

## Wright Cemetery

### Description

#### Introduction

The landscape layout, appearance and gravestone art of the Wright Cemetery derive from design characteristics of the pre-industrial burial grounds. These characteristics consist mainly of the slate markers and the utilitarian, formerly agricultural landscape. The burial ground was owned until the 20th century by one of the many nearby farm families named Wright. In 1909, the town Cemetery Commissioners suggested the private cemetery be cared for by the town as were Fairview, Westlawn and Hillside Cemeteries. The parcel of land including the cemetery was later given to the town. Cemetery occupants influenced the town's history and appearance and continue to do so by virtue of their artfully carved gravestones. War veterans, mill operatives, farmers and business people occupy the approximately 150 visible historic burials.

Markers are made mostly from slate as well as from other materials. The earliest gravestones are from the Federal Period and appear in the form of shouldered-arched and flat-topped stelae (rectangular or arched tablets or slabs), the largest of which belongs to Lieutenant Nahum Wight. (Note: There are occupants named both Wight and Wright.) Monuments from the Victorian Period take the form of an obelisk and carved marble stelae. Slate continued to be used until 1854 although marble and granite were becoming more common at that time. Grave markers are mostly arranged in rows oriented east to west with inscriptions on older stones typically facing south.

#### Landscape

Land comprising the Wright Cemetery belonged in 1836 to Bela Wright who was granted, with some neighbors, permission by the town to keep a burial ground. The appearance at the time was likely that of a field of grass with a few small slate gravestones. The nearly square, flat, grass-covered parcel is located along the north side of a straight segment of Groton Road (State Route 40).

Boundaries of the cemetery are lined on the north, east and west with a fence four feet in height consisting of granite posts and 4"x4" rails. The Groton Road (south) boundary has a two- to four-foot high mortared fieldstone wall with split granite capstone. Entrance to the cemetery is thorough an opening in the wall at about the mid-point where a pair of stout, low granite posts support a wooden gate. Pedestrian access is through gaps beside the gate and secondary granite post. A modern flagpole occupies a site just inside the east entry. Historic burials occupy approximately ½ acre while the remaining four acres of reserve ground are in an undeveloped farm field outside the historic granite post and wood rail fence. Granite elements may have been quarried locally given the prominence of that industry in the north part of town.

Plot definition occurs in three instances with simple granite curbs. The most pronounced is approximately 24 inches in height and encompasses the Albion Wright family plot. Steps to access the plot are flanked by low pyramidal piers which also mark the corners of the plot. Other plot-defining curbs lack corner piers and rise only slightly above ground level. Curbs enclose square and rectangular plots of from eight to twenty feet per side.

#### Markers

The Wright Cemetery reflects trends in gravestone development in its variety of slate, marble and granite markers. Slate and marble are the oldest surviving materials used for marking burials. Slate is frequently carved in shouldered arches that range in height from one foot to approximately five feet. They can demonstrate a relatively crude, hand cut appearance, a well-designed and possibly machine cut sharpness and several levels of workmanship in between. Quality of workmanship of the slate marker is sometimes obscured by the fact that the stone has deteriorated or been broken. Inscriptions also vary in quality and detail. The simplest have fine, narrow letters with little relief or depth. Later slate stones from the 19th century are more likely to demonstrate clear, deep, stylized letters with a pronounced serif, well thought out organization relative to the shape of the stone, and a tooled finish to set off the inscription panel, ornament and banding at the edge of the stone.

Slate markers from the earliest period appear in a variety of shapes. Many are rectangular with an arched top, which may be representative of the figurative portal between life and death. The shape is also considered an abstraction of the human head and shoulders. This form of marking the passage from life is a Puritan concept brought from Boston and elsewhere during the region's period of first settlement and endured in to the early 19th century. Eighteen slate markers exist in Wright Cemetery and have dates from 1819 to 1854. Miss Sally Stevens (d. 1848 at 43 years of age) has a typical shouldered arch-topped slate marker. It is inscribed with urn and willow motif above a central oval panel for inscription of her name and dates. Flanking the inscription are classical columns of the Doric order. This was the work of B. Day, gravestone carver from Lowell, Massachusetts.

Prior to the Federal Period, the event of death was considered a common reality whose dim portent reflected the stern view of life as a struggle for survival. Subsequently, New Englanders' view of death adopted a sentimental quality that spoke more of the emotional state of those left behind than of the journey of the deceased, causing the replacement of darkly spiritual carvings with abstract sorrowful imagery. Urn and willow designs begin to appear on gravestones in the late 18th century and are based on classical influences exerted by the spreading glow of the Enlightenment. Both slate and marble markers exhibit this late 18th and early 19th century motif that is an icon of sorrow and grief. A highly ornamented slate marker is that of Lucy Osgood from 1854. The arched top is decorated with an urn and willow motif carved with a high level of detail including the oval background that has a hatched or tooled finish. The use of classically inspired columns in gravestone design, frequently of the Doric order, is evidence of the pervasive influence of classical imagery popularized by the Enlightenment. The stone of Nahum Wight has a design similar to Lucy Osgood's and includes Doric columns beside the inscription panel as well as tooled finish and geometric rounds, symbols of the eternal nature of death.

Additional marker types in the form of an obelisk, Gothic designs and marble tablets with biblical and classical symbolism appeared during the Victorian Period. The single obelisk in Wright Cemetery is carved from gray granite and commemorates the lives of Joel Wright (1782-1834) and his wife Sally (d. 1869 at 79 years of age). This is the cemetery's tallest marker at around 10 feet. Gothic themes are carved into some markers, including the pointed arched stone of Mary Wright who died in 1871 at the age of 21. Her marker has a recessed circle with inscribed flowers. Beside her grave is a small slant marker inscribed with the word "baby", a common Victorian marker for those who died very young.

Marble markers from the mid 19th century are usually rectangular with a flat top but sometimes have a cambered (segmental arched) or pointed top. Asa (d. 1877 at 78 years of age) and Bathsheba Wright (d. 1869 at 68 years of age) have matching marble stelae with cambered tops. These three-foot high stones, which have edges set off by moldings, pendants and chamfers, are set on plinths and pedestals. Other marble tablets have tops articulated by a gradually sloping point that were erected in the mid 19th century. For example, Abbie M. Edes (d. 1859 at 15 years of age) and her relative Elvira (d. 1876) have this type of stone as does Nathan Wright who died in 1846 at 57 years of age.

20th century military stones exist in the Wright Cemetery. A small rectangular bronze marker mounted flush with the ground marks the resting place of Albert Picking (1915-1994) who served in the U. S. Army as a sergeant in World War II.

## Carvers

Gravestones in the Wright Cemetery bear some identifying inscriptions by their carvers. B. Day is by far the most frequent name, appearing in around six instances. Markers for Sally Stevens (1848), Abigail Wight (1850), Nathan Wright (1846), Walter Wright (1830) and Abigail Wright (1835) were carved by Mr. Day. He worked in Lowell and craved gravestones now in cemeteries in many surrounding communities. Carvers T. Warren and D. Nichols, both of Lowell, carved the marble pointed arched stelae of Caleb Wight and Hannah Ryan from 1864 and 1863. A. Sawtell of Groton carried out the shouldered arch form with urn and willow design on Lucy Osgood's slate marker from 1856. The Lowell shop of Andrews and Wheeler has one stone to its credit in the Wright Cemetery.

Existing Conditions

Repairs have been carried out in the cemetery on a regular basis since the 19th century, altering only slightly the appearance from its Federal Period beginnings. Slate stones are particularly susceptible to cracking and toppling given the weak structural nature of the material. Several different methods have been used to stabilize markers. There are some which have been re-set in concrete footings poured at ground level. Others have been re-attached at severed points with metal braces and bolts or cemented or glued across fractures. Both these measures were taken in order to conserve the 1846 marble marker for Nathan Wright. Most stones remain in good to excellent condition. Some slate markers are difficult to read due to erosion. While very little vandalism appears to have taken place, damage has been sustained in many cases due to scraping by lawn-mowing equipment. Few ornamental plantings remain from past landscaping efforts.

Aside from routine maintenance, repairs and some deterioration over time, few changes have occurred in the Wright Cemetery. While records do not indicate as much, it is possible that, since few remain, footstones were removed as part of past efforts to tidy the grounds. However, the large number of remaining 19th century markers makes it possible to get a clear sense of historical burial and gravestone carving techniques in Westford.

### ***Statement of Significance***

The Wright Cemetery retains integrity of materials, design, workmanship, feeling and association. It is eligible for the National Register under Criteria A and C at the local level and meets Criterion Consideration D as a cemetery which derives its significance from distinctive design features and association with historic events. The cemetery is significant under Criterion A for its association with historical events in the community such as service in the Revolutionary War and establishment of family burial grounds during the early 19th century. It is eligible under Criterion C as an example of a burial ground containing gravestone carving representative of techniques commonly used in the period. The period of significance for the cemetery begins at its establishment in 1819 and extends to 1952. It has been in continuous use.

### **Introduction**

Westford's Wright Cemetery first came into use around 1819, which is the time of the earliest death date on a gravestone. The town of Westford granted the privilege of a burying ground on Groton Road (then called the North Road) in 1836. Approximately two dozen stones survive from the first half of the 19th century. Gravestone ornament at the time was restrained and the surrounding landscape was allowed to appear as a grassy plot marked by slate headstones. The most basic of maintenance schedules has allowed the cemetery to retain much of its historic appearance by virtue of the densely grouped slate markers near the road, the small scale of markers and the simple landscape unencumbered by modern paths and furniture. Burials are ongoing in the Wright Cemetery.

The Wright Cemetery was the fourth of the town's historic cemeteries to be established. Westford's earliest cemetery was originally called the East Burying Ground and is now called Fairview Cemetery. This is on Main Street east of the town center and came into use around the turn of the 18th century. The second burial ground was the former North Burial Ground established in 1753, now called Hillside and located at the corner of Depot and Nutting Roads. The West Burial Ground or Westlawn was established in 1761 on Concord Road at Country Road. Nearly all of those interred here belonged to the First Parish Church until 1829, the time of the founding of the Congregational Church.

### **1819-1900**

The Wright Cemetery occupies land that had been in use in the 18th century as farmland belonging to one branch of the large Wright Family. Among the founders of the cemetery was an area resident named Bela Wright to whom, in 1836, the town voted to grant "the privilege of a burying ground on the North Road, between Caleb Wight's and Reuben Wright's, which is to be free of expense to the town."

Records from an early meeting of Wright Burying Ground proprietors held on June 3, 1837 and recorded in the Records of the Proprietors of the Wright Burying Ground indicate the full list of founding residents as follows: Caleb Wight, Horatio Wright, Bela Wright, Walter Wright, Martin Wright, Asa Wright, Benjamin L. Wright, Jesse

L. Wright and Joel A. Wright. Votes were taken at the meeting to name Caleb Wight as moderator and Jesse Wright as clerk. Caleb Wight was determined to have care of the burying ground. A single lot was voted to be kept for burials of strangers. Caleb Wight was chosen as agent to sell lots.

There are eight gravestones with dates prior to the privilege granted by the town. These include Lieut. Nahum Wight (d. 1834 at 89 years of age), Abijah Wright (d. 1834 at 54 years of age), his wife Mary (d. 1831 at 55 years of age), Ellen Wright (d. 1830 at 28 years of age) and her children Francis and Henry who both died at less than one year of age in 1827 and 1828. Also, a single rectangular stele exists for two brothers, Jotham and Edmund Wright, whose deaths occurred in 1828 and 1819. However, this stone may be a cenotaph (a stone commemorating the death of a person interred elsewhere) since the Wright Brothers died in Dayton, (spelled Daton) Ohio and Mobile, Alabama. Jotham was a graduate of Harvard College in 1817. Other burials whose markers do not survive may also have occurred before the official establishment of the Wright Cemetery.

Gravestones from the first half of the 1800s are typically located very close together. Family members tend to be adjacent to one another, frequently aligned in the order in which they died. No segregation based on ethnicity, occupation, military service or wealth is apparent. Most stones are around the same size, two to four feet high by one to three feet wide. Maintenance of the burial ground during this period was presumably the responsibility of a Wright family member.

Nineteenth century residents of Westford who are buried in the Wright Cemetery consist mostly of farmers, several of whom were military veterans. Cemetery founder Bela Wright (d. 1859 at 62 years of age) worked as a farmer and lived 1/2 mile to the south on the current North Main Street. He also served in the War of 1812 according to notes to that effect printed in the 1896 Town Report. His relative Asa Wright (d. 1877 at 78 years of age) was also a farmer but lived in the village of Westford Center. His death was brought about by a suicide drowning according to the historian Marilyn Day in her 1998 book *Westford Days*. Parker Wright (b. 1791) was another occupant of the burial ground to have served in the War of 1812.

Lieut. Nahum Wight was born in Medfield, Massachusetts and served in the Revolutionary War. Lieut. Wight (also spelled White in Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War) served as a corporal under Captain Benjamin Bullard from Sherborn and marched on Concord in April 1775. He also served in the Continental Army at Fort Ticonderoga, among other campaigns. After living most of his life in Medfield and Sherborn, he moved to Westford, possibly to be near his son Caleb and his family. Nahum is buried next to his wife Abigail (d. 1850 at 90 years of age). Caleb Wight (d. 1864 at 77 years of age) lived in Westford Center, worked as a farmer and served as a deacon, probably in the Union Congregational Church, of which both he and his parents were founding members in 1828. Caleb Wight also served in the War of 1812. Mr. Wight is buried next to his wife Mary (d. 1869 at 80 years of age) and daughters Joanna (d. 1837 at age 24) who died at Plymouth, Michigan, Harriet (d. 1854 at age 37), Lucy Osgood (1821-1856) and Caroline (1819-1882).

The largest grave marker in the Wright Cemetery is that of Joel Wright (1782-1834) and his wife Sally (d. 1869 at 79 years of age). The grey granite obelisk is approximately 10' high. Mr. Wright served in the War of 1812 at Boston's Fort Warren under Lieut. Col. Jonathan Page. Approximately 100 markers from the period exist in the cemetery.

During the mid 19th century, the Burial ground had a white picket fence at its edge. The Records of the Proprietors of the Wright Burying Ground, kept from the time of the founding of the burial ground has a small number of sporadic entries thereafter. One entry indicates Ansil Davis was paid \$7 for whitewashing the fence in 1847.

## **1900-1960**

During the 19th century, the Wright Cemetery was privately owned and maintained. This is in distinction to the East (now Fairview) West (now Westlawn) and North (now Hillside) Cemeteries, which since at least 1840 had received care by a neighbor at the expense of the town. In 1909, the Cemetery Commissioners noted in the town report that "Parties interested in the private cemetery called the Wright Cemetery at the north part of the town have expressed a wish that the town assume the care. Your commissioners recommend it be done". No caretaker is specified in town reports for the Wright Cemetery, as was done for other cemeteries, until the middle of the 20th

century. However, military veterans in the cemetery did receive commemorative markers at the expense of the town starting around 1909. Since scant mention is made in public records, it is difficult to determine the date of construction for the ashlar granite wall that separates the cemetery from the road or names of those who may have built it. This is also true of the granite post and wood rail fence surrounding the cemetery.

World War II veterans are buried in the Wright Cemetery, at least one of which has a military marker. Albert H. Picking (1915-1994) served in World War II and is buried under an arched granite slab. His military service is as a sergeant in the Army is remembered by an adjacent bronze tablet mounted flush with the ground. He is buried with his wife Bernice Picking (1915-1996). Mrs. Picking lived her entire life at the farm ¼ mile to the west of the Wright Cemetery.

Interments continued throughout the period with granite being the gravestone material of choice. The 1937 town report includes a sample contract for purchase of burial plots that indicates no walls, fences, curbs or projecting corner posts were allowed, probably to simplify maintenance. This regulation, instituted by the Cemetery Commission, served to stem the installation of new ornament in cemeteries and to encourage removal of furnishings that may have been installed in the Victorian Period, although no such activity is documented. Sebastian Watson, Fred Blodget and Axel Lundberg served the town as cemetery commissioners from at least 1937 though 1949. Town employees performed work at the cemetery in 1960 that included painting and repairing the fence, cutting brush and planting new shrubs. Few ornamental plantings remain.

## **Conclusion**

Colonial, Federal and Victorian period historical associations of the Wright Cemetery are largely intact despite interruptions by the small number of modern markers and the smaller amount of documentation compared to the town's other cemeteries. The possibility remains, by observing the rows of arch-topped slate stones carved with urn and willow designs, classical columns, and by recalling names so important to the development of the community, to get a strong sense of how 19th century residents of the Town of Westford experienced their burial places.

A diseased elm tree was cut down in 1963. The existing gate was installed with original hinges and nails in 1975 during the Bicentennial period when all of Westford's cemeteries were recognized as important resources for the historical appearance they retained and for the accomplishments of the Westford residents interred there. The stone in the wall with the inscribed name was given to the town by Carl Wright in 1977.

## ***Geographical Data***

### **Verbal Boundary Description:**

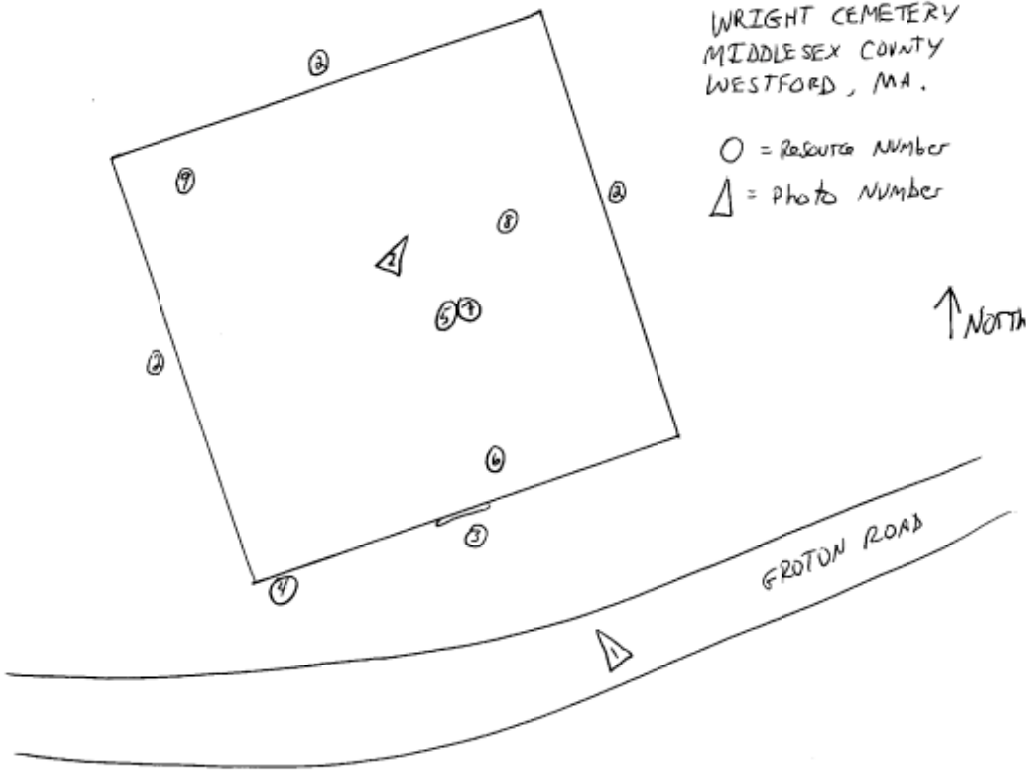
Wright Cemetery comprises all of the land within the boundaries of the cemetery. It is bounded by Groton Road on the south. The cemetery encompasses 4.5 acres, described by the assessor's office as parcel 5 on map 35.

### **Boundary Justification:**

Boundaries of the cemetery were determined by the Westford Historical Commission and by the consultant. Boundaries include all gravestones, burial-related buildings, structures, circulation paths and ornamental plantings. Stone walls encircle the cemetery and mark all boundaries.

## **SKETCH MAP**

**NORTH TOWARD TOP**



SKETCH MAP

NORTH TOWARD TOP



SKETCH MAP

NORTH TOWARD TOP

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