

## The Headstone of Joseph and Dorothy Curtiss

This remarkably well-preserved schist headstone stands on the hill in Wethersfield's Ancient Burying Grounds. It is one of the earliest stones found thus far in the Thomas Curtiss of Wethersfield, CT 1636 line. This may be explained in a local publication, which notes, "*The Puritan attitude about death is cause for endless debate. It is known that many chose to bury their dead in unmarked graves.*"<sup>1</sup>

Yet there, in Row 25 of Section A of the burying grounds is a marker that no self-respecting genealogist or archeologist could ignore.

<i>In Memory of Mr. Joseph Curtiss, he died Dec. ye 31st 1765 in ye 92nd Year of his Age</i>	<i>In Memory of Mrs. Doro thy wife of Mr. Joseph Curtiss, who died April 18 1760 in ye 79th Year of her Age</i>
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The headstone's arcane design is credited to renowned stonecutter Gershom Bartlett: "*Gershom Bartlett's gravestone carvings are among the most bizarre of any produced during the eighteenth century. He was a native of Bolton, Connecticut... Bartlett appears to be the first owner of the Bolton Notch Quarry...schist/granite that came from that quarry is very much appreciated for its durability....His stones are easily recognized by the bulbous noses, turned down mouths, row of vestigial teeth at the bottom of the face, raised eyebrows, usually a four-lobed crown, [and] three curved wings of curls beside the face. The finials are most frequently pinwheels or four-leafed clovers and often a small heart can be found near the bottom of the legend...Bartlett stones are found throughout eastern Connecticut but are most common west of Mansfield and become very scarce in the northeast and in coastal communities...*"<sup>2</sup>



Indeed, the Curtiss stone contains all of the described attributes and more, since it is also a double stone. While the faces put contemporary viewers in mind of “Kilroy was here” caricatures, they have been described otherwise in the literature:

*“The central figure...is a whimsical cherub with startling, close-set eyes and bulbous nose....The cherub’s crown symbolizes the triumph of life over death. It represents a departure from the [earlier] Puritan-Congregational philosophy...”*<sup>3</sup>

That earlier philosophy is mentioned in the description of a stone done thirty years previously, in 1734, which featured a winged death’s head:

*“This funerary image was brought to New England by seventeenth-century English settlers for whom the renewal of life after death was an important religious experience.”*<sup>4</sup>

The doubled nature of the Curtiss stone suggests that it may have been ordered and emplaced at the wishes of Joseph, who outlived his wife by five years and died at the advanced age of 91. This third generation colonist had lost both his Puritan grandfather and his notorious, hell-raising father by the time he was nine years old. He lived through the Great Awakening, doubtless among the many attending George Whitefield’s revivals (James Lockwood, who became Wethersfield’s minister in 1738, was an ardent Whitefield supporter<sup>5</sup>).

By the time Joseph passed on, his progeny (including Old Zach of Dorset) were busy helping their cousins make “Curtis/s” ubiquitous throughout the northeast: the first Census 25 years later found 592 Curtis/s households.<sup>6</sup>

It has been documented elsewhere<sup>7</sup> that the cherub design was frequently associated with social status. Riding the wave of the Great Awakening, it may well be that the old fellow felt rather pleased with himself.

On the other hand, it’s just possible that Joseph was a contrarian who viewed the ecumenical religious fervor of the times with cynicism and yearned for the simpler days of his grandfather’s generation. The “whimsical cherub” of Gershom Bartlett is actually an evolved death’s head (remember the vestigial teeth). In fact, it may have been the throwback Puritan motif of the 1760’s<sup>8</sup>; a way for Joseph to poke his neighbors long after his death.

Given the Curtises studied by the author and known over the years, his money’s on theory number two.

### **References:**

<sup>1</sup> Gladys G. Macdonough, *The Stone and The Spirit*, Wethersfield Historical Society, 1987, p.15

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ctgravestones.com/gallery/barlett2.htm>, Connecticut Gravestone Network (accessed November 12, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Macdonough, op.cit., p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p, 31

<sup>5</sup> Sherman W. Adams and Henry Stiles, *The History of Ancient Wethersfield Connecticut*, Vol. I, The Graf-ton Press, 1904, p 333.

<sup>6</sup> W.S. Rossiter, *A Century of Population Growth, From the first to the Twelfth Census, 1790-1900*, U.S. Census Bureau, p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> James Deetz and Edwin Dethlefsen, “Some Social Aspects of New England Colonial Mortuary Art,” *Memoirs of the Society for American Archaeology*, No. 25, 1971, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 32.