

SIMSBURY

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Mysteries Surround East Granby's Smallpox Cemetery A Relic of an Eighteenth-Century Scourge

Many themes and mysteries surround the disappearance of the headstones from the East Granby Smallpox Cemetery on Hatchet Hill: in the 18th century, a dreaded disease and a grandfather and his four grandchildren isolated on a hill — in the 20th century, an eccentric stone collector; an expanding quarry, a church that became a workshop and, later, a house; a landowner who cared about the cemetery and a high sheriff who didn't; a junior high student who was curious; and a historian and grandfather who learned about them all and resolved to tell the story; and, finally, to place a monument at the site to honor the dead and remind Metacomet Trail hikers who walk by of what transpired 225 years ago.

Ancient cemeteries are challenged by vandalism, weather, good intentions and gravestone collectors. That they still survive is to our benefit because we learn so much from them. The several headstones in the smallpox cemetery in East Granby, Connecticut, are listed in the "Hale Headstone Inscriptions" at the Connecticut State Library. This was what was recorded on October 8, 1934:

Holcomb, Deacon Joshua, died of small-pox, April 16, 1784 In the 161st year of his age (Note the age). This is exactly as inscribed.

Ford, Ruth, dau. Of Adanyah and Martha, died April 14, 1784 age 9 months.

Holcomb, Caleb, son of Caleb & Marcy, died April 6, 1788, in the 2nd Year of age.

Holcomb, Amarilla, Twin dau. of Caleb & Marcy, died March, no date 1793.

Holcomb, Boadica, Twin dau. of Caleb & Marcy, died March, no date 1793. Died in the 12th month.

This cemetery is on the top of "Manitank Mt" between Turkey Hill & Hatchet Hill, the property is owned by William Seymour.¹

About the Author

Thomas F. Howard is a retired high school teacher who lives in East Granby. He is also a historian and professional genealogist who has written for the *Berkshire Genealogist* and *Connecticut Nutmegger*. He is past president of the Connecticut Professional Genealogists Council, is on the Board of Governors of the Connecticut Society of Genealogists and is president of the New England Regional Genealogical Consortium, Inc. He co-chaired the NERGC genealogical conference in Hartford in 2007.

Mr. Howard was president of the East Granby Historical Society for many years and is past president of the East Granby Land Trust. He has taught genealogy courses and he lectures often on a number of historical and genealogical topics. He published in the Summer/Fall 2005 issue of this newsletter the article "The Gift Givers of St. Bernard's Catholic Church: Nineteenth-Century Memorials in Stained Glass." He is in the process of returning a memorial stone to the smallpox cemetery he writes about in this article. He and his wife, Virginia, have a son Stephen, a daughter Karen and four grandchildren.

Today we know this hill along the ridgeline as Hatchet Hill and the road to its south as Hatchet Hill Road. The Hale headstone survey was done as part of a statewide Works Progress Administration (WPA) project during the Great Depression. Obviously only stones that existed at that time were noted. Joshua Holcomb's age we know was an error as other sources say he died at age 60 or that he was born in 1723.² He was known as Deacon Joshua Holcomb or Joshua IV in the Holcomb family history.

Deacon Joshua Holcomb IV was born in Simsbury on February 2, 1724, the second child and first son of Joshua H. and Mary (Griffin) Holcomb. He was the fifth generation from Thomas Holcomb who came from Dorchester, Massachusetts, to Windsor, Connecticut, in 1635-36. He had eight brothers and sisters. Deacon Joshua married Martha Griffin, the daughter of Stephen and Mary (Delacy) Griffin, sometime before 1752, when his son Joshua was born. Joshua and Martha's children included Joshua, Caleb, Martha, Ahinoam, Bathsheba, Hannah, Zilpah, Leonard and Amasa. Deacon Joshua, his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, all Joshua Holcombs, represented Simsbury in the Connecticut General Assembly.³

The reason for labeling the cemetery a smallpox cemetery is clear. Holcomb died of smallpox and very likely his granddaughter Ruth also did, just two days before him. *Did Caleb and Mercy's children die from this dreaded disease, too?* They all died in April or March the months with the most frequent occurrence of smallpox deaths. We also know that there were smallpox deaths in other Connecticut towns during the years they died: in Sharon in 1784; in Haddam, Berlin and Saybrook in 1788; and in Middletown, Glastonbury, Berlin, Haddam, East Hartford and Waterbury in 1793.

The real and justified fear of smallpox may explain why the five were buried in a remote plot on Holcomb land.⁴ In the 18th century, smallpox victims sometimes were buried at night and in small isolated cemeteries. Ten other towns in Connecticut have cemeteries labeled smallpox cemeteries, likely because smallpox was given as the cause of death of at least one of the deceased as in the case of East Granby. There are many more towns with small isolated cemeteries that have smallpox victims that are not labeled as smallpox cemeteries. Nevertheless, having said that, the fact is most smallpox victims were buried in the larger community burial grounds. Smallpox occurred in or near every town in Connecticut at one time or another. It has been estimated that this highly contagious viral disease took the lives of 600,000 people annually worldwide between 1500 and 1800. Over 500 million people died in the 20th century before the disease was officially declared eradicated by the World Health Organization in 1979.⁵

Preventative treatments for this dreadful disease were then and continue to be controversial. Inoculations using the less virulent of two smallpox viruses and vaccinations using the even milder cowpox virus, which gained favor in the 19th century, sometimes caused violent reactions and even death. People treated by inoculation or vaccination could and did spread the disease, but it became standard practice to immunize with one treatment or the other whenever smallpox outbreaks occurred since the disease itself posed a greater risk. In the 19th and 20th centuries doctors noted on death records



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whether the deceased had been treated (inoculated or vaccinated) or whether the smallpox was “natural.”

The pustule-covered bodies of victims and the scarred or blinded survivors were horrifying. Since smallpox was spread by physical contact with infected people or their personal effects, community practice during the Holcombs' time was to set up pest houses, quarantine all exposed and have victims serviced by family or volunteers who had been made immune by surviving the disease. The disease was fatal thirty to forty percent of the time.⁶ There was no certain cure when the Holcomb family members were put to rest between 1784 and 1793. We know from Joshua Holcomb's probate papers that his wife Martha paid Doctor Hillyer \$1.00 around April 10, 1784, for medicine and later, in June 1874, gave him bushels of Indian corn and still later, in October 1874, paid him \$2.00 for his services to care for her family during the smallpox crises.⁷

While the cemetery on Hatchet Hill is isolated today in the late 1700s and early 1800s it was part of the Joshua Holcomb farm. In the 20th century a barbed-wire fence was placed diagonally south of the stonewall next to the cemetery, going southwesterly to the ridge, to keep the cows out of the cemetery.⁸ Part of that fence still survives. Over time a forest grew where pastures and orchards had been.

The Metacomet Trail, part of the Blue Blaze trail network of the Connecticut Forest and Park Association, passes a few yards from the gravesites. Actually, for a time the trail split and one branch went through the cemetery. There was and is no signage at the cemetery site. The Association's *Connecticut Walk Book's* biennial editions told the changing story of the headstones. The 1938 book said, “Some of the headstones have been removed from time to time and only a few remain.” In the 1940 book, Trail Master Jesse Smith of Suffield wrote, “Vandals have removed the headstones from time to time until not one is now left.” The most recent edition makes no mention of the cemetery at all. It is a shame that many hikers pass by not knowing the story of a grandfather and his four grandchildren buried a few yards away two centuries ago.

A few black and white photos taken in November 1932 are the only visual evidence of the headstones before they were removed from the cemetery.⁹ The headstones are not extraordinary in design, artistry or size. The red sandstone used for Caleb and Mercy's children's headstone is a common material, but the three heads at the top of the stone are poignant images. The soul effigies with their winged heads on the other two and the vines along the sides are simple and basic images. Joshua Holcomb's stone is gray. All three are gone now. *When were they taken, by whom, and why?*

While the headstones left the burial ground, they did not go far and local people knew the story. The stones ended up in the wall of a workshop in Bloomfield, Connecticut, built and used by an eccentric railroad engineer with eclectic talents and interests — William Eli Talbot. Mr. Talbot was born in East Granby on January 8, 1887, the third child of George W. and Clara A. (Case) Talbot.¹⁰ He was baptized at the Tariffville Baptist Church and grew up on Spoonville Road in East Granby. He married Rose A. Hill in the 1930s, probably in her hometown of Montgomery, New York. He built a home for his bride on Tunxis Road near the Farmington River in northern Bloomfield within a mile of where he grew up in East Granby.

To the rear of the house, he built himself an unusual workshop on a unique foundation. What he built or rather assembled on the foundation was, in fact, a church building he purchased for six hundred dollars. It was the Tariffville Baptist Church where Talbot and his siblings had been baptized and/or married.¹¹ It reportedly took ten years for Talbot to build the foundation and to reassemble the building. He and a neighbor, who was a mason, built the foundation from fieldstones and added millstones,

factory bricks, a meteorite, and a stone dated A.D.1876.¹² He cemented those special stones and the Holcomb and Ford smallpox cemetery headstones into the basement wall. In that same wall, it was said, he had artifacts and stones of all kinds from forty-nine states (Maine was not represented). There were no other headstones, although one headstone that came from a North Granby Cemetery was found on his former property. (It is still there and the present owner would like to see it returned to its original place.)

William Eli Talbot died March 12, 1973, and was buried with his wife Rose, who died in 1955, in Old Saint Andrews Cemetery in North Bloomfield. They had no children, so he left his estate to nieces and nephews who soon after sold the property. The property has been sold a few times since and the workshop upgraded to an apartment and then to a beautiful home overlooking the banks of the Farmington River. The headstones remain encased in cement in the interior cellar walls and are visible, but they are beyond salvaging. The hollow sound that comes from one of the stones indicates a vertical split right down the middle, no doubt from the weight of the building above the wall.

The building and foundation were featured in the *Hartford Courant* in a picture story by photographer Harry Batz.¹³ There were several photographs of the outside of the house with Talbot next to the wall with the millstone and meteorite. Mr. Talbot also received recognition in a 1957 article for his special talents with old clocks and chairs.¹⁴ The Batz article became the substance of a paper dated May 1, 1978, written by East Granby Junior High School student Keith Antioch. Keith interviewed his neighbors and Talbot's and visited the workshop, by then a house. Keith quoted one of the neighbors, Mr. Phillip, who said Talbot "was a genius" and was "the friendliest man you ever met."¹⁵ In 1997 another *Courant* reporter, Bonnie G. Dresner, interviewed me about the research that I was doing on the cemetery and my goal of returning a suitable memorial stone to the burial site.¹⁶

Why did Talbot take the stones and then place them in his foundation wall? Nobody really knows, but many of the local folks knew about it. The story raised eyebrows whenever people heard about it for the first time. John Harries Viets of Hatchet Hill Road, who knew both of the 20th century landowners and Talbot, said to me a short time before he passed away, "Talbot got permission to take the stones by the owner of the property." But he added, "It was not the right thing to do". Viets remembered fondly his family driving cars up to the cemetery from Hatchet Hill Road and picnicking along the stone wall. There once was an iron fence around the cemetery that went to the World War I war effort, he said.

Who were the owners of the property that included the cemetery? How did they feel about this cemetery? What would motivate them to grant removal rights to Talbot? This ancient cemetery was part of the Joshua Holcomb farm in the 18th century and passed to his widow and children upon his death.¹⁷ It was referred to as a family burial ground in some of the probate and land records.¹⁸ Times were changing the face of Hatchet Hill in the 20th century, and maybe that was a variable affecting the fate of the smallpox cemetery headstones? A basalt quarry was progressing south from near Connecticut Route 20, which could have resulted in the removal of most of the hill surface to get to the stone underneath. Today zoning regulations protect the hill and require a hundred foot buffer at the top of the hill, barely leaving the cemetery untouched.

Did the owner of the hill property in the 1930s, William A. Seymour know all this? Did it serve as a basis for his granting Talbot clearance to remove the stones? Then what would be the fate of the graves? We do not really know the answers to all these questions, but the fact that William A. Seymour was the High Sheriff of Hartford County for several years in the 1930s and was the East Granby First

Selectman for ten years beginning in the 1924 makes one wonder about the wisdom of his decision. "It was not the right thing to do," to repeat John Harries Viets. Mr. Seymour died May 4, 1941, at the age of 81, about two years after the headstones were removed.¹⁹

The headstones may have been gone but they were not forgotten by the next owner, Charles Julian Kaiser. Mr. Kaiser provided solid evidence of exactly where the cemetery was and even where the graves were located. Kaiser was Vice President and General Manager and a Director of the Stevens Paper Company in Poquonock. He left a note and sketched map for a worker that showed the second stonewall, the split trail, the barbed wire fence with its 4-foot bar that kept the cows from the graves and, finally, the west ledge. The note was on a C. J. Kaiser memorandum pad and dated October 1950. The map was titled "Map of the Smallpox Cemetery."²⁰ Kaiser was born in San Francisco and was in Connecticut by 1925 and located in East Granby sometime in 1945. He passed away at the age of fifty-two on October 9, 1952.²¹ The note he left is testimony to how he felt about protecting the cemetery even with the stones removed. Further testimony is the flush stone marker with his name on it that was put in the ground a short distance northwest of the cemetery where there is an especially nice view overlooking the Farmington River Valley. A grandfather and his grandchildren just about 150 yards away had a century and a half to view and appreciate the same scene.

The story would not be complete without mentioning what happened to the parents of the four children who are buried with their grandfather on the hill. Ruth Ford was the first to die and likely died of the sickness for which her grandmother Martha Holcomb paid Dr. Hillyer "For Doctoring the Smallpox"²² Adonijah Ford and his wife Martha married August 24, 1772, in Simsbury.²³ They had a total of nine children born between 1774 and 1791. The children were Martha, Adonijah, Martha, Elisabeth, Ruth, Almon, Ruth, Alvin and Orpha.²⁴ All were born in the Turkey Hills (East Granby) section of Granby. Earlier in 1778 they lost Martha, age four, and in 1784, of course, Ruth, age nine months. It is possible Martha was the first to be buried in the cemetery on Hatchet Hill and her stone was one of the stones the trail master inferred had been taken "from time to time." The Ford family moved on with their lives and like so many others moved west. They went to Steubenville, New York.

Caleb and Mercy (Winchel) Holcomb married in Granby, Connecticut, on December 25, 1776. Their children were Mercy, Bashabe, Ursille, Caleb (d. 1788), Caleb and twins Amarilla and Boadica (d. 1793).²⁵ They left Caleb and twins on the hill with their grandfather and around 1803-1804 traveled to Hunter, Greene County, New York, and later Hartsgrove, District 8, Ashtabula County, Ohio, by 1804.²⁶ Mercy told her story as a pioneer woman in Windsor, Astabula County, Ohio, where the family settled.²⁷

There are many messages in this story of the mysteries surrounding an ancient, almost forgotten burial ground. The dead lay buried and the survivors found a way to move on. In our times, those of you who linger, ponder and pass the second stone wall from Hatchet Hill Road on the Metacomet Trail will now have the chance to say a prayer or a "wish you well" as you think about a sixty-year-old grandfather and his four infant grandchildren and maybe say for them, "Good night PopPop."

by Thomas F. Howard

Notes

1. "Hale Headstone Inscriptions, Cemetery #107-5, Small-pox Cemetery East Granby, Copied by C. G. Flanders & Edward McCue, October 8, 1934," 42. Manuscript in the Connecticut State Library. Marcy Holcomb's name generally is given as Mercy in other contemporary records.

2. Albert Carlos Bates, *Sundry Vital Records of East Granby, Connecticut, 1737-1886* (Hartford: A.C. Bates, 1947), 62. Bates noted that the Simsbury death record indicated he died at age 60 and the 161 was either an uncorrected error or the work of a prankster. For the twins he noted further, "There are two graves marked with rough stones." This may refer to the surface fieldstones that are still evident where the headstones may have stood.
3. Elizabeth Weir McPherson, *The Holcombes, Nation Builders....* (n.p.: L.D. & E.W. McPherson, 1847), 9, 10, 30, 44, 45, 46, 47, 144, 211. Jesse Montgomery Seavers, *The Holcomb Genealogy....* (Philadelphia: American Historical-Genealogical Society, 1925), 13, 15, 23, person #108, 113, 114, 120. Deanna Holcomb Bowman, *Thomas Holcomb and Other Simsbury, Connecticut Settlers* (n.p.: D. H. Bowman, 1989), including ancestor charts back to the 11th century. Alice Gay Papers, Holcomb Family Manuscripts, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut, including abstracts of land and probate records and personal papers.
4. Land and probate records related to the distribution of Deacon Joshua's large estate and sales of portions of the estate by his heirs recorded the presence of the family burial ground. Page 133 of the Joshua Holcomb "the younger" estate distribution of December 12, 1810, sets out to his son Joshua Holcomb land "opposite the family burial ground." Joshua Holcomb Papers, 1749-1816, Connecticut Historical Society.
5. John Schwartz, "Soldier's Smallpox Inoculation Sickens Son," *New York Times*, May 18, 2007. "What is Smallpox?; Responding to Terrorism: Bioterrorism" *Hartford Courant*, October 19, 2001. Statistics used in this article came from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Federation of American Scientists and the World Health Organization.
6. Ibid.
7. Alice Gay Papers, Item #33145, 1-10. On page seven, Alice Gay notes "Asa Hyllyr for doctoring in the smallpox 1784," and adds that it was "Quite a Bill." She abstracted this from the Joshua Holcomb Papers now among the manuscript collections at the Connecticut Historical Society. Deacon Joshua's son Joshua P. Holcomb was the administrator of his father's estate. His administrative notes, as well as the account book his father used from 1773 until his death in 1784 and that the son used until 1793, are in this manuscript collection.
8. A sketched map left by Charles J. Kaiser, who owned the property after the headstones were removed, showed the fence and the location of the graves. This map and the wire fence, part of which was in place in the 1990s, was very helpful to the author in locating the cemetery at the second stone wall north of Hatchet Hill Road. See note 20.
9. The photographs, taken by a member of the Seymour family, are preserved in the History Room at the East Granby Public Library. These are the only known images of the headstones as they were in the cemetery.
10. East Granby birth record filed Feb 1, 1887 and amended to add baby's name August 8, 1952.
11. Simsbury and Bloomfield land records and Bloomfield building permits granted.
12. Photos of the foundation taken by the author circa 1997.
13. Harry Batz, "How Firm A Foundation," *Hartford Courant*. Undated newspaper clipping included in the Keith Antiuk paper. See note 15. The original could not be found.
14. Cliff Knight, "Former Railroad Man Master of Old Clocks," *Hartford Courant*, September 8, 1957, A16. Interviewed at his workshop by the reporter, Talbot told of his fifty years with the railroad as well as his interest in old clocks and old chairs that he repaired or replicated in his workshop with its church-like windows.
15. Keith Antiuk, "Finding the Small-Pox Headstones," paper written for a junior high class May 1, 1978. This short but resourceful effort on an interesting subject, I am pleased to report, received its just reward – an A/A. Nice going to Keith who now lives on Hatchet Hill Road just below the hill where the cemetery he helped to save is located.
16. Bonnie G. Dresner, "Troubled by the Loneliness, historian will restore cemetery," *Hartford Courant*, June 8, 1997, B1. The cemetery restoration is still a work in progress given the cost of headstone replication. The fund established then is still active and is growing slowly from lecture fees and fees for marriages performed as a justice of the peace. It is expected that this year will be the year a heavy single monument will be cut and placed in the cemetery with appropriate signage. At that time the mission begun in 1997 by the author and earlier by all those who helped to preserve awareness of this ancient cemetery will be accomplished.

Award of Merit for Jean Perreault

The Connecticut League of History Organizations gave SGHRL member Jean Perreault an Award of Merit for her book *Footprints Across Connecticut From Simsbury 1930 Census*. Scott L. Wands, CLHO Awards Committee Chair, presented the award to Jean at the organization's June 2 annual meeting.

Attending the event in support of Jean were Jim Flynn, president of the Board of Trustees of the Simsbury Free Library; Mary Jane Springman, trustee; and SGHRL member Nancy Pexa, a professional genealogist and NSDAR official.

The book is for sale at SGHRL.



Regular Hours Resume at SGHRL

After the Labor Day weekend, the Simsbury Genealogical and Historical Research Library will discontinue its summer hours and resume its regular hours. The library will be open Thursday through Saturday from 9:30 A.M. to 3:30 P.M.

SPECIAL EVENTS ON SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 6

As one of Simsbury's historical organizations, the library is having events in conjunction with the Simsbury Chamber of Commerce's "Home Improvement Show" on Iron Horse Boulevard, "Family Fun Day" at Simsbury Meadows, Simsbury Main Street Partnership's Downtown Sidewalk Sale and Touch-a-Truck, and the Simsbury Public Library's Annual Giant Used Book Sale at Simsbury High School. **Look for details on page seven.**

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