West Cemetery History

In 1727-28, during a lull in the French and Indian Wars, the British colonial settlers of the Hadley plantation began to build homes in their East District. In 1730, Hadley Town Meeting authorized a new burying ground for these settlers. The one-acre lot took its name—West Cemetery—from “the West Street” within which the cemetery was created. The West Street was one of 40 (600 foot) wide north-south highways established in a 1703 Hadley land division. Amherst’s early meetinghouses, village center commons, cemeteries, and other shared public uses would all be placed in these highways.

1730-1769 – At first, West Cemetery was an open, unfenced meadow without roads or paths. Graves were not plotted, but simply dug where there was room as people died. Burials faced east and headstones faced west. Most graves were unmarked or had impermanent wooden markers. Permanent markers were of local stone–granite, schist, and sandstone. African Americans, Native Americans, and other people of color were buried together in a separate section of the cemetery at the southeast corner. The cemetery was kept open by the pasturing of livestock.

1770-1832 – The burying ground acquired fixed boundaries during this period. Slate became a popular headstone material and funeral plantings using native species were introduced. Land for the North and South Amherst cemeteries was purchased in 1818.

1833-1868 – The Town expanded the cemetery to the east and west, purchased the access road to North Pleasant Street (the West Highway), and fenced the area. Family plots began to be fenced or coped with stone, and marble became the predominant headstone material. In 1854, the Town laid out the first cemetery road. The next year, the Town Tomb was erected for the “free use of the town,” serving as temporary storage for bodies prior to burial, especially in winter. In 1858, Edward Dickinson arranged for an ornamental iron fence to enclose the Dickinson family plot.

1870-1906 – Individuals and families were required to take deeds permitted in the burying ground except during funerals. To farmers, millworkers, servants, soldiers, professors, and poets. Land for the North and South Amherst cemeteries was purchased in 1818.

During the 20th century, the cemetery suffered from neglect, years of environmental damage, uncontrolled foot traffic, vandalism, and inappropriate use. In 1998, Historic Massachusetts named West Cemetery a historic cemetery.

In January 1730, the town meeting of the British colonial plantation at Hadley voted to grant the settlers of its East District “liberty for a burying place.” Set in the ancient (1703) West Highway, the burying ground became known as the West Cemetery. Amherst was created as a separate colonial parish in 1759 and named for General Jeffery Amherst, a British hero of the French and Indian Wars. West Cemetery was expanded in 1833, and again in 1870. Amherst’s oldest burying ground retains some of the town center’s original unchanged landscape, recognizable to the early colonial settlers who lie here next to farmers, millworkers, servants, soldiers, professors, and poets.

In 1998, Historic Massachusetts named West Cemetery one of Massachusetts “Ten Most Endangered Historic Resources.” By 2000, the Historical Commission had succeeded in getting Amherst’s ancient burying ground listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
From left to right, the mural is divided into the following aspects of Amherst's history as a community:

1. **FARMING**

   - **Farm Children** - North of Mount Nonisock, young Marjorie Atkins Elliott and a friend carry a basket of apples.
   - **Howard Atkins** (ladder, 1912–1957) – 20th century South Amherst orchardist and popular community leader who started the Atkins Farm Country Market.

2. **DOMESTIC LIFE**

   - **Robert Smith** (on right, 1906–1966) – Orchardist and dairy farmer Bob Smith was born in the West Street house that now serves as the Adams House Office for Hampshire College. The 250-acre Smiths family farm was purchased as the site for the new college in 1965.
   - **Emily Dickinson** (†1830–1886) & **Lavinia Dickinson** (†1835–1932) – A widely-traveled agronomist and educator. Stockbridge was the first farm manager, agricultural instructor, and fourth President of Mass. Agricultural College. He also served as a state legislator.

3. **EDUCATION & the MILITARY**

   - **David Todd** (1855–1939) – A distinguished Amherst College professor of astronomy. Todd believed that “canals” on Mars were artifacts of civilization, and conducted high-elevation balloon experiments to detect Martian radio signals. His wife Mabel gave lectures titled, “A Message from Mars.”
   - **Dick Todd** (1895–1985) – Well-loved young son of Austin and Sue Todd. Gib’s death at age 8 of typhoid fever was a severe blow to family and friends.

4. **LITERATURE**

   - **Edward “Hed” Dickinson** (1861–1898) – Old son of Austin and Sue Dickinson.
   - **Martha “Mattie” Dickinson** (later Blanche, 1866–1943) – Austin and Sue Dickinson’s daughter. Novelist and editor of her Aunt Emily’s work.

5. **“Peanut John” Musante** (1848–1913) – World-traveled jazz musician, renowned banjo player and member of the Blue Ribbon Syncopators. B.J. Roberts played with Louis Armstrong and accompanied Josephine Baker. He played locally with the new Black Eagle Jazz Band and Blue Horizon Jazz Band. Member of a longstanding Amherst family of blended African-American and Native-American (Montauk) ancestry.

6. **Business**

   - **Charles “Professor Charley” J. Thompson** (1896–2002) – Arriving in Amherst in 1921, German native Peter Karl Muth opened himself the only doctor in town (the others being away in the military). He opened a general practice and served as Amherst College’s physician. After the war, Dr. Muth opened an obstetrical practice, delivering over 10,000 babies during his career (many of whom were named Peter).

7. **Entertainment**

   - **Stephen Perry Puffer, Sr.** (1896–1985) – A long-time employee of the Stearns family, Charles Stearns continued to operate the stand after Col. W.S. Clark, Hills was instrumental in bringing the Massachusetts Agricultural College to Amherst, and helped to organize local lighting, water, and gas companies.

8. **Revered David Parsons** (1712–1781) – Minister of Amherst’s first church—the Church of Christ in Hadley’s Third Precinct (later the First Congregational Church of Amherst) and a staunch Loyalist during the Revolutionary War. Revered Parsons and his son, Dr. David Parsons, preached from Amherst’s principal pulpit for 70 years.

9. **Barnett Hat Factory Girls** (1896) – Irish women workers at the Barnett Hat factory, one of two successful straw and palm leaf hat factories operated near the Amherst Railroad Depot. In the 1970s, Amherst was “the hatmaking center of the nation.” Irish immigrant men and women constituted a large part of the laboring, factory and service workforce in 19th century Amherst.

10. **Angeline Palmer** (see Henry Jackson, below). Nearly 30 black soldiers enlisted on behalf of Angeline Palmer (of devotion” to freedom.

11. **Dr. Peter Merzbach** (1856-1932) – Member of a prominent North Amherst family, Civil War hero, pioneering physician. After the war, Dr. Merzbach opened an obstetrical practice, delivering over 10,000 babies during his career (many of whom were named Peter).

12. **Charles Parsons** (1872–1946) – A New Hampshire boy fond perplexed by the Scientific Agriculture program at Mass Aggie for leading other students in pranks, Stone instead attended Amherst College, graduated in 1894 and went into law. Appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1925 by fellow Amherst alumnus President Calvin Coolidge, and elevated to Chief Justice in 1941 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.