Burying Ground Preservation Group, Inc.

www.bgpg.org
P.O. Box 2492 Sag Harbor, NY 11963 631.287.6437 (O) 631.275.3374 (M)

April 28, 2021

Site Investigation & Analysis:
Slaves Burying Ground, Orient, New York

Introduction

The Burying Ground Preservation Group, Inc., was engaged by the Oysterponds Historical Society to investigate and analyze the stone monuments and related site features in evidence at the Slaves Burying Ground located on Narrow River Road, Orient, New York (latitude 41.13196, longitude -72.29389). This historic site is owned and maintained by the society and interpreted as the burial place of Dr. Seth H. Tuthill, his wife Maria L. Tuthill, and approximately twenty former "slaves" (or servants) associated with their household. The site was investigated by Dr. John A. Rayburn, Professor of Geology, SUNY New Paltz, on September 12, 2020 utilizing Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) and by Dr. Allison McGovern, Senior Archaeologist, VHB Engineering, Surveying, Landscape Architecture and Geology, PC, on December 2, 2020. The findings of their site assessments will be referenced wherever relevant, below.

The Burying Ground Preservation Group, Inc., is a non-profit consulting firm that surveys, records and preserves historic cemeteries and burying grounds (www.bgpg.org). Current projects include restoring and interpreting the Revolutionary War patriots' grave monuments at the Old Sag Harbor Burying Ground, preparing a National Register Nomination Form for the Town of East Hampton's historic cemeteries, and restoring the Schenck-Mann Family Burying Ground in Syosset. Knowledge of Colonial, post-Colonial and Victorian-era burial practices, regional stone types selected and inscribed for memorial purposes, and the types of deterioration associated with a variety of grave markers are essential skills for investigating, analyzing and authenticating the Slaves Burying Ground.

The methodology used in the site investigation was non-invasive, at the request of the Oysterponds Historical Society. The surveys performed by Prof. Rayburn and Dr. McGovern have provided invaluable insights and scientific data that were useful in understanding the sub-surface conditions, origins and historical evolution of the site. The following report is based on a visual assessment of the features – grave markers, boundary wall, and grade contours – preserved at the Slaves Burying Ground. Recommendations for further investigation are contained in the **Summary**.

General Site Description

As noted by Dr. McGovern in her "Tuthill Cemetery Study" (January 2021), the property on which the Slaves Burying Ground is located measures 1.98 acres, although the cemetery itself is approximately 50' long by 46' wide (interior measurement) and surrounded by a loosely stacked, drystone wall composed primarily of quarried sandstone intermixed with granite. The front of the cemetery is defined by an opening in the wall and a wooden gate that faces northwest. For purposes of analysis, Prof. Rayburn simplified his GPR grid orientation by referring to this as the "western" wall, while acknowledging that the cemetery is actually

oriented NW-SE. The significance of the true orientation – of the burying ground and the grave markers whose rows are parallel with the walls – will be addressed later in this report.

The burying ground is situated on a relatively flat, elevated plot of land that slopes gradually beyond its walls to the east, south and west into surrounding wetlands. A heavily vegetated verge surrounds the site and the land between it and Narrow River Road, effectively screening it from the road. A wide, grassy path provides access from the road (left), where a rise in grade as the path approaches the burying ground is readily visible. As a result of GPR analysis, it's been determined that the entire burying ground rests on about 3' of fill above the glacial outwash that is natural to the area. Without this fill, the site would be situated at about 2' above mean sea level (McGovern, p. 2). The grave markers are widely and evenly spaced within the site; those of Seth and Maria Tuthill are adjacent the front ("western") wall and to the left of the entry, whereas the slave markers are arranged in four orderly rows containing five stones each, with an additional stone that is now interpreted as a potential marker set in the far southwest corner. The inscriptions on the two Tuthill headstones and two footstones face toward the slaves' markers, which themselves bear no inscriptions.

Historical Precedents

Isolated family burying grounds, individual gravesites and small cemeteries like the Slaves Burying Ground, which were located at a distance from early population centers and date between the 18th and the middle of the 19th century, are commonplace on Long Island. Especially in remote farming and coastal communities such as Orient, where regular communication with established settlements was limited, the custom of setting a burial plot aside for deceased family members was both accepted and practical. Its occurrence decreased over time, however, as villages grew in size, farms became less isolated, and local residents established their own communal burial places such as the Orient Village Cemetery established c. 1790.

Examples of family cemeteries near Orient include the Latham Family and Terry Cemeteries on the Main Road, both east of the village. Each is rectangular in shape, includes a stone wall on one or more sides, and preserves the headstones of family members and collateral

relatives. Each contains headstones dating from the late 18th and early 19th century, but the majority date from the mid- to late 19th and early 20th century. Although a majority of family cemeteries on Long Island were abandoned by the mid-20th century, both the Latham Family and Terry Cemeteries remain active today.

Latham Family Cemetery facing southeast, Main Road, Orient, NY.

One important difference between the Slaves Burying Ground and those dedicated to the Latham and Terry families is immediately apparent: the inscriptions on the grave markers in the latter two sites face uniformly west, while those of Seth and Maria Tuthill face southeast. The disposition of the body on a west-east axis, with the head of the interred placed at the west and the feet at the east, was traditional and invariable in early American burial practices throughout the Colonial era and well into the Victorian period. This orientation was based in the Christian belief that the deceased, whose body was aligned along a west-east axis, could sit up to witness the miracle of the Second Coming, when Christ arises from the East. In this position, the inscription on the headstone typically faces west and that of the footstone east, away from the body. This traditional burial practice, in which the inscription of the headstone faces west and aligns with a matching footstone set on a west-east axis, is not followed in the Slaves Burying Ground.

One additional nearby site of great significance – the Browns Hill Burying Ground – pre-dates the individual family cemeteries referenced above and is the original place of interment for Orient's founding families. Situated west of the village close to the Long Island Sound shoreline

within a natural, elevated hollow to the north of the Main Road, this ancient burying ground preserves 69 documented slate and sandstone headstones dating between 1699 and 1787, with Booth, Brown, King, Tuthill and Youngs family surnames predominating. Despite the adverse effects of weathering for over three centuries, this protected site preserves its original rectangular west-east orientation and a surrounding wall of loosely stacked fieldstones, some of substantial size. The headstone inscriptions face uniformly west. The site is also characterized by numerous large stones embedded in the ground which do not appear to align with the rows of headstones and therefore cannot be interpreted as grave monuments. Of interest is that none of the Tuthill descendants who owned the Hog Pond Farm later owned by Dr. Seth H. and Maria Tuthill – on which the Slaves Burying Ground is located – and which had been acquired by John Tuthill (1635-1717) and bequeathed to his son Daniel (1680-1762) in 1712, are interred at the Browns Hill Burying Ground. The whereabouts of their grave sites remains unknown.

Browns Hill Burying Ground facing northwest, Orient, NY

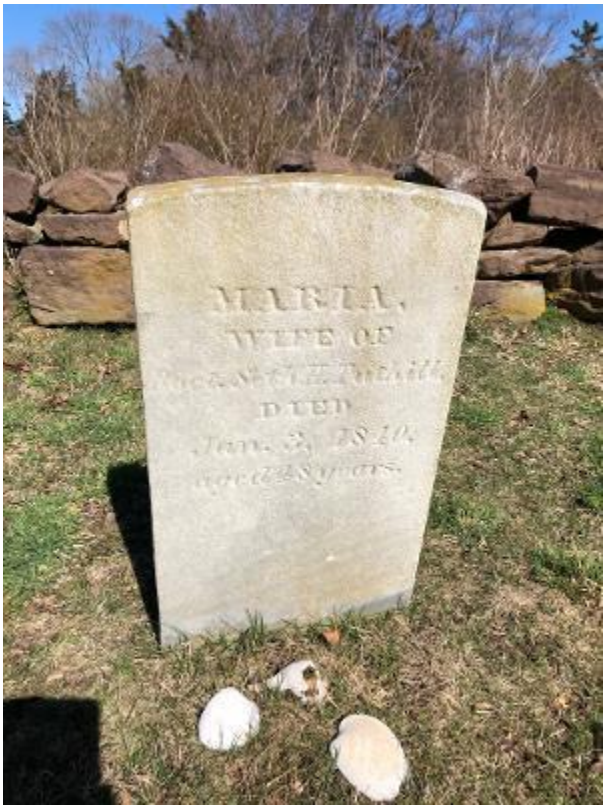
From this synopsis of surviving local burial sites, it is concluded that the customary way of burying the deceased was on a west-east alignment and that the headstone was positioned above the head, with its inscription facing west. When there was a footstone, it is set at the foot of the interred, with its inscription facing east. This practice is uniformly observed among Colonial and early Victorian burying grounds on the North Fork (e.g., Southold, Cutchogue and Mattituck Burying Grounds) and throughout Long Island, and mirrors that of New England, New

York and other localities. The burials at the Slaves Burying Ground, in its present configuration, do not appear to follow the customary arrangement of monument placement.

Headstones & Footstones

The Slaves Burying Ground preserves the two headstones and associated footstones of Dr. Seth H. Tuthill and his wife, Maria Tuthill. The headstones are of white marble and bear the traditional inscriptions of the deceased – name, death date, age at death – and the footstones, also of marble, are carved only with their initials which is customary. The use of marble is appropriate for mid-19th century tablets of this size. The slate that was typical in the Colonial period was long out of use by this time, and sandstone, which became popular briefly in the late 18th and early 19th century, was only employed for bases or large-scaled monuments (such as obelisks) when the Tuthill stones were quarried, dressed and inscribed. The last of the most common 19th century stone types used in cemetery work – granite – did not appear with any regularity until after the 1880s, when the rock could be quarried affordably and because of its durability, gradually replaced marble for all but the most elaborate sculptural work.

Doct. Seth H. Tuthill. Died May 30, 1850.



Maria, Wife of Doct. Seth H. Tuthill, Died Jan. 3, 1840.

Besides the stone type, the relatively modest size and shape of the Tuthill markers is also typical for this time period. The gently arched tops and overall dimensions are characteristic of mid-19th century period work. The calligraphy and punctuation of the inscriptions are also consistent with period practice and the visible tool marks seen along the edges are typical of the

time. Closer analysis reveals that the stones are not identical, however, which suggests that they were actually carved at different times, as indicated by the ten-year time span between the burials of Maria and Seth Tuthill in 1840 and 1850, respectively. While the heights of the stones above grade are each approximately 2' and not a function of their fabrication, the widths are different – Maria's stone is 13 ½" wide and Seth's measures 13 1/8 " – and the thickness of each tablet is also different – Maria's is 1 7/8" and Seth's is 1 ¾". The stones were fabricated to look alike as would be expected for a husband and wife, but appear to have been made at different times (i.e., ten years apart). Similarly, the footstones differ slightly in dimensions; each is 5" high above grade but Maria's measures 6" wide by 1 ½" thick, while Seth's footstone is 5 ¾" wide by 1 5/8" thick. These differences, although minimal, are enough to suggest that the markers were not quarried, finished and carved at the same time, although they were made to look alike and may have been derived from the same source in 1840 and 1850.

Dr. Seth H. Tuthill headstone, edge detail.

Maria Tuthill headstone, edge detail.

In addition to the difference in overall measurements, the two Tuthill headstones were apparently worked by a different hand. Maria Tuthill's headstone preserves pronounced tool marks along its sides and top edges (right), whereas the Seth Tuthill stone was finished with less defined and parallel tool marks (left). Both techniques are typical of the period; it is only the difference between them that is significant in this context, suggesting they were worked at different times. Despite these subtle differences, the characteristic that each stone shares with the other is their surface weathering. Not only has each begun to lose the definition of its carving due to atmospheric deterioration ("acid rain"), but each also shares a condition common to marble

stones, which is that the weathering becomes less pronounced closer to the ground. This phenomenon is attributed to airborne contaminants which degrade the surface of the marble, but whose negative effects are mitigated by the porous nature of the stone, which remains moister near the ground and therefore more resistant to surface weathering. Each of the two Tuthill stones appears to have been subjected to the same degree and duration of surface weathering.

Slaves' grave markers

Unlike the Tuthill headstones and footstones, the assumed slaves' grave markers preserve no carved lettering that would identify them as being *bona fide* memorials. While this lack of inscriptions is commonplace among the fieldstones (glacial erratics) used for this purpose, their various stone types, irregular shapes, and lack of orientation provide no alternative evidence of having been chosen and set as memorial stones in the 19th century. From the recent revelation of anecdotal evidence about the site provided by the Oysterponds Historical Society, it appears that the stones were introduced and arranged in the mid-20th century to reaffirm the perceived authenticity of the site as a "slaves' burying ground." A comparison with Long Island burying grounds in which fieldstones are well documented or authenticated to be memorial markers will help make the distinction more apparent.

Elizabeth Moore memorial stone, Caroline Church Cemetery, E. Setauket (left) and "H. H." memorial stone, Cutchogue Burying Ground, Cutchogue (above).

These examples of inscribed glacial erratics employed as grave markers are unusual for having carved inscriptions. Each stone also preserves a natural rounded shape that is more characteristic, however, and suggests the intention and choice behind its selection as a grave marker.

Considerable evidence exists for using fieldstones as grave markers in the 18th and early 19th century, especially on Long Island, where no natural rock deposits existed for quarrying. Stone of all types including slate, sandstone and marble was imported in great quantities from nearby New England – not as "ballast" but as valuable cargo needed for construction and other purposes – unless it was collected locally in the form of fieldstones, or discovered during cellar excavation or land clearing. The fieldstones on Long Island are typically small glacial erratics, the residue of retreating ice shields that shaped Long Island's geology and left its landscape littered and embedded with rock debris. Some are of colossal size. Others were gathered and stacked as walls, as seen at the Terry Cemetery and Browns Hill Burying Ground (below), where many of the larger erratics were too large to move and remain *in situ*.

Large glacial erratics are employed in the walls surrounding the Terry Cemetery (left) and at the Browns Hill Burying Ground (above.)

The twenty fieldstones organized in the Slaves Burying Ground in four symmetrical rows of five each are spaced at regular, 7 ½' intervals and vary in size, stone type and orientation. None of these characteristics – their symmetrical placement, spacing, differing sizes, stone types, and orientation – indicates a lack of authenticity alone; collectively, however, these attributes argue strongly against these stones as being set as memorial markers. Authentic examples of glacial erratics used as grave markers are typically a small percentage of the markers at any burial site (e.g., at Cutchogue Burying Ground, where two of over 350 markers are fieldstones); are typically spaced close together (3' to 4' apart) reflecting the disposition of the bodies; and importantly, they retain an inherent shape and/or coloration that explains why they were selected for memorialization in imitation of quarried stones, and not randomly sourced.

Example of brownstone used as a grave marker, Slaves Burying Ground.

The stones in the Slaves Burying Ground are an irregular assortment of rock types including brownstone, gneiss and granite; shapes vary from rounded to square and jagged; and none display any orientation consistent with the intention of setting a gravestone in the ground to identify and memorialize the individual interred. Furthermore, several of the markers match the appearance of the quarried granite pieces found intermixed among the brownstones in the wall, and may well have been taken from the wall itself and placed throughout the site as grave markers (right).

Stone Wall

A low wall of dry stacked stones measuring about 3’ high surrounds the Slaves Burying Ground, with a single opening on the northwest side where a wooden gate of pickets is inserted. The wall defines the footprint of the cemetery as roughly rectangular, its interior space measuring approximately 50’ long and 46’ wide. Although the lower course of stone is embedded in the ground, Ground Penetrating Radar has shown that the site is covered with about 3’ of fill which reaches beyond the cemetery, suggesting that the wall is set into the fill and does not extend far below the surface. A dry stacked stone wall, especially one that does not taper inward as it rises as is the case with this example, would not be stable at 6’ or more in height. Other stone walls observed in the area – e.g., the Latham Family Cemetery, Terry Cemetery, and Browns Hill Burying Ground – are comparable in height to the wall surrounding the Slaves Burying Ground. Construction of the wall therefore appears to be contemporary with the addition of fill covering the site, which elevated it by creating an artificial mound which addressed the adjacent sea level.

The wall is constructed of irregular brownstones with occasional pieces of mottled grey gneiss or granite (left). Unlike the cemetery walls cited above, which were built from local fieldstones (i.e., glacial erratics), the Slaves Burying Ground wall

is constructed primarily of brownstones which were commonly imported in the late 18th and early to mid-19th century from the Connecticut River valley for use as headstones, fireplace hearths, chimneys, and foundations. Although varied in size and

dimension, the brownstones are quarried stone, some retaining flattened sides and tool marks (above and below). Many of the brownstones also preserve traces of mortar, suggesting prior use in a foundation or chimney (left).

The pieces of granite are also fragments of quarried rock, which was not typically available for building purposes or other uses until the late 19th century. Despite their irregular shapes and rustic appearance, therefore, the stones that were used to build the wall that encloses the Slaves Burying Ground appear to have been recycled from another application and repurposed at this site.

Summary

The three uses of stone at the Slaves Burying Ground – as marble headstones and footstones, slaves' grave markers, and dry stacked wall – each present challenges of authenticity. As noted above, the only stones found naturally on Long Island are its glacial erratics, which were either gathered or dug out on the surface, or unearthed during excavation and land clearing. This stone material – common fieldstone for this region – was used for construction in the absence of brick or imported stone, and for dry tacked stone walls and occasionally grave markers. The remaining types of stone in the burying ground – sandstone ("brownstone"), marble and granite – were quarried and transported from New England. Each of these stone types has its own history of importation and use on Long Island, which helps to document their use in the Slaves Burying Ground.

The marble headstones and footstones appear authentic and preserve the tool marks, carving style and techniques, varying dimensions and weathering associated with mid-19th century grave markers. Their origin cannot be explained by their current location and orientation, however, and further investigation is recommended. This additional analysis would entail sensitive probing and the possibility of minor soil removal to determine whether the bases are cut evenly or broken and irregular. This observation may be key to determining he origin of these stones. The random assemblage of small brownstones, erratics and granite pieces that are now organized as slaves' grave markers is not historic; not only does oral history provide a reliable explanation for their arrangement, but the combination of stone types, symmetrical spacing, and lack of any apparent intention in their selection and orientation reveals them to be of modern installation. The perimeter wall, which is built of quarried brownstone and pieces of granite set above 3' of fill, is also non-historic. Further investigation and research may result in documenting the sources of the stones that make up the Slaves Burying Ground, but it is unlikely to result in the conclusion that the burying ground is authentic or conforms to the characteristics of a typical, communal mid-19th century burial site.