

# Cemeteries in the Town of Williamsburg

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There are five cemeteries within Williamsburg's boundaries: two in Williamsburg village, one in Haydenville village, one on Mountain Street, and one in a remote outlying area. Two are owned by the town and have been administered since the early 1990s by the town Trust Fund and Cemetery Commission. Two others are owned and operated by private corporations with boards of trustees. The fifth, a tiny family burial plot isolated in the middle of a large private landholding a mile from the nearest public road, has been unused for nearly 200 years and is being preserved without disturbance (or maintenance) by its present owner.

The author, a historian and genealogist, aims to introduce others with similar interests, whether local residents or visitors in town, to the places where many past residents of Williamsburg and some of their descendants are buried. The various other web sites and documents linked within this article offer additional help in finding the graves of specific people. Secondary purposes of this paper are to acquaint local residents who are not historians with the historic significance of these burial places, how they are maintained, and where in town grave lots are still available.

## Old Village Hill Cemetery (town)

[Old Village Hill Cemetery on FindAGrave](#)



One of the first official acts of the newly erected District of Williamsburg, four years before it became a town, was an October 1771 vote to exchange public land, originally set aside for highways, for a 1.5 acre parcel of Jesse Wild's farm to be used as a burying ground. The transaction was completed by 1773, when the first known burial in the new cemetery was that of Thomas Nash, whose son John had led the drive to separate Williamsburg from its parent town of Hatfield. The cemetery continued to be used until 1914, when the last known burial took place. There are no surviving burial records, and no one knows how or when the records that once existed were lost. The stones themselves are now the only evidence of who is buried here.

Walter Corbin transcribed all the then-extant stones in 1931. Unaware of his work, I transcribed all the surviving stones again in 2000. Several had gone missing or become partly illegible since Corbin's time. In addition, I made an exact numbered map showing every stone's location. By 2014 all the stones had been photographed and posted at FindAGrave.com. There are a few additional FindAGrave memorials assigned to this cemetery for which no photographs appear, because those people's stones no longer exist, if they ever did.

The up-and-down topography of parts of this cemetery make it an odd place for the town's founders to have chosen as a burying ground. More than a few of the burials here must have been physically awkward and difficult, and it must always have been a struggle to get the town's horse-drawn hearse into and out of the cemetery (if it was possible at all). The topography has also contributed to the number of fallen and leaning stones, and a handful are literally, if slowly, sliding downhill out of the cemetery. It is known that some fallen stones were removed in the past because it was no longer possible to determine where to stand them upright again. Other stones have been destroyed by falling trees and limbs, but not recently.

No lots have been available for many years and no new burials are permitted in this cemetery.

[Old Village Hill Cemetery map \(2000\)](#)

[Old Village Hill Cemetery transcription of stones \(2000\)](#)

[Virtual Tour of Old Village Hill Cemetery \(2013\)](#)



## Mountain Street Cemetery (town)

### [Mountain Street Cemetery on FindAGrave](#)



Until Williamsburg's town boundaries were finalized in 1846, some families living along what are now Mountain Street and Adams Road remained citizens of Hatfield, not Williamsburg. Separated from Hatfield by the formidable (especially in wintertime) barrier of Horse Mountain, they didn't feel closely linked with that town, and they were far enough from Williamsburg village to want a burial place for their loved ones closer to their own homes. The origins of the Mountain Street Cemetery haven't been fully discovered, but it seems likely that the family who owned the cemetery's half acre simply designated it informally as a resting place for themselves and their neighbors. It is thought to have been in use by about 1790, and perhaps earlier. There is a monument in it for William Warren, who died in 1768 and was likely the first non-native resident within Williamsburg's present bounds, but it isn't known whether he is actually buried here or elsewhere, or whether his remains were moved here from a previous resting place.

Sometime before 1990 the town accepted ownership of the cemetery. Exactly when and how it passed to the town has not been discovered. That acquisition should have been voted on at Town Meeting and recorded in the meeting minutes.

Corbin transcribed all the stones in this cemetery about 1950. I transcribed them again in 2012, and made a detailed, numbered map of their locations. All the surviving stones as of 2012 have been photographed and can be seen at [FindAGrave.com](#).

During a short interval in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Haydenville's Dr. C. H. Wheeler practiced at the Hampshire County Sanatorium in Leeds, a small number of indigent deceased patients from there are believed to have been buried in unmarked graves along

the south fence of the cemetery. There is no known record of these individuals' names. A careful search of Northampton death records might reveal some information about them, but the exact locations of their graves will remain unknown. The sanatorium has become a private nursing home, and I don't know what became of the county institution's records. Medical records would not be open to the public, of course, but if there were separate records of deaths and burials, those might be.

There must once have been records of the other burials, with and without surviving stones. But no records came to the town when it acquired the cemetery, or at least none can be found now. So the only burials for which records exist are the ones kept by the Trust Fund and Cemetery Commission since the early 1990s.

The cemetery is still in use and has burial and cremation plots available in two rows along the east fence, nearest to Mountain Street. Both conventional and "green" burials (without casket or vault) are permitted. Inquiries can be made to the Trust Fund and Cemetery Commission through the Town Offices.

[Mountain Street Cemetery booklet: notes, map and transcription of stones \(2012\)](#)

### Maintenance of the two town cemeteries

The Old Village Hill and Mountain Street cemeteries are mown three times a year (for the Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day holidays) by direction of the Trust Fund and Cemetery Commission. A modest effort has been made in the last few years (2012-2014) to cut back brush and eradicate poison ivy, Japanese Knotweed and Asiatic Bittersweet on the perimeter of the Old Village Hill Cemetery and recover ground and gravestones that were being overgrown. More needs to be done there, and bittersweet is also invading the Mountain Street Cemetery now.

Williamsburg has no established tradition of adequate public funding for cemetery maintenance or repairs, and the town's tight budgets of recent years have not been conducive to starting a new public funding tradition. Neither of the public cemeteries has any Perpetual Care funds worth mentioning. (Old Village Hill has none, and Mountain Street has about \$100: less than the cost of one year's mowing.) New plantings, continued invasive-plant control, straightening and repair of damaged gravestones and fences, and new signage and historical markers are out of the question at current funding levels. Private donations might be used to meet additional needs, but there are technical questions to resolve about how to receive such donations before soliciting them.

The sign identifying the Mountain Street Cemetery was blown down and destroyed in 2014, and a new one was paid for in 2015 out of the Commissioners' pockets. The Old Village Hill Cemetery, one of the town's most significant historic assets, has no identifying sign at all.



## Haydenville Cemetery (private; aka High Street Cemetery)

[Haydenville Cemetery on FindAGrave](#)



As the factory village of Haydenville evolved in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, entrepreneurial brothers Joel and Josiah Hayden saw a need to provide a final resting place for their families, neighbors and employees that was identified more closely with their village than with Williamsburg. The brothers designated a parcel of theirs on High Street for a cemetery, and their father, who died in 1847, was authoritatively reported later to have been the first person buried there. They gave the land to the town in 1853, and in 1859 the town transferred it to the newly organized Haydenville Cemetery Association, which has operated it ever since. After 1847 a small number of stones were erected bearing death dates before then, and it is possible that some of the individuals whose names appear on those stones were moved from other burial sites and reinterred here. By 1860, 101 people had been buried in the cemetery.

There is currently (early 2015) some ongoing discussion of the Association dissolving itself and turning the cemetery over to the town, but no decision has yet been made. A town meeting vote would be needed to accept the cemetery.

When I transcribed the stones in the cemetery in the early 2000s, I found about 500 stones representing about 800 individuals. I did not consult the cemetery association's records to confirm exact numbers. I did examine Dr. Charles H. Wheeler's c.1950 transcription of the so-called "Johnson Record" of burials here, which was maintained from the Association's founding until 1871 by Association official Benjamin S. Johnson. Without informing anyone else, Johnson evidently stored his record in the vault of the Haydenville Savings Bank, of which he was the first Treasurer. The burial record, long thought to be lost, was discovered there in 1945, decades after his death. The Johnson Record lists 90 individuals who were buried in the cemetery but for whom no stones now

exist. Curiously, it fails to note 20 other individuals whose surviving monuments bear death dates in the years covered by the record. Johnson was known to be meticulous in all he did, so these omissions are puzzling at first glance. But some of these stones, and perhaps all, are cenotaphs (memorial stones for people actually buried elsewhere), and logically, because those people weren't buried here, there were no burial records for them. The Johnson Record also gives the names of nine people who died before 1847 and were reinterred here after then.

FindAGrave.com lists 809 burials here, nearly all of them with gravestone photographs. In Dr. Wheeler's "Haydenville Records 1" scrapbook (copy available at Meekins Library), there is a plan of the cemetery prepared by Dr. Wheeler's son in 1952 from two older plans. It shows the outlines of all the variously-sized numbered lots, both in the original cemetery and in the area to its west that was added about 1880. The plan does not show individual graves or stones, but it does show the lot owners' names (presumably at the time of its making). It can be useful in searching the grounds for particular family groups.

12 victims of the Mill River Disaster of 1874 are known to be buried here. There could be others in graves that are now unmarked.

[Transcription of Haydenville Cemetery stones \(c. 2004\)](#)

[Wheeler plan of Haydenville Cemetery lots \(1952\)](#)

[List of Haydenville Cemetery lot owners \(1952?\)](#)

## Village Hill Cemetery (private; aka New Village Hill Cemetery)

[Village Hill Cemetery on FindAGrave](#)





By far the largest in town, this privately operated cemetery contains over 2000 stones memorializing more than 3200 people. I transcribed them in 2001, but this cemetery is still very active, and I have no list or locations of the burials that have occurred since then.

Local businessman Gross Williams, whose four infant sons' stones are found here with death dates from 1802 through 1811, seems to have owned this cemetery's original parcel of land at that time and buried those children on it, likely without any thought of founding a larger cemetery. That idea may have come much later, and perhaps from someone else.

Be that as it may, the cemetery came into frequent use in the late 1830s. There are 15 stones bearing death dates in the 27-year period from 1811 through 1837, but some or all of those stones could be cenotaphs, or the people memorialized by them could have been buried elsewhere first and their remains reinterred here later. In just the years 1838 and 1839 there were 11 new burials, and in the 1840s there were 37 more. The cemetery's own records do not reveal when and by whom it was started and how it was managed in its first years. Perhaps some member of its board of trustees will one day delve into its early history and write something about it. The cemetery association that owns and operates it now was incorporated in 1885, but by then the cemetery itself was a long-established fact.

For nearly all the time this cemetery has existed, there were others in use in and near Haydenville, so the majority of people buried in the Village Hill Cemetery have probably lived in Williamsburg village and the western and northern parts of town.

The oldest stones are at the downhill (southeast) end. There have been several successive additions to the cemetery, expanding it uphill a few rods each time. In the last 15 years the southwesternmost section — west of all the interior roads and south of the maintenance building — has come into greater use. There are still many lots available for sale in that section, and a few in the older sections. There is also ample space for future expansion of the grounds: a luxury that few cemeteries in our region have today.

Roughly two-thirds of the people buried here have FindAGrave memorials, and at this writing 64% of those people's stones have been photographed. Identifying all the burials that still lack FindAGrave memorials and/or photographs would be a worthwhile project for a group of volunteers

Thirteen victims of the Mill River Disaster of 1874 have gravestones in this cemetery. Others may be buried here without stones. The cemetery is, and seemingly always has been, very well maintained, and I suspect that few if any stones have been removed from it. Any graves that are unmarked now probably never were marked.

[Village Hill Cemetery aerial photo \(2014\)](#)

[Transcription of Village Hill Cemetery stones \(2001\)](#)

## Rogers Cemetery (private; aka Old Williamsburg Road Cemetery)

[Rogers Cemetery \(Old Williamsburg Road Cemetery\) on FindAGrave](#)



Sheltered beneath a grove of white pines on a knoll in the remote northwest corner of town, close to the Goshen line, is a tiny burial lot containing five legible headstones. A circle thirty feet in diameter could enclose them all. This is known to long-time residents as the Rogers Cemetery, though FindAGrave (following the lead of a disoriented Walter Corbin, who thought he was in Goshen) misleadingly calls it the Old Williamsburg Road Cemetery. The five people known to be buried here between 1788 and 1826 came to Williamsburg from Martha's Vineyard between the Revolution and 1800 and settled on land in this immediate vicinity. Other families escaping the Vineyard's depleted soils and perilous seafaring occupations came to Williamsburg during the same period and made homes in the same section of town, along what we now call Old Goshen Road. Back then an even older road to Goshen passed within 200 feet of the cemetery and the homes of the people buried in it. That road has long been discontinued, and visiting the cemetery requires a mile-long hike across private property from East Street in Goshen. The piney knoll is now a truncated pyramidal island standing 20-30 feet above a vast sand and gravel pit that completely surrounds it. Still in use, the pit currently covers 38 acres, minus the half-acre that has been left untouched to preserve the cemetery. "DO NOT DIG" signs posted by the pit's owner stand at short intervals along the toe of the high, steep banks that rise to the original ground level on all sides of the cemetery. A sufficient buffer has been left to provide reasonable assurance that if the banks remain undisturbed, the cemetery will too. Over a long period, the banks will revegetate and stabilize.

It's worth remarking here that despite the reverence widely felt for historic sites and relics in Massachusetts, the private owners of old burial grounds are not required by state law to preserve them. Some have been obliterated. The Rogers Cemetery's protection



was mandated by Williamsburg's Board of Appeals in 2002, when it issued a Special Permit for sand and gravel mining on condition that the cemetery not be disturbed. Fortunately, that condition has been respected.

The stones have all been photographed and can be seen on FindAGrave.

[Rogers Cemetery leaflet: map, notes and transcription of stones \(2008\)](#)

### Finding the graves of Roman Catholic residents of Williamsburg

Most of the immigrant mill workers who flocked to Haydenville in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were Irish, French Canadian, German or East European, and most of them were Catholic. It was for their benefit that St. Mary's Church in Haydenville was built in 1867 on land donated by Joel Hayden, who employed much of that village's population in one enterprise or another. Few of these Catholic residents are buried in Williamsburg and Haydenville. Look for them in St. Mary's Assumption Cemetery on Route 9 in Leeds (opened in 1890 for parishioners from Haydenville and Leeds) or in the older and much larger St. Mary's Cemetery on Bridge Road, North Elm Street and Hatfield Street in Northampton. The Catholic Diocese of Springfield is generally unhelpful with genealogical inquiries, often not responding at all. Workers in the cemeteries are a better bet for assistance.

### Finding the graves of other Mill River Disaster victims

The reservoir dam collapse three miles above Williamsburg village on May 16, 1874 took 57 lives in that village, 4 in Skinnerville, 27 in Haydenville, and 51 more across the town boundary in Leeds, a part of Northampton. Of those 139 people, only 25 are known to be buried in two of our town's cemeteries (and none in the other three). Some of the rest are buried in Northampton's Catholic cemeteries. A good many were short-term residents who had come here to work in the mills, and whose remains were taken back to where they had come from for burial. Some were buried in Northampton's Bridge Street Cemetery because relatives were already buried there, or for other reasons unknown to me. Some may have been buried without markers in Williamsburg cemeteries.

Researchers investigating people lost in the flood may encounter a rumor that the "New" Village Hill Cemetery was opened hastily in 1874 to accommodate the burials of a great many flood victims. That is a myth. The cemetery had been in use for decades by then.

Eric W. Weber  
Chair, Williamsburg Historic Commission  
Member, Williamsburg Trust Fund and Cemetery Commission  
April 2015

**Links edited Feb. 10, 2018**