

Outdoor Art Gallery

By Tedd Levy • Photos by Old Saybrook Historical Society



Typical cemeteries are somber places that appropriately convey their Greek meaning of “sleeping grounds” but they are filled with quiet excitement for artists, stone carvers, historians and the curious. They are, in fact, unique outdoor art galleries and community treasures.

There are as many interesting features above ground as there are stories below at Old Saybrook’s Cypress Cemetery. It is not only who rests in peace here, but it is also an exhibit area for past stone carvers to show their work and one of the few cemeteries with notable examples of two distinct regional artistic traditions of gravestone design: the Boston School and the Connecticut River Valley School.

In recognition of this important group of gravestones, Cypress Cemetery was recently listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The research supporting this listing was developed over a two-year period by a Maryland-based consulting firm which concluded residents of colonial Saybrook used headstones from both the Boston School where carvers typically used slate and the Connecticut River Valley school which used sandstone.

The celebrated Lady Fenwick monument is the earliest in the cemetery and likely

produced in 1679. It is a sandstone table tomb composed of a large arched block with a roof-like shape on three piers of the same material.

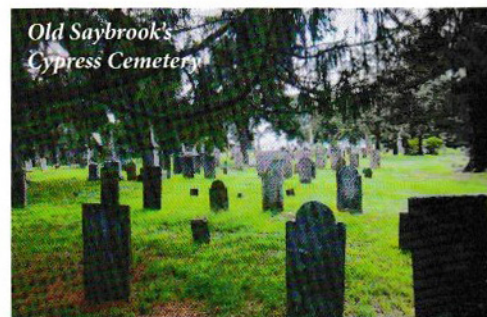
The slate stones of the more sophisticated Boston School include elaborate ornamentation that often portray a winged skull and other symbols including crossed bones, vines, gourds, and floral arrangements.

The Connecticut River Valley school is represented by perhaps its most notable carver, James Stanclift, who was the first to be mining sandstone for markers at the Portland, Connecticut quarries. His work is recognized with his frequent use of all capital letters and periods between words.

Regrettably, many of the designs on these early sandstone markers have not weathered well and have flaked, peeled and crumbled. They are being damaged by the environment and from the ever-growing lichens that obliterate many of the stones. Many need greater attention and protection or will be lost for all time.

A guided tour of this incomparable site will be conducted on Sunday, October 28, 2018 starting at 4:00 p.m. Cost is \$5 with children accompanied by an adult admitted without charge.

For more information on the history of Cypress Cemetery, you can visit the Old Saybrook Historical Society Archives, 350 Main Street or the Cypress Cemetery website at www.cypresscemeteryosct.org



Call the Old Saybrook Historical Society at
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any inquiries or visit our website at www.saybrookhistory.org