The Mortimer Cemetery in Middletown's Transition (1815)

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January 1980
Social History Seminar
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The breakdown of the traditional homogenous community of New England and the rise of the more modern, less-religious, differentiated capitalist society is clearly reflected in Middletown's Liberty St. (Mortimer) cemetery and in the various styles of stone markers with which the town's former residents chose to represent themselves, their parents and their children. The changes in the most popular stone designs, burial arrangements, settings and type of stone used on the markers around the year 1815 parallel the marked shift in attitude of that time toward the purpose of community and the duty of the individual, the concept of afterlife and the origin of authority.

Bordering on the north and west by Main St. and Liberty St., and on the south and east by Pearl and Washington Sts., the Liberty Street cemetery was given as a burial ground in 1778 by the family of Captain Philip Mortimer, whose tomb had been there from 1773. The cemetery was the third to be used in Middletown, predated by the Riverside (laid out 1650) and Washington St. (1739) cemeteries.

The earlier graves in Mortimer cemetery are a reflection of the pre-revolutionary, mainly agrarian, close-knit religious community that existed as Middle-
town in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The stones are clumped together in narrow rows midway on the Liberty St. side of the cemetery, & sandstone beds so close together that the "footboards" of some touch the backs of others' headstones. An attempt has been made to keep relations together but where a person was buried was often determined by the date of death rather than by where his or her family members were buried: for instance Allyn Southmayd (town surveyor) died five years after his wife and was buried some rows away from her. The stones in this early grouping show little distinction in size, shape or materials - most are bed-sled-shaped or rectangular ("doorway shaped", according to the Tashjians) not over five-feet tall and made of the red sandstone from the quarries in Portland. The most striking way in which the stones differ is in the design, if any, decorating the stone. At the plainest, there are large, rectangular stones with nothing but the deceased's name and date of death. Others will add a simple urn later in the 18th century. The most ornate show the "bat-winged pinions and rumy-nosed" version of the death's head/cherub transition peculiar to the Connecticut valley. The stones of the earlier Titus Hosmer (member of the Continental Congress) & 1780, and his
(d. 1798) are probably the finest in the community at this time—comparatively ornate, cherubs' faces with short wings, shrouds, and what appear to be some kind of crowns (nightcaps?). They are taller than the surrounding stones and shaped differently at the top. These two matching stones could have been purchased before need or they may have replaced more ordinary stones a few years after the Hosmers died, but in any case, they were probably carved at the same time.

The way in which this older part of the cemetery is laid out is probably indicative of the nature of the community at that time. The extreme proximity of the stones and the relatively small amount they differ in size and shape point to a community in which the individual is not encouraged to overly distinguish himself from the group but to live his/her life in a way that will ultimately benefit the community as a whole, and therefore whose personal “space” and privacy may not be an issue. Death itself was not a private affair in the original community—Riverside cemetery, put aside in 1650, was close to the very center of the original town, and everyone in town came to a funeral, whether related to the deceased or not. Funerals were one kind of life rituals (like weddings, or deaths or
social gatherings) which were opportunities for the townspeople to congregate and reaffirm themselves as a close-knit community. As there was a relatively small population, the townspeople knew each other at least in passing, and most problems of living together were probably worked out by individuals face-to-face instead of by the authority. Also, enough people were doing the same thing—farming—that the needs of the individual citizens (or more accurately, the household heads and their households) were the needs of the community as a whole.

The Liberty Street/Mortimer Cemetery, although never near the center of town, was intended to be a familiar gathering place for the old community when the ground was given in 1778, but by this late date that close-knit community is showing the effects of the strain of land shortage for a new generation of farmers and the resulting proliferation of merchants starting a modern market system. Titus Hosmer's elaborate stones stand out from any near them by their size, shape and design, and also that there are two identical stones. From 1797 this is one of the
first examples of an individual distinguishing himself from the rest of the community on his head stone, because his influence has an impact that goes beyond the community. (as mentioned above, Mr. Hosmer was a member of the Continental Congress.) The mausoleum of General Comfort Sage and his family behind which the other stones cluster is the second oldest object in the cemetery and as such is rather hard to explain, except perhaps to guess that the General and his family were such prominent and well-traveled people that and individually successful people even in 1786 that they did not feel themselves integral components of the community in Middlebourn. If this is true, they could have considered themselves way ahead of the times in their thinking. Except for the Sages' mausoleum, Middlebourn's burials are marked by simple small sandstone markers up until the early 19th century.

Around 1812 there is an abrupt change in the styles and layout of tombstones and monuments. Cherubim and death's heads disappear (Mortimer cemetery never had death's heads - they were an older fashion and appear in Riverside and Washington St cemeteries) and 'cones' and small spires start cropping up.
The social, economic and spiritual changes the town had gone through left the community no longer an end in itself. It had become a proving ground for individuals—most prominently the new merchants—who would eventually rise above their close neighbors to enjoy more widespread influence. The shift in emphasis from the community and its continuity to the individual and his achievements is shown in the Middletown cemeteries by the appearance of monuments to persons CLEARLY not intended to blend in with the rest of the neighbors' graves, but to stand apart from them as large white marble cones and the later, more conspicuous brownstone spires. The first cones originally appeared in the Washington St. cemetery over the graves of Chauncey Whittlesey (merchant and public official) and his son, who died in 1812. From this time while marble markers also seem to be gaining popularity, partly because sandstone tends to crumble over the years, and partly because the family wanted the purer neo-classical look. The more modest white stones were smaller, bed-shaped, and had as decoration (if any at all) a willow tree weeping over an urn, or perhaps a simple wreath. These
smaller marble markers were popular into the next century, but large marble cones don't appear after 1827 and the large marble slabs which replace them did not appear after 1850—but they had always been relatively rare. In the three oldest burial grounds there are only about 14 sizable marble stones—most of which seem to have belonged to the prominent men of the time. Seven of the 17 officeholders in 1810 could be located, and of these 6 had marble stones and were merchants. The 7th, John R. Watkinson (the factory owner) died sometime later but his granite spire was probably as impressive in 1836 as marble blocks had been in the 1820s—this is, if it wasn't put up by the family fifty years later, which is more likely.

It is still uncertain where the earliest brown sandstone obelisk in Middletown is. Dr. William B. Hall, buried in Mathew's Cemetery, has a large stone shrouded sandstone obelisk dated 1809, the year of his death. Dr. Hall may have passed on in that year but the monument matches exactly the styles of the 1840s and '50s, so it may have been put up years later. The 'family vault' of Benjamin Henshaw (merchant) is marked by a simple 6' or 7-foot monument dated 1815 in the
Riverside Cemetery. Its simplicity is more in keeping with the trend in simplicity lasting 20 years ahead of it. But if Dr. Hall's monument isn't the first of its kind in Middletown it stands in what is probably the city's first enclosed family plot. Reserving land for one's own family had gradually become an accepted practice, but the idea of enclosing a family plot with a little iron fence, isolating it from the rest of the community, would have seemed to the town's original settlers as vain, selfish and antisocial. An indication of the new merchants, and their families differentiating themselves as INDIVIDUALS from the more general populace in the Mortimer Cemetery, is the trend through the years of adding increasing numbers of spires, slabs and enclosures as separate family monuments and then of choosing a more secluded place than the Liberty St side of the graveyard (which soon became an awful tangle of high, fencelike enclosures). The Washington St. half of Mortimer is divided into neat family mounds (obelisks in the middle, usually) with plenty of distance in between. Some of these family plots, however, have never been used and some show signs of former
enclosures—fragments of the corner blocks still stand—which suggests a family plot may have been actually relocated to a more secluded site, such as far-away Indian Hill Cemetery where the Alsops, for example, formerly of Mortimer Cemetery, build their mausoleum, the ultimate in seclusion and privacy.

The increasing consolidation of wealth and influence in the hands of fewer families corresponded to the increasing number of transients and town poor, who, like their better-off fellow townsmen at the other end of the financial scale, no longer had the household head or the familiar community to answer to (or to be cared for by). It is possible that the absence of many stones other than the large and middled-sized family monuments points to the existence of paupers' fields at the Pearl St. end of Mortimer Cemetery where there is a blank space with only a few bland small stones, and in Washington St. It is likely that paupers' graves were marked with small or wooden markers that disintegrated with time.

It is obvious that over the 18th century, a physical immortality became more important than a spiritual one, and this is apparent not only in
in the monuments themselves but in the nature of their epitaphs, in any, what could have possessed an early capitalist to erect what his Puritan great-grandfathers would have considered an ostentatious monument to himself? Perhaps a heavenly immortality seemed a dubious prospect at the time and the accomplished individual sought a lasting immortality among men—in the form of a massive, ornate spire (by the mid 1800s) often decorated with a wreath, a shroud, an urn or crossed swords, a listing the deceased, his ancestors, his achievement and his progeny, surrounded by a little iron fence. The more massive the obelisk, the farther-reaching the man's accomplishments were. 

(Incidentally, the largest and most ornate monuments the carvers—or the shops—do not remain anonymous.) Less fragile stone such as granite from New Hampshire and Massachusetts were imported in favor of the permanent sandstone native to the Connecticut Valley. It is very likely that coffin was being made of sturdier material in order to protect the remains as long as possible instead of returning them to the earth as which used to be the custom. Even the inscription on the stones indicate...
a change in spiritual attitude: the earliest stones in Middletown often read "Here Lyeth the Body of..." which may be extrapolated: "... and one day you too will certainly be dead. But where will your SOUL be?" The many of the newer stones (mid 18th century to the present) read something along the lines of "Dedicated to the memory of" our parents or our child, etc. and may be translated "we would rather think of him/her as living than as a corpse. He/she will surely conquer death because of his/her wonderful life.

The noticeable changes in the Middletown cemeteries around 1815 in their layouts, stone designs, epitaphs and plot arrangements reflect the changes is thinking that had gradually resulted from the conflicts orignally arising from the flaw in the parital inheritance system - land shortage, out migration and stresses of a new market system being instituted by the many men forced off the land to become merchants. The shift in emphasis from the traditional, undifferenciated community to the self-motivated and self-controlled individual is illustrated by the change in the cemetary layout from the modest, relatively similar standstone markers grouped closely together to the fenced in, geo-
graphically isolated family plot, distinguished from its neighbors by its monument. The change in these people's spiritual outlook is a general trend toward achieving an increasingly lasting memory among men (rather than eternal spiritual life) with far larger monuments, usually of a more 'lasting' stone, with epitaphs which draw attention to the life of the deceased rather than to his death. These trends—both social and funereal—continue right up to the present. Modern cemeteries—at least in some parts of America—offer larger, more permanent mausoleums and monuments, in which a solid granite coffin and its contents will never deteriorate. The funeral is small and private, usually and takes place in a secluded, peripheral cemetery.
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