The John Foster Gravestone

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Two factors severely limited artistic output in the first century of Colonial America. One was a preoccupation with basic necessities which consumed the energies of the settlers and left them "little time for the development of a taste and all that an interest in the arts implies."[1] The other was the Puritans' belief that "human inventions in art led to idolatry."[2] Despite these limitations, a confluence of circumstances and the appearance of a few enlightened individuals contributed to the creation of an artistic masterpiece, the John Foster gravestone.

Gravestone carving in the seventeenth century was encouraged by the same factors that limited other art forms. The Puritans rejected Catholic funerary rituals because their eschatology decreed that "judgement came immediately at the moment of death, thus denying the need for rituals undertaken by the living to affect the state of the dead."[3] Yet gravestone carving was acceptable because the Puritans needed the imagery to advance and promote understanding of their beliefs.[4] To them, gravestones were necessary tools rather than icons. Death provided the Puritan congregation with an opportunity to remind people of their impending fates; according to David Waters in *With Bodilie Eyes,* the Puritans transformed the Catholic ritual into a *memento mori* framework.[5] *Memento mori,* "Remember that you must die," and *fugit hora,* "the hour is fleeting," were common Latin inscriptions on gravestones.[6] For the illiterate majority, the Latin inscriptions and epitaphs were not as important as the imagery on the gravestones. Since members of the congregation often passed the noon hour meditating in the cemeteries, pictures on the tombstones served to remind them that they too must prepare for death.[7] Simple images including winged skulls, coffins, pick-axes (scythes), hourglasses, and figures representing Time gave them a direct understanding of Puritan moral precepts—perhaps more than did the "sometimes too ponderous sermons."[8]

Despite being iconophobic, this culture embraced gravestone carving as long as it enhanced the Puritan ethic. Harriette Merrifield Forbes, in her book *Gravestones of Early New England,* outlines five primary images found in early gravestones: recognition of the flight of time, certainty of death, occupation of the deceased, the Christian life, and the resurrection of the body and activities of the redeemed soul.[9] The symbols used to express these concepts were not only restricted to these meanings, they were also limited artistically because stonecutters had few sources on which to draw. Most stonecutters did not serve solely as gravestone carvers; they also worked at jobs such as making ship figureheads, furniture, silverware, and architectural decorations.[10] Like the painting and architecture of the time, stonecutters looked to European prototypes. Images that fulfilled the Puritans' eschatological needs came from such graphic sources as book illustrations, broadsides, and emblem books.[11] Stonecutters could easily translate these two-dimensional, black and white images onto stone with the result that many of the gravestones are both austere and flat.[12] Although Puritan gravestones have been regarded as merely decorative art due to their naive style and borrowed imagery, I intend to show that in the case of the John Foster gravestone, the carver's decisions concerning iconography and stylistic motifs have made this stone a masterpiece of Colonial art (Figure 1). In order to understand the emergence of such a masterpiece in provincial seventeenth-century America, one must understand its social context, its artist/carver, and its subject, the deceased.

Dorchester, a suburb of Boston, experienced both a growing population and increased prosperity during the seventeenth century. The so-called "Great Migration" between 1620 and 1640 resulted in 14,000 Europeans immigrating to Massachusetts.[13] The Puritans came to America seeking a new spiritual life and better economic opportunities. Their ingenuity together with their religion, which regarded work as an end in itself, helped them to become rich businessmen.[14] Their success enabled them to afford the trappings of a growing urban center. Boston prospered primarily from fish and wood; Catholic Fridays in Europe demanded a constant supply of fish that Bostonian fishermen happily satisfied.[15] Wood products in the form of barrel staves and clapboards, as well as agricultural products such as sheep, pork, and goats, were traded for wine, sugar and tobacco.[16] Boston expanded culturally as well as materially. Books from England began to fill libraries; periodicals and newspapers from abroad brought the latest information which domestic printing presses made available to many.[17] The three-and-a-half foot telescope that Governor John Winthrop, Jr. brought from Europe in 1662 helped Harvard students focus their eyes on the universe.[18] New England cultural life was expanding.

John Foster was a prominent figure in this new urban culture. He was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts in 1648, the son of Mary Bates Foster and Hopestill Foster, the town Brewer and a captain in the militia.[19] He attended Harvard and taught school for a time after graduation. The Reverend Increase Mather and John Eliot, who was known as "apostle to the Indians," were his friends and

religious colleagues. They were, in fact, responsible for encouraging him in 1675 to open the first successful printing press in Boston.[20] Although not a great artist, he is remembered for, among other things, a woodblock print which he created of Richard Mather that was most likely made as a frontispiece to the 1670 pamphlet "Life and Death of that Reverend Man of God, Richard Mather."[21] Foster was also responsible for engraving the Great Seal of Massachusetts, compiling one of the earliest almanacs in the Colonies, and creating minor broadsides and important early maps and charts. In 1681, he drew an astronomical chart of *The Copernican System* and wrote an essay on "Comets, their Motion, Distance, and Magnitude."[22] This fascination with stars and physics was not uncommon among Puritan thinkers; Cotton Mather, for example, had tried to show "how divine order manifests itself throughout the phenomenal universe."[23] When John Foster died in 1681, the best carver in the area, known as "the Stonecutter of Boston" was commissioned to create an appropriate gravestone.

There were many stonecutters among the craftsmen who came to Boston in the seventeenth century, but three workers from this early period were preeminent. Although the name of the earliest is unknown, he was called "The Stonecutter of Boston." Forbes concluded that "if there was more than one stonecutter in Boston at that time, he was of slight consequence, and one alone was worthy to be called 'The Stonecutter.'" The gravestones attributed to this man "exceed in quantity the output of all the other very early stonecutters." His work is found in all the old burying-grounds near Boston and date from 1653 to 1695. Most of his stones are simple, with little ornamentation, but sometimes he attempted more ambitious effects as in the John Foster gravestone, which is considered by some scholars to be his masterpiece.[24]

When Foster died, his will requested that "twenty or thirty shillings should be paid or reserved for a pair of handsome gravestones."[25] According to Forbes, "his brothers must have tried to select the best man they could find to make the stones, and they saw how very appropriate to him would be a design similar to that on Joseph Tapping's stone" of Boston's King's Chapel (Figure 2).[26] The Tapping stone, which was created by "the Stonecutter of Boston" in 1678, did in fact serve as the prototype for the Foster stone. Like most colonial images, its central design had come from Europe, specifically from the 1638 emblem book *The Hieroglyphikes of the Life of Man* by Francis Quarles (Figure 3).[27] Illustrations created by the English engravers Marshall and Simpson accompanied Quarles' religious poetry. "The Stonecutter's" use of "Hieroglyph VI" may have resulted from its legibility, an important consideration in Puritan eschatological imagery. In this image, a skeleton is prevented from snuffing out a candle by a bearded figure holding an hourglass. Puritans were well-versed in the imagery of death and would know that this hieroglyph represented the flight of time and the certainty of death. To them the skeleton was Death, the candle Life, and the old man Time. This conflict is dramatized in Quarles' verse:

> "Time: Behold the frailtie of this slender snuff;
> Alas, it hath not long to last...
> Death: Time, hold thy peace, and shake thy slow pac'd sand...Canst thou appoint my shaft?
> Time: Or thou my how'r?
> Death: 'T is I bid, do.
> Time: 'T is I bid, When."[28]

The argument over who decides when a life is ended must have reinforced the certainty and omnipresence of death to the Puritans because it emphasized not only its finality but also the capriciousness of when it might come.

Creation of the Foster gravestone began with the selection of the imagery by "The Stonecutter of Boston." His earlier stone for Joseph Tapping had been designed with an elaborate scroll top and images common to many gravestones of the time: leafy borders, a large winged death's head, a large hourglass, and rosettes. The copy of the hieroglyph filled a small section of the stone and was flanked by gothic arches which held the inscription. For the Foster stone, "the Stonecutter" chose a simpler tripartite shape, possibly symbolizing a doorway. The Boston minister Samuel Willard had made this comparison in "Death is the portal to eternity, and carries men over to an unchangeable state." To further simplify the Tapping design, "the Stonecutter" eliminated all imagery except the hieroglyph. He moved the Death and Time scene to the center of the tripartite arch. To border the epitaph he employed a leafy scroll motif similar to the decorative carving on Wainscot Chairs created in Massachusetts at this time (Figure 4). An odd detail of this headstone is the difference in relief between the top leafy scrolls and the lower ones; the latter are carved in a much lower relief and suggest a later reworking of the stone or evidence of a second set of hands in the carving.[29]

The hieroglyphic image was also changed, first from the original to the Tapping stone and again for the Foster stone (Figures 5 and 6). Although Death and Time stand in the same positions as in the hieroglyph, Death's head on the tombstones is rendered as a large, flat bulb with an abstracted triangular "nose" and stylized "eyebrows," a signature of "the Boston Stonecutter." This change relates to the more common image of death's head in Colonial gravestones, such as "the Stonecutter's" Mary Cromall monument, Salem, 1683. The sundial and Death's dart have been eliminated from the hieroglyph. The sun, which Quarles compares to God in the line "Great God, I am thy tapour, thou my sun," was transformed from an orb with graphic lines radiating to an expressive face with abstracted triangular rays on the Foster stone.[30] The candle in the original hieroglyph is nearly two-thirds the size of the figures and rests in an urn with plain scroll handles (Figure 3). The Foster and Tapping candles are smaller and each rest on a candle plate balanced atop a globe. The globe on the Foster stone rests on ornamental "paintbrush" feet, common to the Boston chairs popular at the time (Figure 7). The plain scroll handles have been transformed into serpents with duck

heads, a symbol of regeneration, similar to the serpent handles of Jeremiah Dummer's *Silver Punchbowl,* Boston, 1692 (Figure 8). These images had certain currency since they appear in Colonial silver, furniture, and gravestones.

Below the illustration and between the rosette borders a flat area is reserved for the epitaph, reading "THE INGENIOUS Mathematician & printer/ MR JOHN FOSTER/ AGED 33 YEARS DYED SEPTR, 9TH/ 1681." According to Forbes it was customary for "the Stonecutter of Boston" to follow the epitaph with a Latin inscription of his own choosing, typically a verse from Ovid or simply "memento mori." On this stone however he used a Latin verse that Increase Mather had sent to John Foster upon learning in April of 1681 that his friend had not long to live. In their correspondence he wrote, "Living thou studiest the stars; dying, mayest thou Foster, I pray, mount above the skies and learn to measure the highest heaven." Foster had written back to Mather "I measure it and it is mine; the Lord Jesus has bought it for me; nor am I held to pay aught for it but thanks."[31] This allusion to Foster's fascination with astronomy reinforces additional meanings for the globe and sun images on his stone. Typically a smaller footstone was anchored parallel to the headstone about six feet away creating a "symbolic bed of repose."[32] Foster's footstone is mentioned by Forbes; she states "the Stonecutter" inscribed on the footstones as he pleased, and being fond of Ovid, chose for Foster "Ars illi sua census erat" or, as is translated beneath the quote, "Skill was his cash."[33] This seems an appropriate quote given the accomplishments of John Foster during this period of prosperity of Boston.

John Foster's death was called "a great loss to the country;" the Massachusetts Colony and the city of Boston had benefitted from his extraordinary talents.[34] When "the Stonecutter's" skills were put to the task of carving a stone for such an important figure, he created his best gravestone. Its sophistication is evident in its refined form, economical design, rhythmic and poetic repetition of elements, and deep, rich carving. The John Foster gravestone exhibits the subject-specific imagery and symbolic design motifs in which Puritan eschatological art culminated.

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1 Wright, Tatum, McCoubrey, Smith, *The Arts in America: The Colonial Period* (New York: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1966) 3.

2 David Watters, *With Bodilie Eyes: Eschatological Themes in Puritan Theology Gravestone Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981) 19.

3 Watters 15.

4 Allan I. Ludwig, *Graven Images: New England Stone Carving and Its Symbols* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1966) 4.

5 Watters 16.

6 Francis Y. Duval, *Early American Gravestone Art in Photographs* (New York: Dover Publications, 1978) viii.

7 Harriette Merrifield Forbes, *Gravestones of Early New England (And the Men Who Made Them) 1653-1800* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1967) 113.

8 Duval viii.

9 Forbes 114-23.

10 John Wilmerding, *American Art* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 12.

11 Ludwig 274.

12 Wilmerding 12.

13 Wright *et al* 19.

14 Wright *et al* 27.

15 Hugh Brogan, *The Pelican History of the United States of America* (London: The Penguin Group, 1988) 47.

16 Brogan 47.

17 Wright *et al* 20-21. Harvard College was established in 1636 to educate ministers in the New World and had the first commercial printing press in this country.

18 Miller and Johnson, *The Puritans* (New York: American Book Company, 1938) 734.

19 Wilmerding 14.

20 Wilmerding 14.

21 Wilmerding 15.

22 Wilmerding 15.

23 Miller and Johnson 733.

24 Forbes 21-26.

25 Forbes 26.

26 Forbes 26.

27 Grosort, *Works of Quarles* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1967) lxxiv.

28 Grosort 190.

29 Wilmerding 13-14.

30 Grosort 191.

31 Forbes 25-27.

32 Duval viii.

33 Forbes 27.

34 Forbes 27.

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Figure 1. The John Foster Gravestone, 1681. Dorchester, Massachusetts. Courtesy of American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

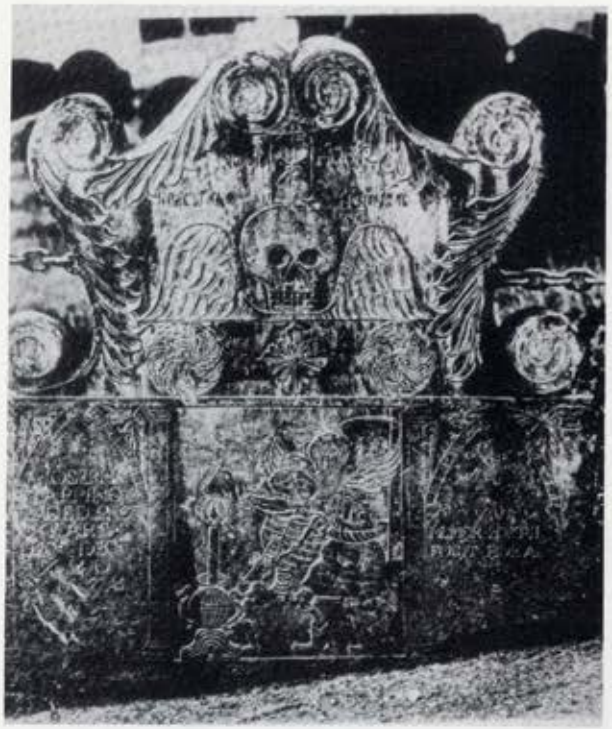

Figure 2. The Joseph Tapping Gravestone, 1678. King's Chapel, Boston, Massachusetts. Courtesy of H.M. Forbes.

Figure 3. Francis Quarles, Hieroglyph VI. Courtesy of Grosort.

Figure 4. The Wainscot Chair, 1670-1685, Massachusetts. Courtesy of Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts.

Figure 5. The Joseph Tapping Gravestone, detail. Courtesy of Allan Ludwig.

Figure 6. The John Foster Gravestone, detail. Courtesy of Allan Ludwig.

Figure 7. The "Boston Chair," 1700-1725, New England. Courtesy of Henry DuPont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware.

Figure 8. Silver Punchbowl by Jeremiah Dummer, 1692, Boston. Courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery, Mable Brady Garvan Collection.