Burial Ground Lesson Plan

Lesson Objectives

**→**Students will be able to **use visual evidence** to make observations and comparison, and formulate early hypotheses and interpretations.

**→**Students can articulate how **setting** affects the value of objects/art.

**→**Students will contribute to **discussion** in a free and comfortable manner.

# Introduction and Logistics

Students will likely be lagging a bit behind coming from the yard. Take **attendance** as they come; **introduce** yourself again, give a **preview** of the section.

My suggestion is to set the tone of the discussion by urging them to feel free to ask questions and make observations of what they see around them. Close looking, comparison, and analyzing the setting are the major takeaways for this week. Unlike their homework, the gravestones in the Burial ground are (mostly) in their original setting.

If extremely cold, you can retire in Christ Church at an appropriate time (well heated and next to the entrance to the burial ground). Christ Church can be a (warm) place to talk about connections between the spaces. I have historical pamphlets about Christ Church for you—the connections will be clear once you read them over.

# Orientation

Have students walk around for 5 minutes to orient themselves to the space.

Ask for some initial observations. Any gravestones that grabbed their attention? Why? [Aimed at breaking the ice, getting them comfortable with speaking in the group]. Try to get them to move from basic observation to more sophisticated interpretation (you can tell them this).

# Direction

Focus in on a few select gravestones in the yard. It’s your choice which to focus on. But do focus on one or two. I will likely let the students drive which gravestones that capture their attention. I have a short slide show that gives you a nice idea of what’s there. Here are two that could be used.

* Abraham Ireland (also in the Farber Gravestone Collection)
	+ “God Brought him from a Distant Land / and Did preserve hime by his Mightey hand” Rest illegible and sunken. (Ties in well with “Transplanting Faith.”
* Sibyl Wigglesworth (will be discussed in lecture).

**Visual Elements**

Pillars (invokes Temple) Composition of Text Elegiac Urn and Willow (1780s on)

Color (changes in sun, moisture, etc.) Skulls “Momento Mori” and other death phrasing

Material (mostly slate here) Cherubs “Portrait” of Deceased

The “frame,” or tympanum Wings Size of stone & arrangement of the elements

Floral features Breastlike Gourds Portraiture

## Key Concepts

A key concept for this week is the religious purposes of these graves. The artistic elements were all aimed at marking a past life, but were also deeply enmeshed in the devotional life of the living. The gravestones (and other ephemera surrounding death) were quite literally for the living. By visiting the graves, individuals were reminded of their mortality, urged to tend to their souls, to reflect on the extent to which they were in a position to receive God’s grace, and to emulate the successful lives of the “saints.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Representations of death are intended to be victorious for the dead, chastening for the living. Assurances are crucial, namely that the deceased had been Christians, and had run the “race” of life, and would be rewarded with victory. The elements of this devotional life is inscribed on the gravestones themselves, but is dependent on a ritual surrounding death as well. Puritans did not believe they could know for certain if they were one of the elect,[[2]](#footnote-2) but they did believe that on the death bed it became mostly clear—as this was the moment of transfer between bodily life and eternal life (or eternal damnation). (Accidental deaths and suicides were a troubling short-circuit to this end of life practice, and carrying premade elegies on your person was a good indicator that you got the message of being prepared for your own death [Van der Woude])

For Puritans, God’s “stamp” or image was present within the individual (LaFontaine argues for this being visible in the artistic composition of the gravestones), and God recognizes his own upon death (those who are stamped by God)—they are rewarded with eternal life. There is a mirror quality here (Promey talks about this)—God the father recognizes the reflection of God the Son (Jesus) in the individual, and they are admitted to eternal life. The gravestones “frame” the life they represent in the open, written space. They frame these lives within the beliefs of the Puritans. Even though all people are made in God’s image, only the elect have the image of Christ “stamped” upon them. Eternal life is realized in two distinct stages. The first, immediately upon death, the elects’ souls join God in heaven (where God dwells). The second stage is triggered by Christ’s return, where the souls of the elect will be joined again with their bodies which are resurrected from the dead (like Christ), and they will inhabit the new heaven and the new earth where they will rule with Christ forever. The key thing here—for our purposes—is…

1. The belief by these early Americans that the dead people in the graveyard would rise again. So the saints are in rest, and will once again be present in the community.-
2. The visual representation of God’s image (or favor) was stamped upon these individuals graves. The person commemorated was framed by the repeated religious aesthetic representations of their beliefs.
3. The gravestones are for the contemplation of the living to think upon their mortality and, ultimately, their souls. In this way, they can function like a mirror to think, or frame, the self.

## Some Questions

What is the difference between seeing the gravestones online, on slides, and in person?

* This line of questioning is aimed at getting them to think about **setting**. Unlike much of what they will see this semester, these objects are in the original setting for which they were valued and designed. How has the setting changed since the graveyard was last actively used (1811)—does this change the experience?
* Some themes that may emerge
	+ Environmental elements: The weather (it’s cold!), the vegetation, the unkempt grounds, dicey patches of ice, the environmental elements, scattershot attempts to create paths, along with paths worn by visitors (practice).
		- Also imagine fauna of the past…sheep keep back the brush, pigs digging up the graves.
	+ Color and Light: versus the black and white images on the database, with the landscape occluded. (LaFontaine)
	+ “Composition:” Gravestones in a row, next to two Churches, spaces in front of the grave, the crypts, circled with a fence, among like objects, across from the Cambridge common.
	+ Sensing the diversity of the medium—despite the fact that Puritan aesthetics was one of repetition.
	+ What is the more important visual feature on these gravestones? (Images, text, divergence from the design style, etc.).

How does the object, visual features (text and image), and setting interact?

* If they struggle here, ask them: If we were to uproot one of these gravestones, and stick the object in the middle of Harvard Yard, what changes? Or, more to the point, uproot one and pin it to a museum wall (like at the MFA)?

How are the churches and the burial yard connected? **Christ Church Conversation**

* + Both ritualize the life cycle--most obviously through funerals (though Puritans held back on full funerals).
	+ Claiming space in ways sacred and profane (connecting pew boxes and burial plots).
	+ Memorials on the walls of churches echo the graves. But what are the differences?

What do images do that text cannot? Vice versa?

* How do text and image interact. Which is the more malleable space? For Promey, it is the text—the mirror/void. Do they agree?

What can the entirety—design motifs, with text, on slate—tell you about the people who are buried here?

* + Familial relationships.
	+ Does this burial ground *really* represent the dead of early Cambridge?
		- Giving them a sense of the large number of people who aren’t marked.
		- And those whose markers have deteriorated entirely (b/c made of wood).
	+ Who is missing? Who is included here? And how is difference signified, coded.
	+ Social standing.
	+ Fertility (circular, flora iconography).

# Further Reading

From the Cambridge Historical Commission

## Old Burial Ground

The Old Burial Ground is located in Harvard Square, on the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Garden Street.  Some history of the development of this site, provided by the Cambridge Historical Commission, appears below.

The first cemetery in Newtowne was "without the Common Pales" on the south side of Brattle Street, probably between present Ash Street and Longfellow Park. Being outside the perimeter fence, it was not safe from wild animals, and was discontinued before the West End fields were opened for settlement in 1634. No trace of this cemetery has been found.

The Old Burying Ground was established inside the pales before 1635. Initially, it covered only about an acre, but its size doubled as more of the Common was enclosed. The construction of Christ Church in 1760 established both the line of Garden Street and the western boundary of the cemetery, while the First Parish Church was built much later, in 1833. In many New England towns the burying ground was placed next to the meeting house, but that was never the case in Cambridge; here, the churches were built after the cemetery.

As the only cemetery in Cambridge for nearly two hundred years, the Old Burying Ground received a cross section of the population, from paupers to Harvard presidents. Burial spaces in the early years were not permanently marked, and the cemetery contains many more remains than are in the 1,218 known graves. Most of the monuments are slate headstones with scalloped shoulders. The oldest, dated 1653, belongs to Anne Erinton, but the stone may have been placed later, as headstones did not come into general use until the 1670s.

The earliest headstones have death's-heads of medieval origin. This motif changed to winged cherubs under the influence of the Renaissance and finally to graceful urn-and-willow patterns in the Neoclassic period. The late-17th- and early-18th-century gravestones are the most striking, with inventive epitaphs and details. The finest are the six stones by Joseph Lamson, whose straightforward naturalism and inventive use of detail are seen in the 1692 stone of William Dickson.

Interspersed among the traditional markers are the late-18th-century altar stones denoting the wealth and social standing of their owners, who were largely Anglicans. As in Britain, upper-class families wished to be interred in burial vaults rather than in caskets placed directly in the ground. The John Vassal tomb is the most elaborate. This structure marks an extensive subterranean vault; when last opened in 1862, it contained twenty-five caskets, including that of Andrew Craigie, who had acquired the family's Christ Church pew and burial plot along with the Vassal estate in 1792. [[3]](#footnote-3)

## History and Notable Burials

Eight Harvard presidents lie in the Old Burying Ground, including three of the first four -- Henry Dunster, Charles Chauncy, and Urian Oakes – who were buried there in the 18th century before Harvard obtained its own adjoining plot. In 1846 the university decided to restore the monuments of its early presidents and undertook a search for the resting place of Henry Dunster, who died in 1654. Several likely graves were opened, and found to consist of brick vaults covered with slabs of stone, containing coffins and remains in various states of preservation. None could be identified positively, but the authorities decided that one skeleton wrapped in a tarpaulin shroud in a coffin stuffed with tansy (an aromatic native weed used to conceal the smell of decomposition) was Dunster’s, and ordered a monument for him. John Langdon Sibley, who recorded the exhumations in his Private Journal, was skeptical. Historian Robert Nylander thought it was more likely the body of the town's second minister, Reverend Jonathan Mitchell, who died in July 1668.

The cemetery contains the graves of at least nineteen Revolutionary soldiers, including the slaves Neptune Frost and Cato Stedman. John Hicks, William Marcy, and Moses Richardson were hastily buried after the hostilities of April 19, 1775. The dedication of the Soldiers Monument on Cambridge Common in 1870 reminded the city that the casualties of the Revolution had not been commemorated. Professor Eben Horsford claimed to have established the location of the soldiers’ common grave after examining a scrap of bloody cloth excavated from the site, and a granite shaft was erected in their memory. Many soldiers mortally wounded at the Battle of Bunker Hill were buried in a field across the road from Thomas Oliver's mansion (now 33 Elmwood Avenue), which served as a hospital. Remains found in the vicinity of Channing Street in the 1920s were reinterred in Cambridge Cemetery. While African Americans were routinely buried in the Old Burying Ground, the Lewis family established a private cemetery off Garden Street in 1835. This survived until 1877, when the remains were moved to the Cambridge Cemetery and the land sold for development.

In 1811 the town opened a new cemetery in Cambridgeport, and regular interments in the Old Burying Ground ceased, although owners of family tombs continued to use them; one of the last to do so was Richard Henry Dana, the poet, in 1879. Except for the ashes of Christ Church's minister, Dr. Gardiner Day, which were placed under a path in 1981, the last burial was that of the Reverend Samuel McChord Crothers, a minister of the First Parish, Unitarian, in 1927.

The old cemetery rarely received more than minimal maintenance. In 1701-2, Aaron Bordman, "requesting that he might have the improvement of the Burying-yard (to keep sheep in)," agreed to repair the gate and pay the Selectmen six shillings a year for the privilege (Town Records, 337). There are no records of repairs made at public expense until 1735, when the town built a stone wall. This was in ruins by the 1840s, when an observer noted that it is rather surprising that, in this age of improvement, Cambridge should fall behind her neighbours, and suffer her ancient grave-yard to lie neglected ... Many of the tombs are without the names of the owners; many of the grave-stones have been broken, and more are broken every year; brambles abound instead of shrubbery; and what might be a beautiful cemetery is converted into a common passage-way. Unfitting is it, indeed, that the sod beneath which rests the ashes of a Shepard, a Dunster, and a Mitchell, should be rioted over by every vagrant schoolboy (Harris, v).

It was 1860 before the city replaced the ruined wall with a picket fence. Conditions improved after the Centennial, and the present iron fence was installed in 1891. In 1900, the cemetery commissioners, "after twenty years of effort to save money," rebuilt twenty brick tombs, reset innumerable headstones, and (apparently for the first time) planted trees and landscaped the grounds (Chronicle, Nov. 10, 1900).
In 1934, a committee that included President Conant of Harvard, Professor Samuel Eliot Morison, and preservationist William Sumner Appleton raised money for another restoration. A subsequent burst of enthusiasm during the Bicentennial enabled the Cambridge Historical Commission to restore many grave markers, work that continues on a regular basis.

Excerpt from Susan Maycock and Charles Sullivan. Building Old Cambridge: Architecture and Development. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press (forthcoming)

Cambridge Historical Commission
February 11, 2010 [[4]](#footnote-4)

1. Puritans believed that all true believers were saints. Not just a few with exemplary holiness, lives, miraculous powers, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Puritan (Calvinist thought) theology, God preordains those who will be saved and those who will be damned at the beginning of time (this is called the “supralapsarian” view). Everyone is predestined before they are born. Nobody can know for certain if they are one of the elect or the damned—this becomes immediately clear upon death. But people could discern signs—and certain rituals could be means of grace (baptism, eucharist [aka communion])—means of receiving God’s undeserved favor—which may or may not indicate election. If an individual experienced faith—they could have a pretty good inkling that they were one of the elect, and so upon a public declaration were eligible for church membership (which in the New England colonies meant political power), and are then one of the “visible saints.” The Halfway Covenant of 1662 shifts this a bit, so that there could be half-way members of the church, those who had been baptized into a family of full members, but felt that they were not able to make the public profession of faith. The concept of covenant is exceptionally important, but probably beyond our scope for the section. This is just some background on this notoriously difficult concept to grasp, but one which Puritans would have had a deep knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.cambridgema.gov/theworks/ourservices/cambridgecemetery/oldburialground.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.cambridgema.gov/theworks/ourservices/cambridgecemetery/> oldburialground/historyandnotableburials.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-4)