

Center Cemetery

by Doris Sherrow, October 2000

On **October 22** (rain date: October 29), I will be leading a walking tour through Center Cemetery for the Portland Historical Society. When I agreed to do this about a year ago, I knew nothing about Center Cemetery, and its layout makes it sort of hard to get a grasp on. Fortunately, **Di Longley** of the **Middlesex County Historical Society** had some research materials from tours she had given, and the late Stanley Clark had compiled a complete listing of every grave in the oldest section, with its row number and position, which I could study.

When Portland was first settled in the late 1600s, it had no cemetery of its own. The dead were ferried back across the Connecticut River to be buried in **Middletown's Riverside Cemetery**. When 15-year-old **Samuel Hall** died in February of 1713, his influential father, who lived at 478 Main Street, had a cemetery established on the common ground at the end of Commerce Street, which was considerably longer then than it is now. Young Hall became the first settler to be buried on the east side of the river.

For years Portland families laid their loved ones to rest there, only occasionally going back to Riverside Cemetery in Middletown where earlier ancestors might lie. Then in 1767, a new burying ground was established on Bartlet Street Extension. Why?

I think the answer lies in the desire of **Rev. Moses Bartlet's** family and parishioners to bury him near his home and the church he had served for 32 years. I suspect that his was the first grave in the new cemetery. He died on December 27, 1766. On January 24, 1767 **William Bartlet**, his son, deeded a piece of land, which he had recently purchased from the Wangunk Indian reservation, to the Congregational Church for use as a burying ground. Although Bartlet could also have been buried in the old **Commerce Street Burying Ground** and moved later when Center Cemetery became official, I suspect he was buried directly after his death in what would become Center Cemetery. In the 1700 and 1800s, many people were in fact buried in small family cemeteries near their homes, and Bartlet could have been in just such a lot until his son sold the land to the church.

For several decades after the establishment of Center Cemetery in 1767, people tended to bury their dead in the cemetery nearest their homes, Center for the northerners, and the **Old Burying Ground** for the southerners. Then, for reasons that aren't totally clear, the Old Burying Ground fell into disuse. Center Cemetery acquired additional land, and the Old Burying Ground may have been filling up. The Episcopal cemetery was also opened in the late 1820s, accommodating many of the people who lived "downstreet." The last burial in the old cemetery occurred in 1843, that of George Bush of 259 Main Street.

However, the old Commerce Street Burying Ground was sitting on top of a huge brownstone deposit. In 1870, after intense negotiation, the Middlesex and Brainerd Quarry companies paid \$6,000 to acquire the land of the old cemetery, moving the graves either to other cemeteries, or to an addition on the Episcopal cemetery created especially for this purpose.

In the bluster of March, 1870, surveyor **William Sellew** wrote out a methodical list of all the stones in the old cemetery, even including the ones which had become disassociated from their graves and were leaning against walls or trees or other gravesites. His list included about 400 people.

Records were kept of which bodies were claimed by relatives to be buried elsewhere, and where. Families who were now associated with the Episcopal Church moved their ancestors to the main part of that church's cemetery. Families who were Congregationalists moved their ancestors to Center Cemetery. Four bodies were moved to **Indian Hill Cemetery** in Middletown, and one to **Farm Hill Cemetery**. In 1882, the unclaimed bodies, ancestors of families who had died out or moved away, were reburied behind the Episcopal Church in the northernmost part of the cemetery.

In 1897, the Center Cemetery Association drafted up a booklet listing all the people buried there up to that date. That list shows about twenty gravestones that predate the 1767 date of that cemetery's establishment. Those would be the graves of people who were initially buried in the Old Burying Ground, then transferred to Center in the 1870s or -80s. However, two of those pre-1767 stones are not included on Sellew's 1870 list of the Old Burying Ground.

They are Rev. Moses Bartlet, who died in December of 1766, and his 12-day-old son, **Elihu**, who died in 1742. This means they were in Center Cemetery before 1870. Almost certainly, Bartlet was buried in his son William's Indian meadow before it was a cemetery. Presumably the baby's grave was transferred around the same time--its stone fairly touches Rev. Bartlet's.

Join us for the cemetery tour on October 22nd (2000)!