

CEMETERY RESEARCH -- OUTLINE OF TOPICS

QUERY TO ATTENDEES: WHAT NOTABLE EXPERIENCES HAVE YOU HAD? WHY IS CEMETERY RESEARCH OF PARTICULAR INTEREST TO YOU? (GIVEN THE ONLINE RESOURCES, WHY EMBRACE TRIPS TO THE CEMETERY?)

PERSPECTIVE ONE: Our whole objective in pursuing our ancestors is keyed by the fact that virtually all have died... and met their maker via an interment of some nature. All those folk in our charts... have returned to the earth "dust to dust". That universal appointment applies to all lives lived, and provides we genealogists with the turning point from one set of life's experience to the next.

PERSPECTIVE NO 2: Our last resting place and the associated activities often provide more data and associations than almost any other part of the lives of these SAINTS.

A bibliography of resources that I recommend include

Val D Greenwood's (Chapter 27: Cemetery and Burial Records) in The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy 3rd Edition, Copyright 2000 Baltimore

David Allen Lambert's A Guide to Massachusetts Cemeteries (initial edition) Copyright 2002, Boston

R. Andrew Pierce's THE STONES SPEAK: IRISH PLACE NAMES FROM INSCRIPTIONS IN BOSTON'S MOUNT CALVARY CEMETERY Copyright 2000 Boston

Marie Daly & Judy Luce's (Chapter 5 researching Gravestones, etc. And Part Four, OnLine Resources) in GENEALOGIST'S HANDBOOK for Irish Research Copyright 2016

OTHER RELATED DEATH RECORD SOURCES: include the Death Notices, the funeral arrangements, the church records of services, The Civil Vital Records, Obituaries, sometimes other Newspaper accounts, the Funeral Parlor records of gatherings of family and friends and associates.. Immediate family members of recent events often retain sign in logs and thank-you lists. All these (WHEN AVAILABLE AND ACCESSED) provide a trove information related to the deceased.

THE VALUE OF THE STEP FURTHER,...THE CEMETERY VISIT.

The five types of cemeteries in America:

1. The Churchyard Typical in the early colonial states, (duplicated from the old country).
2. Church-owned cemeteries free standing multi-acre graveyards, not physically connected to the church.
3. Government-owned cemeteries tax supported under town/city, county, state or national jurisdiction
4. Privately-owned cemeteries. Commonly not church affiliated, but run as a profit making business. Very popular across the United States.
5. Family Cemeteries. Often on an estate or farm, set aside in a grove for family members and relatives. Very common in rural areas, and very prevalent throughout the state of Rhode Island.

The Sexton's Records... (Which often suffer from all records keeping frailties) can be very illuminating. Consider that the sexton's records are privately owned and serving their own customers is their primary purpose and what they are paid for. Be gracious and generous to gain their welcome. Oftentimes, their records include simple maps (often too simple) to locate the actual plot used by your decedent family. But when you deal with a cemetery of significant size, somewhere in their office are detailed maps of every (Think \$\$ for Lot sales) which they must employ to assure proper disposition. (The Funeral Director's Records may be pertinent here).

Coupled with the single grave for this particular decedent are the records or the entire plot and maybe historical lot sales and burial records of other family members, often leading to discovery of persons unknown.

The gravestone (or Memorial Marker) is often a source of unknown data. Wow factor ... eg., the adjacent Military or Fraternal Order flag stantion suggests associations not noted elsewhere. Dates and places of birth, death, ages, often may only confirm (or contest) previously identified data. Discoveries may include stated relationships to other persons, and identity of others previously "below the radar", a major discovery, especially on pre 1900 stones which may contain nativity information.

Don't fail to recognize other nearby stones, as associates and relatives typically have reason to locate their own last resting place in the "same neighborhood". Just as "look to the neighbors" on census records is smart use of those records, so also in cemeteries.

Take note that oftentimes very old gravestones and entire cemeteries have suffered from "weathering" deterioration and may suffer from wear and tear, becoming largely or even totally illegible. Especially in old cemeteries, recommended tools include stiff bristled brushes, bottled water for cleaning (but not detergents). Chemicals can do more damage to the stones. A trowel or even small shovel, and hedge or shrub trimmers. The cemetery may even need shrub and grass overgrowth tending. The Association of Gravestone Studies publishes guidelines on proper tools and methods to maximize your cemetery visit and preserve existing stones. Allow that old cemeteries may require extra preparation, and even return visits with proper gear and clothing to maximize your success. Note that there are ways to treat the weathered stones to improve readability, but some improper cleansing techniques are more destructive.

Please confer with the Association of Gravestone Studies website at www.gravestonestudies.org.

Other important websites of use are:

www.bostoincatholic.org/archives/ The Archives of the Boston Catholic Archdiocese, which lists Cemetery records retained and all Parishes.

blogs.umb.edu/archives/recordssearch The Archives at the Healey Library, UMass Boston, which houses and provides access to 1880-1935 Catholic Order of Foresters records based on Date of Death.

A story:

One of my ancestral stones at Holyhood in Brookline had sunk into the ground and the engraving obviously was partially obscured. Fortunately my trusty trowel helped expose one more ancestor's inscription, more clearly readable than the fully exposed portion of the stone. That was a long time ago, and my data was in the form of handwritten transcription.

(At that time, the convenience of digital cameras had yet to be invented, and film photography was far less assured as a record, being dependent on the delay and insecure submittal to the pharmacy for film developing). Today's digital photography provides immediate assurance of one or more accurate image of the subject. Today I also make effort to take sufficient scenic panorama photos to provide a future pictorial pathway to relocate the subject in the cemetery.

"Old" St. Mary's Cemetery in Canton, MA. In the early 1990's, I was inspired to initiate a project to transcribe an nineteenth century cemetery in Dorchester, MA where I hoped to find some of my Irish immigrant ancestors buried. As was common in that time frame this was named St. Mary's Cemetery, a Catholic church owned cemetery, somewhat away from commercial areas. It was adjacent to a public park at its back perimeter, an elementary school on one side, the rear of some row houses (triple deckers) on the other side, and across the street from a City Public Works garage. The cemetery was in deplorable shape, and seemed largely abandoned and overgrown. That public park known as Franklin Field was not an inviting place in those days. Subsequently it became quite famous as community organizations developed and started The Sportsman's Club, later involving Arthur Ashe, a national champion tennis player, and a significant training regimen formed for the African American community there. But in the early 90's it was not a welcoming place for an individual to do gravestone research. I decided to cast my net elsewhere and settled on the aptly named St. Mary's in my hometown of Canton.

(I reference it as "Old" StMary's because that church-owned cemetery is actually based on two separate cemeteries, the original lots founded in 1846, and as that filled up, a much newer location, a block or so away became the "new" sections in the early 1930's. As I initially strolled through this bucolic "old" cemetery I quickly noted the many stones with early inscriptions that included place names in Ireland, nativity information. The new Sections down the street were modern stones, larger bright shiny Marble and granite edifices with clearly readable inscriptions, and not a single reference to nativity information, on quick perusal.

My purpose included not only Irish nativity data, but also the capture of any inscriptions that were in danger of weathering damage and likely short lifecycle availability for information gathering. "Old" St Mary's quickly became my target research training ground. It was ideal in many respects. Dorchester's St. Mary's cemetery would have to wait. Maybe once I'd learned the ropes, I'd be able to confidently tackle the Dorchester cemetery. (A following side note: that cemetery was later transcribed by another team.)

My efforts in Canton did not get fully underway until I'd made presentations at three or four venues; a TIARA meeting enrolled two Cambridge residents and half a dozen

enrolled at The Canton Historical Society including two from the neighboring town of Stoughton. Altogether, including three relatives we finally were ready to start field work. I distributed notebooks and pencils (with erasers) and assigned the individuals to the Ranges (Rows) to be transcribed, keeping track on a homemade map of the cemetery. The transcriptions created are in a digital file on the site of our organization, The Friends of Irish Research, 899 North Main Street Brockton, MA. <www.friendsofirishresearch.org>.