HISTORY OF ELIOT BURYING GROUND:
A COMMUNITY UNDERTAKING

In 1630 the Massachusetts Bay Colony founded six villages: Boston, Charlestown, Watertown, Medford, Dorchester and Roxbury. Eventually Charlestown, Dorchester and Roxbury became part of the city of Boston and Medford and Watertown became separate towns. Roxbury had many resources the colonists were looking for, such as open farm land, timber and stone for building and the Stony Brook for water power. Additionally its location on the only road to Boston gave the town an advantage in transportation and trade as well as a strategic military position. Many of the streets that exist today in the Dudley Square area were laid out in the first years of settlement. The town center was located at John Eliot Square, where the first meetinghouse was built in 1632. The first burying ground was established nearby in Dudley Square in the same period.

Roxbury was a smaller town than Boston. Although there are many similarities between Eliot Burying Ground and the Boston burying grounds, the history of the Roxbury site reflects the more intimate scale of life and the
While doing research for the cover article for this edition of the newsletter, I came across this quotation in *The Town of Roxbury: Its Memorable Persons and Places, Its History and Antiquities, with Numerous Illustrations of Its Old Landmarks and Noted Personages*, by Francis S. Drake, about Eliot Burying Ground:

> We seem here to be brought into the immediate presence of the past. The old homestead and place of worship has disappeared, old landmarks have vanished or are so changed as to be almost unrecognizable: all that time, decay, and change have left of the past is here,—the old gravestone, the quaint inscription, the rude verse, and the dust sleeping quietly beneath.

I find that Eliot Burying Ground is particularly evocative of past landscapes and history. When I look at early maps of the area with different street names and fewer roadways, I can always find the present-day map location based on the position of the burying ground or the distinctive street patterns that still exist in Dudley Square. When I visit the burying ground I can imagine soldiers hiding behind gravestones while being cannonaded by the British “Regulars” stationed about 1,000 yards away down Washington Street. I can almost see the original geography of the Shawmut peninsula: the narrow muddy “Boston Neck,” the dike near where Harrison Street is now, Lamb’s Dam running along the path of the future Northampton Street holding back the tidal waters, local residents collecting shellfish in the tidal flats where the Boston Medical Center and Southeast Expressway now exist, and the farms and orchards that characterized this area in the past.

I know that I am not alone in feeling this way. Many are the genealogists and history buffs who contact me to learn more about this site or others and who come to Boston specifically to visit them.

Thank you for your continuing interest and support.

Kelly Thomas

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*Historic Burying Grounds Initiative*

Our mission is the comprehensive restoration, on-going conservation and heritage interpretation of Boston’s historic burying grounds

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FIELD NOTES: Tomb Restoration in Eliot Burying Ground

In Eliot Burying Ground there are 35 underground tombs. Of these tombs, 18 have some kind of above-ground monument, ranging from a simple headstone to a large marble obelisk. The majority of these monuments have a stone slab (brownstone, marble or slate) laid horizontally on a masonry base. This last type of monument, sometimes referred to as a “table tomb,” is common in Colonial-era sites. To our best knowledge, some of these table tombs started out with a different configuration. Some of the stone slabs did not sit on a brick base but rather were supported by four or six carved “legs,” which were often made of brownstone. These tomb legs must have deteriorated enough so that the slab could no longer be supported and the legs were replaced with brick boxes. Most likely those tombs with stone bases have retained their original configuration. All of the brick bases for tombs in Eliot Burying Ground are made of 20th-century brick.

Several general types of deterioration were common to the tomb monuments, so we created a project to treat these problems. We addressed the following issues: deterioration of the horizontal slabs containing epitaphs, deterioration of the masonry bases, soiling of marble monuments and restoration of structural stability. In total we repaired and conserved eight table tombs, two obelisks, one slab-on-ground monument and the entrances to two underground brick vaults.

This project received grant funding from two sources: George B. Henderson Foundation and the Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund. The total amount of the work was $101,030 including $9,950 for project design and $91,080 for construction. The contract was awarded to Folan Waterproofing, a masonry company.
with significant experience working with historic ma-
sonry. A stone conservation specialist, Daedalus, Inc.,
worked as a subcontractor, concentrating mainly on
any stone pieces containing a carved inscription.

Tomb 31 is a good example of the types of repairs un-
dertaken in this project. The initial conditions report
describes this tomb in the following way: a brownstone
slab with a legible inscription that is mostly complete.
Part of the inscription has become detached from the
slab and is missing. There is serious delamination com-
promising the slab. Crusts have also formed, some very
near, and most likely under, the remaining inscription.
The base is built from bricks and is covered with con-
crete parging. There is a large area where the parg-
ing has fallen off, exposing the bricks underneath. This
brickwork is now suffering from severe spalling and
the grout no longer adheres to the bricks.

After removing the concrete parging from the brick
base, it was discovered that the bricks were in very
poor condition. The base was dismantled where needed
and the joints were completely raked and repointed.
The damaged bricks were replaced with new water-
struck bricks. It was determined that the concrete stuc-
co was damaging the bricks. Additionally, since the
original configuration of this tomb was not known, we
decided not to replace the parging.

Carefully chosen products are used when working with
historic masonry. They must be strong enough to hold
together whatever materials they are adhering, yet
flexible enough to accommodate subtle movement in
the masonry under various climatic conditions. Prod-
ucts must also be able to be diluted and injected into
very small cracks which would otherwise be impossible
to reach. The carved stone slabs are more delicate than
the bricks for several reasons: natural variations in the
formation of the stone; the manner in which they were
quarried; their age; their historic irreplaceability; their
horizontal positioning, which makes them more ex-
posed to the weather; and the difficult accessibility of
some of the deterioration, such as cracks and voids.
Specialty products such as Paraloid B-72 and Edison
Custom 45 have benefits such as being reversible and
functioning well at differing levels of viscosity.

The brownstone slab was washed with D/2, a solution
which removes biological growths on masonry, applied
with a pump sprayer and then was rinsed with a pressure
washer at 300 psi. Cracks, fissures and delaminating are-
as were re-adhered by injecting them with B-72, an ad-
hesive, in acetone. The cracks were then filled and
sealed with Edison Custom 45 tinted with mineral pig-
ments. This product is a latex-modified cementitious
compound used in masonry repairs. On the top layer of the brownstone slab a crust had formed, detaching itself from the lower strata of the stone. After filling the voids created by this separation, Edison Custom 45 was applied to the rim of the top layer, sloping down to the delaminated strata of stone. The joint is designed to shed water from the surface of the slab as well as to provide extra protection against water intrusion under the reattached crust. Once the mortars and adhesives had set, the tomb marker was cleaned again used Vulpex detergent, a safe yet deep-cleaning product used in conservation. The slab was reset on a bed of mortar on top of the rebuilt brick base.

There were two underground tombs which required repairs. The entry stairway to each of the tombs protruded slightly from the crest of a small slope. The doorways were covered with pieces of slate. In order to have a full understanding of all problems in the tombs they needed to be unearthed; however even without opening them up it was clear that the pieces of slate had shifted, the brickwork was falling out and the tomb would require repairs. Both tomb entrances had been repaired with inappropriate mortar at some point, which was contributing to the problems.

Once the dirt covering the tombs was removed, we were able to gauge the state of the tombs. Luckily in both tombs the underground burial vault was completely intact and required no work. In both tombs portions of the arched entryways were rebuilt. A marble cross which had been moved across the site at some point was returned to its original position on Tomb 10. When finished, both tombs were recovered with soil.

The repair and conservation part of the project took about two months to complete. We are thankful to our funders, the George B. Henderson Foundation and the Massachusetts Historical Commission, whose generous grants enabled us to complete this important project. We are also thankful to the craftsmen whose sensitive work produced great results!
strong community bonds in this town. As was the custom at this time, the burying ground was outside the center of town, located about one-half mile from the meeting house. Both town and church activities took place at the meeting house, which was built through taxation of the town members. The distinction between town and church was much narrower than today. The burying ground was owned by the town.

The first recorded death was the wife of George Alcock. She died soon after arrival in Roxbury. At that point a meeting house had not yet been established in Roxbury; community members had to use the meeting house in nearby Dorchester. The *Roxbury Book of Possessions* lists George Alcock as the proprietor of twenty acres of upland and marsh to the north and east of the “Way to Boston” and the “Way to Dorchester” (now Washington Street and Eustis Street, respectively) over to the water and the town line of Dorchester. The burying ground is located in a corner of this section of land. It is unclear if the burying ground was originally taken from Alcock’s land or if it abutted it. It is an unusual coincidence that the burying ground was established on land either belonging to or abutting the property of the first person to die in Roxbury.

The first mentions of the burying ground in the town records are for boundary and access issues such as gates and fences. In 1648 the town contracted with John Woody Constabel to have a stone wall with a double gate, six to eight feet wide, built for the sum of six pounds. The agreement was reached on February 23, 1648, and the work had to be finished by June 1 of that year. The burying ground was also leased out for “herbage,” usually to the abutting land owner. In November of 1654 John Alcock, the son of George Alcock, was allowed to graze his livestock in the burying ground provided he kept the site “in good and sufficient fence and a gate with a locke and two kieas [keys] the one to be kept by the sayd Alcok and the other by such a man as the town or select men shall appoint.”

The shared boundary of the burying ground with the abutting land owners appears to have been an issue of minor conflict over the years. In November of 1675 it was ordered that the selectmen determine what agreements had been made with Mr. Alcock concerning the fencing around the burying ground. In January of 1677 the town residents voted to fence in the burying ground with a stone wall, leaving the details up to the selectmen. A few years later in 1682 it was voted that the selectmen and several others would be “impowered to treat act & transact Respecting the Towns Interest In the Burying place with Joshua [heir of Alcock’s land] or his Deputy & to do according to the best of their prudence for the Towns good.” This issue would lay dormant for about a century and rear its head again in 1785. In May of that
year a committee was appointed by the town to assert the town's right to the burying ground with Aaron Blaney, who owned the abutting tract of land at this point. There was a disagreement between the parties as to the boundaries between the burying ground and Mr. Blaney's land. The committee, the selectmen and Mr. Blaney all met that month but were unable to reach an agreement. A week later they came to an understanding and staked out “what appeared to us to be the Original bound thereof for as to include all the Graves on the North east side adjoining to the said Mr Blaney’s Land, fenced it off” and had a surveyor measure it. The resulting plan was entered in the town book of records. This did not remedy the fence situation though, with various negotiations and contracts going on until 1796.

The site was enlarged to nearly its present size (0.8 acres) by a gift of land. In March 1724/25 Colonel Joshua Lamb gave a quarter acre of his land to the town burying place in exchange for the right to pasture his livestock. The burying ground was approximately half an acre in size before Colonel Lamb’s gift. Existing records indicate that by the beginning of 1689, approximately 609 community members had died. A rough calculation would allot 36 square feet to each body in 1689. Assuming the same rate of death, by the time 1725 rolled around an additional 369 people would have died and the average space allotment would have declined to 22 square feet per body. Obviously it did not work exactly like this but it is a good indication that the town needed more space for burials and Colonel Lamb’s quarter acre of land would have been welcomed.

Around the same time a disagreement occurred surrounding the ownership and burial rights of an underground tomb. Both the descendants of Mrs. John Eliot and the Town of Roxbury claimed ownership to the tomb now referred to as the Parish Tomb. Mrs. Eliot, the wife of the esteemed First Church pastor, was the first person to be buried in the tomb. Other church officials were also subsequently buried in the tomb as were Mrs. Eliot’s kin. The town believed the tomb was intended for burial of its ministers, and that Mrs. Eliot was included in that category as the spouse of a beloved church leader. Her descendants believed it was her tomb and hence the burial rights were passed on to them and not the church. In this belief, they had paid the tomb’s maintenance and repair costs. With no records and conflicting testimony among witnesses, the town decided to allow both parties to have continued use of the tomb as well as to share the costs for its upkeep. During the testimony for this case, several witnesses told an interesting story about the tomb’s origin. In the late 1600s a local sailor, William Bowen, had been captured at sea by “Turks” or “Barbary pirates” (actually pirates based in North Africa, which was at that time under Turkish rule) and
sold into slavery. The townspeople collected a ransom for his safe return. When news of his death reached local shores, it was decided to turn over any money that had been raised to the congregation of the First Church of Roxbury. The town decided to use the money to build a tomb for its ministers.

During the American Revolution, the American forces set up a large encampment in Roxbury. At the height of the eleven-month Siege of Boston, 4,700 soldiers were stationed there. The British army occupied the Boston peninsula. The only land route to Boston was through Roxbury along the “Way to Boston,” now known as Washington Street, right next to Eliot Burying Ground. Starting in 1774 the British began fortifying their end of the neck, erecting advanced fortifications near the present-day intersection of Washington and West Dedham streets. The Americans quickly built defenses after the Battle of Lexington, including a redoubt along Eustis and Williams streets right next to the burying ground. They also built two more fortifications near the present-day intersections of Washington Street with Thorndike and Northampton streets. Eventually only about 800 yards separated the British and American defenses along the neck.

The diary of Samuel Bixby, who was stationed in the Roxbury camp from May to December, 1775, provides a fascinating glimpse into the life of a soldier as well as the history of the burying ground. On June 17, 1775, Bixby describes the events that transpired in Roxbury during the Battle of Bunker Hill:

About noon we fired an alarm & rung the bells in Roxbury; and every man was ordered to arms, as an attack was expected. Col. Larned marched his regiment up to the Meeting House, & then to the burying yard, which was the alarm post, where we laid in ambush with two field pieces placed to give it to them unawares, should the Regulars com. About 6 o.c. the enemy
drew in their sentries, & immediately a heavy fire was opened from the Fortification. The balls whistled over our heads & through the houses, making the clapboards and shingles fly in all directions. Before the firing had begun, the General ordered some men down the street to fall some apple trees across the street, to hinder the approach of their Artillery.

The British fired on the Americans in Roxbury all night long. The area around the burying ground and the neck sustained much damage during the time that Samuel Bixby was encamped there. Abigail Adams commented in a letter to her husband written after the evacuation of British troops from Boston in 1776 that: “Roxbury looks more injured than Boston, that is, the houses look torn to pieces. I was astonished at the extent of our lines and their strength.”

A shortage of ammunition plagued the American troops from the beginning of the war. In the Roxbury encampment American soldiers were instructed to collect any unexploded cannon balls the British shot towards them. One legend that comes to us from that time is that the American soldiers took a lead oval decorating the tomb of the Dudley family and used it to form bullets. Currently the Dudley table tomb has a brick base with a brownstone slab set upon it. There is a void in the shape of an oval on the brownstone slab. Photos from the 19th century show a thick piece of marble inscribed with the name “Dudley” set into this cut-out area. However in New England, marble was used in funerary monumentation mostly in the mid-19th century, with granite coming into fashion in the late-19th century. Also experience has shown that carved marble is not very durable in the New England climate. It is very likely that something else was set in this oval before the marble piece.

In the 1800s this part of Roxbury started seeing more industrial and business development. Many of the large farms that characterized this part of town were sold off and developed into lots. Industries such as distilleries, turpentine and lead factories and rope walks were established closest to the water. The population of the town started growing. In 1814 the town decided to initiate a search for a new plot of land upon which to build a new firehouse. The southeast corner of the burying ground, where a shed used as a hearse house stood, was suggested as an appropriate spot in April 1819 although no action was taken. In the same month a motion proposing to discontinue digging graves in the burying ground was voted down and another motion proposing to have the town take measures to build a tomb for municipal use was approved. Based on the outcome of these two votes and the fact that the fire station was not built until 1829, it would seem that Roxbury residents were reluctant to alter the usage of the old burying ground. Ten years later, in 1829, a new firehouse was finally built on burying ground land. The building...
was a two-story wooden structure measuring 16 feet along Eustis Street and 42 feet back into the burying ground. There was a small cellar under the rear part of the house. The building was paid for by contributions from the townspeople; the firemen performed the labor of building the house. In 1833 the town considered building another firehouse on the other edge of the burying ground, stating that “the Committee had not come to a decision without mature consideration....” However this second firehouse was built somewhere else for unknown reasons. In 1859 the wooden firehouse in the burying ground was replaced by a brick firehouse which cost $4,690. The old firehouse was sold and relocated several blocks away to be used as a residence. The previous building had a small cellar which was built over graves. This cellar was enlarged to a full-size basement and a large number of human remains were reportedly thrown out during the construction. Later a wooden horse stable was built in the rear of the building. Brick piers were placed under the stable in 1891.

In the early 1800s many towns began to question the desirability of urban burying grounds. People were concerned that urban burials were dangerous to public health. Additionally the old public burying grounds were not well maintained. After the founding of Mount Auburn Cemetery in 1831, many towns aspired to recreate similar cemeteries. The conception of what kind of landscape was appropriate for commemoration of the dead was evolving significantly. The town of Roxbury followed these trends.

Around 1842 a petition was submitted to the selectmen of Roxbury deploring the conditions in the town’s burying grounds, notably the lack of perimeter fences, absence of ornamental landscaping and the use of burying grounds for pasturage. A committee was established to investigate the complaints. The committee determined that since a public tax would have to be levied in order to pay for any repairs the perimeter fencing should be the responsibility of the town and ornamentation of the grounds should be undertaken by the descendants of those buried there. Subsequently the town of Roxbury paid to have a stone wall built in the rear of the site, completing the enclosure of the burying ground. Only several years later, in a seemingly contradictory move, Forest Hills Cemetery was established in 1848 by the town of Roxbury with the mission of providing of a beautiful, garden-like setting for townspeople to go to commemorate loved ones. In 1856 more improvements began at Eliot Burying Ground, taking place over several years: widening the intersection of Eustis and Washington Streets, which included taking a small section of land from the burying ground; building a Roxbury puddingstone wall along the street.
sides of the ground, including a new gate at the corner; repairing collapsed and dilapidated tombs; regrading of the site; and resetting of headstones.

As the active burials shifted to other cemeteries in the area, interest in Eliot Burying Ground as a historic site began to grow. A 1903 Cemetery Department Annual Report states that the site was open on Saturday and Sunday from June 1 to November 1 for visitation. That same year Eliot Burying Ground received a thorough restoration. According to the report:

Five artificial stone steps were constructed with buttresses on each side, and three landings from these steps were constructed. The ground was spaded up, fertilizer in quantity worked into the soil, and grass seed sown. Twenty trees were cut down, their roots taken up, and thirty-five trees were trimmed. In taking up the roots of the trees a dozen long-lost gravestones were uncovered. Leaning gravestones were righted, and the ground graded. A substantial fence of wood was placed on the southerly wall and a large catch-basin built on the south line.

A beautiful cast-iron fence was installed in 1905 on the new puddingstone wall. A photo from the 1920s shows that fence in good condition. This fence is no longer present, having been replaced by a plain steel picket fence. There is a good possibility that the ornamental fence was removed during the years of World War II. In 1942 the Boston Salvage Committee was formed within the Boston Public Works Department with the goal of collecting all salvageable material needed for military and essential civilian use. During that year a nationwide salvage drive took place and many cemetery fences were removed to use in the war effort.

Unfortunately conditions declined in Eliot Burying Ground from that point until the establishment of the Historic Burying Grounds Initiative (HBGI) within the Boston Parks and Recreation Department. The first major restoration project undertaken by this program was a $100,000 wall repair project in 1986. Since that time HBGI has accomplished over $500,000 worth of conservation and restoration work in this site. Some of the projects have included restoration of the front gate, installation of a steel picket fence in the rear of the site and several rounds of grave marker conservation. We are well poised to continue into the future, allowing the burying ground of the old Roxbury families to continue to tell its stories.
We are thrilled to have new neighbors in the old Torrent 6 firehouse! Historic Boston, Incorporated, completed their beautiful restoration of this building last year. The old engine house had become decrepit and was structurally unsound. Although the building was attractive and historically significant as the oldest surviving firehouse in Boston, the amount of work required to save this structure was so high that it was difficult to imagine anyone taking on this task! Luckily our new neighbors were dreaming big!

Historic Boston Incorporated (HBI) announced their plans to restore the firehouse in 2009. Before any “bricks and mortar” activities could begin, many other issues needed to be resolved. Since the new ell initially called for excavating into land that was originally part of the burying ground, archaeological research had to be undertaken in order to avoid the possibility of disturbing human remains. After much work and persistence on their part, including design alterations and many delays, HBI started construction in 2010 and completed the renovation in 2011, moving their offices into the building that summer.

Senior Project Manager Lisa Lewis, who was in charge of the project, says: “Rehabilitating the Eustis Street Fire House was challenging on many fronts. The structural condition was precarious after many years of deferred maintenance, and excavating for a foundation in a historic burying ground was tricky to say the least. But it was all worth the effort, and we love the views of the Eliot Burying Ground – a beautiful oasis that will always be there.”
In addition to restoration of the brick building, a small ell was placed on the rear of the structure. This addition occupies the area that was taken up by the horse stable used by the fire station. The entrance to the second floor offices is through this ell. A charming ornamental fence by artist John Tagiuri runs along the brick path to the entrance. This fence depicts firemen dashing off to battle a blaze with a Hunneman firefighting machine similar to what was used by the original fire company. The artist even incorporated the firehouse dog seen in the photo on page ten into the design. The North Bennet Street School helped restore or rebuild wooden features on the house such as the window frames and the cornices. The renovated firehouse contributes significantly to the neighborhood and in particular to the burying ground. We would like to publicly doff our hats to HBI and the magnificent results they achieved with this project. In addition to beautifying the neighborhood, HBI is also partnering with HBGI to enhance access to the site as well as to help with other site-related issues. We are looking forward to working with our new neighbors.

We would also like to acknowledge some of our lesser known neighbors, like this red tailed hawk. One day while checking on the progress of the tomb conservation project, I noticed this handsome bird eating a pigeon. He punctuated his meal with a number of high-pitched screeches. Perhaps he was not happy that I was observing him at close range. I watched him finish his meal and then fly away. Following his departure I checked to see if anything was left. Other than a few downy feathers, everything was devoured. Staff members at HBI confirm seeing hawks regularly in the trees in the site (although some trees were recently removed due to damage from Hurricane Irene). Hawks are quite common in larger cemeteries. We hope they will continue to visit us at Eliot Burying Ground.

**Sites included in the Historic Burying Grounds Initiative**

- Bennington Street Cemetery (1838)
- Bunker Hill Burying Ground (1816)
- Central Burying Ground (1754)
- Copp’s Hill Burying Ground (1659)
- Dorchester North Burying Ground (1633)
- Dorchester South Burying Ground (1810)
- Eliot Burying Ground (1630)
- Granary Burying Ground (1660)
- Hawes Burying Ground (1816)
- King’s Chapel Burying Ground (1630)
- Market Street Burying Ground (1764)
- Phipps Street Burying Ground (1630)
- South End Burying Ground (1810)
- Union Cemetery (1841)
- Waite Street Burying Ground (1711)
- Westerly Burying Ground (1683)