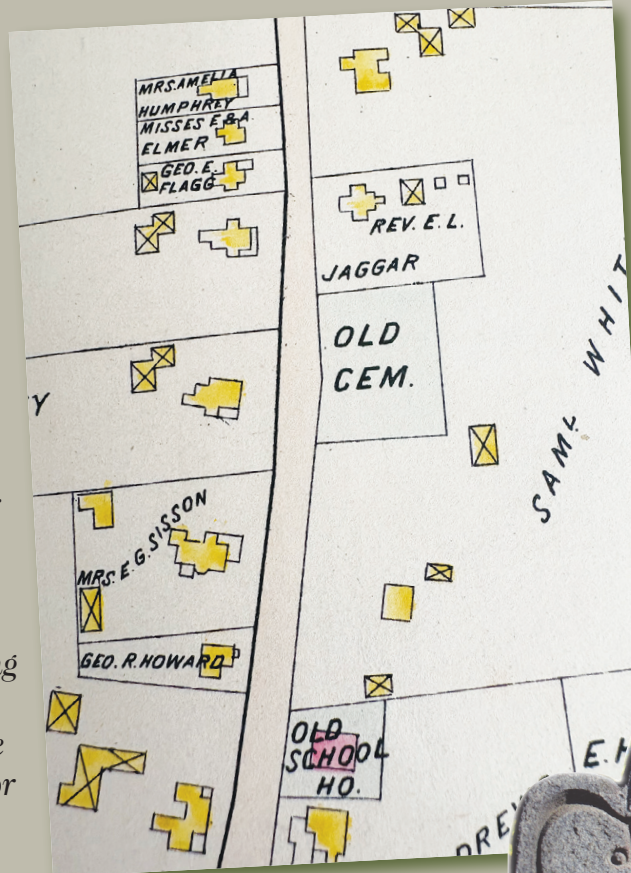


West Hartford's OLD CENTER BURYING YARD

Epitaphs Lost to Time

In the 1700s gravestones were very expensive, so not everyone had one. In 1934 the federal Works Progress Administration documented 136 gravestones in the section opened in 1719, but there were only about 100 in 2001. Many have been lost due to the erosion of the brownstone or vandalism. In 2026, not all the gravestones identified in a 2000 guide or the National Register of Historic Places nomination (2002) could be found. There are archival sources that list the burials in the 1719 burying ground and the southern section known as the "Private Cemetery" that can be used for further research. The history remains even if the grave is unmarked.

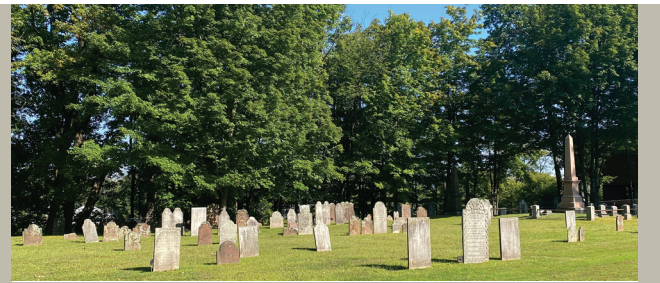


Hartford Atlas, 1909

THE WEST DIVISION'S FIRST BURYING YARD
With about 165 residents, in 1711 the West Division became the Fourth Ecclesiastical Society of Hartford, allowing it to build a meetinghouse, hire a minister, levy taxes for religious expenses, and oversee other local matters. West Division remained under Hartford control until 1854 when it was incorporated as the Town of West Hartford. First Church, West Hartford is the successor to the Fourth Ecclesiastical Society.

Prior to 1719 West Division residents were interred in the Ancient Burying Ground, (est. 1640) on Hartford's Main Street. In 1719 John James sold a plot of land of less than one acre in the West Division to serve as a graveyard. The original plot comprised the northern 3/4 quarters of the current graveyard. It was in use for more than 70 years until the North Cemetery opened in 1790. William Hall's History of West Hartford includes a list of individuals known to be buried in Old Center.

In addition to Bristow (See #6), West Hartford's First Church records include the deaths of three Black individuals that can be assumed to be buried here.

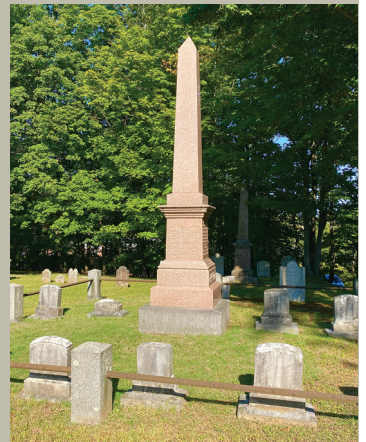


PRIVATE SECTION

In the early 19th century, the graveyard was expanded on the south side with property taken from the Whitman family to be used for family plots. The new section is known in town records as the "private cemetery." The Gridley, Stanley, Crofoot, Talcott, Whitman, Keeney, and Whiting families have large family plots and markers here.

FAMILY BURIAL PLOTS

In the Private Section a family could purchase several contiguous lots to create a family plot. A large gravestone with the family's last name would be placed on the plot and smaller grave markers with individual names placed around it, or the name of each person interred in the family plot would be added to the large central gravestone.



Talcott Family

GRAVESTONE DESIGN AND ARTISTS

Old Center Burying Yard contains many fine examples of hand-carved gravestones, the primary form of sculpture in the 18th century. Distinctive designs were developed and executed by talented folk artists. The carved designs and epitaphs reflect the religious beliefs of early settlers. Some depict a human head or face flanked by wings surrounded by a decorative border. Most are carved out of brownstone; a few are marble or schist. The willow tree and urn are Neo-classical mourning symbols from the early 19th century. Known carvers include Gershom Bartlett of Bolton, Ebenezer Drake of South Windsor, and a sculptor only known as the "Glastonbury Lady Carver."



Capt. Steven Keyes



19. (left) Sarah Whitman Hooker Collins (1747 – 1837) and Capt. Seth Collins (1742 – 1791)

Enslaver of Bristow

(#6). Sarah Hooker married Capt. Seth Collins in 1779, four years after her first husband, Thomas Hart Hooker, died in the Rev. War. The Sarah Hooker Chapter of the DAR placed a new stone in 2025.



20. (right) Amos Bidwell (1730 – 1803), and wife Phoebe Williams Bidwell (1676 – 1747)

Bidwell was a potter and brick-maker who later also owned a tanning yard.



21. (left) Jacob Merrill (1714 - 1771) The Deacon Abraham Merrill and his wife Prudence were founding members of the 4th Ecclesiastical Soc.

22. (right) Talcott Family Obelisk

A granite monument surrounded by a simple iron fence. Obelisks are tall, tapering stone monuments topped by a pyramid. Surrounded by small family grave markers. Samuel Talcott (1765-1839), first person buried in the Private Cemetery.



23. Crofoot Family Marker Dr. Evelyn E. Crofut (1812-1889) was a practicing dentist in Hartford for over 50 years. Married to Eliza J.



Belden (1814-1901). Their children, Ellen Elizabeth died in infancy in 1841, and their son Eugene B. (1843-1860) died at the age of 17. They had no other descendants.

West Hartford's OLD CENTER BURYING YARD

THANK YOU to the West Hartford Cemetery office staff for their assistance.
West Hartford Cemetery Office:
200 Whitman Avenue West Hartford, CT 06107 860-561-8136
Office Hours: 9am-12pm; 1-3PM
westhartfordct.gov/town-departments/fairview-cemetery
FIND-A-GRAVE is a free online database. It contains over 260 records for Old Center Burying Yard. findagrave.com

ARCHIVES
West Hartford Public Library, Local History Room, 20 South Main St, West Hartford, CT westhartfordlibrary.org/research/local-history-2/
Noah Webster House and West Hartford Historical Society, 227 South Main St, West Hartford, CT noahwebsterhouse.org

WEST HARTFORD HISTORIES
From Colonial Parish to Modern Suburb, A brief appreciation of West Hartford, Nelson R. Burr, Revised edition (West Hartford: Noah Webster Foundation and West Hartford Historical Society, 1982).
Life in West Hartford, Tracey M. Wilson (West Hartford: Noah Webster Foundation and West Hartford Historical Society, 2018).
West Hartford, William H. Hall (West Hartford: The West Hartford Chamber of Commerce, 1930).

CREDITS: Portions of the text adapted from the Old Center Burying Yard National Register of Historic Places nomination, Diana McCain, preparer/historian, (National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 2002). Map adapted from *Old Center Burying Yard* by Barbara Cornelius (West Hartford Historic District Commission, 2000)
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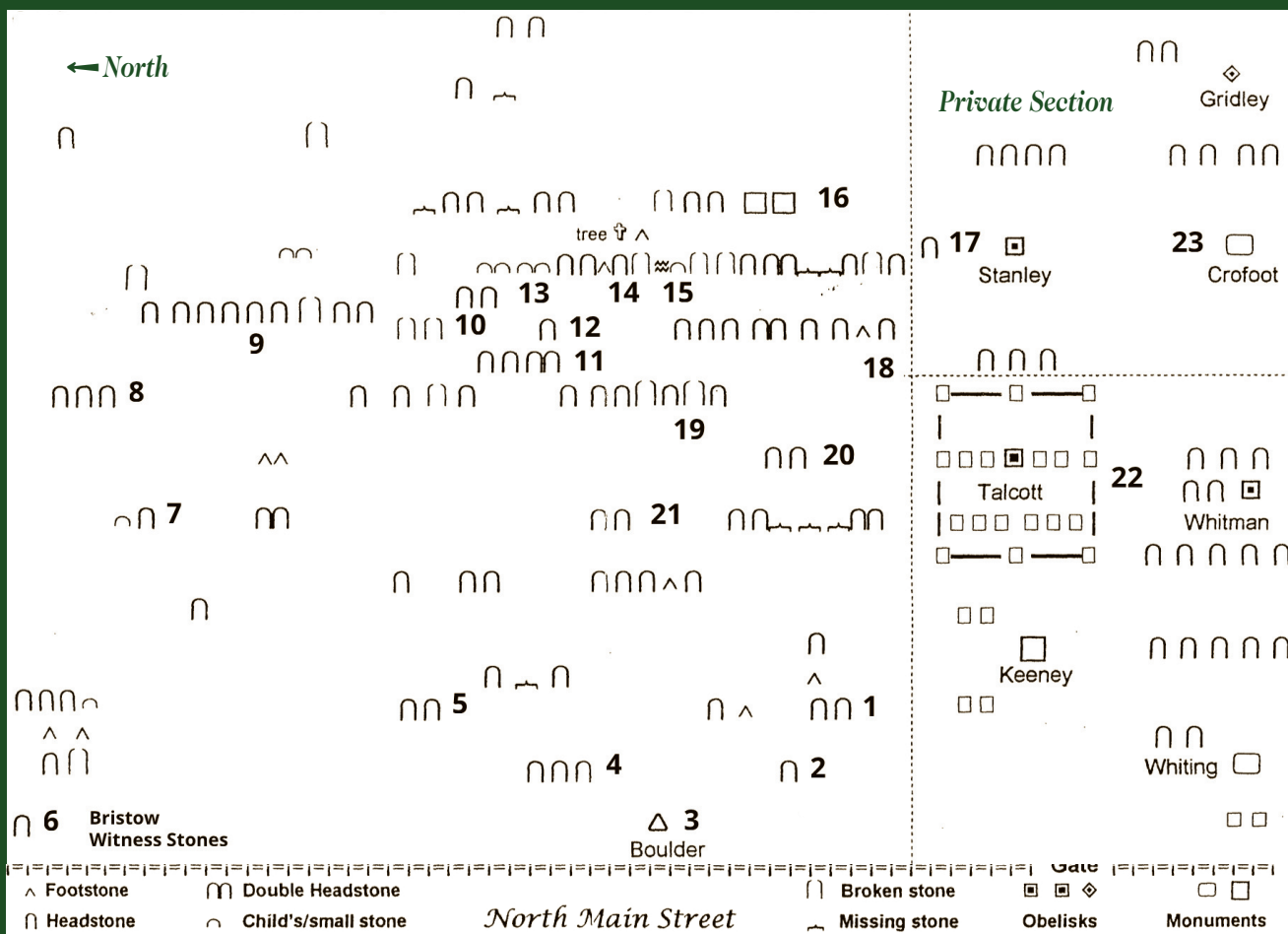


West Hartford's OLD CENTER BURYING YARD

A Self-Guided Tour of Notables & Memorials
30 North Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut



Mary M. Donohue, West Hartford Town Historian



Reproduced from *Old Center Burying Yard* by Barbara Cornelius (West Hartford, CT: West Hartford Historic District Commission, 2000).

OLD CENTER BURYING YARD



The map is a general guide. For more detailed location information, use the Find-a-Grave website or scan the QR code on a Smartphone to access more info. www.westhartfordct.gov/OldCenterCemeteryTour

10. Thomas Hosmer (1702 – 1777), wife Susannah Steele Hosmer (1716 – 1798), and son Elisha Hosmer (1753 – 1779)

Thomas was the grandson of WH's first settler Stephen Hosmer (1645 – 1693) and his wife Hannah Bushnell. Thomas' wife Susannah is buried next to him and to the east is their child Elisha Homer. (No photo)

11. (right) Timothy Goodman Family, Timothy Goodman I (1706 – 1786), first wife Joanna Wadsworth Goodman (1710 – 1768), son Timothy Goodwin II (1736 – 1752)

In 1747 the elder Goodman deeded to the West Division a parcel of land to be used for "a place of parade forever." Known as Goodman Green until renamed Unity Green in 2021.



12. Sen. John Watson, Sr. (1651 – 1725) (No photo)

Watson's marker was one of the earliest in the burying yard. The uppercase lettering, rosettes on the shoulders, and use of floating punctuation between words suggested that it was the work of the Stancliff Shop of Middletown.

13. (right) Timothy Skinner (1701 – 1779), wife Ruth Skinner (1719 – 1754), and children Mabel Skinner (1743 – 1743), Timothy Skinner Jr. (1745 - 1750), Abigail Skinner (1746 - 1750), and James Skinner (1748 - 1750)

Timothy Skinner died from dysentery at age 78. The winged cherub on his gravestone represents the flight of the soul heavenward. The phrase "in memory of" memorializes the deceased, implying the body is not necessarily interred beneath. Of Timothy and Ruth's seven children, these four predeceased them. Mabel died at three months old. Timothy Jr., age 5, Abigail, age 3, and James, age 18 months, all died in 1750 days apart, probably in an epidemic. Ruth died four years later at age 35.



14. (right) Rev. Benjamin Colton (1690 – 1759), first wife Ruth Taylor Colton (1693 – 1725), second wife Elizabeth Pitkin Colton (1689 – 1760)

1st minister of the 4th Ecclesiastical Soc. served 46 years until his death from measles. Elaborate style of stone typical for ministers and important figures. Like Stephen Keyes's stone (#4), it may be a portrait.



15. (right) Capt. Samuel Sedgwick (1667 – 1735), wife Mary Hopkins Sedgwick (1671 – 1743)

Samuel Sedgwick born in Hartford, son of William Sedgwick and Elizabeth Stone, daughter of Rev. Samuel Stone. He married Mary Hopkins in 1689 and in 1695 they were the first Sedgwicks to come to the West Division. Founding members of the church.



16. (right) Rev. Nathaniel Hooker (1737 – 1770)

Hooker was the 2nd minister of the 4th Ecclesiastical Soc. and a doctor. Died at age 32 from mercurial poisoning treating himself for tuberculosis. His marker was originally a "tablestone" raised above the ground on four legs. Hooker enslaved three individuals in his home.



17. (right) Rachel Marshfield (1668 – 1754) Hourglass, with time gone, and one live/one dead flower severed by a scythe, death images symbolizing the frailty of life. The stone may possibly be by William Holland or the Johnson family of Middletown. Her epitaph reads:

"When souls lye buried deep in dust their flesh shall be in Christ's care. They sleep in Jesus."



18. (right) Lt. Joseph Gillitt (1665-1746)

Gillitt, one of the founders of the 4th Ecclesiastical Soc. He owned/operated a tanning yard. The gravestone motif resembles a skull or death's head, a common theme on early stones that served as a vivid reminder of death/resurrection. This depiction may be a transition to a winged cherub and not a skull, as it has a human face and lacks death's head teeth.



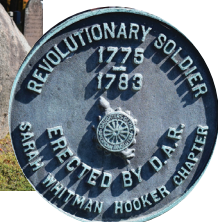
Notables & Memorials

1. (right) Samuel Stanley (1749 – 1787) and first wife Anna Olmsted (1747 – 1780)

The Stanley stones are by popular carver Ebenezer Drake of South Windsor. Stanley enslaved a man named Truman Merrill who self-emancipated in 1784.



2. (left) Lucy Gray (1743 – 1791) Stone by Thatcher Lathrop of South Windsor.



3. (right) French Soldiers in the American Revolution Memorial, 1923

Erected by the Sarah Whitman Hooker Chapter, DAR, to commemorate French soldiers who died while encamped in WH with Gen. Rochambeau's troops. The French troops marched through WH, but encamped in Farmington making the boulder incorrect.



4. (above) Captain Steven Keyes (1717 – 1788), wife Abigail Keyes (1723 – 1808), daughter Peggy Keyes (1747 – 1808)

The Keyes family came to the West Division in 1784. Keyes served as commissary officer in the Third CT Reg. during the Amer. Rev. The very elaborately carved granite may be a portrait. Capt. Keyes epitaph reads:

*"Beneath this stone death's prisoner lies.
The stone shall move, the saint shall rise.
What now concealed beneath the dust,
Shall then appear among the just."*

5. Noah Webster, Esq. (1722 – 1813), wife Mercy Steele Webster (1727 – 1794), Rachel Merrill Webster (1753 – 1776)

Parents of lexicographer Noah Webster, Jr. whose home is the Noah Webster House Museum. Webster, Sr. was a farmer, weaver, church deacon, and Justice of the Peace. Twelve years after Mercy died, he married again, at age 84, to the widow of Stephen Hopkins. (No photo)

6. (right) Bristow (c. 1731 – 1814)

Born in Africa c. 1731, Bristow (also Bristol or Bristo) was brought to North America and enslaved prior to 1757.

His epitaph reads, "In Memory of Bristow A native of Africa Died March 11, 1814. Aged 83 years"

The original gravestone has been preserved, and a replica now stands in the cemetery. Also marked by a Connecticut Freedom Trail plaque. Nearby are 60 Witness Stones that commemorate other enslaved individuals in WH. It should be noted that many of the earliest families of West Hartford buried here were enslavers. Find out more at Hidden History: noahwebsterhouse.org/hidden-history/

Bristow served in the French and Indian War under Col. Phineas Lyman in the First CT Reg. (1757 – 1761). On May 9, 1775, he purchased his freedom from his owner, Thomas Hart Hooker, for £60. Local tradition claims that after purchasing his freedom, Bristow continued to reside with the Hooker family on New Britain Ave. An 1848 pamphlet on WH history (author unknown) states that he could read and owned a small library.

By 1788 Bristow purchased three acres of land with a gristmill in Bristol, CT for £146. Four years later he sold the land, and by 1800 appears to have moved back into the household of his former enslaver Sarah Whitman Hooker Collins. He died in 1814, at 83. In his will he left his estate to Thomas Hart Hooker, Jr. and his sister Abigail Hooker, the son and daughter of his former enslaver. It is likely that the Hookers arranged for his gravestone.



7. (left) Aaron Cadwell (1760 – 1802) Marble gravestone with urn and willow mourning motif.

8. Zacheus Butler (1743 – 1791) and wife Joanna Butler (1734 – 1813) Butler ran a cider mill and shop. (No photo)



9. (right) Wells Family Ebenezer Wells II (1732 – 1814), first wife Abigail Wells (1740 – 1758), second wife Elizabeth Wells (1730 – 1781), third wife Abi Wells (1752 – 1804), and child Ebenezer Wells III (1765 – 1766)