



THE HISTORY OF KEENE'S CEMETERIES AND BURYING GROUNDS

by Esther P. Cook

The First Town Yard

It was the custom of early New England settlements to combine the meetinghouse, in which all governmental affairs were carried out, with the church. In Keene the first meetinghouse and burying ground, commonly called the "Town Yard" or "South Yard," were found on the west side of lower Main Street, where a marker now stands. This meetinghouse, with its adjoining burying ground, was established in 1736 on what was then the convenient location opposite the head of the Boston Road (now Baker Street).

The oldest record of Keene's first burying ground is found in the minutes of the proprietors' meeting of 1762, when it was voted for "Dan Guild to dig graves in the Burying Place by the Town Street." Later records show a slow decay of this first yard into eventual oblivion. In 1808 the town voted to raise \$300 to fence all burying places with \$103.83 appropriated for the South Yard. This was the last time any money was spent to preserve these grounds. By 1840 the yard was in a state of neglect. The fences and walls were down and farm animals grazed there. Many stones had been broken by vandals; others had been carried off for use as door sills or other purposes. In the years 1844, 1845, and 1846 the town tried to have the South Yard, then on

the Robinson Farm, fenced in, but the fence was not built and stone by stone the old yard vanished. This left Keene with a "lost cemetery." A few headstones and graves were moved to the Washington Street Cemetery. The old South Yard is now under the intersection of the Route 9 bypass and Main Street.

It is a tragedy for Keene to have lost its first burying place. Interred there were most of its first pioneers, proprietors of the town and veterans of the French and Indian and Revolutionary Wars. Colonel Isaac Wyman, who died March 31, 1792, was buried there. Wyman came to Keene in 1762, built the finest house in town, and kept it as a tavern for 30 years. He marched at the head of his company to Lexington in 1775 when news of the battle reached Keene. Later he served in the Battle of Bunker Hill, and was promoted to colonel.

The last to be buried in this lost graveyard was one of Keene's "milder" Tories, Major Josiah Willard, who died in 1801. Willard had been the town's first representative to the legislature in 1768-70.

Keene's Five Burying Districts

In 1793 plans were laid down for the establishment of five burying districts for the town, and by 1795 this had taken effect, with one burying ground in each district. Most of these yards were already being used for burial purposes at this time. Since transportation in that era was poor at its best, people buried their dead nearby. In cases of communicable diseases, the deceased were buried immediately.

The first district included the village, the land between the Ashuelot River and the North Branch, the land from the Swanzey line as far north as the west side of Fisher Brook (now crossing Court Street underground), to the Sullivan line on the east side. The burying yard for this district was the Prison Street Yard. Prison Street has since been renamed Washington.

The second district was the southwest quarter of town, north to the Chesterfield Road and included the small village at West Keene; people of this district used the Ash Swamp Burying Ground.

The third district was the northwest quarter of town. This ground was "Near the Westmoreland road, three and one half miles from Town," off the present Hurricane Road.

The fourth district included the north part of town. This yard was "in the crotch of the road beyond the Chase farm," now Court Street and East Surry Road.

The fifth district included all the land east of the North Branch

(Otter Brook). This yard is now in the town of Roxbury, west of the Nathan Nye homestead.

Later the second and third districts were combined and the West Yard near the Sawyer Tavern was used. This is now on Bradford Road.

The Ash Swamp Yard

At a proprietors' meeting February 23, 1761, it was "Voted upon the Fourth article that the neck of Comon Land where Isaac Clark and Amos Foster were buried be appropriated and Set apart for a burying Place for the Town." Thus Keene's oldest existing burying ground came into being.

Clark and Foster and Foster's wife were victims of a severe small-pox epidemic that spread through the settlements at that time. They were buried on a forest knoll near Ash Swamp Brook, and the town acquired the land for its second burying ground. Clark and Foster were among the original proprietors and they and some of Keene's first settlers were buried there, the town being only 27 years old when this yard was started.

This small yard can be found north of West Street, just east of White Brook. Most of the old slate markers are gone and there is one stone on which the date 1761 is barely legible. The Ash Swamp Yard has been treated kindly, and is cared for along with the other Keene cemeteries; on May 30, 1900, the Daughters of the American Revolution rededicated the grounds and placed a memorial boulder there. The Yard is officially closed and is kept as a memorial.

The North Yard

Nestled under the shade trees in the triangle at the junction of Court Street and East Surry Road is the North Burying Ground. This land was originally part of the farm of Israel Houghton, who willed it to his son John in 1769. John served in the French and Indian Wars and later was a captain in the Revolutionary War.

In 1776 Captain John Houghton set aside land for a family burying ground and shortly afterwards his friend, Ebenezer Day, was buried there. In 1794 Captain Stephen Chase bought the farm and built the present house, which now stands on the west side of Court Street. Although the North Yard was designated as a "Town Yard" in 1795, the deed to the land remained in the Chases' possession and

the family continued to keep records of the burials. It was not until 1900 that a descendant, Joseph Chase, presented a quitclaim deed to the city. In 1954 Mrs. H. Bramwell Shaw, granddaughter of Joseph, and resident of the Chase homestead, found the old burial certificates among the family papers and presented them to the city clerk.

Still standing is the stone of Ebenezer Day, the first to be buried in the North Yard. He died January 12, 1776, at the age of 66. Day was an original proprietor and served under Captain Willard in 1747 and 1748.

The gravestones in this yard abound with inscriptions and epitaphs. Here is found the classic:

“Reader behold as you pass by
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, so you must be.
Prepare for death and follow me.”

Many stones are engraved with similar words, warning the passer-by of his impending doom, regardless of his position in life. The good man: “Here lies a man whose heart was kind and free, who was ever loved with God-like Charity.” The worldly man: “And when ambition fills your breast, Think of my lonely place of rest.” Some stones give the cause of death, such as that of Stephen Chase, age 7 years “. . . whose death was occasioned by the fall of a tree. How short the span of the cradle to the grave.”

The Yard on the Westmoreland Road (Hurricane Road)

The third district burying ground is on the left side of the Hurricane Road close to the Westmoreland line, and was laid out in 1795. Because of its age, many old stones are gone and most of those still standing are illegible. This yard is well tended. Weathered or broken stones have been laid on the surrounding stone wall, rather than left on the ground to disappear. Their shape alone indicates that they were once headstones. Since it was the custom of the era to mound the earth over graves, one can still make out the old lots. About 100 persons were buried here.

William S. Briggs listed the inscriptions on the stones in the cemetery in 1878 and remarked that the oldest monument in the yard was dated 1798 and the latest 1868.

One headstone which has remained in remarkably good condition reads: “In memory of Mrs. Lydia Partridge, wife of Mr. Levi

Partridge who died 28, Nov. 1798, aged 51 years. Virtue now received reward, And every grace with sweet accord, Shall now unite to praise the Lord, In halleluvers to our God." It is recorded that Levi Partridge (also Amos and Reuben) ran a tavern and sawmill on the stream out of Goose Pond.

In this yard is the grave of Revolutionary War soldier John Balch. In 1781 he was appointed by the legislature as the first post rider for the first public mail route. Once in "each and every fourteen days" he rode from Portsmouth to Concord, to Plymouth, to Charlestown, to Keene and back to Portsmouth. For this he received \$70.00 every three months.

The town farm, the former Deacon Kingsbury farm, was located nearby and used as such until 1876. This cemetery would naturally have been used for burial of persons who died at the poor farm and it has been suggested that those native stones without inscriptions for the most part mark burials made between 1830-1876.

The Prison Street Yard

The Prison Street Yard (Washington Street) was made a town cemetery in 1795. This replaced the South Yard as the burying ground of the first district; however, the old yard had a few interments after that date.

The first to be buried in the Prison Street Yard was John Holland Johnson, the seven-year-old son of Moses Johnson, who died April 22, 1795. His slate stone is in good condition a short distance southeast of the entrance.

Gravestones giving an earlier date than 1795 are those marking the resting place of bodies removed from other places or erected as memorials. The first to be moved was the remains of Captain Eliphalet Briggs, who died of smallpox in 1776 and was buried at the foot of the hill on the road leading to Roxbury.

As early as 1789 the town appointed a committee with power to call on their neighbors to turn out and fence the several burying places, without pay. At first the new Prison Street Cemetery was surrounded with a stone wall, the same kind that farmers used to build on almost all the hill lands. There was a small building in the back part of the yard, painted black, for the storing of tools and biers. It was later used for storage of the town hearse.

There were two biers, one for adults and one for children. During the year 1795 local citizens voted to buy a pall cloth, the first one

ever used in town. At a funeral the coffin was placed on the bier, and the black pall cloth spread over it. Eight pallbearers were appointed, four to carry the bier and four to assist. Mourners and friends followed on foot. The meetinghouse bell gave notice of a death in the community and was tolled on the morning of a funeral and also during the march of the procession from the Meetinghouse to the grave.

About 1830 the tombs on the west side were built, and those on the south side of the enclosure were added a few years later. In 1847 the old wall was removed and a fence constructed around the yard at the expense of the town. Under the direction of the Ashuelot Chapter, DAR, the tombs were again repaired in 1903.

Burial places have been recorded for 695 persons in the cemetery. This record contains the names of less than one-fourth of the bodies which have been buried there, the rest having passed into oblivion.

Between 1800 and 1835 several plain headstones were erected to the memory of Revolutionary War soldiers. They bear the names and dates:

Samuel Bassett, died November 8, 1834, aged 81 years.

(Town records, aged 80 8-12 years)

Noah Cooke, died October 15, 1829, aged 80 years

Major Davis Howlett, died February 23, 1817, aged 79 years

(Town records, aged 80 years)

Samuel Osgood, died July 11, 1828, aged 71 years

Josiah Richardson, died February 20, 1820, aged 74 years

(Town records, Feb. 25, 1820)

Capt. Jeremiah Stiles, Esq., died December 6, 1800, aged 56 years

(Town records, Dec. 5, 1800)

William Woods, died March 23, 1818, aged 83 years

(Town records, aged 84 years)

Capt. David Wilson, died December 5, 1818, aged 70 years

Capt. John Leonard, died April 27, 1829, aged 76 years

Major General George Ingersoll, died July 16, 1805, aged 56 years.

The remains of at least two Revolutionary War soldiers were buried in graves not now designated, viz., Nehemiah Towns (Towne), died May 2, 1820, aged 72 years, Samuel Heaton, died April 1, 1830, aged 70 years.

In the late 19th century Superintendent Stephen Barker sought out and found 13 of the old yard stones from the so-called "Lost Cemetery" and stored them. In 1904 the Ashuelot Chapter, DAR, had the 10 legible headstones set in a lot at the rear of the cemetery

with a memorial boulder (site of the old hearse house). The Chapter also gave the iron gate at the cemetery entrance that year. Descendants of early settlers have since placed more durable monuments on some of the old graves, and in 1966 there were two new stones with bronze DAR seals on the graves of Revolutionary War soldier William Woods and his wife.

Old slate stones rescued from the Lost Cemetery included those of Elizabeth and William Sumner; Abner Blake, six-year-old son of Nathan, who died 1766; Elizabeth, seven-year-old daughter of Rev. Clement and Elizabeth Sumner, who died 1767; Widow Betsey Fairbanks, wife of Capt. Nathan, deceased in 1772 at 69 years of age; William Sumner, died 1765 on his day of birth to Rev. Clement and Elizabeth Sumner; Zipporah Harvey, 1778, 27 years old, wife of Ezra Harvey; David, 1789, 20 years of age, son of Thomas and Sarah Baker; Capt. Ephraim Dorman, 1795, 85 years; Hephzibah Dorman died 1781, aged 63 years; Abigail Reed, wife of General James Reed, died 1791, age 68 years; and Madam Ruth Whitney, 72 years old, died 1788.

From the minutes of the town meeting in 1859:

“Paid J. & F. French for New Hearse \$300.00

Paid H. P. Muchmore for Hearse House \$175.00”

The town maintained a hearse for public use and housed it in a shed in the southeast corner of the Prison Street Yard. Later in the century funeral directors provided their own vehicles. The city abandoned the keeping of a hearse and ordered the shed torn down. The last horse-drawn hearse was used in 1932.

After demolishing the hearse house, workmen found an old partially-filled tunnel that led toward the stone house on the south side of the cemetery.

Noteworthy citizens of Keene who have been buried in the old Prison Street cemetery include Rev. Zedekiah S. Barstow, for 50 years pastor of the Congregational Church and the last minister to be settled by the town. He died March 1, 1873, aged 82 years and 5 months. His epitaph reads: “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth, there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day.”

Also buried here are Ithamar Chase, father of Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase; Miss Catherine Fiske, the founder of Miss Fiske’s Female Seminary; George Newcomb, whose life was “cropped like a rose before ’tis fully blown,” and his parents and brother Seth, whose

life was "too much devoted to the world and too little to his Maker."

The stone of Miss Eliza Carter, though she had passed three-score years and ten, announced that "She was always young." Mrs. Lydia Beals, aged 102 years, was the oldest person buried here. She died January 12, 1815.

The West Yard

The West Yard, on the west side of Bradford Road, has been in continual use since the 18th century. There were eight interments in 1965. It was not included in the districts of 1795, but was made a town cemetery when districts two and three were later combined. The oldest marked grave is that of Daniel Washburn, aged six days, who died January 25, 1793. The many stones dated 1798 give evidence of the smallpox epidemic of that year.

In 1806 Colonel Abraham Wheeler opened a tavern at Ash Swamp (now on Arch Street, opposite Bradford Road). He was succeeded by his son-in-law, Josiah Sawyer, who deeded the land containing the West Yard to the town. In 1889 the yard was enlarged on the back and sides with cemetery lots.

This yard is a combination of the old burying ground and the modern cemetery. There are old slate and marble stones on graves laid in rows, side by side, some with small foot stones. There are also the later rectangular lots, each with one monument and flush or small headstones. The later monuments gave names and statistics only, but the early stones were inscribed with epitaphs and expressions of faith, and one stone bears the simple statement: "Here lies an honest man."

The Old Nye Yard

The fifth burying ground laid out by the town of Keene in 1795 is now in the town of Roxbury. (In December 1812 the town of Roxbury was incorporated, taking land from Keene, Packersfield, and Marlborough.) This yard is on a high knoll on the left of Roxbury Road, one-eighth mile beyond the Babbidge Dam Road, and is not easily seen from the road. This is commonly called the "Old Nye Cemetery," as the land was originally part of the Nathan Nye farm. The Nye homestead is still standing, just above the cemetery. This yard is still in use, although there is a much larger town cemetery farther up the road.

The first to be buried here was the wife of Nathan Nye, Lucretia,

who died August 14, 1795, aged 23. Her husband is buried at her side. At his other side is his second wife, Lydia. Their three headstones are among the few of the old ones still in good condition.

Woodland, Greenlawn, and Northeast Division

In 1854 Keene purchased land from Thomas M. Edwards to be used as the Woodland Cemetery, including the old Muster Field on Beaver Street. The grave of the renowned Keene naturalist, George A. Wheelock, is to be found in the Northeast Division, marked by a large black slate stone.

During the 19th century expert stonecutters and quarrymen were imported from Europe and great marble and granite mines were opened in Vermont and New Hampshire. This, coupled with the ability of trains to haul heavy freight, meant that gravestones could be large monuments of superior quality, polished and carved to the taste of the purchaser. There also came into being the large family plots surrounded by granite or iron fences, with individual lots reserved for future generations. This era saw the advent of the trust fund for perpetual care of the lot.

Facing Beaver Street on the southwest corner a tomb was constructed for temporary interments during the winter months. Today this is used mainly by out-of-town small or private cemeteries lacking facilities for winter burials.

Near Beaver Street in Woodland Cemetery is a marble stone inscribed "Old Peter; died Feb. 9, 1870, Ae. 57 yrs. Erected by his friends at the Cheshire House, Keene, N. H." Peter Jeffery, a Frenchman, had been employed a lifetime as a man-of-all-work for Keene's famous hotel, the Cheshire House. When he died no trace of home or family could be found, but he had a multitude of friends.

On May 8, 1889 land for Greenlawn Cemetery, off Page Street, was conveyed to the city and on September 20, 1901, land between Woodland and Greenlawn was bought from Pierre Couillard. The part of the cemetery from Page Street to North Lincoln Street was called the Northeast Division. Conflicting dates have arisen as to the origin of Keene's cemeteries. The dates the town or city council voted to buy a cemetery, appropriated the money to do so, and officially opened the cemetery, could have a spread of 10 to 20 years, and in the meantime, several persons were buried in that location. There are many recorded burials going back one to 20 years before these two cemeteries were officially opened.

Buried in the Northeast Division is Major General Simon Goodell Griffin, who died January 14, 1902. He commanded the Sixth New Hampshire Volunteers during the Civil War, which he joined as a captain at the beginning of the conflict. Later he wrote *The History of the Town of Keene from 1732 to 1874*. In April of 1902 the massive granite monument that marks his grave was hauled into Keene by ox sled, as there was still snow on the ground.

There are a great many graves for the year 1918, showing 193 burials the year of the influenza epidemic. In 1965, with a much larger population, there were only 134 interments.

Keene does not have a military cemetery, though there are lots maintained by veteran organizations.

Sumner Knight Chapel

The Sumner Knight and Family Memorial Chapel is situated on high land in the Woodland, Northeast Division Cemetery. It is a one and one-half story structure with a seating capacity of 150 persons.

By the will of Marcus W. Knight the sum of \$50,000 was bequeathed to the city for the erection of a chapel in memory of his father, Sumner Knight, and the Knight family. The bequest was accepted on December 4, 1930.

Saint Joseph's Cemetery

In 1857 the first Roman Catholic parish was established in Keene. Shortly afterward Saint Joseph's Cemetery was laid out—a tract of land on the east side of Main Street, a few hundred yards south of the South Branch River. Later a tomb for temporary winter interments was build in the northwest corner. Like other cemeteries in Keene, the lots were quickly bought up and Saint Bernard's Church established a much larger cemetery directly across the road, actually an enlargement of the same cemetery, and using the same name. Here was set aside a lot for Catholic war veterans.

This is Keene's largest private cemetery. The grounds are owned and cared for by the Catholic Church. Statistics of interments are recorded at City Hall, as well as in church records.

Both cemeteries are bounded by iron fences and plans for the future call for new granite entrances. On Memorial Day 1964 a memorial monument was dedicated in the newer cemetery.

Monadnock View Cemetery

In 1936 the last available land of the Northeast Division was opened up. These lots sold so fast that the City Council purchased, on May 7, 1946, 75 acres at Park Avenue and Maple Avenue from John Cook and Jedd Wilder. This ground was named Monadnock View Cemetery and it was voted that sale of each lot should include the cost of perpetual care. The original plan called for markers flush with the ground, but after many complaints the cemetery was divided, monuments being allowed in one half. A few years after this cemetery was opened it was the only one left with lots for sale. The first to be buried in Monadnock View was baby Ann Hiede Coppo on April 19, 1948.

In Woodland, in Greenlawn, and in the Northeast Division the city has always kept a "free ground." In the past it was called the paupers' lot or paupers' grave, but in 1966 Keene closed all previous "free grounds" and set aside a new "free ground" at Monadnock View. The first burial here was on December 13, 1966.

This topical concerned only a brief history of the cemeteries, that is, how and when each began. No attempt has been made to list persons buried in the grounds, except in a few instances of special interest value.