

The Sampson Stones

An article composed by Robert Tucker Gregg, June 2000, updated December 2011, October 2015

At Vine Lake Cemetery in Medfield, Massachusetts, there are two almost identical stones, each with a perforation. There are no other stones similar to these in the cemetery.



Located in the center of the Colonial graveyard (Section A4, Grave 334), these stones are positioned on an east-west axis. Their composition is quartzite (identified by John Thompson, a Medfield geologist), a material not native to Medfield. The sizes in inches are: west stone (13 wide, 12 high, 2½ thick); east stone (13 wide, 11½ tall, 1 thick). The diameter of each perforation is roughly 1½ to 2 inches. Measurement between the two stones is 72 inches. On the north

side of each stone, a shoulder appears to be cut, while the south side is not shaped as distinctly.

Early Suggestions

The first mention of these stones appears in a "*Sermon preached in Medfield, 5th January 1817, near the 166th Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Town*" by Daniel Clarke Saunders, D.D., Pastor of the Congregational Church in Medfield (Dedham: Abel D. Alleyne, Printer, 1817). On page 16 Sanders states: "There is but one place for the burying of the dead. The land was given by Joseph Metcalf. The first person laid in it, as tradition relates, was one Sampson, and the stones, near the centre of the yeard [sic], erected over his grave are distinguished by being each perforated." (Saunders may have been mistaken about which Metcalf gave the land for the burying grounds. John Metcalf [born 1622 in England] removed to Medfield from Dedham about 1652; his son Joseph inherited the "the home place near the cemetery" after his father's death in 1690. The donor, in all likelihood, was John and not Joseph.) Since we know the date of John Metcalf's arrival in Medfield (*History of the Town of Medfield 1650-1888*, edited by William S. Tilden, George H. Ellis, Boston 1887, page 436-7), the Sampson stones can be dated no earlier than 1652.

The next mention of the stones appears in 1899 when a *Catalog of Inscriptions* was composed by five Medfield citizens. On page 68 it states "(Headstone and footstone with round holes, but no inscription legible. Said by some to be grave of Samuel Morse)." The cause for this assumption may have been the towering presence of the Morse Monument (erected in 1854) located two feet immediately south of the perforated stones. In addition, there are two Morse gravestones, crudely carved, on the other side of the monument. Samuel Morse was a person of some import in Medfield, his house having been burned to the ground during the attack by King Philip's warriors on 21 February 1676. An unsubstantiated argument could be made, based solely on geographical proximity, that the unmarked and undated perforated stones are those of Samuel Morse who died in 1718. This assumption has never been proved or disproved by the Morse Society or family researchers.

A third mention of the stones is made in *Medfield, Massachusetts Proceedings at the Celebration of the Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Incorporation of the Town, June 6, 1901*, page 69. A photograph of the west stone is titled 'First Headstone Erected, 1654.' No name is attached to this stone.

Last, in 1986 a *Catalog of Graves* was compiled by the Medfield Historical Commission. It states: "Grave no. 334 (headstone and footstone have no marking, only a large hole through the center of each; possibly the grave of Samuel Morse." (page 8)

In January 2008 I began the compilation of a *New Catalog of Graves and Inscriptions in the Old Section of Medfield's Vine Lake Cemetery*. It was during this project that new attention was focused on the untitled, undated, perforated stones.

On 23 November 2008, a discovery was made thanks in great part to the angle of the setting sun. Faintly and crudely scratched above the perforation on the west stone was "1667." This date cannot be read unless the right light is present.



In addition to the date, a crude inscription could be read on the left side of the stone below the perforation. In the first line was inscribed "SAMP" and below it on a second line in smaller and fainter letters was "SON." This inscription now confirms Sander's remarks in 1817 that these stones are those of one named Sampson; however, the 1654 date in *Proceedings* is disproved.

Thus, the first two steps have been completed, by identifying the name of the person buried (Sampson) and the burial date (1667). Numerous and intriguing questions remain.

Why are there two perforated stones rather than one? Who was Sampson?

In *Cautantowwit's House* (Brown University Press, Providence, 1970, pages 126-7) William Scranton Simmons itemizes an Indian burial site where a perforated slab of slate was found, eerily similar to Sampson's. He further refers to a drilled slab associated with Indian graves in Connecticut. Simmons cites another reference (page 127): "The Iroquois to the north often made an 'opening through solid materials to allow souls to pass.'"

It appears then that in cases of Native American burials, one perforated stone is used. The uniformity of this practice remains to be seen.

Another practice needs to be examined in which two perforated holes were used. According to Peter Benes (*The Masks of Orthodoxy*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1977, page 38), the earliest New England gravemarkers "were made out of wood, not stone, and probably resembled signboards or sections of fencing." Following the English custom, graves were marked with "coffin posts or rails." These were formed by placing a log or squared beam "upright into the earth at each end of the coffin" and joining these with one, sometimes two, connecting rails, the whole resembling a section of fencing. The rails may have been painted or carved. Not one of these rails exists today, but there are descriptions of them in early letters and probate records.

In the case of Sampson, two stones were used instead of two logs or beams and perforations were made for the rails. Is this principle identical to the English custom even though the material was different?

If the case is made that Sampson was buried using an English custom, then his identity leans in the direction of being an immigrant who resided in Medfield at the time of his death. Thus, the persons who buried him had to be knowledgeable of his background and the prevailing custom, but with these questions: why stone and not wood, and why perforations for the rails and not ties?

Who was Sampson?

Two possibilities come to mind. One is that he was an African-American, the other that he was a slave. In his 1817 sermon Saunders states "A large number of weavers were among the *first* settlers in the town. *Slaves* were common and numerous." (page 26) Three deaths are listed as "Negroes, etc." in the *Vital Records of Medfield, Massachusetts to the Year 1850*, page 243. In each record, the deceased Negroe only has a given name, which is identical to Sampson having just a given name. In contrast, of the almost two thousand persons buried in the Old Section, everyone has a given and surname except for Sampson.

He might have been a slave of a distinguished and early citizen, and his prominent burial location in the middle of the colonial section certainly gives weight to such a consideration. No other references to a Sampson in early Medfield and area resources point to a person by that name. Further research into journals of early citizens may give reference to Sampson's place in a family, if indeed he was a slave.

Sampson's North American Indian connection can be strengthened by the presence of the Praying Indian community in South Natick, a mere four miles northeast of Medfield. An initial email message was sent (26 November 2008) to Jennifer Hance, Executive Director of the Natick Historical Society; her reply (3 December 2008) was that no Sampson is mentioned in any historical records of that community although that does not rule out his connection.

However, the perforated stones are the strongest indicators yet as to Sampson's Native American heritage. No other gravestone in the Medfield burying ground comes the least bit close to resembling his. Observation must also be given to gravestones extant from the early years of Medfield: most all of them are slate while a very few are fieldstone. Furthermore, the funerary practices of the early families point to gravestones that were shaped in traditional rectangular or semicircular tops. All legible inscriptions reveal either Puritan or Protestant attitudes towards death.

Sampson's stones were clearly erected by persons familiar with a culture different from the predominant one in Medfield during the 1660's, simply because his stones are noticeably different from all others. These perforated stones, unique to the Medfield cemetery but perhaps not to others, and their documented association with Indian tribes, enforce a compelling argument that

Sampson was a Native American, although his connection to a Medfield family cannot be determined...yet. In fact he could have been living by himself or with a group of Indians. Regardless of his race, Sampson's burial location in the middle of the colonial burying ground may demonstrate his link to an influential family.

An Intriguing Idea

A most intriguing possibility in identifying Samson's Indian connection is to excavate his burial site. Simmon's well-documented book describes how such undertakings were made in Jamestown, Rhode Island to identify a Native American population being buried there in the same period that Sampson lived. Such an excavation might prove or disprove his Native American identity by examining Sampson's burial posture and the presence of grave goods.

The Association of Gravestone Studies published this article in its *AGS Quarterly*, Volume 33 Number 3 in the Summer 2009. One reader replied with an intriguing idea. She opined that "they were burials of an Indian called 'Samp' and his son. Samp is a word of Algonquian origin (*Oxford English Dictionary*: Nasamp, 1643) meaning coarsely ground corn; hominy, a porridge made from it...'Samp' may have been shortened from an Indian name which no one knew how to spell (syllables were regularly dropped from long Indian names), and 'son' etched below and smaller because he was young and his name was unknown. Or possible 'Samp' was a title given this Indian because he traded ground corn or grew the primary supply."

Some credibility could be given to that fact that two persons are buried here, given the fact that the first line of the inscription "SAMP" certainly has enough room to its right to include the word "SON." Instead the names appear on two lines.

The replier adds: "Indian corn was so valuable at the same time that there was a bounty paid for killing blackbirds in Medfield. The Town Report of 1677, the same year Samp died, says that Henry Smith was paid for 'killing 15 dozen blackbirds.' Incidentally, Indian children were assigned the task of scaring blackbirds out of the corn."

Thus, following this reader's line of thinking, Samp and his son, two Native Americans, are interred beneath these two stones.

The Scholars Respond

I did contact Peter Benes (17 June 2009), asking his insights into the Sampson Stones. In a phone conversation, he stated that he had never seen memorials such as these.

Likewise, a letter (5 April 2010) to Allen I. Ludwig, author of *Graven Images, New England Stonecarving and Its Symbols, 1650-1815*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT, 1966) resulted in a telephone conversation with me. Ludwig stated that, having toured many graveyards throughout the world, he had never seen two stones like these. He was perplexed as to their meaning, offering valid reasons to catalog them as English (a wooden rail supported from the two perforations) or Native American (the two perforations allowing the spirits to be released to the next life.)

Vincent Luti, preeminent scholar of southeastern Massachusetts gravestones and carvers, remarked in a 20 December 2011 phone conversation that he too had never seen memorials like these. He suggested using ground-penetrating radar as another research step to identify whether the remains were buried horizontally (reflecting a Christian tradition) or vertically (indicating perhaps a person of another religious persuasion).

Further Research

My next step is to research probate records or manuscripts of key Medfield citizens who died after 1677. Perhaps references will be made to Sampson or Samp; however, this buried person or persons would have predeceased that citizen and for that reason no mention of him might have been made.

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