

Who rests in old burying ground?

Answer remains forever buried

By June W. Kennedy
Eagle correspondent

The dedication and naming of the Old Pioneer Burying Ground at the corner of Old Lowell and Carlisle roads in July of 1972 was indeed a momentous occasion in town. This season of Halloween turns my thoughts to cemeteries and mystery. I'm reminded of the major addresses of that dedication day in July of 1972. They were given by the late Allister F. MacDougall, Westford historian, and by James J. Fahey. Both offer plausible theories as to who lies beneath these unmarked stones in the little graveyard at the end of my road [Old Lowell Road].

Certainly there can be no positive last word; this cemetery plot will always have an air of mystery about it. This week I feature the address given by the late Allister F. MacDougall:

"For a great many years this 'mystery' cemetery has been neglected and almost forgotten. ...First I would like to say a word about why it is fitting that the Minutemen share in this honor. This little cemetery was set aside on part of the original Parker Farm. The first Parker Homestead was located on Old Lowell Road, just down the road on the left hand side, a short distance from this cemetery.

Early Parker Family

"The first ancestor of the Parker Family to come to this country, Abraham Parker, supposedly came from Wiltshire, England, about 1644. He settled in Woburn, married Rose Whitlock, and became a freeman in 1645. He later moved to Chelmsford along with his brothers, Jacob, James and Joseph about 1653. His son, Moses, born in Chelmsford about the year 1657, married Abigail Hildreth, daughter of Richard Hildreth, the first ancestor of that family in this country, and a family well known in Westford's early history.

"Aaron Parker, son of Moses and Abigail, born in 1689, the first of the name in Westford, settled on the farm as mentioned on Old Lowell Road. He married Abigail Adams about 1712, and to them were born ten children, whose offspring accounted for this area being known as Parker Village. [Note that school reports and townspeople used the term Parkerville also.]



Photo courtesy June W. Kennedy

The Aaron Parker Jr. homestead served as the first Parkerville School as early as 1757. Today it stands as a residence at the corner of Griffin and Concord roads. The building was made of brick from the neighboring brickyard.

"The location of the original farm is marked on the so-called 1729 map of Westford, found in the Town History. His name is listed among the original members of the first church in Westford. That the family carried on down through the years is shown on the Symmes Map of Westford dated 1853.

"At that time the first three houses on the left hand side of the road, going from the Parkerville Schoolhouse toward Carlisle, were all occupied by Parkers. Aaron died in 1772.

Role of Minutemen

"Now as to why the Minutemen of Westford are interested in the Parker Family. When the call came on the 19th of April 1775 for the Minutemen to march to Concord and meet the British, seven Parker men responded. Four were in Capt. Underwood's Company: Sergeant Joshua Parker, Isaac Parker, drummer, and John and Moses Parker. In Capt. Minot's Company were Sergeant Aaron Parker Jr. and Ebenezer and David Parker.

"Sergeant Joshua Parker from Capt. Underwood's Company was captain of a company at the Battle of Bunker Hill and Isaac Parker was his drummer. It is interesting to note that Capt. Parker had Amazial Fassett as his first lieutenant. Fassett was born in Westford

but was residing in Groton at the time. His second lieutenant was Thomas Rogers from Westford. Fassett was taken prisoner at Bunker Hill and died in Boston, July 1775. This shows that Capt. Parker and this company were in the thick of the fighting at Bunker Hill.

"Twelve Parker men served in the Revolutionary War and the present Westford Minutemen are proud to honor those men and pay their respect to the original site of the Parker Homestead.

Legends of cemetery's origin

"Now a word about this little cemetery in a corner of the Parker Farm. As a boy I knew of this cemetery and its mystery. At that time some thought that it contained a whole family that had been wiped out in a smallpox epidemic and the neighbors buried them here.

"Others told the legend of it's being an Indian resting place. But there never seemed to be any facts to substantiate either story.

"Family cemeteries located on old family farms can be found all over New England. I can remember one shown to me many years ago, back a mile or more into the woods, on a hill in the Berkshires. The family stones still stood in place, telling the story of an early pioneer family who cleared the land and developed a farm.

"His children's children carried on until the attractions of far away places called them away and the old farm was abandoned and the family lot was again surrounded by trees.

"Here is a little cemetery on the old Parker Farm that is a mystery. It is not a family lot; otherwise such a prosperous and prolific family, it certainly would have had marked headstones. If one branch of the family had been wiped out by small pox or some other epidemic, the relatives would have seen that the family lot was fittingly marked.

"The fact that in my early days, some thought it was an Indian cemetery may be a lead. We know that when Indians roamed this countryside and they buried their own dead, they had other burial customs. But it may be that when Indians were few in number, almost outcasts, and were squatters on the land of our ancestors, other customs were followed.

"Maybe there remained a family or a few Indians in Parker Village or in what is known as Texas, the last wilderness in Westford, with no one to care for them when they went to their final resting place. Could not the Parkers have taken pity on them and set aside a little lot on the old farm for such a place? I think so, and here is a little proof.

"In our Town History in the chapter telling of the period between the Revolution and 1800 is this small item headed 'Death of an Indian.' It says: 'February 13, 1788, Pay to Leonard Parker 1 pound 10 shillings for nursing and taking care of the Indian, James Symonds, when he was sick at sd Parker's house, and the trouble of sd Indian's funeral when dead.'

"Maybe this Indian had a few other relatives in Parker Village, with no place for them when they went to their 'Happy Hunting Ground,' except for Leonard Parker to lay them beside old James Symond, the Indian he had cared for and whose funeral he had tended. Leonard was born in 1745, great grandson of the first Aaron.

"Ordinary fieldstones were erected as headstones, simply to denote a grave, maybe because of expenses, and also because they did not know the real Indian names. This is my answer to this little Mystery Cemetery."

Next week you will hear another side to the story.

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