

Nantucket's Old "Colored Cemetery"

Turning off Prospect Street just uphill from the entrance to Nantucket Cottage Hospital is a road that curves around the south side of Mill Hill Park and turns unpaved just past the hospital. A sign at the corner of Prospect Street directs the visitor down the road to a historic cemetery, an acre of land enclosed with a split-rail fence and decorated each Memorial Day with fluttering American flags. This has been the designated last resting place for people Nantucketers deemed non-white—a socially constructed category that included not just African-Americans, but some people actually born in Africa, others of African heritage from Cape Verde and the Caribbean, people of at least partially Wampanoag Indian heritage, Pacific Islanders, and a man who came to the island from Calcutta, India. Only recently have a few "white" burials been permitted. After two centuries, Nantucket's officially designated "Colored Cemetery" has been racially integrated.

Formal recognition of the site began in 1805 when it was voted that "the Black People" could fence the land. At the time, much of Nantucket was held in common by shareholders in a proprietary. Under this system, each share corresponded to the right to graze a particular number of sheep, cows, or horses on the common, undivided land. If a share-holder preferred outright ownership to grazing rights, however, he could seek to trade in his shares for a particular piece of land, and provided the Proprietors were in agreement, the land in question would be set aside from the commons.

The vote of the Proprietors in 1805 was for something different, however. It was in recognition that burials had already been taking place for some time

on the common land at the base of the hill. The survivors of the deceased laid to rest there were not shareholders in the proprietary and had nothing to exchange for the land. Nor had they at the time an organized church of their own to which the land might have been conveyed. It was two full two decades after the land had been set aside from the commons that they founded the first of their two churches. Those churches, the African Baptist Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, did not survive into the twentieth century. As a result, the question of who “owns” the cemetery and is responsible for its maintenance has remained a fraught question. Today it is tended by the Town of Nantucket’s Department of Public Works.

In the late 1700s a localized community of people of African and Wampanoag heritage had formed nearby. In the early part of the century, some Nantucketers had been slave owners, but early on the Nantucket meeting of the Religious Society of Friends had published a revelation against life-long involuntary servitude, and in the course of the 1700s, at least seven Nantucketers manumitted the people they had held in slavery and generally provided the people they freed with some land or help in acquiring a place to live and farm. The freedmen themselves actively bought, sold, and traded land to consolidate their holdings in an area not far from the mills on Popsquatchet Hills, giving rise to a concentrated neighborhood variously known as Negrotown, Negro Village, Negro Hill, and—the name that really stuck—New Guinea.

Only a mile away there had been a Wampanoag community in the valley of Miacomet Pond, localized near their own meetinghouse. A ruthless

epidemic in the winter of 1763-64 wiped out Miacomet Village, and the survivors either left the island or relocated to the African community that was forming nearby. Generations later, in 1822, several residents of New Guinea put their names to a statement that “We hereby certify that there are among the coloured people of this place remains of the Nantucket Indians, and that nearly every family in our village are partly descended from the original inhabitants of this and neighboring places.”

The community was still young when the first deaths took place. A grave marker, now missing, that was recorded in the old cemetery in the 1960s carried the date 1798. At least fourteen deaths of people identified as “black,” “colored,” or “Negro” are documented before 1805, including one person who had been manumitted from slavery and others for whom there are court and probate records. They were among the first to be laid to rest downhill in sight of the mills. Many others were to follow. Some of their graves were marked with headstones and footstones. Shockingly enough, it appears that some such stones have been carried away. Other grave markers were ephemeral and have long since been obliterated by the elements. And some—probably many—people had no marker to begin with. Today much of what seems to be open land within the fence is in fact occupied by unmarked graves.

These days people find it difficult to know what to call the cemetery. An 1807 document in the Nantucket registry of deeds describes a piece of land as abutting the “Burying Ground that belongs to the Black People or People of Colour.” Since then, the term “Burying Ground” has fallen out of use. Moreover, “People of Color” was turned around to “Colored,” which,

despite the venerable name of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, is widely felt as derogatory. Hence the question of an appropriate name for this Nantucket cemetery. Signage that identifies the spot as a “Historic Cemetery” is intentionally descriptive and noncommittal with the advantage that it will never be incorrect. “Historic” is not a name, however. Town death records consistently indicate interments in the “Colored Cemetery.” If historic precedent is to be set aside, what are the other possibilities? Some recent publications have labeled it the “African-American Cemetery,” but this hardly seems inclusive of the non-American people of African heritage, the people of Wampanoag heritage, and the Pacific Islanders who were laid to rest in this spot. “Black Cemetery” reflects the way nineteenth-century Americans characterized anyone they considered non-white but is no more inclusive of Pacific Islanders than “African-American.” Another name that has recently been taken up is “Mill Hill Cemetery,” which avoids entirely the issue of racial categorization. Some Nantucket residents, on the other hand, feel that given two centuries of usage, the name “Colored Cemetery” should continue because, as one put it, “One shouldn’t prettify history.”

In June 2007 an informational marker was placed in the cemetery that reads:

Historic Cemetery

The earliest known burial was in 1798.

In 1805 the Nantucket Proprietors “voted that the Black People may fence one acre of land where their Burying Place is.”

In 1807 this place was described as “the Burying Ground that belongs to the Black People or People of Color.”

Among those who have found their last rest here are members of the Boston, Pompey, Ross, Porte, Grant, Wheeler, and Carter families; the families of churchmen Arthur Cooper, James Crawford, and John W. Robinson; and four Civil War veterans.

Marker placed in 2007 by families and friends with the support of the Nantucket Historical Association.

A selection of photos of the cemetery and its new marker is available by email from karttu@nantucket.net or karttu@comcast.net.

Columns over the next several weeks will provide a glimpse into the lives of some the people who came to rest in this cemetery.

Frances Karttunen's books, *The Other Islanders: People Who Pulled Nantucket's Oars* and *Law and Disorder in Old Nantucket* are available at Nantucket bookstores.

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