairs on both the west tombs and the east tombs and install replica cast-iron doors in the currently bricked-over doorways to each tomb. Budgetary constraints forced us to delay the repairs of the east tombs, use blank slate plaques instead of cast replica doors, and focus only on the west tomb and wall.

As a municipality, we adhere to public procurement laws and are obliged to take the least expensive of qualified bidders. The range of prices for this project was from \$173,500-\$486,000—quite a wide range of prices! The lowest bidder was an experienced masonry company and was hired to do the work.



West tombs before restoration

The basic scope of work for the project was as follows:

Dismantle Bennington Street wall and rebuild plumb. Dismantle the tomb roofs and walls down to the indicated depth. Rebuild the tombs walls, both interior and exterior, with new bricks. Install tension rods to structurally reinforce the Bennington Street wall. Replace rusty iron lintels over the tomb entrances with structurally reinforce the Bennington Street wall. Replace rusty iron lintels over the tomb entrances with new painted galvanized steel lintels. Reconstruct the tomb roof using the original

## BENNINGTON STREET CEMETERY TOMBS *continued*

stone slabs. Reset granite cap stones. Restore site conditions to those existing before execution of masonry work.

One of the most important issues to address in a project like this is the existing human remains which are lying in the tombs. There are several matters to consider: respecting the dignity of human remains, avoiding



In construction

having workers touch remains, ensuring the safety of the workers, respecting the stringent state laws regarding human remains. This matter has come up before in tomb repair projects, but we settled on a standard procedure in planning for a 2008 project. After much debate, research and a consultation with a funeral director, we came up with a plan. Upon entering the tomb, the contractor would gently cover the remains with sand. Eventually he would build up a flat platform of at least two feet of sand upon which sheets of plywood would be laid. The workers could walk on the plywood without crushing the remains or having to move them to another site. In the future, if someone wished to remove the sand, it would be easy to do so and there would be no damage to the remains or the tomb structure. Also the sand in the tomb provides some insulation against frost heaving.

Initially we hoped to use as much of the existing brick as possible when rebuilding. After starting the work we decided this would not be possible. The wall and tombs had areas of different bricks and mortars, indicating repairs and rebuilding at various times. There were not enough of the old bricks to complete the project so new matching bricks were selected.

workers touch remains, ensuring the safety of the workers, respecting the stringent state laws

In all projects in the historic burying grounds, there is always an unknown factor: the construction plans are based on what we believe to exist, but we are never totally sure what we will find inside and underground. This project turned out quite well, with few surprises. The eight-foot tall, twelve-inch wide wall behind the tombs needed to be rebuilt from below the sidewalk level but we suspected that might be the case. Originally we had planned to rebuild about half of the tomb façade and repoint the other half. However upon commencement of demolition, about half of this façade collapsed, so that part was rebuilt from the ground up. We were surprised to see that the tomb roof was not made of solid stone slabs but rather long, narrow granite strips, reused from previous structures, with only packed earth between the strips. We were even more surprised to see how dry the inside of the tombs were, considering the method of roof construction.



Finished tombs

Upon inspection of the interior tomb walls it was determined they did not require work other than selective repointing.

This project was completed ahead of time, with only a small change order, and with few surprises inside the tombs. These beautiful tomb repairs should last another 200 years!

## EVERYTHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT TOMBS (continued from front page)

Underground tombs have a stairway leading down to the crypt from ground level. Usually the stairs are made of granite and the walls of the staircase are made of brick or stone. At the bottom of the stairway is an arched entrance to the burial chamber. The casket was carried down the stairway and placed in the crypt, the living people exited back up by the staircase, a stone slab was placed on top of the stairway, and finally dirt was placed on top of this slab to completely hide the tomb entrance. In the case of a “table tomb” or “table-top tomb,” a



Two “table” tombs in Eliot Burying Ground

monument in the form of an engraved slab of stone, usually commemorating the deceased owner of the tomb and sometimes their family members, was placed on top of the tomb. This slab was frequently mounted on 6 stone pedestals or sometimes on a box made of stone elements. Many of these pedestals have deteriorated and the slabs were remounted on brick boxes, usually hollow inside.

Some tombs are built without a stairway, being either only partially underground or fully aboveground. These tombs are similar in size and construction to the

underground crypts. These tombs frequently had a granite lintel or capstone and a cast-iron door allowing entrance into the tomb. Sometimes the tombs are built into the side of a hill. Usually the roofs and sidewalls of these tombs are covered with dirt and have grass growing on them.

Although those people buried in tombs were frequently better off financially than those interred in in-ground graves, this is not universally the case. The earliest tombs (in the 1600s) were usually for leaders of the community, such as ministers or government officials. The cost of building some of these tombs was undertaken by the community itself and they tended to be in the middle of the sites. Tombs around the perimeter of the properties appeared in the 1700s. Although the town had established basic rules for burial fees in 1701, much more specific rules officially regulating the cost of various types of burials according



View inside of an underground mound tomb in Dorchester North Burying Ground

## EVERYTHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT TOMBS (continued)

to grave type, age, and race, were enacted by the Selectmen in May 1732, upon request of the general public at a town meeting. The rates were as follows:

Digging Graves for White Persons man or woman Ten Shillings  
For Persons from Six to Twelve of Age. Seven Shillings.  
For Children Caryed by Hand five Shillings  
For Digging a Grave for a Negro Man or woman Seven Shillings and Six pence.  
Ditto from Six to Twelve years of age Six shillings.  
For Children four Shillings  
For Opening the New or Wall Toombs Fourteen Shillings  
For Opening the Old Toombs or those that Stand in the midst of the Burying Places  
Sixteen Shillings.

Starting in 1701, people who wanted to build a tomb had to obtain permission from three selectmen. At this time in the town of Boston, which was then separate from Dorchester, Roxbury, and Charlestown, there were three burial grounds open: King's Chapel, Copp's Hill and Granary. A petitioner had to agree to build the tomb and maintain it. Usually he had to continue the wall around the site from the previous tomb. In the Granary tomb builders also had to contribute a sum of 20 shillings (in 1720) to the common tomb drain, which drained out into the Boston Common and helped the grass grow for grazing. In Copp's Hill, tomb builders were not required to contribute to the common drain, but in 1717 a group of existing tomb owners petitioned the Selectmen to obtain permission to build a drain from the tombs down to the Mill Pond.

If a tomb owner did not keep up the maintenance of his tomb, the city of Boston could reclaim ownership and sell it to someone else. Tomb owners could also sell their tombs and ownership parts thereof. It was not uncommon to have a tomb where one person owned half, another person owned a quarter, and still another person owned the final quarter. This means that over time many people could have been buried in one tomb.



Row of tombs along wall of South End Burying Ground

A new tomb-building trend started in 1801: speculative building. In that year Nicholas Peirce, Jr. applied to the Selectmen for permission to build a number of tombs to finish off an existing row in the Central Burying Ground, with the goal of selling them. Peirce had already built a number of tombs for other people who were

## *EVERYTHING YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT TOMBS (continued))*

approved to build a tomb. The Selectmen approved Peirce's request under the conditions that each potential tomb buyer had to apply for permission from the Selectmen, that Peirce would charge each buyer the same amount as for other tombs in that row, and that he would receive his pay from the persons to whom they tombs were granted. An invoice from 1802 shows the cost of building one tomb in Central Burying Ground was \$126.66. Half of the cost was paid in cash and half of the cost was paid in "West India Goods," which meant, loosely, imported items, particularly from the Caribbean.

Copies of deeds for tomb resales indicate an approximate price for a whole tomb to be \$200, but there seem to be many variations from that price. Bennington Street Cemetery in East Boston is the most recent of all of the burying grounds/cemeteries in the Historic Burying Grounds Initiative, established in 1838. This site did not have as many tombs as many of the other sites, but it appears that speculative building continued, perhaps with fewer conditions in place regarding the amount of profit to be made on resale. Most of these tombs were built in the 1840s. Upon completion of a tomb, the builder paid \$1.00 to the City of Boston and became the new owner of the tomb "for the sole purpose of depositing therein the Dead." Records show that some of the tomb owners resold the tombs several years later for the price of \$80.00, which is significantly lower than the \$200 price for sites like Copp's Hill Burying Ground and Central Burying Ground.



Tomb of the Innocents at the Granary Burying

Tomb ownership was not only for individuals; the City of Boston and other charitable institutions also owned tombs. In 1904 the annual report of the Cemetery Department lists the city as owning tombs in the following burying grounds: 25 in South End; six in Phipps Street; one infant's tomb in South End, King's Chapel, and Central; one infant's tomb and one adult's tomb in Copp's Hill and Granary; two receiving tombs in Bennington Street; and one receiving tomb in Dorchester North and Dorchester South. The city needed space to bury paupers and victims of epidemics. Records show that in the infant's tomb (also called the "Tomb of the Innocents") in the Granary Burying Ground approximately 480 babies were buried over a 31-year period. The South End Burying Ground also has tombs owned by groups such as the Association for the Relief of Aged Indigent Females and the Boston Female Asylum.

The history of development of the physical tomb structure and the evolution of tomb ownership is helpful in understanding many aspects about the history of Boston. It provides a glance through a different prism at issues such as death, land use, and government functions. It also raises many more questions than could be dealt with in this newsletter. Luckily for me, it gives me more topics for future newsletters!

# INTERVIEW

WITH JOHN WATHNE, PRESIDENT, STRUCTURES NORTH  
CONSULTING ENGINEERING, INC

**HBGI:** You were the structural engineer on the tomb renovation project at Bennington Street Cemetery. Have you worked on similar projects before?

**John:** None of them are exactly the same however there are of commonalities between different projects. In some ways this is similar to the South End Burying Ground project (2005-7) where we rebuilt tombs. What's nice is that you can reapply some of the solutions. For example, at the South End Burying Ground we came up with the idea of putting sand in the tombs to cover the remains and we're instituting that here at Bennington Street Cemetery to protect the human remains and provide frost protection for the foundation.



John Wathne in front of a tomb at the South End Burying Ground

**HBGI:** What is the biggest challenge in a project like this:

**John:** I think the challenge is trying to anticipate conditions and trying to understand what is causing the problems. If you don't understand the source of the damage then you don't know how to fix it. One of the more complex projects we've had was actually the South End Burying Ground where we had tombs literally lifting themselves out of the ground. We had to figure out what was lifting them out and come up with a solution which would solve the problems that were plaguing these tombs for over 100 years. Often I say the only surprise is when there is no surprise. We always try to minimize the impact of surprises or form the project in such a way that it can handle things that come up.

**HBGI:** Why did you get into the field of preservation engineering?

**John:** I really like old things; I like the architecture of the past. There's a certain aura about them, a certain beauty that things and places and structures of old have that we just don't build into them today. When it comes to working with new buildings, I am a mediocre engineer. I think if I had to design a new Wal-Mart mine would be the most expensive. However I think I'm really good at solving problems with existing structures. Fortunately I found a niche. My mind is able to focus on the nuances of existing structures and it's both a fascination and a passion. It's like antique restoration on a grand scale. It's just fun, really really fun.

**HBGI:** What is one of the strangest things you ever encountered in one of your projects?

**John:** I see a lot of strange things and I do a lot of strangely fun stuff. For example I've walked underneath the Boston Harbor in the Blue Line tunnel when I did some consulting for the T. Actually one of the oddest things I've ever seen was in a burying ground where there was a mummified body with all the hair and all the clothing and it was really shocking to see how well preserved somebody was. Usually you

## *INTERVIEW continued*

don't really relate to a person when you see their skeletal remains but in this case I did. Another time was when we worked on Governor Huntington's tomb in Norwich, CT. The headwall was leaning out and we had to figure out how to stabilize it. Traditionally in these tombs there are stone slabs that stick out of the vault walls and they put caskets on the slabs. He was buried with his wife and at some point the caskets had spilled their contents out to the floor. When we probed down into the tomb with the video before disassembling it, the camera suddenly focused on these two skulls and we knew they were the husband and wife. They were obviously not interred that way and they died at different times. It was almost like something out a romantic novel where they spent their lives together and now through the last how many years they've been literally side by side. Hopefully they got along...

**HBGI:** Do you ever feel creepy about crawling in the tombs with human remains?

**John:** Usually I don't. I do believe the places have auras sometimes, and one time when I went in a tomb, and it's the only time, I felt like I was jumping into hell. It was the only time I got creeped out. And it wasn't because I was in an odd mood that day because I do this on a routine basis, but there was just something about this one tomb. It was very disturbing on a deep level.

**HBGI:** What was one of your favorite projects and why?

**John:** My favorite projects tend to be those that really don't serve any economic purpose other than the fact that they're beautiful things and people want to save them. One of my favorite projects was the restoration of the Pine Street Inn tower. We took down and then recreated a Tuscan campanile; it was really a life experience. Another was restoring a railway tunnel in Pennsylvania under a mountain. Right now I'm working on a lighthouse offshore of Rhode Island. These are all things that had served purposes previously but they're now saved because of their historic or architectural significance -- it's more a labor of love.

### *SITES INCLUDED IN THE HISTORIC BURYING GROUNDS INITIATIVE*

*Bennington Street Cemetery (1838)*

*Hawes Burying Ground (1816)*

*Bunker Hill Burying Ground (1816)*

*King's Chapel Burying Ground (1630)*

*Central Burying Ground (1754)*

*Market Street Burying Ground (1764)*

*Copp's Hill Burying Ground (1659)*

*Phipps Street Burying Ground (1630)*

*Dorchester North Burying Ground (1633)*

*South End Burying Ground (1810)*

*Dorchester South Burying Ground (1810)*

*Union Cemetery (1841)*

*Eliot Burying Ground (1630)*

*Walter Street Burying Ground (1711)*

*Granary Burying Ground (1660)*

*Westerly Burying Ground (1683)*

## *ABOUT THE SITES: Bennington Street Cemetery (1838)*



The Bennington Street Cemetery is one of the earliest planned open spaces in East Boston. Its physical layout, individual gravestones and the people to whom these stones pay silent tribute, reflect the growth and socio-economic diversity that has characterized East Boston for the past two centuries. The landfill projects of the 1830s and the shipping-associated industries attracted countless laborers--many were attracted to East Boston because of guaranteed employment and housing. Their numbers and diverse ethnic backgrounds are clearly articulated by the markers in the Bennington Street Cemetery.

The nationalities of East Boston's immigrant population corresponded to the waves of people fleeing other countries over the course of the nineteenth century. Immigrants groups represented in the Bennington Street Cemetery were from Germany, Norway, Ireland, England, Scotland, and New Brunswick. One exceptional feature of the markers in this site is the number of epitaphs inscribed in a foreign language. For example, eleven of the legible stones have inscriptions in German.

A significant number of veterans' markers are located in the site. Local participation in the Civil War is illustrated by the thirty-seven markers commemorating members of the Massachusetts Infantry, Navy, Cavalry, and Artillery. In addition, there is one free-standing "G.A.R. Post 23"

monument and two headstones commemorating World War I veterans.

The Bennington Street Cemetery is also a living landscape which has been evolving for nearly 160 years. Established when thoughts on landscape planning and the beautification of open space were being conceptualized and practiced in such places as Mount Auburn Cemetery, the Bennington Street Cemetery was a site which was clearly intended to be used as a place for passive recreation. By the late nineteenth century, however, there were only a few originally intended open spaces still in existence in East Boston. Because early park planning was minimal, these early-established landscapes were of tantamount importance. People rallied around preservation and revitalization activities. In 1852, for example, the East Boston Tree Association planted nearly two hundred trees in the site in an attempt to remedy the effects of an earlier deforestation campaign waged for the sake of commercial lumber and firewood. On Sunday afternoon, people over would gather in the nicely shaded, green landscape of Bennington Street Cemetery to picnic with their families, pay respects to loved ones, and enjoy the cooling ocean breezes which came directly off the Harbor.