

Menotomy Minutes



NEWSLETTER OF THE ARLINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SUMMER 2023



Enslaved and Free Persons of Color Monument Honors and Educates

Chattel slavery, to the surprise and shock of many, was a feature of everyday life in Menotomy, the colonial-era designation for sections of the towns of Cambridge and Charlestown that today include all of Arlington, most of Belmont, and part of Winchester. Peoples of African descent, Native Americans, and multiracial individuals were legally kept in permanent bondage in Massachusetts, from 1641 until it became the first U.S. state to effectively abolish it in 1783.

Menotomy was incorporated in 1732 as the Second Precinct (also known as Second or Northwest Parish) of Cambridge, after which the area that had been set aside in 1724 for a burial ground came into use. In 1864, The Rev.

Samuel Abbot Smith, pastor of what had become the First Parish (Unitarian) wrote about the racially segregated section of Arlington's Old Burying Ground in his published sermon "West Cambridge 1775." Smith described the mass burial places of combatants on April 19, 1775, noting that "the British dead were, many of them, buried near the wall and close to the brook which runs through the old grave-yard, in the spot used for the burial-place of the slaves."

Beyond the general location of the burial site, there are no known records to confirm precisely where the enslaved and free persons of color were laid to rest in individual graves. Unlike later cemeteries operating on a purchased deeded-plot



Over 150 attendees listen as Richard Duffy leads the dedication ceremony. (Chuck Kraemer photo.)

basis, the Old Burying Ground was land owned in common by the town and a simple allocation system was followed to frequently have burials of close family members near one another. Parish death records are considered the most reliable source of likely interments there, as no private burial grounds in Menotomy are known to have existed.

In situations where parish records are missing or incomplete, gravestones have served as the most precise proof of all. But there are no gravestones for the enslaved persons, and indeed, for many of those from the wider community who either could not afford markers or whose documented markers have since been destroyed. Thus, like so many dimensions of the early history of racial minorities in New England, assumptions must be relied upon to develop a reasonable picture of the past.

The Second Parish records suggest that at least 24 persons of color were laid to rest in Menotomy's burying ground, between the years 1741 and 1778. Few were recorded with full first and last names; most frequently they are identified by

descriptions such as "Negro servant of . . ." For the most comprehensive study to date on the history of enslavement in Arlington, Beverly Douhan's 2011 monograph *Buried Secrets of Menotomy's Slaves*, is an engagingly written presentation that is available to read on the Society's website.

Racially segregating burials of persons of color was not unique to Menotomy. The Salem Street Burying Ground in Medford is a neighboring example of this practice. It carried forward demeaning treatment based on race that existed during their lives, such as a separate seating area at Sunday worship services in the meetinghouse.

125th Anniversary Project

During the 2022-2023 season, the Society observed the 125 years since its establishment in 1897. This occasion inspired thought about creating a lasting educational project. A monument to the enslaved and free persons of color was immediately embraced as a readily visible way to engage the community with the topic of slavery in the history of the town,

and at the same time to further interpret the Old Burying Ground. Visitors who previously would have come principally to view the monuments to April 19, 1775 would now gain knowledge of a largely hidden dimension of the reality of life and death in colonial times.

A Highly Collaborative Process

The concept of the monument and the timing to dedicate it on June 19, 2023, called for thorough and efficient collaboration with several community stakeholders. The Town of Arlington's Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), Jillian Harvey, was the first person consulted, and she gave her enthusiastic endorsement of the concept and agreed that the timing would dovetail perfectly with the Town's Juneteenth holiday observances.

Once the timeline was established, a presentation was made to the Arlington Cemetery Commission, which provided thoughtful input and voted unanimously to support the monument project. Commission Chair Michele Hassler and Public Works Director Michael Rademacher met with Society representatives at the Old Burying Ground to establish a location for the monument in the field where Menotomy's persons of color are buried, to also ensure continuing access for equipment needed to properly maintain the graveyard. They stayed closely involved throughout the entire process and the attentiveness of the Town's Cemetery Department staff was indispensable to the project's success from concept to completion, in particular



Sunflowers, a floral emblem of the Juneteenth holiday, were placed at the base of the grave-marker side of the monument. (Richard A. Duffy photo.)

Jean Smith and Jason Jones.

The Arlington Historical Commission contributed actively to the endeavor. Commission Co-Chair JoAnn Robinson accompanied field visits to both Arlington's Old Burying Ground, and to Medford's Salem Street Burying Ground, where a similar monument had been erected in 2019. This engagement was essential because introducing new elements to historic landscapes calls for sensitivity in scale and design, while avoiding the creation of an imitation of historical grave markers or monuments. The final monument proposal went on to receive unanimous endorsement by the commission.

Monument Style and Material

The aesthetics of the monument were carefully considered. To convey a sense of timelessness, a traditional slant design was selected. This optimizes readability, as does the placement of the text closer to the top of the stone.

For durability, granite was the definitive material of choice. A New England granite was desired from the outset. Georgia granite is less expensive, but it can take on a streaky appearance after a rain. Unfortunately, two renowned granite-quarry areas have long been closed: at Concord, New Hampshire (from where the granite was sourced for the 1848 obelisk in Arlington's Old Burying Ground, honoring American patriots who fell on the first day of the American revolution) and at Quincy. Vermont produces the highest quality granite for cemetery monuments today, and the stone was selected from the Smith Quarry in Barre. The particularly handsome gray granite has an even and compact grain that is ideal to keep the viewer's focus on the inscriptions. David Deveney, owner of Oak Grove Memorials in Medford, provided expert work on production and installation.

The monument features rock cut finishes on the top, sides, and nose of the monument, as well as on the sides of the base. It is sited on a rise in elevation, which gives it visibility and a sense of prominence, while being proportioned to coexist with the variety of monument styles standing closest to it.

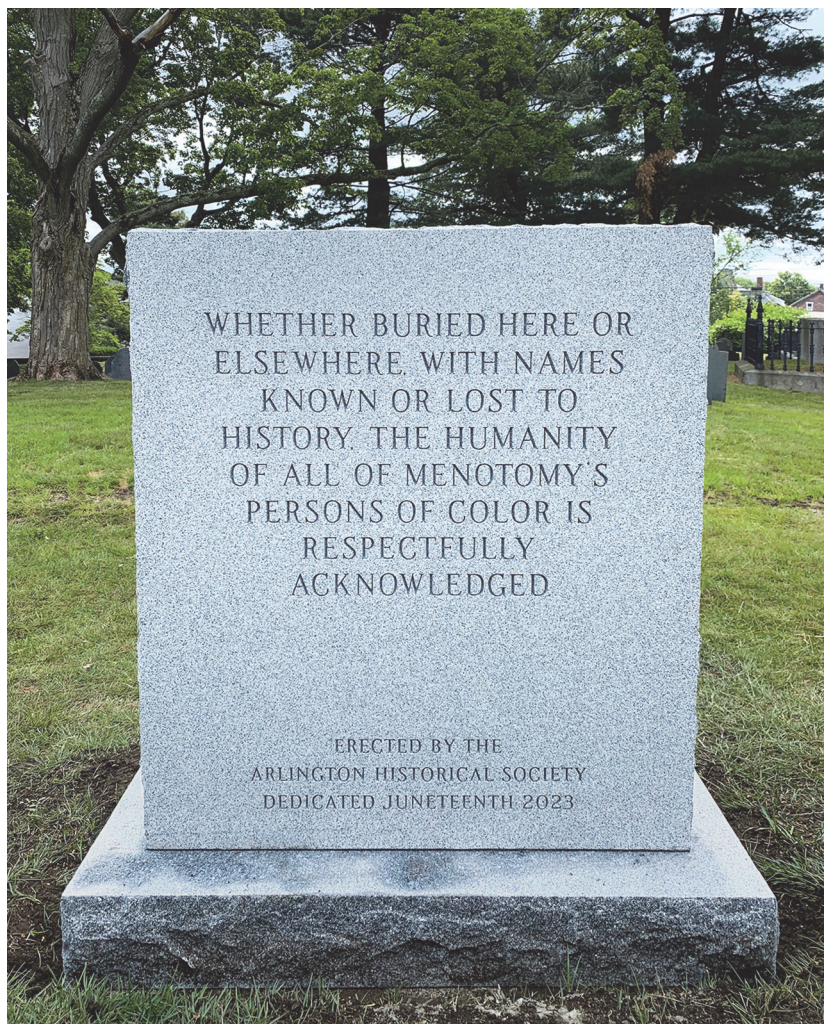
The panels for the wording have a smooth, unpolished finish—known in the industry as “stepped”—to facilitate readability and to have elegant simplicity as the background to emphasize the deeply engraved wording.

Dual Design: Burial Marker and Cenotaph

The monument was intended foremost to be a burial marker. The inscription on the front reflects this aspect. In few words it describes both the site within the burying ground and the circumstances of

the era. Most of the history of persons of color is unknown and the decision was made to focus on the individuals as members of a group that shared the common experience of subjugation and segregation. This avoided making unsupported assumptions or omissions about individuals, if other historical data might emerge in the future.

On the reverse side of the monument, the inscription serves to create the second function of a cenotaph—a marker that memorializes the deceased persons of color who once lived in Menotomy but who are not buried at the site. This includes David Lamson, a biracial veteran of the French and Indian War who led a group of the “old men of Menotomy” in the capture of a British military supply wagon on April 19, 1775. And Cuff Whittemore, a biracial member of the Menotomy Militia who went on to further service at the Battle of Bunker Hill and at Saratoga, where he was captured. Lamson's and Whittemore's achievements are known and celebrated. But many were the enslaved and free persons of color who were born, married or worked in Menotomy but who did not finish their lives in the



The cenotaph side memorializes persons not buried at the site and communicates the historical context of the monument itself. (Richard A. Duffy photo.)

community. It was felt that these people also were collectively deserving of formal remembrance.

The cenotaph aspect of the monument also serves to sensitize viewers to the wider presence of enslaved and free persons of color, who most frequently are anonymous or even unseen players on the historical canvas of the town.

Lastly, just above the base of the monument on the reverse side is the visually reticent inscription of who erected the monument and when. The monument itself is an object of history, and this information is essential to fully understand it; however, it was a conscious design decision to take a minimalist approach. Although the Society is honored to have presented the monument, the wording of its role deliberately sits “outside the frame” of the core messaging.

Identifying the Segregated Burial Section

Although the notion of placing a monument to the enslaved persons of Menotomy had been brought up from time to time in recent years, there was a lack of precise information available to confirm which part of the graveyard was the “burial-place of the slaves,” versus the mass-burial location of the fallen British soldiers. The suspicion was at last confirmed

thanks to a ground-penetrating radar study performed on a pro bono basis by Geophysical Survey Systems, Inc. (GSSI) in September 2020. With COVID-19 outdoor masking protocols, GSSI's director of sales, Dan Welch, and staff archeologist Peter Leach met at the Old Burying Ground with George Parsons, president, and Sara Lundberg, museum director of the Society; and James Feeney, deputy town manager. The interval lines of the GPR field survey were spaced to crosscut as many burial sites as possible. This non-intrusive technique revealed a pattern of soil disturbances in the area closest to the now-covered brook (today the central avenue of the Old Burying Ground) that were consistent with one or two adjacent mass-burial trenches.

By process of elimination, given that the burials of enslaved persons happened individually over the course of decades, it became possible to isolate the racially segregated section of the graveyard and to consider options for the design and placement of a suitable monument.

Centering Black Voices

Before advancing to the monument's production stage, the DEI division was called upon again to seek input from persons



of color in Arlington, thereby centering their sentiments on the overall project, with particular focus on the phrasing of the inscriptions authored by Arlington historian Richard A. Duffy. A presentation of the artwork and discussion on the wording was led by Jillian Harvey at a meeting of The Black Joy Project, which is a collaborative project organized by the Arlington Commission for Arts and Culture, Arlington's DEI Division, and the Arlington Human Rights Commission. It was gratifying that the proposed inscription was thoughtfully considered and discussed, and that it resonated with those experiencing it on paper. Among the participants comments are these excerpts:

Beautiful, succinct, evokes emotion and captures all that is necessary.

Brief, but also loaded. And it sounds like poetry.

I like the alliteration of the lines.

*The location of the monument
—its isolation and feeling of separation—
creates a space for gathering and honoring the ancestors.
It can be a place to go to for homage.*

*I'm so proud and happy to have a physical monument honoring
ancestors—it's wonderful. I will be taking all my grandchildren;
I'll show them so that they can have a feeling of pride and emotion.*



Botanical illustration by John Miller (1715 - c.1792).
New York Botanical Garden collection.



Lois Fine places a sprig of rosemary on the monument in a gesture of respect following the dedication. (Chuck Kraemer photo.)

— Juneteenth Dedication Ceremony —

Monday, June 19, 2023

The weather was most clement as over 150 people assembled at 10:30 a.m. in the Old Burying Ground for the public presentation of the monument, which had just been erected the prior Thursday. The choice of Juneteenth for this event was determined from conception of this project, and it was timed to be immediately followed by the Town of Arlington's Juneteenth celebrations in the Winfield Robbins Memorial Garden.

The brief ceremony was solemn yet celebratory, reflecting both sorrow for the injustices endured by the persons of color buried there, and gratitude that their resting place would no longer be unmarked.

Three keynote speakers shared their knowledge, thoughts, and feelings at this special occasion in Arlington's history, setting an engaging tone for the collective dedication of the monument by all present. Selected highlights:



Welcome by Robert Brazile, President of the Arlington Historical Society.

The Society's mission is to preserve and share the history of our town, and not just the heroic parts—all of it.

On this day, designated a holiday to acknowledge the effects of slavery on our country, to mark its ending, and to recognize the contributions to our society of those who endured and suffered from it, we gather here to add our own recognition of an often-overlooked part of our town's history.

This monument is intended to inform and educate all who visit this place, in an enduring and visible way, about the pervasiveness of slavery in the Colonial era. It is a centuries-overdue memorial to residents of our town whose lives should not be forgotten.

Historical Remarks by Richard A. Duffy, Chair of the Monument Committee, Arlington Historical Society.

Beyond this monument is the magnificent backdrop of the Whittemore-Robbins mansion, and the elegant Robbins Library, but when this segregated section was designated for the burial of Menotomy's residents of color, the only entrance was on Pleasant Street, making this merely the back end of the graveyard, with open crop fields beyond. It was a place of necessity, a place of neglect, and a place to literally perpetuate the otherness of these individuals.

They are excluded no longer from being memorialized in this place.



Contemporary Commentary by Jillian Harvey, Director of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Division of the Town of Arlington.

Arlington continues to make strides in the right direction as the Town has committed to building a community where everyone is heard, respected, and protected. This monument speaks to the work that has taken place over the last few years. While we are prioritizing racial equity, we still must acknowledge the harms of history and how they impact us today. This monument helps us to humanize those who were purposefully left out of history. The intentionality of the monument's word choices, and involvement of the Black Joy Project participants centers the voices and experiences of Black community members.

Uplifting silenced voices is a vital piece of the diversity, equity, and inclusion work that is taking place in Arlington today. ♦



— Collective Dedication —

All of us together shall now dedicate this monument.

We have received springs rosemary; rub it to release its scent and to breathe of it.

Rosemary is the herb that symbolizes remembrance.

We do this in silence to remember the loved ones in our lives who have passed,
and to extend this sentiment to those buried here whom we have not known personally,
but who are the reason we are gathered today.

For the words of dedication, for each line that ends in “because,”
we respond out loud and emphatically with the words:

THEIR LIVES MATTERED

Together we dedicate this monument so that the horror of human bondage as
a shameful part of our town’s history be more widely understood, because

THEIR LIVES MATTERED

Together we reject the segregation practices that further dehumanized
our brothers and sisters whose bodies rest here, because

THEIR LIVES MATTERED

Together we acknowledge not only the wrongs of the past;
we seek to understand their lasting impacts in our modern society, because

THEIR LIVES MATTERED

Together we celebrate the bringing forward of these members of our community’s history, and
we dedicate our thoughts, words, and deeds to combating discrimination, promoting an end to
bigotry and hatred, and seeking peaceful understanding among people of all races, because

THEIR LIVES MATTERED

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