Heraldic Design on New England Gravestones

By LOYD GROSSMAN

BORN of war and tournament in twelfth-century Europe, heraldry was predominantly utilitarian from its beginnings. This does not imply that decorative or allusive considerations had no place in early medieval heraldry but only stresses that heraldry was first used to identify similarly armored knights in combat, much as modern armies use shoulder patches to identify soldiers today. It was not long before heraldry was recognized for numerous nonwarlike though still practical uses and could serve to identify an individual's home, land holdings, or assent to a legal claim. As heraldry proliferated and its use became manifold, even greater ingenuity was required for designing coats of arms; for it was early established that no two individuals within the same jurisdiction should bear the same arms.

With advances in literacy and a decline in the use of armored suits, heraldry became less utilitarian as its purely decorative aspects were explored. More complex and delicate coats of arms became popular during the Tudor period, resulting in a tremendous demand. By the mid-seventeenth century heraldry was well on its way to becoming a recognized affectation of gentility. With the cessation of county visits by heralds (for the purpose of recording lawful coats of arms) in the late seventeenth century and growing indifference to the College of Arms by William III and his Hanover successors, heraldic authority was weakened and pandemonium ensued. Moreover, a number of popular textbooks helped turn heraldry into a fanciful pursuit.

Heraldry in America

The spread of heraldry to America dates from the seventeenth century when Englishmen came here to settle. They took their heraldry with them as the family coat of arms often decorated their possessions. While the Puritans did not actively discourage heraldic display (Cromwell had a coat of arms of which he was particularly proud), it was not until after the Restoration that heraldry achieved any considerable popularity in New England. First used mostly for funeral hatchments, coats of arms soon appeared on gravestones, silverware, and bookplates. Because the authority of the heralds was not held in particularly high regard in those days and since New England was a long way from home, the colonists had to rely on articles brought in passage by them (or their families) or on textbooks, of which the most popular were those by John Guillim (1724) and Alexander Nisbet (1718), as sources of heraldic design. Once the blason of a coat was found, artists were able to use considerable freedom in the presentation of the design. While a good number of "herald painters" are known to have lived in New England, it is doubtful whether most of them were engaged in the painting of coats of arms on a full-time basis. Yet gravestones provide us with some of the best visible evidence of early American heraldic design.

I have not attempted to make an exhaustive study of heraldry on gravestones, but instead have tried to make some general and specific comments on early American heraldic design based on some thirteen examples dating from

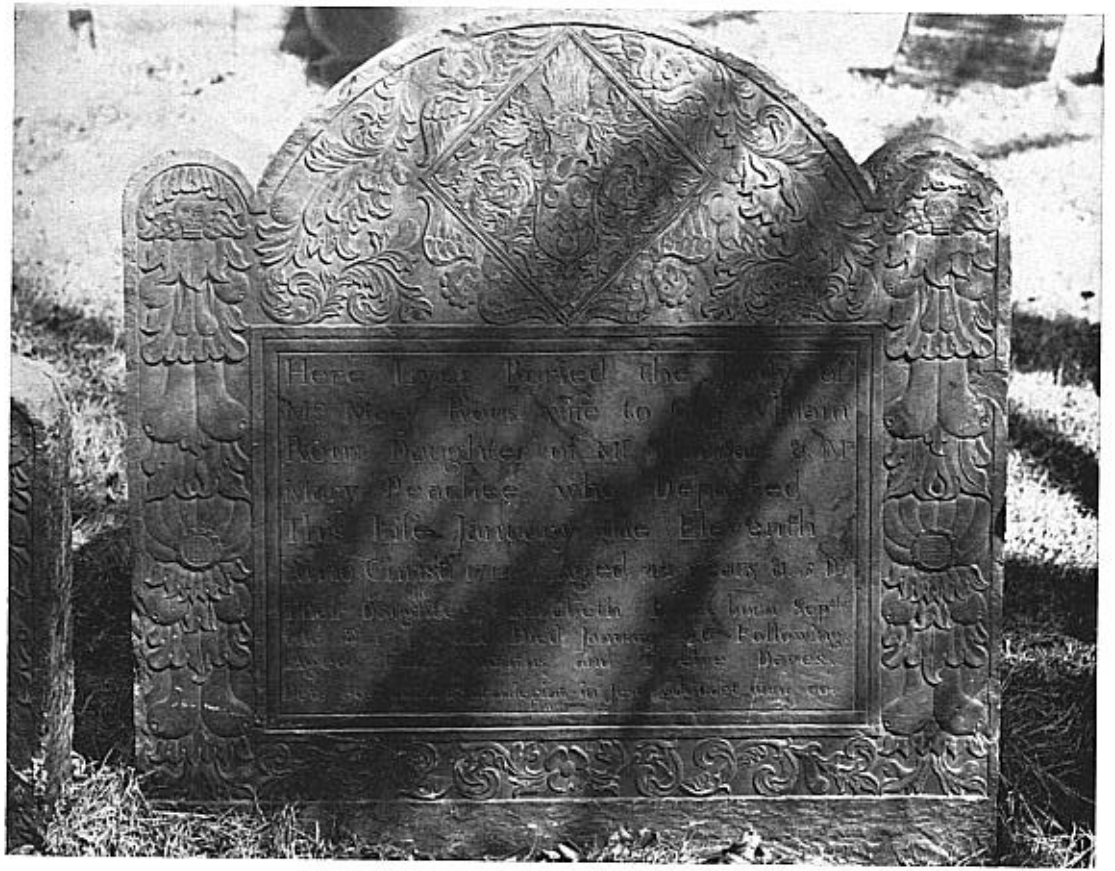

FIG. 1. MARY ROUS, CHARLESTOWN, MASS., 1714
Courtesy of Dr. Allan I. Ludwig.

1691 to 1810. As my drawing skill leaves something to be desired, I have not attempted to illustrate them here though photographs of most may be found in Harriette M. Forbes's *Gravestones of Early New England* (1927). It is curious that none of the authorities on American gravestones have paid much attention to heraldry. There is but passing mention of coats of arms in Forbes's book and no mention at all in Ludwig's.

Thirteen gravestones listed here in chronological order deserve especial attention: John Grosvenor stone (1691), Roxbury; John Howell stone (1696), Southampton, N. Y.; Richard Hawley stone (1698), Marblehead; John Fowle stone (1711), Charlestown; Elizabeth Pain stone (1704), Boston; Mary Rous stone (1714), Charlestown; Sarah Harris stone (1723), Providence; James Foster stone (1732), Dorchester; William Clark stone (1743), Boston; Joseph Reynolds stone (1759), Bristol, R. I.; James Barrett stone (1778), Concord; Jean Paul Mascarene stone (1796), Boston; and a stone marked "Lyde" (1810), Boston. Space does not permit a description of each, but two stones merit particular attention.

Fig. 1: The very ornate stone belonging to Mary Rous (Charlestown, 1714) was carved by Nathaniel Lamson, a son of Joseph Lamson, carver of the John Fowle gravestone. The achievement is here presented within a diamond-shaped frame and is well balanced. The shield is boldly and ornately carved and is quite elegant. The ornate helmet is large and well proportioned and the crest of flames is finely executed. The mantling is quite properly shown as being held to the helmet by and beneath the torse, and, as was the fashion of the time, it is very reminiscent of seaweed. Although very ornate, it is a very fine piece of work and wonderfully conveys a sense of elegance and aristocratic pride.

Fig. 2: The James Foster stone (Dorchester, 1732) was either carved by the stonecutter himself as his own marker prior to death or by his son James. The coat of arms represents an interesting example of provincial carving: the shield is much too square and, while the chevron and hunting horns are well executed, the lions appear cramped due to the small portion of the shield on which they have been aligned. The helmet is well carved but fails to convey the strength that a piece of armor should have. The crest is a foreshortened arm vambraced and embowed, clutching what appears to be a twig or possibly a chisel rather than what should be a lance. The relief carving of the mantling overwhelms the shield and a blank motto scroll begs a reason for inclusion. Overall, this achievement is the product of provincial heraldry and yet a high degree of carving skill.

Comments and Observations

1) *The Shield and its Evolution*

The shield is the one indispensable element in a coat of arms. One can have a coat of arms with only a shield, but one cannot have a coat of arms with everything (helmet, torse, etc.) but the shield. The shield may be said to define and give order to the coat of arms. The most common medieval shield and the most pleasing was the "heater" type which resembles an inverted equilateral triangle with convex sides. This shape or a variant of it was used on the earliest American gravestones, but soon colonists began to adopt the English taste for increasingly elaborate shields. It can be seen that with time the shields become increasingly

FIG. 2. JAMES FOSTER (DETAIL), DORCHESTER, MASS., 1732
Courtesy of Dr. Allan I. Ludwig.

complex and baroque. By the late eighteenth century most people were familiar with only the highly stylized shields of the time.

2) *The Helmet and Mantling*

Few of the helmets seen on the gravestones are at all like an actual helmet. They are much too fancy and their shapes would make them impossible to wear. The mantling also bears little resemblance to the real thing (which was after all only a cloth to protect the back of the head from the sun) and is fantastically vented and scalloped.

3) *Sources of the Arms*

While Guillim's *Display of Heraldry* and Nisbet's *A System of Heraldry* were the two most popular heraldry books of the early eighteenth century, only one of the gravestones examined (that of Mary Rous) owed its design to either of these books. None of the other coats were to be found in these or other contemporary books on heraldry. I doubt that any of the arms were pure inventions as nearly all of them can be found in Burke's *General Armory* (1884 ed.). Most of the arms then must have been derived from either family documents or armorially marked family possessions brought from England.

4) *Heraldic Design on New England Gravestones*

In general the practice of heraldry in eighteenth-century New England was fairly contemporary in style to heraldry in England. It is most likely that the several heraldry books published in England found their way across the Atlantic and also that recent arrivals from England kept the colonists informed of current heraldic fashion. In eighteenth-century New England, as in England, heraldry was becoming increasingly stylized and fanciful; in general, heraldry was loosing much of its strength and flamboyance. There seemed to be an ever widening gap between heraldic art and heraldic science. The frequent occurrence of blank motto scrolls may serve as an example. Every artist who was aware of heraldic fashion knew that a "proper" coat of arms had a motto scroll, so, that even when he did not know the motto, the artist often retained the scroll not realizing that a motto scroll with no motto is a bit of heraldic nonsense. Apart from a few provincialisms, such as charges facing the wrong way, and no doubt such provincialisms were also to be found in England, American heraldic design in the eighteenth century compared quite favorably with English practice.

One special problem that is worth mentioning, as both English and Americans shared it, was the difficulty of drawing a good lion. The lion is among the most important charges in heraldry, requiring not an accurate portrait of the beast but rather a highly stylized representation conveying all the attributes of the lion. Most eighteenth-century heraldic lions are very meek and pudgy looking creatures and for some reason New England lions are very hairy. Among the best eighteenth-century lions is the crest on the James Barrett gravestone in Concord. It is indeed strange that only a few artists succeeded in solving the "lion problem."

One fascinating aspect of heraldic art is that it forces the artist to work within a tightly circumscribed area using for the most part already refined and conventionalized forms. In such art even the smallest subtleties are of great impor-

tance. When the difficulty of working in so resistant a medium as stone is also taken into consideration, it is greatly to the credit of New England stonecutters that they were so often able to create successful designs. Yet when thinking about the heraldic art on these gravestones I am not struck so much by the ingenuity and skill displayed by these often nameless craftsmen as I am by the very fact that such monuments to gentility should have been so painstakingly carved on what was then the edge of a rugged frontier.