

SOUTH CEMETERY
by Bruce E. Ingmire

The South Cemetery is actually four separate burial grounds which include the Proprietors', Cotton, Harmony Grove and Sagamore Cemeteries. Cotton Cemetery and an adjacent private Cemetery called Elmwood Cemetery were family plots at one time. The Elmwood belonged to the Brakett family. Cotton and Elmwood owned by the City of Portsmouth and the Proprietors is owned by the South Church Charitable Society.

Cotton Cemetery, the first on the site, was originally given to William Cotton for twenty years for clearing and fencing the property. Cotton used part of the site for a family burying ground. During the seventeenth century burials in Portsmouth occurred in family plots. The origin of family plots was a colonial invention as public burials alerted enemies to a diminishing population. In the earliest days, burials were silent nightly affairs intended to draw as little attention as possible to the reduction in a settlement's population count.

A private burial ground was organized by the Pickering family who owned the point next to the inlet, Puddle Dock. As the century ended Portsmouth became centered around Puddle Dock and the Pickering family gravesite was transformed to a community gravesite during a small pox epidemic in the early 1690's. Today the Point of Graves is maintained by the city of Portsmouth.

Traditionally in England parishioners were buried in a yard adjacent to the parish church. In the colonial period on the Piscataqua the dead in that small settlement were buried quietly at night, near homes and without monuments. This strategy prevented enemies from being alerted that the number of settlers had been diminished. As a result of this early practice families developed private cemeteries near their homes. Many of these small private

family cemeteries remain in Portsmouth.

As Portsmouth emerged from its pioneer days and population grew, John Pickering gave a plot of land, the Point of Graves, which became the first community burial place. It remains the earliest public cemetery. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the South and North Cemeteries were established.

When Portsmouth's Puritan First Church of Christ divided into the North and South Churches at the beginning the eighteenth century, an ecclesiastical court awarded each church a plot of land for support. The North Church was awarded the original church lands, the Glebe lands. The South Congregation was awarded the former "Trayning Field" on the road to the south, today's South Street. The South Church ministers leased the land as pasture and continued to bury parishioners at the Point of Graves.

Sometime after the end of Cotton's twenty years, the pastor of the Puritan Church, continued to graze his cattle at the site. In 1711 the town decided to enclose the family burying ground adjacent to the training field implying that the town reclaimed the site. A divisive period of Portsmouth history from 1703 to 1718 resulted in the division of the settled church and an ecclesiastical court divided church lands between the resulting North and South Congregations. Minister Emerson buried his young daughter in the "Cotton" Cemetery. About 1721, the town fenced in the rest of the site and the large elm at the edge of the property on South Road became the town's hanging tree. The Cotton Cemetery was remanded to Portsmouth. South Congregation minister Haven was also allowed the former training field for his cattle.

When the two churches were organized, the North Church chose the shore of the North Mill Pond for its cemetery while the Meetinghouse Congregation or

South Church continued to use the training ground for its burials. In 1825 the South Church moved to the Stone Church on State Street. By 1830 the "minister's fields" were developed as a private burial facility administered by Trustees from the congregation and called Proprietors' Burial-ground, the second cemetery organized in the nation as a commemorative park.

In 1825 the South Church moved to a new house of worship, the Stone Church on State Street. In 1830 the "minister's fields" were turned over to the South Church Charitable Fund which was administered by Trustees from the congregation. The trustees laid out the first private cemetery in Portsmouth, the Proprietors' Burial-ground. William Cotton controlled adjacent land and he also organized a cemetery. In 1847 Harmony Grove was laid out on land to the south. In 1871, the Sagamore Cemetery was laid out in land further to the south. Among its earliest burials was those graves moved from the Green Street Cemetery when the railroad was built.

The Cheever family descended from Ezekiel Cheever who was a classical teacher in New Haven, Ipswich and Charlestown. A descendant, Charles Augustus Cheever was born in Boston in 1793. His mother died before he was two and he was raised by his father's sister, Elizabeth. Charles attended Harvard and graduated in 1813. Following graduation, he studied medicine under Dr. John Warren and Warren's son-in-law, John B. Brown. Cheever was interested in vaccination and went to the west Indies to experiment with the procedure.

In 1816, he set up practice in Portsmouth, NH encouraged by his Harvard classmate named Haven and son of John Haven. There were already several

1. A grandson Thomas lived in Lynn, a section later called Saugus and Thomas's grandson, Abijah Cheever graduated from Harvard in 1779 and was the father of Charles Augustus Cheever. A. P. Peabody, Extracts from the Writings of Charles A. Cheever, M.D. with a Memoir (Boston, MA: JohnWilson & Son, 1854), 1-3.

doctors in Portsmouth including Dr. Jackson, Dr. Cutter and a Dr. Pierrepont.

Charles Augustus Cheever married Mary Haven, daughter of John Haven, Esq. and granddaughter of the minister of the South Church. They had two sons and then Mary died and Charles Augustus Cheever married her sister Adeline Haven and they had four children. In the summer of 1838, one of the Cheever boys by Mary was drowned in the Piscataqua.

Cheever's closest friend in Portsmouth was Dr. Parker of the Unitarian Church. It would appear through this connection he came to develop the new cemeteries. Another association for Cheever was that of John W. Foster. (Sarah Haven Foster?) Cheever's youngest son entered Harvard in 1848. Charles A. Cheever died in Boston, Massachusetts, September 22, 1852. Buried in family tomb.

Michael Griffin was hired by the Cheever's as a gravekeeper. Forty years later, Griffen left the business and home to his son John. Now Michael's great-great-grandson Tim manages the burial ground.

The first commemorative cemetery was Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. For that reason Portsmouth originally called the new burial ground, the "Auburn" cemetery and the avenue leading to the cemetery was called Auburn Street. It was renamed Richards Avenue for Henry L. Richards, a local soldier who died at Gettysburg. Young Richards helped Dr. Robert O. Treadwell plant elm trees along the street when it was laid out.² The tribute was thought to be fitting and more recently the trees were killed by Dutch elm disease and new trees were planted on the avenue.

The expansion of the private cemetery with Harmony and Sagamore burial grounds has been owned by a variety of persons. The Cheever family was an

² This information comes from page 134 in Gurney's or Fosters Portsmouth Guide.

early owner and they left some land to Tuft's but the Griffin family finally purchased much of that ground and parlayed their management into a successful proprietorship.³ The Harmony and Sagamore Burial Grounds were started when Dr. Cheever was an active member of the South Unitarian Church. That family owned and managed the additions until the Griffen family purchased the cemeteries.



³ Ray Brighton, They Came to Fish, Vol. 2 (Dover, NH: Randall/Winebaum Press, 1979), 298-299.