

The Early History of Plain Cemetery
Research by Nancy Gray Garvin from Proprietor and Town Records

In 1628 a group of Puritans came to Salem with John Endicott under a Charter from the King of England. They established the Massachusetts Bay Colony with John Endicott as Governor. They established the Congregational Church as the official church of the Mass. Bay Colony, to be supported by the taxpayers of each community.

In 1735 Ebenezer Hunt and others petitioned the General Court of the Mass. Bay Colony for land to repay the soldiers who had gone to Canada from Weymouth in 1692 with Capt. Ephraim Hunt during King William's War. They were granted a piece of land west of Deerfield. They named it Huntstown Plantation. It was to be divided into 63 shares, with one share for the minister, one share for the church, and one share for a school. The first division was located in the northeast part of the town. The owners of these lots were Proprietors. They first met in Weymouth, then Deerfield, and by 1764 in Huntstown.

In 1739 the Proprietors began planning for building a meeting house and purchasing a burial ground. However, they had more important issues, such as building a corn mill and laying out roads.

In 1762 the Proprietors hired Rev. Jacob Sherwin to be minister of the Congregational Church. The 13 original members met in February 1763 at the home of Ebenezer Belding, on what is now Bellus Road. Jacob Sherwin had purchased parts of Lots #12 and #13 near by. The Proprietors put up a frame for a meeting house on the northern end of Lot #13, but Chileab Smith, founder of the Baptist Church here in 1753, refused to let them saw boards for this church at his saw mill.

In 1765 Huntstown Plantation was incorporated as the Town of Ashfield.

In 1767 voters at Town Meeting agreed to take down the unfinished frame and move it to Lot #18, nearer what was becoming the center of the Town. The southernmost end of Baptist Corner Road at Main Street is the division between Lot # 18 on the east and Lot #17 on the west. The American Legion field and the original "old" part of Plain Cemetery are on Lot #18. The rest of Plain Cemetery is on Lot #17. In May 1767, Phebe Lilly, daughter of Jonathan and Phebe (Foster) Lilly, died. She was buried near this new location, on property owned by Jonathan's cousin, Silas Lillie.

In 1768 the General Court passed the Ashfield Law, allowing the Town to continue to tax the Baptists for support of the Congregational minister. The Town seized their lands for non-payment of taxes.

In December 1769 the Town voted to purchase a burial ground of 1.5 acres, near their church building site, from Silas Lillie. This was the site where Phebe Lilly had been buried in 1767. This burial ground is now called the "Old Burial Ground." The cemetery was original called "Center Cemetery," and later, "Plain Cemetery."

In January 1771 the Proprietors met at their new, unheated and unfinished meetinghouse, located at the southeast corner of what is now Plain Cemetery. There were cracks in the walls where the boards didn't meet. The seats had no backs and no cushions. They soon adjourned to a nearby tavern. In 1771 King George III, having been petitioned by the Baptists, repealed the Ashfield Law, the first example of Freedom of Religion and Separation of Church and State, long before it became part of the Mass. Constitution in 1780 and the U.S. Constitution in 1791. The Town returned their seized lands to the Baptists.

In 1774 the Town dismissed Rev. Jacob Sherwin and hired Rev. Nehemiah Porter. He was given the Minister's Lot near what is now Hill Cemetery.

In 1801 the Town appointed a Committee to find a spot near "the geographical center of Town" on which to build a new meetinghouse. There was much discussion and dissension over various locations. The Town continued to repair the old meetinghouse and to hold their Town Meetings there.

In 1808 the Town hired Rev. Alvan Sanderson as a "colleague pastor" to help the aging Rev. Nehemiah Porter.

In 1812 the Town hired Col. John Ames of Buckland to build this new meetinghouse on what is now the front part of Hill Cemetery. They had purchased the land from Rev. Alvan Sanderson and Dr. Enos Smith. The first church service was held there in 1814.

In 1813 the Town bought a new cemetery located 3 rods south of the new meetinghouse. Alanson Lilly, son of Bethuel Lilly, was the first person to be buried in this new cemetery. Rev. Alvan Sanderson noted in his diary that the funeral was held in the old meetinghouse with burial in the new cemetery, now called "Center Cemetery," and later Hill Cemetery. This resulted in some of the Congregational Church families being split between two cemeteries. Those who died before 1813 had been buried in the "Old Cemetery." Those who died in 1813 or later might have been buried in the "new cemetery."

In 1819 the Town held its last Town Meeting at the old meetinghouse.

In 1821 the Town sold the "old meetinghouse." They agreed to "pay the avails" from this sale to the Congregational Church.

In 1889 the State Legislature voted to incorporate the Ashfield Burial Ground Association. The Town of Ashfield was required to deed its cemetery on the Plain and its cemetery on the Hill Cemetery to this Association. Over the next few years this Association acquired deeds to the Baptist Corner, Beldingville, Northwest, South Ashfield and Spruce Corner Cemeteries from the private individuals who owned them.

Four other cemeteries are located on private property and ownership is retained by the heirs of those buried there. These are the Wait, Guilford, Edson, and West Road cemeteries. The bodies of those buried in the Heman Howes cemetery on Stroheker Road, the Edson Cemetery on Graves Road, and in the David Howes Cemetery on Hill Road were removed to Hill and Plain Cemeteries. There was another cemetery on Creamery Road, across from the former Baptist Church. (The building was moved and used as the Village Hall). The cemetery is now a corn field. There were no stones marking the graves and the bodies may still be buried there.

From 1890 to 1984, the size of Plain Cemetery has been increased, from its original 1.5 acres to almost 9 acres, by deeds to the Ashfield Burial Ground Association from Augusta (Knowlton) Thompson, Henry S. Ranney, Miranda (Smith) Alden, Walter Lesure, Chester Bronson, and the Whitney family.

At some time after 1890 a vault was built at the front of the cemetery as a "winter storage place." It has not been used since 1993, due to the need for a new floor.