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THE WALTER STREET "BERRYING" GROUND

AT the turn of the 18th Century the town of Roxbury was growing rapidly. Out by Jamaica Pond, along the Dedham Road, the section called "Jamaica End" was filling up with thriving farms. By 1702, Joseph Weld and forty-four other men felt that the community was large enough to support a church of its own. Until this time they had been parishioners of the Roxbury town church on Meeting House Hill—a long, weary way from Jamaica Pond, especially on cold winter nights. On account of the distance, and, as they said, "The great travail and time in going and coming," they petitioned to be allowed to establish a second parish, with a meeting-house nearer home. The petition was ignored.

In the records that remain to us, the next five years are shrouded in silence, but by 1711 it was clear what the men of Jamaica End had been up to. They had built a meeting-house and started a parish, and were now suing for pardon and recognition by the General Court and Town Assembly. The church they thus established surreptitiously was on Walter Street (then part of the Dedham Road), and the remains of their parish cemetery are now part of the grounds of the Arnold Arboretum.

Revolutionary Soldiers Buried Here

The little cemetery, now reduced to thirteen stones and a crypt, can be found on the far side of the Peter's Hill Road, nearly opposite the dirt road leading to the crest of the hill. Originally the area was somewhat larger. As late as 1903, according to the records of the Cemetery Department (which held jurisdiction of it until the land came to the Arboretum in 1923), it covered 34,800 square feet. At this time about 300 square feet were taken from the grounds in order to widen Walter Street and in the subsequent excavating for the street, the remains of twenty-eight bodies were found. These were said to have been soldiers killed in the Revolution. Supposedly, they were reinterred, but there is no sign of them

today except for a commemorative marker erected by the Sons of the American Revolution. Perhaps they were put in the underground crypt, which appears to be of later date than the original stones.

Although the church was gone by the time of the Revolution, there is good reason to think that the convenient facilities of a burying ground by the side of the road might have been utilized by the Continental Army. During the battle of Dorchester Heights and the accompanying Siege of Boston, the Dedham Road was the lifeline of the Army, connecting the active forces with their arms and supplies stored in Dedham. Today one soldier's grave remains—that of Capt. Jonathan Hale, of Glastonbury, Connecticut, who died March 7, 1776, at the age of 56, three days after the decisive battle. Capt. Hale's present stone is a modern replacement, telling us only that he was a member of Wolcott's Regiment of Militia, but the original stone, which remained well into the last century, was more detailed. It is also known that after the war was over, the bodies of soldiers who had been buried in various parts of Jamaica Plain were gathered together and reinterred in the Walter Street Cemetery.

Aside from these interesting but purely fortuitous soldiers, the occupants of the cemetery were members of the Second Parish Church of Roxbury (now the First Parish Church of West Roxbury), which stood near the corner of Walter and South Streets from 1712, when the General Court formerly recognized the *fait accompli* of its existence, until 1773, when it moved to its present location.

Land Provided by Weld Family

Since about 1640, the tract of land which is now the grounds of the Arnold Arboretum had been the property of the Weld family, so it is not surprising that Joseph Weld, the prime mover for the new parish, should have provided the plot of land for the church and the cemetery. Unfortunately, in 1712, just as the new parish was about to be recognized, Joseph Weld died and was therefore unable to enjoy the results of his labor and generosity. It would be satisfactory to know, at least, that he was buried in the new burying-ground, but of this there is no record. Until the 19th Century very little ritual surrounded the disposal of the dead. Cemeteries were exactly what they were called, "berrying-grounds," and few records of burial were kept by the church. As far as the grounds and plantings were concerned, the cemetery looks today much as it did in its prime.

First Pastor Ordained

On November 2, 1712, Nehemiah Walter, the pastor of the First Parish, formally gathered the congregation (now numbering eighteen), and they duly ordained their own pastor, the Reverend Ebenezer Thayer of Boston, on November 26. By the first of the year 1713, the parish was well under way. The first communion was in January, the first baptism in February—and thereafter baptisms made up a large part of the church records. In the first year there were eleven; in the second year, twenty-two.

In those days the congregation did not sit in church by family groups. Men sat on one side, women and girls on the other. Overhead, in the gallery, were the boys, watched over by one or more "tything-men," members of a special committee "to take care of ye boys and to prevent their playing or making any disturbance in ye meeting house." Although many churches made do with one or two, the Second Parish immediately appointed four tything-men, a number which was soon increased to six. It may have been a small parish, but apparently it was a lively one up in the gallery. A similarly cryptic notation in the year 1733 makes one wonder what had been going on downstairs. Among the measures which the parish passed to cope with its maintenance problems, there appears the regulation that those who sat by the windows should mend all the broken glass.

Maintenance was a constantly recurring problem. We are not told what the church looked like. It was probably, like most churches of the time, a fairly rude structure, possibly thatched, and almost certainly without the steeple and belfry with which our imaginations automatically equip New England meeting-houses. The cemetery lay to the north of the church and the parsonage to the south, at the junction of Walter and South Streets. Before the streets were named, when Walter Street was still only part of Dedham Road, this corner was identified as "Cookson's Corner."

Roxbury, with its streams, ponds and wooded hills, was a very beautiful place to live and already becoming known for the salubrity of its climate. Certainly, if the gravestones remaining in the cemetery are a valid sampling of the total population, long life was the rule. Of the twelve civilian stones, only two record the deaths of persons under the age of 60. The average of the other ten is somewhat over 75; two were in their eighties; one was ninety-five. We would consider these respectably venerable today.

The Reverend Mr. Thayer kept his records meticulously, in a small, neat hand, and in as terse and unemotional a style as can be imagined. It is, therefore, the more surprising to come across one entry, dated September 24, 1723, in which we can detect a generous glow of very human exasperation. "Isaac Bowen," the Reverend Mr. Thayer writes, "Having in several respects given great offence to the church and obstinately refusing to make the satisfaction the Brethern insisted upon, tho strongly urged thereto was, after Two Months waiting upon him, this day suspended from their Communion till he should give a Christian satisfaction for his miscarriages, pursuant to their own vote." To our eternal frustration, Mr. Thayer neglects to mention what, exactly, Mr. Bowen had done to cause such general consternation. Although today we find the occasional note of discord interesting for the breath of life it brings to dead records, on the whole there is every indication that the life of the little parish was serene and prosperous. Mr. Thayer's neat records continue in this vein until the time of his death in March of 1733.

Nathaniel Walter Called to the Pastorate

In January of 1734 the parish elected for its new pastor Nathaniel Walter, son of the Nehemiah Walter who had originally consecrated the church, and grandson of Increase Mather. His ordination in July of that year was a noteworthy event for which the congregation raised the sum of £45 to defray expenses. Lunch and dinner for all at a local tavern alternated with the examination of the candidate in the morning and the service in the afternoon.

The Reverend Mr. Walter, like his famous ancestor, was an energetic man and active in the life of the community. His popularity may be recognized in the naming of Walter Street. One story is often told to illustrate the intrepidity with which he embraced new ideas. In the "great small-pox time" of 1751, when Dr. Boylston was advocating inoculation in the face of lively public disapproval, Mr. Walter had himself inoculated. As he was recovering in the home of Dr. Boylston, some aroused member of the opposition threw a grenade into his room through an open window. Fortunately, the fuse of the grenade immediately went out and Mr. Walter was spared to continue his pastoral duties.

It is interesting to note that at the time of the small-pox several children described as "of Boston" were baptized in the Walter Street church. Presumably these had been sent to Roxbury to escape the pestilence.

In the meantime, Roxbury had continued to grow, and the meeting-house to deteriorate. In 1766 it was voted to build a new building, but nothing was done. In 1769 the Third Parish of Roxbury was established, the church being built where the First Church of Jamaica Plain now stands, in Monument Square. This was, of course, rather close to the Walter Street meeting-house, which lost some of its adherents to the new parish. These people felt it proper to take with them some of the Second Parish plate, which the Second Parish resisted. There was further dispute over the parish boundaries.

All these factors no doubt led to the decision, reached in March of 1773, to pull down the Second Parish meeting-house and use the good parts toward a new building "at the west end of Roxbury, towards Dedham." This resolution was immediately put into action, and by June a committee of fifteen had, by themselves, accomplished the task. Although occasional individuals were later interred in the old burying-ground, its period of regular function in the community had ended.

Interesting Headstones Remain

Today when we visit the little plot, our attention is attracted by the archaic quality of the stones, the quaint phraseology of the epitaphs, and the way the decorations gradually change from the grim death's-heads of the earliest years to quite cheerful little cherubs as the century progressed. The last stone, erected in 1812, is replete with urn, weeping willows and sentimental verse in full-blown romantic tradition:



PLATE IX

Upper: Sketch of a typical early church, taken from page 447 of Francis Samuel Drake's book, "The Town of Roxbury," published in 1878. Lower: Marker in the old burying ground on Peter's Hill commemorating the soldiers of the American Revolution who were buried here.

“While the dear dust she leaves behind,
Sleep in thy bosom, sacred tomb. . . .”

the last two lines being illegible.

By a coincidence, the stone with the earliest date commemorates the only other young person buried here—Mrs. Anna Bridge, who died at the age of 30. The date on the stone, 1722, is apparently a stone-cutter’s error. Mrs. Bridge did not die until 1729, and in fact, did not marry Mr. Edward Bridge until November 7, 1728. Previously she had been Mrs. Anna Child, of Brookline, a young widow. The Bridge estate was at the corner of May and Centre Streets and remained without a mistress for thirty years before Edward remarried.

The oldest stone, therefore, is the double one for Grace and Benjamin Child, husband and wife, who died just over a year apart, in their sixties. Nearby is the stone of Benjamin’s brother, Joshua, and we know that as late as 1878 the stone of his wife, Elizabeth, was also there. These two couples were apparently very close in life as well as in death. Not only were the husbands brothers, a year apart in age and baptized on the same day, but the wives were sisters, the daughters of one Edward Morriss. Each couple had twelve children, most of whom survived to maturity, and as Joshua and Benjamin were themselves part of a large family, it is not surprising that the name Child was a common one at the time in Roxbury, Brookline and Boston. The family estate was near the Brookline border, on the right going up Pond Street, and originally consisted of a house and barn and 80 acres “conveniently adjoining to ye sd housing.”

Another early stone is that of Thomas Bishop, who died in 1727 at the age of eighty-two. Little can be found about this man. We can assume that he was prosperous, as he presented a silver cup to the church in 1721. He was, of course, 65 when the Second Parish was established and so unlikely to figure prominently in the records.

Lt. Daniel Weld was a son of the Joseph Weld who founded the church. As a very young man he married a girl named Susanna and was the father of a daughter at 16. This infant was baptized Hannah in 1713, the third child to be baptized in the new church. Shortly thereafter Susanna must have died, for in 1720 Daniel was married again, this time to Elizabeth Tucker, and subsequently became the father of nine children, only two of whom (twins) failed to survive to adulthood. He lived on the Weld estate where the Arboretum now stands, and was buried in 1761 at the relatively early age of 64, the last person (according to the stones which remain) to be buried on Walter Street before the church was moved. Elizabeth lived to be 83, and was probably buried in West Roxbury.

Daniel’s mother is also buried on Walter Street, under the name of Mrs. Sarah Chamberlin. Seven years after Joseph Weld’s death, Sarah married Jacob Chamberlin and apparently was buried with the Chamberlins instead of the Welds. There is a considerable body of evidence that Sarah’s daughter, also

Sarah, had married Jacob's son Jacob, so that the Welds and the Chamberlins were doubly allied.

Far off by themselves are the small and crumbling stones of Deacon Ezra Davis and his wife Sarah. These two were both brought back to Walter Street after the church had moved, presumably to be buried with the rest of their family, since in 1787 several other stones bearing the name of Davis still remained. This family, abounding in deacons, was very prominent and active in the church from the beginning. Deacon Ezra and his wife lived in a farmhouse on the corner of the Weld estate about where the railroad underpass is now.

Another family which continued to use the old cemetery was the Bakers. Mrs. Hannah Baker, who died in 1776 at the age of 95, was interred in the family plot near her husband, Thomas, who had died previously at the age of 83. She was born Hannah Park, of Newton, and the two were married in 1722 in Watertown. Their house and Thomas' wheelwright shop were on Centre Street near Boylston Street, and there they raised three sons.

Capt. John Baker was apparently more prosperous, with a large farm near the Brookline border, where he raised six children. We are not told in what capacity he received his title of Captain, but of course all the commissioned men buried in the Walter Street cemetery, with the exception of Capt. Hale and the anonymous soldiers, were pre-Revolutionary.

With these Bakers, John and Hannah, we find the first real departures from the old skull motif in headstone decoration. Hannah's stone has what appears to be a bow-knot and John's, although it has the usual cheerful later variation of the conventional skull and wings, is further embellished with a short poem:

"Life is uncertain. Death is sure.
Sin is the wound. Christ is the cure."

This was a time of change in many ways, ecclesiastical and social as well as political. With the countryside about to take up arms against the British, many of the older members of the Second Parish were still "up in arms" over the changes which had recently been introduced in the singing of hymns in church. Before this time hymns had been sung responsively, one verse at a time being read aloud by a deacon and then sung in unison by the congregation. The new method eliminated the reading by the deacon, and was extremely unpopular at first. At much the same time the public confession of sins in the aisle was also abandoned. It is possible that many of the older people were more upset by such trifling innovations than by the Revolution itself.

Gregorian Calendar Changes Dates

One very widespread and significant change which probably upset no one, is graphically illustrated in the old burying-ground. From the Twelfth Century until England accepted the Gregorian Calendar in 1752, the New Year had been

celebrated on March 25th, causing the dates from January 1st through March 24th to belong to what we would consider the previous year. Apparently the discrepancy caused some contemporary uneasiness, for about 1670 the custom began of hyphenating the two years during January, February and the early part of March. Many of the stones in the Walter Street Cemetery are dated in this fashion, and when we read a date recorded as 1729/30 we can remember that for our purposes the later year serves.

It is surprising what a strong sense one has of knowing the people from reading the old records, bare and factual though they be. Except possibly in the case of Isaac Bowen (and even there it is purely conjecture), we find little evidence of the stern, dogmatic Puritans so beloved by later writers. Some of these there may have been, but Jamaica Plain appears to have been settled by a hard-working, practical crowd, trying to be good, but slipping with monotonous regularity from the straight and narrow, only to be forgiven and brought back into the fold. They were people with a nice appreciation of the value of a pound and a healthy awareness of the good things of life, restrained from the excesses of many frontier towns by domesticity and a steady striving for decency and orderliness.

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