

THE ASHFIELD BURIAL GROUND ASSOCIATION

Research by Nancy Gray Garvin

Sources: Records of the Ashfield Burial Ground Association; Franklin County Deeds; Booker and Garvin, Ashfield Gravestones, AHS archives; F.G. Howes, History of the Town of Ashfield, Vol. I, 1742-1910; History of the Town of Ashfield, Vol. Two, 1910-1960.

On 12 April 1889 the Massachusetts Legislature approved “An act to incorporate the Ashfield Burial Ground Association and to authorize the Town of Ashfield to convey certain existing burial grounds to such association.” This Act, recorded in Mass. General Law, Chapter 252, Sections 1-7, was “for the purpose of purchasing, holding, caring for and improving any existing cemetery or cemeteries in said town ... the town of Ashfield is hereby authorized to convey to said corporation by proper deed or deeds two cemeteries, situate, one on the Plain, so called, in said Ashfield and known as the Plain Cemetery, and one on the Flat, so called, in said Ashfield near the geographical centre of the town and known as Centre Cemetery, provided that said town at any legal meeting votes to make said conveyance ... All persons owning lots or rights of burial in either of the cemeteries mentioned ... be and become members of said corporation; and all persons owning lots or rights of burial in any existing cemetery in said town shall, whenever such cemetery shall be acquired by said corporation, be and become a member.” At their first meeting on 9 Sept. 1889, the members elected Chauncey Boice, President; Archibald Flower, Secretary and Treasurer; and five Directors. They adopted a set of bylaws, one of which gave the Board “full power to direct and undertake such work for the maintenance and improvement of the Burial Grounds ...to set a price upon the lots and to do all other requisite business.”

“At a legal meeting of the Inhabitants of the Town of Ashfield held on the fifth day of November A.D. 1889 ... the following vote was passed ... to convey to the Ashfield Burial Ground Association all the town’s right and title in and to the following named cemeteries ... the one on the Plain, called Plain Cemetery; and the one near the geographical center of the town called Center [now Hill] Cemetery...” In 1890 the Ashfield Burial Ground Association (ABGA) was deeded another 5 acres adjacent to Plain Cemetery’s “Old Cemetery” by Augusta Thompson and 2 acres from Henry S. Ranney. They were deeded more land in 1893 by Miranda Smith Alden; in 1908 by Walter Lesure; and in 1915 by Chester Bronson, some of which Walter Tatro used for farming until it was needed for burials. Walter and Jennie Whitney deeded an abutting parcel in 1952 and Walter Whitney, Jr. deeded another parcel in 1984.

The South Ashfield Cemetery Association was organized in 1860, but never incorporated. They purchased land for a cemetery in 1862 and sold lots to shareholders. In 1893 they transferred ownership of this cemetery to the ABGA, which purchased the present right of way to it in 1908. In 1903 Clinton Wing transferred ownership of the Northwest Cemetery and a right of way to the ABGA. The last recorded burial in this cemetery, near the top of Pumpkin Hill, was that of Ruth Taylor, wife of Isaiah, who died in 1867 at the age of 99. In 2012 Ashfield Trails completed their Northwest Trail from the Overlook off Hawley Road to Smith Road. This trail passes by the Northwest Cemetery and provides the easiest access to it, although the ABGA continues to maintain their deeded right of way from Apple Valley Road.

Houghton Z. and Sarah Smith transferred ownership of the Baptist Corner Cemetery to the ABGA in 1910. In the same year Howard and Modena Streeter transferred ownership of the Spruce Corner Cemetery to them. Although the ABGA takes care of and sells lots in the Brier Hill Cemetery on West Road, ownership is reserved to Silas Blake in all deeds from 1884 to the present. He died in 1895. The ABGA has no record of a deed for Beldingville Cemetery, but Ellis descendant, Wilbur Dixon Ellis, gave them two bonds in 1916 to pay for care of “the burying grounds belonging to said Ashfield Burial Ground Association, called the Beldingville Cemetery.” Burials are still permitted in all these cemeteries. However, in 1989 the ABGA limited burials in the Brier Hill Cemetery on West Road to cremations only. This restriction was extended to the Baptist Corner and Northwest Cemeteries in 1991 and to the South Ashfield Cemetery in 2013.

There are several known private family cemeteries retained in the deeds to the owners at the time of burial. Examples are the graves of Simeon Wait and his daughter, Caroline Wait, in a small cemetery off Brier Hill Road. Another is the Guilford Cemetery with four stones off Bird Hill Road. The stone of Levi Edson was found recently just below the surface in the Edson Cemetery off Barnes Road, which probably had four burials. There was a burial ground on Creamery Road, in what is now a corn field, near the former location of the South Ashfield Baptist Church. In 1884, when Bethiah (Howes) Wait sold her property on Hill Road, she reserved the small plot where her parents,

David and Rhoda (Wait) Howes and one of their granddaughters, were buried south of Hill Road, purchased with the same reservation in 1912 by William Turnbull.

No records have been found of the earliest burials in any of the Ashfield cemeteries. In 1895 the ABGA commissioned C.W. Clapp of Greenfield to do a map of the lot owners in five sections of Plain Cemetery. This map was updated by Clapp and Abercrombie in 1902. In 1911 A.H. Beers did a survey showing the lot owners in two additional sections. A very fragile, undated, hand-drawn map shows the names of lot owners in the earliest section, the "Old Burial Ground," located next to the site of the first Congregational Meetinghouse. The South Ashfield Cemetery Association kept a record of their shareholders and the lots they purchased, but not the names of the persons buried there. A survey of "Beldenville" Cemetery, dated 1917, shows the owners of the lots. John M. Sears served as Town Clerk from 1898 to 1915 and as Secretary of the ABGA from 1898 to 1909. During his tenure he drew a map of Hill Cemetery, Section B, using the last names only or initials taken from the stones of the persons buried there. There is a map of Hill Cemetery, Section A, drawn by an unknown person before 1925, with lot numbers and names of lot owners. These two maps of Hill Cemetery were combined in 1936 into one map drawn to scale. Austin Packard was Secretary of the ABGA from 1933 to 1951. He recorded names and dates from Ashfield gravestones and kept records of lot purchases and burials as they occurred. Elizabeth Carter, who married Lawrence Morrissey in 1967, was Secretary/Treasurer and keeper of the books from 1951 to 1983. Martha Townsley kept the records updated from 1989 to 2001, when President/Burial Agent Thomas Graves took over.

President/Burial Agents: Frank Rice, 1934 to 1954; Ernest Nelson; D. Wallace "Wally" Lilly by 1961-1967; Jonathan Sears, 1968-1969; Norman Pike, 1970-1978; Gerald A. Ranney, 1979-1985; George F. Bickford, 1986-1988; Ralph Townsley, 1989-2001; Thomas Graves, 2001 to present.

Treasurers: Deborah Scott, 1984; David McGee, 1984; George F. Bickford; Deanne Brochu, 1989-1990; Secretary, Clayton Craft, 1989-1991; Combined Secretary/Treasurer: Abigail Wilson, 1992-1994; Gail Wiedmann, 1994 to present.

Former Board Members: Jonathan Sears to 1998; Emory Howes to 1992; Audrey Gray; Gerald Ranney; Wallace Lilly; Michael Williams; Clayton Craft to 2005; Thomas Graves, 1994-2001; Russell Williams; Donald Lesure, 1996-2010. Present Board Members: Roger Howes; Nancy Gray Garvin; Nelson Howes; Erik Nelson; Steven Lilly; John Dickinson.

In 1981 the ABGA Board agreed that their Superintendent would have the final say regarding the location and size of all monuments and grave markers. No bushes or shrubs could be placed on any lot without approval from the Superintendent. Only the Association could plant shade trees. This procedure was updated in 2001. In 1990 Attorney Richard Evans worked with the ABGA to develop a policy to reclaim gravesites which had been purchased but not used. Mass. General Law, Ch. 114, allows reclaiming if a site has not been used for 50 years and for which ownership cannot be ascertained. It was noted that legal title to a cemetery lot is not considered property, but passes directly to the heirs of the deceased. Richard Evans worked with the Board to update their Bylaws. In 1993 Ralph and Martha Townsley began identifying unused lots which might be reclaimed. Subsequently several owners agreed to sell their lots back to the ABGA.

In 1989 Marie Scarborough, descendant of Thomas Phillips, determined where she believed he was buried, and placed a large fieldstone to his memory in Beldingville Cemetery. In 1992 the ABGA considered buying two acres on the west side of Beldingville Cemetery from Benjamin Miller, but then decided his asking price was too high. By 1993 the vault or "winter holding space" in Plain Cemetery was no longer able to be used due to the need for a new floor. The Chapel at Green River Cemetery in Greenfield was used until 1996. In 1993, 1996, and 2001 the Association agreed to increase their charges for burials to conform to what other towns were charging. In 1996, in response to requests for lots from out-of town residents, the Board decided to sell lots only to Ashfield taxpayers and anyone with family connections to Ashfield people. In 1996 the Board agreed to remove the "old tool shed" from Hill Cemetery. This was done by Donald Lesure, who had it moved to his yard on Main Street. In 1998 the three gates at Hill Cemetery were removed. In 2001 the Board updated the job description of their Burial Agent to make him responsible for keeping the books, selling and reclaiming lots, running the annual meeting, doing all maintenance work, and following all procedures necessary for burials.

In 2005 the Board began discussing the problem of dogs, which are allowed by their owners to run loose in Plain Cemetery, even though Ashfield has a leash law. This continues to be a problem impacting the gravestones and the grounds. In 2007 the Board adopted a policy that all gravestones should be in keeping with the historical tradition of the cemeteries at the discretion of the ABGA.

The money paid for burials and for perpetual care of the gravesites is invested by the Treasurer, as is money willed to the ABGA by Henry Field, Frank Eldridge, and Ernest Wing. The Town Treasurer pays dividends to ABGA from cemetery funds left to the Town by Fred Cross and William Hathaway. Conditions of these two bequests prevent the funds from being transferred by the Town to the ABGA. In 1991 Addie (Dyer) Hall left a large bequest to the ABGA. Labor, equipment, and insurance costs are paid from these funds. The Town pays the cost of new flags for Veterans' graves, replaced each year by Wayne Farrell and other American Legion members.

In the spring of 2004 Nancy Gray Garvin and Carol Booker, of the Ashfield Historical Society, received permission from the ABGA and/or private owners to read and record the gravestone inscriptions in eleven Ashfield Cemeteries. They prepared for this project by attending workshops given by the Association for Gravestone Studies. They used vital records, obituaries and other newspaper articles, records of the Ashfield Burial Ground Association, town and family histories to check the accuracy of their readings; find maiden and other married names not engraved on the stones; find possible burials in unmarked graves; write a brief history of each cemetery, including other Ashfield burying sites that had no visible gravestones; and identify the graves of veterans to ensure each was marked with a U.S flag. They noted discrepancies and cited their sources in footnotes. They made an index for each cemetery which included both married and maiden names. Kate Spencer helped them photograph many of the stones. Their work is available at the Ashfield Historical Society, as well as at several genealogical libraries.