

Travel

Stones and Bones of New England: A Guide to Unusual, Historic, and Otherwise Notable Cemeteries

Lisa Rogak

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For those who can think of nothing better to do on a free afternoon than wander in the local cemetery, travel offers all kinds of possibilities for funerary discovery. There's the chance for an impromptu picnic among the gravestones in a new city, or the attractive proposition of learning about a town's history by reading about its citizens' lives as depicted on their gravestones. For the true cemetery nut, there are trips planned entirely around noted graveyards.

The author certainly falls into this latter category. A self-professed tapophile, or cemetery lover, and author of a number of previous books, Rogak has compiled a tempting list of graveyards and graves, perfect for a Sunday drive or a longer excursion.

The sites are organized by state, and Rogak has a good eye for the human stories that make visiting cemeteries such a compelling pastime. There are the "celebrity stones"—P.T. Barnum in Bridgeport, Connecticut; Edie Sedgwick and Norman Rockwell in Stockbridge, Massachusetts; and Anaïs Nin and H.P. Lovecraft in Providence, Rhode Island.

She also collects catchy epitaphs, as in this Glastonbury, Connecticut stone: "Here lies one whose life threads Cut asunder /, she was stricke dead / By a clap of thunder." Or this evocative epitaph from Pelham, Massachusetts: "Think my friends when this you see / How my wife hath dealt by me / She in some oysters did prepare / Some poison for my lot and share; / When of the same I did partake / And nature yielded to its fate / Before she my wife became / Mary Felton was her name."

One of the best is this punny Nantucket epitaph: "Under the sod / Under the trees / Lies the body of Jonathan Pease / He is not here / But only his pod / He has shelled out his peas / And gone to his God."

The stones that Rogak highlights provide a nice timeline of American history. Readers can go visit the grave of Mary Allerton Cushman, the oldest living Mayflower passenger, who

died at the age of eighty-three and is buried in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Or spend an afternoon contemplating the Prince Whipple grave marker. Whipple was an African-American who served in the Revolutionary War and is the only person of color in the famous painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware.” His grave marker is in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Rogak has done admirable historical research and one of the pleasures of the book is reading the historical anecdotes about the people buried beneath the featured stones. In Bangor, Maine, you can visit the grave of Joseph Peavey, who invented a logging device-now called a peavey-that allowed loggers to separate logjams as the huge logs floated downriver. Rogak gives readers a nice history of Bangor and of the importance of logging to the community. You can see Joseph Peavey’s stone, complete with a carving of his invention, at the Mount Hope Cemetery.

What the guide lacks, however, is a sense of how stone carving in the United States has evolved and some information about the carving styles and iconography of gravestones. For the dedicated tapophile, tracing the work of particular stone carvers or noting the evolving iconography on American stones is a large part of the pleasure of cemetery-going. Early stones that feature macabre images of skulls and crossbones, or winged hourglasses denoting the passage of time, reflected the Puritan society’s preoccupation with death.

Many later Victorian stones feature idealized floral iconography, reflecting that society’s preoccupation with a more gauzy, sentimental version of the afterlife. Putting some of the highlighted stones and cemeteries in the context of social history and art history would have offered the reader a look at the place of burying grounds in our national life.

But that’s a small quibble with a whimsical and humorous guide to New England cemeteries. Rogak has collected some of the best in the region and at these resting places of the dead, the living may find humor, inspiration, and contemplation.

Sarah Stewart Taylor