



FIG. 1. WAUGH HEADSTONE, LANGTON, ENGLAND, 1620
Courtesy of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

Gravestone Carving and Artistic Intent in Essex County

By STEPHEN C. FOSTER

NEW ENGLAND gravestones have been discussed by both early (Norris)¹ and contemporary scholars (Ludwig)² as reflections of two major stylistic categories. The first of these categories includes English provincial work centering around Boston, and the second comprises a number of regional variations on this type. Although the earliest authors tended to ignore regionalism (Forbes),³ it is precisely upon these variations that certain recent scholarship confers the most symbolic and intentional significance.⁴ Furthermore, this literature views provincial and rural developments as products of essentially different processes.⁵

I wish to discuss the regional type, begun in the late seventeenth century in Essex County, Massachusetts, as an example of the second category of carving. My position is that this type, like the more obviously provincial Boston stones, is also essentially provincial, only further removed from normative English practice.

Recent literature crediting American folk carvers with sophisticated symbolic intent came as a surprise to me and, in my opinion, requires further examination. It seems that the notion which regards vernacular traditions of art as expressions of positive artistic spirit is still popular. My purpose here is to reassert that there is, indeed, degraded art which exhibits more confusion than symbolism and little, if any, "artistic" intent. I then wish to isolate certain aspects of Essex County stones which are descriptive of

this condition. As criteria for reassessing early New England carving, I would suggest re-examining the origins and passage of individual motifs from Europe to America and the subsequent nature and instrumentality of the change in a sequential context.

The differences in the two historical positions seem to focus on more than just the recognition of the derivative status of the stones, even if one accepts the term "provincial" as adequate for them. More importantly, the position taken on this issue depends on what, for any particular scholar, "provincialism" entails as "artistic" consequence.

I

The origin of rural American decorative and symbolic devices and their passage from Europe to America has been the object of a surprisingly intense inquiry by recent investigators. Ludwig, in the most complete treatment of New England gravestones to date, summarized his position as follows:

The first group of stones with symbolic consequences appeared after ca. 1678 in Greater Boston and after 1668 in Haverhill, Massachusetts. Both developments were distinct iconographically and stylistically. The former was based on provincial Baroque formulas and conventional mortality emblems derived from English sources, and the latter was concerned with the ornamental style and symbols of the soul in heaven.⁶

Ludwig also suggests that "we may be dealing with two distinct religious cultures which, as we would naturally sus-

pect, reveal themselves in different forms.”⁷

Concerning the first proposition, there can be little doubt about his derivation of provincial work. “The stones which became popular in Greater Boston were composed around a central image of a winged death’s head derived from English funeral broadsides common since Elizabethan times.”⁸ Other suggested sources include book front-plates, primers, illustrated sermons, and, somewhat later, emblem books. None of these sources begs objection and would seem to be supported by substantial evidence. Graham has proposed similar sources for English developments away from artistic centers. On the other hand, much of the evidence presented by Ludwig suggesting symbol making and stylistic intent for rural developments may be more apparent than real. There is reason to doubt whether the carver possessed the technical skill or conceptual sophistication to implement a vocabulary of artistic intentions, even presuming that he had some. The evidence seems to suggest not two religious cultures but one, which materialized in provincial art in and around Boston and which barely materialized at all in rural areas.

Addressing the origins of American rural ornamental styles, Ludwig suggests that such a tradition was not totally lacking in England. As examples, he cites the Pimble and Colley stones (Plates 12 and 13 in Ludwig). As possible prototypes for this European style, he mentions Anglo-Saxon survivals or a lost tradition of ornamental carving (possibly suppressed with the advance of the Baroque). Also considered is the possibility that such stones represent local eccentricities.⁹ The improbability of the first suggestion has been discussed by

Graham.¹⁰ The second possibility—that of a larger (now lost) ornamental tradition—may be more tenable, but the widespread use of Renaissance and Baroque stylisms on interior monuments makes this seem unlikely. It is more probable that isolated developments by untutored carvers evolved along the same lines as those found in Essex County, but experienced a less radical drift and lasted for shorter durations. The carvers of interior monuments, usually more sophisticated than those working in the churchyard, were always present as admonishments to such eccentricities.¹¹

The use of the six-pointed rosette on English stones has invited speculation in this regard. The motif appears on Romano-British stele and occasionally on Celtic stones, but the scarcity of later examples suggests there was no continuous tradition of its use. “Were there more of these stones it could be believed that the New England use of these forms owes something to 17th-century English precedent.”¹² Ludwig rightly notes the improbability of such singular examples sparking a whole tradition of its use in America and concludes that the rosette was more likely part of a larger ornamental tradition brought to America before its disappearance in England.

Referring to the rural American ornamental tradition, Forbes, in a much less recent opinion, said the following about the work of Jonathan Worster of Essex County:

He seems to have been a man of one pattern—a pattern which he inherited from the grave-stone carvers of Essex County, and they in turn, from the Romans of two thousand years ago. In York, England, there is a Roman sarcophagus which shows the same geometric rounds which Jonathan Worster and his forebears considered appropriate for the dead.¹³



FIG. 2. EBENEZER AYER, HAVERHILL, MASS., 1695



FIG. 3. MARY HART, IPSWICH, MASS., 1689



FIG. 4. AMERICAN CHEST, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Bequest of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1910.



FIG. 5. JOHN WILLARD, HARVARD, MASS., 1739

That the citation of one monument dating from centuries earlier is wholly inadequate evidence hardly need be said. Moreover, no mention is made of how this supposed trans-Atlantic diffusion could have been effected.

Although my own opinion on the origin of Essex County carving shares certain aspects of these positions, I wish to offer what seems to be a more realistic solution. Contrary to Ludwig, I cannot believe that the John White stone from Haverhill, Massachusetts, 1668 (Frontispiece), is free of European prototypes with regard to the figure depicted in the lunette and believe, rather, that it can be directly referred to earlier monuments in England such as the Waugh headstone from 1620. (Fig. 1.) This stone shares some of the same slurring and misunderstanding as observed in the White stone and in the Ayer stone, also from Haverhill, 1695 (Fig. 2), and in many others from before the turn of the century. Even more extreme confusion appears in the figures and decoration of such markers as the Mary Hart stone, Ipswich, 1689 (Fig. 3), giving evidence to establish that as in the case of certain English stones no corrective models were present to prevent even further degeneracy. The general configuration of the Essex County stones seems as easily accounted; that is, by referral to antecedent practices.

The appearance of purely decorative motifs, however, especially the variety of rosettes, seems to represent a different tradition. I wish to suggest that for associational reasons, the lunette figure and the shape of the stone were vaguely adapted from Baroque gravestones, while the decorative motifs were taken from more familiar, intimate objects—namely furniture and other household

artifacts, already staples in the material culture of the New England Puritan. The importance of the portability of such prototypes for subsequent design is discussed by Louis B. Wright, who points out that New Amsterdam, for example, enjoyed greater achievement in painting than other colonies precisely because the practice of this genre was based on collections (sometimes sizable) in the colony itself.¹⁴

It is well known that the colonist came to America meagerly equipped. Articles brought to the new settlements were primarily household effects. Even among these, only the basic items appear—tables, chairs, chests, racks, and the like. Cescinsky notes that it is among these that one would find copies of English models if such a thing existed. Furthermore, “they would be the work of the carpenter and not the cabinet or chair maker.”¹⁵

... the trade of the English maker is divided in quite a distinct manner. Thus, in Great Britain are found the cabinet-maker, the chair-maker, and the wood carver, all separate trades. None of these three would have been among the early emigrants, as they were not among the “general utility” men. It is the carpenter and the joiner who would be the most useful in the early American settlement, and there is no doubt that it was from the ranks of those men that the first settlers were culled.¹⁶

Throughout the sixteenth century, the maker of household furniture was called an arkwright and enjoyed much less prestige than a joiner whose main tasks included working roof beams, screens, pulpits, choir stalls, etc. Cescinsky and Gribble trace this division back to the thirteenth century and maintain that it was not until the sixteenth century or later that the distinction between the two skills was dropped.¹⁷ This fusion generally coincided with the incorporation of

Renaissance influences which occurred after the monastic suppression by Henry VIII in 1525. This event dispersed the centers of Gothic art and enabled carvers to follow the lead of Italy, Flanders, and France.¹⁸

By contrast, the rural and untutored carver from the lower classes made no such advances and retained the Gothic idioms.

In constructive skills this post-dissolution Gothic is far behind the Renaissance work of the same period. Doors are mere pierced slabs of wood; not framed and mortised in the skilled manner of the carpenter. To this date belong the chip-carved chests where the design is patterned with the divider and chisled with the gouge. Occasionally Renaissance motifs such as heads enclosed in circular cartouches or similar crude ornament is attempted, but with dubious success.¹⁹

The persistence of the Gothic influence appears to have been common well into the seventeenth century. Cescinsky remarks that Gothic motifs remain favorites, possibly because they are easily remembered and as easily carved.²⁰

While not plentiful, examples of woodworking in America which demonstrate links with late English Gothic development are sufficiently adequate to illustrate the present purposes. The most direct evidence is seen in the chests, boxes, and racks, which are frequently decorated with motifs directly traceable to English models. The example illustrated here is from the seventeenth century. (Fig. 4.) A comparative typology of rosettes from English furniture, early American furniture and household items, and Essex County gravestones clearly demonstrates their communality. Cescinsky and Hunter propose that it was between 1640 and 1700 that English types were copied most closely in New England "due allowances being made

for want of facilities and trade traditions."²¹ It is precisely from this period that the examples in the proposed typology would be drawn. That rosettes did not enjoy such popularity in the Boston area is not surprising in view of the different patronage base and artistic expectations which I have discussed at greater length elsewhere.²²

II

If a true picture is to be formed from these developments in rural carving, some differentiation must be made between what I shall call the unit motif and the imagery of the stones as a whole. It has already been suggested that the ornamental motifs were drawn from a common stock of folk crafts which was shared by most of Europe, whereas the shape of the stone and the effigy figure stem more directly from examples in the high cultures. Such a fact tells us much about the intention, degree of sophistication, and general disposition of the Puritan carver.

However conceptually unsophisticated the Puritan carver and his client were, they recognized that a gravestone was more than a mere receptacle for ornamentation. The stone also carried the function of commemorating the dead. The importance of the Christian associations and content, in a very general sense, hardly can be over stressed, but it appears to have had severe limitations in its material expression because of the lack of proper artistic skills. A good deal of sanctimony attended death for the Puritan, and certain elements of gravestones persisted more or less strictly as expressions of this function. The elements most obviously associated with this function would seem to be the effigy figure and the general configuration of the stone,

and, accordingly, one might expect these traits to exhibit the most conservative change. The ornamental motifs employed for purely decorative purposes would appear to allow the carver freedom to innovate and elaborate. Such a simple explanation, however, does not satisfy the facts. While both the shape of the stone and the effigy figure are important elements, the effigy is the most difficult to carve. Furthermore, the effigy figure is not part of more familiar decorative motifs, a fact involving two consequences. Carvers were not as familiar with the motif and its iconographic significance, nor were these motifs part of their everyday material culture.

Decorative motifs have no special significance for Puritan death and burial, but they do occupy a place in Puritan material culture and provide the carver with suitable models. While these models are in another medium, a fact that prevents expert carving in the early stages, these motifs are the first to be perfected. The presence of models would have provided a check against drift as well as improving technique. There is naturally less chance for misreading and slurring in these decorative, rather simple motifs.

One curious result is that the effigy figure retains its function while it loses specific meaning. Any sanctity is located in the concept "gravestone," and the maintenance of the central location of the effigy motif bears witness to this, but such a concept is extended to an actual stone motif only with difficulty. Lack of technical skill and iconographic knowledge greatly increases that difficulty. The location of the effigy can be (and is) preserved, while its specific pictorial attributes are subject to drift.

The purely decorative aspects of the stones retain their less elevated function.

The fixity of these motifs, however, is enforced by traditions in other media (for example, metal and wood) which were being produced simultaneously with the gravestones (perhaps by the same artists).

The John White stone generally conforms to the shape of its English prototypes, employing a typical (if somewhat debased) effigy figure and correctly using the resurrection symbol. The decorative motifs belong to the folk inventory of forms discussed previously and are also crudely carved. In the Mary Hart stone the effigy head has acquired hair and lost its wings. The hair may suggest some new and purposeful meaning, but the general confusion of the design indicates that this is unlikely. In this stone it must be remarked that the carving is so early that even the decorative motifs are carved unskillfully. In the Ebenezer Ayer stone the effigy motif has lost most of the positive attributes of the original winged motif while the decorative features subscribe to the traditional type. Nonetheless, the effigy still is the sanctified part of the stone and maintains its central position. A further development of this drift can be seen in the Sarah Baker stone, Ipswich, 1722, an early appearance of the developed hair type, where again the decorative motifs conform to the traditional type while the effigy continues to drift. An interesting comparison can be made between the Baker stone and the earlier Thomas Hart stone, Ipswich, 1673, which exhibits a flanking bird motif. In both examples, the effigy has acquired a slightly new content while fulfilling the same function as the figure on the White stone. Their difference lies in the possibility that the Hart stone takes its prototype, in terms of content, from an already entrenched

decorative device whereas no precedent exists for the Baker type. While this may not change the more basic function of the stones bearing these birds, the presence of prototypes in the material culture offers a tentative explanation for the unusual contemporary fixity and quality of carving found in this Ipswich type, even in the early stages of the sequence. Whether the birds flanking the head may have been given over to a decorative function, purely and simply, or whether they still operated within the context of associations attending the usual effigy head is difficult to say.

This simultaneous dissolution of a motif and maintainance of its function cannot be safely read as an intentional heightening of the image's meaning. That such a thing does occur in an environment of sophisticated "artistic" notions is clear from twentieth-century primitivism, but early Essex County carvers had neither a sophisticated aesthetic nor the skills necessary to facilitate intentional problem solving. Evidence which seems to substantiate this claim includes the following. First, the class of decorative motifs which derived from models did not experience drastic change. If it is claimed that the functional part of the monument was most important, and that the change here represented a reaction against English norms, one is faced with the question of why the school system and other cultural institutions remained closely based on English models. It seems significant in this respect that puritan letters were very sophisticated, a fact suggesting that educators were better able to follow English types. There is no indication in the letters or diaries of these carvers to suggest that they were even aware of a tradition to react against. Second, parallel cases can be drawn from

England which exhibit changes from a comparatively naturalistic prophet's head to a death's head.²³ The change occurred at about the beginning of the eighteenth century, a time when most symbolic motifs were changing from death's heads to resurrection symbols. This last fact strongly suggests that such changes are not effected as part of a new religious outlook or as part of a shift in theological values. It appears that in the English as well as in certain New England examples, the debased motif had shifted so far from the norm that it became easier to interpret it as something else.

While all of these factors are relevant to discussing the early Essex County stones as a total development, it has also been shown that the concepts of skill, intention, and tradition must be qualified on the basis of the particular element of the stone being discussed. The inability to apply such single concepts uniformly over Essex County developments (even in the case of individual stones) implies certain things about their expressive qualities—essentially that they were not the result of solving artistic problems in any generally accepted sense of the word.

III

As it is true that explanatory concepts cannot be applied uniformly to separate elements of individual stones; it is equally true that any one of these explanatory concepts cannot be applied uniformly to successive stages of Essex County developments. An examination of the so-called "Roman" style from central Massachusetts shows that all the concepts applied to the early stones require considerable adjustment in the nature and extent of their applicability. The unification of formal elements, for example, has been so successfully achieved that Dethlefsen



FIG. 6. MARY HEALD, CONCORD (CHURCHYARD), MASS., 1759



FIG. 7. SARAH WHITCOMB, HARVARD, MASS., 1766

and Deetz are led to the following conclusion:

It is tempting to view the intense conservatism of Worster's curious design as resulting from its unique qualities. The design in toto could have been taken as a minimal significant unit, rather than as constituent attributes, while cherubs and death's heads could have been more easily perceived as made up of rather discreet, semi-independently variable elements such as wings, skulls, faces, and different hair patterns.²⁴

The above quotation indicates that the object in the lunette, that is, the head, has been effectively adapted to the stone-carver's skills. It is also clear from an examination of the objects that the expertise seen in the heads is of the same kind previously seen only in the ornamental motifs. The exact nature of this expertise is important to any further discussion of these stones' significance or function, either for the public or for the carvers themselves.

When improvements are made in art, they are commonly seen as the result of one of two processes: the improvement of craft practices and techniques or the solutions to various problems which involve new, unsolved, or neglected needs. Those needs may range from simple functional factors to highly metaphysical ones. They may concern a community or an individual. It is my position that this whole dimension was lacking in the earlier Essex County developments or, at least, that this dimension cannot be considered a feature of the major explanatory strategy. In discussing the "Roman" style, this becomes a quite different matter. It seems to be the factor of increased technical skills which figures most prominently in accounting for the reasons why these stones look the way they do and in explaining how this change took place. It is important to note that after the "Ro-

man" type was first established, the format and configuration of motifs experienced almost no change for the following thirty years or more. Only the regularity and cleanness of the carving itself experienced significant development. The importance of this is implied by George Kubler, who has characterized learned craft education as "the groups of learners performing identical actions. . . ."²⁵ Before the stable condition exhibited in the "Roman" type could exist on any significant scale, or for any duration, the type had to become fixed, regardless of the reason of the fixity. It can be seen that certain carvers had acquired this craft skill to a high degree well before the middle of the century as exhibited by the John Willard stone, Harvard, 1739. (Fig. 5.) The acquisition of such skills, however, did not invite experimentation in the "artistic" sphere described by Kubler, and stones such as the Mary Heald stone of Concord, 1759 (Fig. 6), and the Sarah Whitcomb marker, Harvard, 1766 (Fig. 7), show no significant changes. This phenomenon has unavoidable implications for the nature of the carvers' thinking and the status of the stones themselves. These are, more specifically, the lack of an "artistic" attitude addressed to evolving new symbols and the corresponding and overwhelmingly decorative function of the carving. This last observation must not be construed to mean that the sanctity or overall function of the stones, as remarked on in the earlier developments, was not present. Rather, the link between such concepts and the actual stone was still affected by association. This lack of logical connection permitted the stones to develop in the context of craft processes even when the carver may have possessed the technical competence to solve "artistic" problems.

IV

The evolution of Essex County-based stone carving seems to depend heavily upon technical or conceptual limitations. In viewing this development, it becomes obvious that limitations of the artists did not entail any the less in change, but rather, change which was unguided. In certain cases it can even be shown that when the carvers overcame such limitations and were equipped to solve intentional problems, the forms were stabilized and change occurred only in a minimal way. The limitations most responsible for Essex County carving included a scarcity of models, a lack of stone-carving tradition, and a lack of iconographic sophistication. All of these factors encouraged a maximum of drift in a society where the public was not equipped to check the extent of the drift (in contrast to developments in the Boston area). In the absence of norms, motifs tended to acquire an inbred and eccentric-looking character, but the fact that one can refer these changes to limitations at all weakens the notion that the stones' figural motifs were the purposeful inventions of unspoiled folk artists. It is more accurate, I believe, to see these stones as products issuing from circumstances characterized by the absence of developed rules and procedures. There is every reason to believe that these carvers were attempting to approximate English prototypes, at least in the early stages, but lacked the

ability to do so. It is probable that had the Essex County carver possessed any aesthetic intentions, he would still have to be referred back to stylisms in the objects which he was trying to copy rather than to the debased traits in his own style. From the nature of the change in these stones, there is every reason to believe that even late developments in central Massachusetts never transcended the limitations of a craft.

Two points of view must be distinguished when considering the value of these stones. For the stone carver and his public their value was not attached to specific stylistic conventions except, perhaps, in the case of certain decorative motifs. In connection with craft, however, the increased expertise of carving in the later stages was, no doubt, directly experienced as an improvement. This point of view contrasts sharply with a no less legitimate though nonhistorical account (usually given by twentieth-century observers who have experienced modern primitivism) which claims value for aspects quite the opposite of those the carver himself would have claimed. It seems unfortunate that in the recent enthusiasm over this latter (and essentially critical) approach, scholars have completely obscured a different (and essential historical) approach which yields a more fundamental (if somewhat less exciting) view of these objects and their makers.

NOTES

¹ Wilfred Norris, "Old Burial Ground at Watertown, Mass." *OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND*, Vol. 16, No. 1.

² Allan Ludwig, *Graven Images* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press), 1966.

³ Harriette Forbes, *Gravestones of Early New England* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1927.

⁴ Ludwig, *op. cit.*, pp. 69, 424.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxix.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

¹⁰ A. Graham, "Headstones in Post-Reformation Scotland," *Proceedings of the So-*

- ciety of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Vol. 91 (1957-1958), p. 4.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-9.
- ¹² Ludwig, *op. cit.*, p. 271.
- ¹³ Forbes, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-78.
- ¹⁴ Louis B. Wright, *The Cultural Life of the American Colonies (1607-1763)* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), pp. 208-209.
- ¹⁵ H. Cescinsky and G. Hunter, *English and American Furniture* (Grand Rapids: The Dean Hicks Co., 1929), p. 32.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ¹⁷ H. Cescinsky and E. Gribble, *Early English Furniture and Woodwork* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1922), pp. 32-33.
- ¹⁸ Cescinsky and Hunter, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- ²⁰ Cescinsky and Gribble, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
- ²¹ Cescinsky and Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
- ²² Stephen Foster, *Massachusetts Gravestones: Evolution and Behavior of Folk Carving in Colonial New England*, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Illinois (Urbana), 1969.
- ²³ Innes Hart, "Rude Forefathers," *Architectural Review*, November, 1939, p. 185 f.
- ²⁴ E. Dethlefsen and J. Deetz, "Death's Heads, Cherubs, and Willow Trees: Experimental Archaeology in Colonial Cemeteries," *American Antiquity*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (1966), pp. 505-506.
- ²⁵ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 15.