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Death in Colonial New England

James J. Naglack

The Puritan society of New England was an intensely religious one in which death played an important role. An analysis of the preparation for the "great beyond" can provide a greater understanding of Puritan ideology. This paper will examine the physical and emotional treatment of death by the New England colonists.

Colonial funerals combined three functions: sociability, religiosity, and reaffirmation of the established social class of the deceased.¹ The first function of the colonial funeral was to provide a means by which friends, family and relatives would re-unite. When someone died, the colonists would often journey to participate in the funeral, comfort the bereaved, and share in the social gathering which followed the funeral.² Nathaniel Hawthorne was struck by the social role of funerals. He maintained:

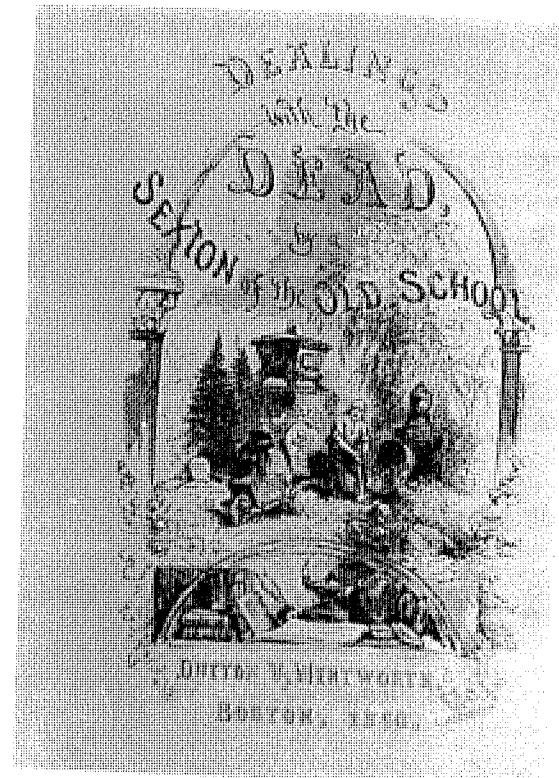
They were the only class of scenes, so far as my investigation has taught me, in which our ancestors were wont to steep their tough old hearts in wine and strong drink and indulged in an outbreak of grisly jollity...New England must have been a dismal abode for the man of pleasure when the only boon-companion was death.³

Jessica Mitford, in *The American Way of Death*, pointed out that "the colonial funeral was almost exclusively a family affair."⁴ Children were allowed to attend, often as pallbearers, so that they might be impressed with the significance of death as "the end of a life of trial and probation."

On the other hand, there was more to the colonial funeral than the ritualized disposal of the dead. The liberal use of intoxicating liquors at funerals prevailed in every settlement in the colonies.⁶ In 1797, at the funeral of Calie Dawes in Boston, wine, beer, rum, gin, and brandy were served along with a dinner that featured beef, ham, and fowls. The funeral cost \$844—a small fortune for that time.⁷

Alice Morse Earle, an authority on the social customs of the colonists, noted that liquor was always served at funerals. In her book, *Social Customs and Fashions In Old New England*, Earle quoted a bill for the funeral of David Potter of Hartford, Connecticut, who drowned in 1678.⁸

a pint of liquor for those who dived for him.	1 s
a quart of liquor for those who bro't him home.	2 s
two quarts of wine & one gallon of cyder to the jury of inquest.	5 s
eight gallons and three quarts wine for the funeral.	f 1 15 s
barrel cyder for funeral.	16 s
One coffin.	12 s
Winding sheet.	18 s



One reason why drinking was allowed at the early funerals is that the Puritans took literally the exhortation: "Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish and wine unto those that be of heavy heart."⁹ Drinking, even to the point of intoxication, became so scandalous that "ministers in New England thundered at the practice from the pulpit," and Edmund Waits in Virginia was moved to declare in his will that no strong drink be provided or spent when he was buried.¹⁰

The second major function of colonial funerals was to promote religiosity. Funeral services were often held in church with prayers said over the pall-covered bier. Evidence suggests that the colonial clergy looked upon funerals as occasions to deliver important and inspired sermons. Perry Miller, the foremost authority on Puritanism, noted the "stream of elegies and sermons that poured forth on such occasions." He quoted Reverend James Fitch, who criticized the "abusive, and justly to be condemned practice of...misrepresenting the dead." Miller noted that as time passed, there was an increasing secularization of funeral sermons. The trend was away from an emphasis on God and his salvation, and towards people and personalities.¹¹

A third function of the colonial funeral was to reaffirm the social class of the deceased. This became more prominent during the eighteenth century when urbanization and secularization had begun to reduce the theological emphasis of New England. Spiritualism gave way to materialism, with its pursuit of worldly comfort.

Mourning took an extensive social character. Scarves, rings, gloves, and verses were used in paying tribute to the dead. Social distinctions were observed in the quality of the gloves given to the mourners, and sometimes a provision concerning this detail was made in a will. In 1633, Samuel Fuller ordered his sister to mourn his departure in gloves worth 12 shillings, but only two shillings sixpence were held to be adequate for the grief of Rebecca Prime, who also was mentioned in his will.¹² Specific types of gloves were recognized as acceptable for mourning purposes. "Black shammy gloves and white glazed lambs were as often given as black and purple."¹³ The custom of giving gloves at funerals was so firmly ingrained that even pauper funerals required the distribution of a few pairs of gloves.¹⁴ Rings were also given at funerals, especially in wealthy families. The rings were generally given to close relatives and persons of note in the community. Earle described the mourning rings:

Mourning rings were of gold, usually enamelled in black, or black and white, they were frequently decorated with a death's head, or with a coffin with a full-length skeleton lying in it, or with a winged skull. Sometimes they had a framed lock of hair of the deceased friend. Sometimes the ring was shaped like a serpent with his tail in his mouth. Many bore a posey.¹⁵

When the rings, which cost over £1 each, were purchased by the mourner's family, the name or initials of the deceased and the date of the death were engraved upon the rings. This was called "fashioning."¹⁶ Some mourning rings were inscribed with mottoes:

"Prepared Be
To Follow Me"
"Death Parts
United Hearts"¹⁷

Indications are that early colonial mourning rings were more valued in a sentimental sense than considered a mere traditional custom. Mourning rings were often worn on the anniversary of a friend's death.¹⁸ Earle cited old newspaper accounts which revealed a genuine love for the rings. One described a desperate attempt to find a lost ring.

Escaped unluckily from me
A large gold ring, a little key;
The ring had death engraved upon it;
The owners name inscribed within it;
Who finds it and brings the same to me
Shall generously rewarded be.¹⁹

In addition to being given gloves and rings, the minister at the early funerals was usually presented with a scarf of white linen. Mary Crawford, in *The Social Life of Old New England*, described the scarves:

The scarf was about three years long and was worn folded over the right shoulder; rosettes of black crepe fastened it at this point as well as where the ends crossed under the left arm. After the funeral, the scarf was made into a shirt, which the officiating minister was supposed to wear as a memorial to the deceased.²⁰

In 1708, Judge Samuel Sewall gave black scarves to several people besides the bearers, and twenty-two pairs of welsh leather gloves to those who went to his son's funeral.²¹

A great many sources suggest that the wealthy carried their display even to the grave. Members of the upper class were ushered out of life with "expensive ostentation." When Andrew Faneuil was "honourably interr'd" in 1738, over 1,100 persons accompanied his "general and expensive" funeral cortege, and three thousand pairs of gloves were given away.²²

Funerals became such extravaganzas that Charles M. Andrews, in *Colonial Footways*, remarked that it was "usual to find a man like Robert Hume of Charlestown, declaring in his will that his funeral should not cost over ten

pounds, that I coffin should be plain and not covered by a pall, and that none of his relatives should wear mourning clothes.”²³

As the years passed, opposition developed to gift-giving and the wearing of excessive mourning apparel. Very early the city of Boston passed laws regarding funerals. For instance, in 1767, the town fathers made it illegal to give gifts at funerals or to serve “Spiritous liquor.”²⁴

Lucius M. Sargent, in *Dealings With The Dead* reported the reaction of the colonists. On October 28, 1767, in Faneuil Hall, residents passed the following resolution:

And we further agree strictly to adhere to the late regulations respecting funerals, and will not use any gloves but what are manufactured here, nor procure any new garments, upon such occasion, but what shall be absolutely necessary.²⁵

The resolution was passed as one of the many steps taken to reduce dependency on English goods, in response to the enforcement of the laws which began in 1763. When the supply of funeral and mourning clothes diminished, there was a noticeable decrease in their use. For example,

The economy enforced to avoid importations from Great Britain brought in sensible changes in the management of funerals and their attendant ceremonies -the full suits worn by all connections were dispensed with, bands of crepe for gentlemen and black ribbons for the ladies being substituted. The gloves, formerly being distributed generally, were now only presented to the pallholders.²⁶

There were also attempts to regulate funeral expenses. In 1790, the town fathers of Salem published regulations limiting funeral expenses.

For each tolling of the bell

8 Pence

The Sextons are desired to toll the Bells only four strokes in a minute

The undertakers service in borrowing chairs, waiting on pall-holders and warning the relatives, to attend²⁷

8 Shillings

The appearance of such restrictions and regulations further demonstrated the weakening of the theocratic traditions and customs and illuminated the growing secularization of American society.

Since it was often necessary to preserve the body while awaiting the arrival of friends, the colonists used several crude methods — disembowelling, filling the cavity with charcoal, immersing the body in alcohol, or wrapping the body in alum, or “sere sheet.”²⁸ No funerals were allowed on the Sabbath because they believed it “profaned the sacred day.”²⁹



Many local customs prevailed with regard to funeral behavior. In Hartford and neighboring towns “all ornaments, mirrors, and pictures were muffled with napkins and cloths at the time of the funeral, and sometimes window shutters were kept closed in the front of the house for a year.”³⁰

In some colonial homes, often a room was set aside as a “death room.”

The paper was dark and gloomy, — white with black figures and a deep mourning frieze; and there was but one window. Benches were arranged stiffly around the sides of the room, and there were drawers filled with necessities for preparing a body for burial. Here the dead lay until the funeral. Between obsequies the room was always closed up empty, gruesome — waiting.³¹

Other customs may be seen in the way the colonial press treated the subject of death. For instance, “Mr. C. H.” offered to lighten the burden of the bereaved by supplying them with engraved sets of ready-made obituary notices, “with Void Space for the Name, Age, Distinction, and Profession, or such Particular and Eminent Qualities, as do not properly fall under the notice of the General Description.”³² This illustrates how unhampered the society in general felt about death. Once again, the way the press viewed death illustrates a change from the intense theocratic guidelines to a more secular society.

One necessary item was a coffin for the burial. Among those who migrated to the New World from England were skilled craftsmen. Carl Bridenbaugh, an authority on the colonial city, does not specifically mention coffinmaking as a trade, but he suggested that carpenters and cabinet-makers made coffins as a sideline.³³ Early evidence demonstrating the use of coffins by the colonists can be seen when Judge Sewall described a visit he had made to his family tomb in 1698:

I was entertained with a view of, and converse with, the *coffins* of my dear father Hull, mother Hull, cousin Quinsey, and my six children... 'twas an awful yet pleasing treat.³⁴

That quotation is evidence that coffins were at least used by the upper class.

By 1750, there was a subdivision in the development of occupations. For example, Bridenbaugh maintains that:

Woodworking provides an excellent example of the breakdown or secularization with a trade...in the city it was divided and subdivided into roughly carpentry, carving, coffinmaking, cabinet-making... and a variety of other categories to meet the constantly widening demands of the colonial population.³⁵

As the urban population grew, then, coffinmaking as a specialty developed, but cabinet-makers and carpenters made coffins when necessary. In 1761, John Knox was a cabinet-maker, and a study of his records indicates that coffins were a major "undertaking" in his business.³⁶

As in the mourning customs, the coffins also reaffirmed the economic status of the individual. Early coffins were made out of wood, with different varieties indicating a person's wealth. Persons of distinction had hardwood polished, or stained coffins. Pine, painted with a mixture of lamp black and glue water, served the less fortunate.³⁷ The interior of the coffin was best described by Crawford in *Social Customs of Old New England*:

The coffin itself was lined with a white linen, and a certain linen, pinked on its lower edges and just long enough to cover the face of the dead, was nailed to its head, this was thrown back when those present at the funeral were viewing the remains.³⁸

The coffin was frequently carried to the grave site by two sets of bearers: underbearers, usually young men, who carried the coffin itself; and pallbearers, men of age and dignity who held the corners of the pall. Since the coffin was often carried long distances, there were frequent rest stops. "Mort-Stones" were set by the "wayside" in some towns upon which bearers could rest the heavy coffin for a short while on their way to the burial site. The order of procession to the grave was a matter of etiquette. Usually a magistrate or a person of dignity walked with the widow.³⁹

One development which effected the funeral practices of the colonists was the elimination of the role of the clergy. Very early in the period, ministers ceased to participate in the ceremonial features of burial. This may have resulted from a conscious attempt to avoid committing the "popish error" of saying prayers over the dead at the grave site.⁴⁰

In *Social Customs In Old New England*, Earle described the process of burial:

At burials nothing is read, nor any funeral sermons made, but all the neighborhood or a goodly company of them came together by toling the bell and carry the dead solemnly to his grave and then stand by him while he is buried. The ministers are commonly present.⁴¹

Haberstein and Lamers in *The History of American Funeral Directing* indicated that the colonists adhered to "The Directory of Publick Worship of God...approved anno 1645." The law stated that when anyone died "Let the dead body" be interred without any ceremony."⁴²



Perhaps the most valuable source available on the early burials is Lucius Manilus Sargent's *Dealings With the Dead*. This book is an accumulation of Sargent's previously published newspaper accounts. *Dealings with the Dead* suggests that the fear of being buried alive was a primary concern of the people of Boston. Sargent relates the following story:

An old deacons wife fell sick and died as was supposed, and was put in her coffin, and screw'd down and lifted. Everything went smoothly till they began to descend into the tomb, when the Sexton, at the foot slipped, and the coffin went by the run, and struck violently against the wall of the tomb. One instant of awful silence was followed, by a shrill shriek from the corpse — Let me out — Let me out! All attempts to persuade her to be still and go home as she came, for the decency of the thing, were unavailing. The top of the coffin was removed...She insisted on walking back, in her death clothes.⁴³

Sargent indicates that such occurrences were frequent. It is no wonder colonial people feared being buried alive, when they were told to "go home as they came," in the coffin.

Burial in colonial New England was either in the churchyard or adjacent to the meeting-house.⁴⁴ In many communities, however, each family had its own buryingplace in the corner of the homestead or farm.⁴⁵ Charles Andrews in *Colonial Folkways* doubted the existence of a Potter's Field. Lower classes and negroes buried their deceased relatives and acquaintances in several streets and alleys of the town, and... not until 1792 was a special section set apart for their use."⁴⁶

During the winter months it was impossible for the early Americans to bury their dead in the frozen earth. Consequently, they had to develop other methods of burial. In Vermont, a woman died in the middle of winter, and her husband had no boards with which to build a coffin. In order to keep the body safe from "wolves and bears" until burial in the spring, he put the body in a hollow tree and plugged the open end with big stones to "foil the wild beasts." In the spring the burial is completed. One of the major problems associated with burial in early America were wolves disinterring the bodies of the settlers. Stone slabs were laid over the entire grave site to prevent such destruction.⁴⁷ An old custom following a burial was to "place a sheaf of golden grain over the grave, as a symbol of days and of the gathered harvest. Sometimes the sheaf was later carved on the stone."⁴⁸

Only in their death rituals did the Puritans indulge in any sort of image-making. It was contended by Walker G. Jacobs, in *Stranger Stop and Cast an Eye*, that when the early New Englanders carved their images on stone, "they were projecting their inner feelings about death and after-life." "Early New England gravestone art enjoyed more freedom from control than did other art forms, and therefore grew out of what was considered proper by the community

as a whole."⁴⁹ Harriette Merrifield Forbes, a leading authority on New England gravestones, pointed out that "educated men of the day recognized the inability of women and children to read the epitaphs, but all could understand symbols." The carvings symbolized Puritan man's conception of death. The gravestone images indicate several conceptions of death. First, the carvings suggest that the passing or "flight" of time was of primary importance. The most commonly used symbol to convey this thought was the hourglass. Often Father Time is represented on the stone, sometimes trying to snuff out the candle of life. The second most prevalent thought in the colonial mind was the certainty of death.⁵⁰ Stones often portrayed a death's head. The accompanying epitaph was usually:

Thou traveller that passest by,
As thou art now, so once was I;
As I am now, thou soon shalt be,
Prepare for death and follow me.⁵¹

A third carving indicated the social class.⁵² Persons of importance had coats-of-Arms engraved on their stones, and military symbols were also used.



The gravestones also emphasized death in relation to Christian life. The Puritans used such symbols as the grapevine and the squirrel. The grapevine, usually growing out of the skull indicated the triumph of life over death and time.⁵³ The squirrel symbolized religious meditation.⁵⁴

In the past it was believed that the early American gravestones were imported from England, but research indicates that this was not the case. In 1654, the Hayden Stone Pit in Windsor, Connecticut was in full operation, and before 1700 slate quarries were operational in Massachusetts. Geologists have also invalidated the "English-Import" theory by identifying many gravestones as being local in origin. In addition, ship records do not indicate that gravestones came from England.⁵⁵

The earliest stonemason in New England was a man who was known as "The Stonecutter of Boston." When Reverend Symmes of Charlestown died in 1670, the town fathers directed a committee to "treat and conclude with the stonecutter of Boston for a meet stone for that use; and that John Goodwin or Sam Bickner or some other mason be agreed with to build a stone work in lime."⁵⁶ Another notable stonecutter was John Stevens, of Rhode Island, whose stones were characterized by "death's heads" with "hanging teeth and a simple border, usually rosettes connected by a vine or cord."⁵⁷

Stephen Foster, in his article on "Gravestone Carving and Artistic Intent," intimates that very early there were attempts to imitate the English designs, but Americans "lacked the ability to do so." Therefore stonecutters were individual in their designs.⁵⁸ Three gravestone designs went through "cycles of popularity" in New England. In the early 18th century death's heads gave way to cherubs, and these were replaced by willow and urn designs by 1800.⁵⁹

Epitaphs are important in understanding the way New Englanders treated death. Charles Wallis, a collector of epitaphs, has studied their significance and states that:

Epitaphs suggest a social pattern of a locality and of a generation. They reflect the temper and mood of the period. The epitaph mirrors the thoughts and skills of the common man. It is only on stone that the lines of many a domestic poet have been preserved. The personality, occupation, religious concepts, achievement, opinions regarding the meaning of life, and anxieties and anticipations regarding death of the average individual are given in stark and pointed simplicity.⁶⁰

Epitaphs were not considered to be gruesome by the colonists. Men collected them; women had no time for such matters. One of the favorite past-times was to make anagrams — to see what could be spelled out of the letters of a deceased friend's name. For instance, John Foster's name became "I shone forth!"

Emotionally, the colonists considered death to be both a moral and a deeply religious experience. The early New Englander looked forward to the day of judgement as a reward for being one of the Elect. For example, when an aged man, renowned for his many virtues, neared his end, the neighbors, young and old, would come to see how a Christian would die. "With awe they would observe the slow and laborious heaving of the departing one's chest, the vacancy of his fast-dimming eyes and the spasmodic trembling of his time-worn hands. Our pious forefathers did not view this as repugnant."⁶²

Nevertheless, Charles M. Andrews and Alice M. Earle, two of the best chroniclers of early American social and cultural history described the early reactions to death. Andrews said, "In sickness, death, and the frailties of human life were perennial subjects of conversations and correspondence, and a few family letters of those days are free from allusion to them."⁶³ Death was discussed openly and naturally in the colonial society. Earle analyzed the early attitudes about death and described them:

There was a strange exultation of the spirit with which the New England Puritans regarded death. To him thoughts of mortality were indeed cordial to the soul. Death was the event, the condition, which brought him near to God, and that unknown world, that "Life Elysian" of which they constantly spoke, dreamed and thought; and he rejoiced mightily in that close approach, in that sense of touch with the spiritual world.⁶⁴

Clearly, death was both a natural and a religious experience for the early settlers. To a people who suffered the rigors of severe climate, famine, and epidemics, the world beyond held the promise of a more comfortable after-life. Their views concerning death were reflected in the way they conducted their funerals. But perhaps the best records are in the epitaphs themselves. The following is a representation of how the colonists viewed death.

I came in the morning — it was spring

And I smiled.

I walked out at noon — it was summer

And I was Glad.

I sat me down at even — it was autumn

And I was sad.

I laid me down at night — it was winter

And I slept.⁶⁵

- 1 Robert W. Haberstein and William M. Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing*. (Wisconsin, 1955), p. 219.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- 3 Cited by Alice M. Earle, *Customs and Fashions In Old New England*. (New York, 1893), p. 370.
- 4 Jessica Mitford, *The American Way Of Death*. (New York, 1963), p. 199.
- 5 Charles M. Andrews, *Colonial Folkways*. IX, (New York, 1919), p. 93.
- 6 Alice Morse Earle, *Customs and Fashions In Old New England*. (New York, 1893), p. 369.
- 7 Haberstein and Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing*. p. 210.
- 8 Cited by Earle, *Customs and Fashions In Old New England*, p. 370.
- 9 Mary Caroline Crawford, *The Social Life of Old New England*. (New York, 1971), p. 454.
- 10 Andrews, *Colonial Folkways*, p. 94.
- 11 Cited by Perry Miller, *The Puritans*. (New York, 1963), p. 319.
- 12 Crawford, *The Social Life of Old New England*, p. 456.
- 13 Earle, *Customs and Fashions of Old New England*, p. 375.
- 14 Haberstein and Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing*. p. 205.
- 15 Earle, *Customs and Fashions of Old New England*, p. 376.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 377. Alice Morse Earle, *Two Centuries of Costume In America*. (New York, 1903), p. 655.
- 17 Earle, *Two Centuries*, p. 655.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 650.
- 19 Cited In Earle, *Customs and Fashions in Old New England*, p. 377.
- 20 Crawford, *The Social Life In Old New England*, p. 457.
- 21 William B. Weedon, *The Economic and Social History of New England 1620-1789*. (New York, 1890), p. 414.
- 22 Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities In The Wilderness*. (New York, 1938), p. 412.
- 23 Andrews, *Colonial Folkways*, p. 93-94.
- 24 Cited in Henry M. Brooks, *The Days of the Spinning Wheel In New England*. (Boston, 1886), pp. 95-96.
- 25 Sexton of the Old School (Lucius Manilus Sargent), *Dealings With The Dead*. (Boston, 1855), p. 211.
- 26 Weedon, *Economic and Social History of New England 1620-1789*, p. 740.
- 27 Cited In Earle, *Customs and Fashions In Old New England*, p. 380.
- 28 Haberstein and Lamers, *The History Of American Funeral Directing*, p. 314.
- 29 Earle, *Customs and Fashions In Old New England*, p. 380.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 373.
- 31 Crawford, *The Social Life In Old New England*, p. 462.
- 32 Cited In Bridenbaugh, *Cities In The Wilderness*, p. 412.
- 33 Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Colonial Craftsman*. (Chicago, 1950), pp. 80-81.
- 34 Cited in Haberstein and Lamers, *The History Of American Funeral Directing*, p. 254.
- 35 Bridenbaugh, *Colonial Craftsman*, p. 75.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 65-96; Haberstein and Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, p. 228.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- 38 Crawford, *The Social Life In Old New England*, p. 458.
- 39 Earle, *Customs and Fashions In Old New England*, pp. 368, 373.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 364.
- 41 Cited In Earle, *Customs and Fashions In Old New England*, p. 364.
- 42 Cited by Haberstein and Lamers, *The History Of American Funeral Directing*, p. 197.
- 43 Sargent, *Dealings With The Dead*, p. 50.
- 44 Avon Neal and Ann Parker, "Graven Images", *American Heritage*, XXI(August, 1970), pp. 18-20.
- 45 Earle, *Customs and Fashions In Old New England*, p. 382.
- 46 Andrews, *Colonial Folkways*, pp. 94-95.
- 47 Samuel B. Pettengill, *The Yankee Pioneers*. (Vermont, 1971), p. 171; Mary Bolte, *Huanted New England*, (Connecticut, 1973), p. 118.
- 48 Pettengill, *Yankee Pioneers*, p. 173.
- 49 Walker G. Jacobs, *Stranger Stop and Cast An Eye*. (Vermont, 1973), pp. 17-18, 22.
- 50 Harriette Merrifield Forbes, *Gravestones of Early New England And the Men Who Made Them*. (New York, 1927), pp. 113, 114.
- 51 Cited By Sargent, *Dealings With The Dead*, p. 30.
- 52 Forbes, *Gravestones of Early New England and The Men Who Made Them*. p. 118.
- 53 Jacobs, *Stranger Stop and Cast An Eye*, p. 36.
- 54 Forbes, *Gravestones of Early New England and The Men Who Made Them*, p. 123.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 56 Cited By Forbes, *Gravestones of Early New England and The Men Who Made Them*, p. 21.
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- 58 Stephen Foster, "Gravestone Carving and Artistic Intent In Essex County", *Old-Time New England*, LXIV (Fall 1973), p. 113.
- 59 James Deetz, *Invitation To Archeology*. (New York, 1967), p. 30.
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- 61 Cited By Forbes, *Gravestones of Early New England and the Men Who Made Them*, p. 26.
- 62 Crawford, *The Social Life In Old New England*, pp. 443-464.
- 63 Andrews, *Colonial Folkways*, p. 92.
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- 65 Cited By Earle, *Customs and Fashions In Old New England*, p. 386.

The Stockbridge Indian in the American Revolution

Deirdre Almeida

The Stockbridge Indians, also known as the Mahican tribe, were a branch of the Algonquins. The Indian name is Muh-he-ka-neew, which means "the people of the ever-flowing waters." At the height of their glory their principal home had been on the banks of the Hudson River. Their possessions extended from the Hudson to the Connecticut Valley, and reached north of Lake George and Lake Champlain. The tribe was reduced in size through wars with their enemies, the Mohawks and the Six Nations. By 1680 the Mahicans had been entirely driven from the west bank of the Hudson. Then, they found themselves gradually crowded out of the east bank, by the farming and commercial activities of the Dutch. In addition the English were rapidly pushing inland. Until 1722 the tribe still held the "Housatonic open," which had been untouched by the white man. At that time, the Mahican tribe was reduced to perhaps thirty families scattered along the banks of the Housatonic.¹

In 1722 the English felt the moment was opportune for settlement of this last strip of land that separated Massachusetts from New York. The idea of settling this region originated with John Stoddard, who was the "master mind" of the Connecticut Valley.² He emphasized the friendliness of the Indians who lived across the mountains and he noted how important it was to maintain this friendship. One hundred and seventy-seven bold men were eager for adventure, under the leadership of Joseph Parsons and Thomas Nash. They received the first grants of land in Berkshire County, in 1722.³

Konkapot, chief of the tribe, asked for four hundred and sixty pounds, along with three barrels of cider and thirty quarts of rum, in exchange for the title to the land. The Indians kept for themselves two small reservations, one on the northern boundary of the lower Housatonic township, which they called Skatehook, and the other beyond the mountain, Wnahtakook, later to become the town of Stockbridge. Konkapot lived in the latter, while Umpachene, second in command of the tribe, maintained the Great Wigwam at Skatehook, a tent sixty feet long, where important conferences and ceremonies took place.⁴