

Historical Commission answers to CPA Questions
January 15, 2016

Thompson Memorial Stone

- **Can we know for sure whether the photo is actually Christopher Thompson?**

No, as stated in the original proposal, we cannot be certain that the photo is of Christopher Thompson. It is important to note that the identity of the soldier in the photo is *not* important to this project; we thought that CPAC members would be interested in this striking (showing stature and character) photo of someone who is almost certainly one of our Town's black Civil War soldiers. There is no other known surviving photo of any of our black soldiers. It seems to us that it is fairly likely, though of course not certain, that it is Christopher Thompson for the following reason: The source of the photo was a collection of mostly unlabeled photos in the proverbial "shoe box" of family photos in possession of the Harris family. Edythe Roberts Harris is an Amherst native (a 1946 graduate of Amherst High School), and she is directly descended from Christopher Thompson. She is of course related to the four other Amherst Thompsons who fought for the Union (and to some of the other black soldiers from Amherst), but Christopher was her great-great-grandfather.

- **Why are you asking for \$5000 when the Dorsey estimate was for \$2,470 for the more durable granite (marble \$5,636)?**

The estimates from Dorsey Memorial are preliminary and did not factor the additional interpretive language that would be included on the memorial stone. Also, the estimate did not include a contingency that is typically part of project bidding to cover unforeseen expenses. In this case, these expenses could include installation costs that may need to be modified because the memorial would be installed in one of the oldest parts of the cemetery. The Historical Commission therefore asked for enough funds to ensure that the project would be completed--\$3,000 would be cutting it too close and any unused funds would be returned to the CPA.

- **How is this preservation of a historic resource? It seems more like creation of a historic feature, a new memorial stone, which is not allowable under the CPA law.**

Town staff discussed this question with legal counsel who considers that a memorial stone/sign/plaque constitutes preservation of a significant historic resource.

In September 2011 the Town of Amherst held a special ceremony in West Cemetery to honor the twenty black men from Amherst who fought for the Union during the Civil War. The ceremony celebrated an aspect of town history that was not well known – and still is not as well-known as it should be. That ceremony brought together many Amherst citizens, black and white, as well as approximately 35 descendants of those soldiers.

Although that ceremony honored all the black soldiers from Amherst, brief remarks were made during the ceremony (by descendants and others) about the five who are known to be buried in West Cemetery – Charles Finnemore, Genalvin Marse, Charles Thompson, John

Thompson, and Christopher Thompson (Charles, John, and Christopher being three of the five Amherst Thompsons who fought for the Union). For the first four of those men who were honored that day, there exist surviving gravestones. But for Christopher Thompson we know only (from his Pelham death record) that he was buried in West Cemetery in what has historically been “the African American section” of the cemetery.

Erecting a memorial stone for Christopher would provide a fitting post-script to that 2011 ceremony. It would again call attention to the important black history of the Town of Amherst, a history of which very few physical reminders remain. Located close to the path that borders the “African American section” of West Cemetery, it would be highly visible to those who walk along the path and would be a source of pride to the black community.

The stone is not only a memorial to Christopher Thompson but a special-purpose historic interpretative sign – just like the other West Cemetery signs. This memorial interpretive sign happens to be made out of stone and is shaped to fit in with and be visually compatible with the setting in which it is proposed to be located—among headstones in a cemetery. That is why we are referring to it as a “memorial stone”. Searching the CPA Coalition’s project database identified 15 historic sign/marker projects funded in the past three years in 12 different communities throughout the State (see attached). These signs/markers are used, just like the Thompson memorial, to preserve a significant piece of history of the community.

This interpretive sign does several things, all of which have been determined by the Amherst Historical Commission to be significant to the history and culture of this community:

It memorializes West Cemetery (a property whose significance is affirmed by its listing on the Massachusetts and National Register of Historic Places), specifically in terms of its role as the final resting place of members of Amherst’s black community who fought in the Civil War.

The sign preserves and memorializes the life and the resting place of the physical remains of a specific Amherst resident who was significant in the history and culture of the Town of Amherst.

The sign makes specific reference to the other members of his family who served—the remains of some of whom are similarly physically present in the cemetery—in order to highlight and preserve public knowledge of the participation of groups of related men from local black families in the Civil War.

The sign serves to emphasize and provide a focal point for the African-American section of West Cemetery and for public cultural events and private gatherings related to the history of Amherst’s black community. It will serve its historic interpretive purpose and can serve as the focal point for periodic historic celebrations of the heritage it represents

In all of these ways, the proposed stone memorial sign contributes to the preservation of this ancient burying ground which is listed on the state (as well as the national) register of historic places and has been determined by the local Historical Commission to be significant in the history and culture of the Town of Amherst.

- **Would erecting this memorial create a precedent for the many other veterans who might like us to erect a stone?**

Erecting a memorial stone for Christopher and commemorating the black Civil War soldiers is not likely to lead to similar requests. We know (from Christopher's Pelham death record) that he is buried in Amherst's West Cemetery. However, there is no marker or plaque acknowledging his service to the Town and the importance of black soldiers who fought for the Union during the Civil War. The prospect that other black Civil War soldiers from Amherst would be found to have similar death records specifically indicating burial in West Cemetery seems very small and not a cause for concern.

In terms of other veterans, the Town has a War Memorial that honors those from more recent wars and conflicts. Again, the prospect that this project would set a precedent is not likely.

- **What ever happened to the \$20,000 for wildflowers?**

These funds were approved for landscape restoration in the three oldest sections of West Cemetery—the 1730 Knoll, the African-American section, and the Town Tomb. Restoration would include historically-appropriate plantings, improved access, seating, and interpretive markers. Concept plans have been developed in the West Cemetery Preservation Plan and the Commission worked with Alpha Tau Gamma, the fraternity for the Stockbridge School of Agriculture, to donate time and labor to plant native wildflowers on the 1730 knoll. The Commission is developing a public process to finalize landscape designs and is discussing a program of long-term maintenance and upkeep with Parks and Grounds Division. Before undertaking an extensive landscape restoration project the Commission would like the input of the community and the Town Departments that maintain West Cemetery.

- **Please provide clarification about the cost. If the additional writing on the stone takes up the balance, that seems expensive. What is the remaining \$2,500 going toward?**

Please see the response to question 2 above.

CPA Projects for Historic Signs/Plaques 2012-15

Municipality	Project Description	Year Approved
Boxford	Replace old, rotten wooden Historic District Signs marking the boundaries of the Boxford Historic District with new signs.	2015
Boxford	Round Top Park Signage: Place sign marking entrances to historic Round Top Park, site of old army training grounds	2015
Northborough	Historic Site Signage: Informational signs identifying the historic areas of Chapinville, Assabetville, Woodside, and Peter Whitney Parsonage Historic District.	2015
Sudbury	Historic Projects: 1. Build an information kiosk and produce historical signage next to the Hearse House, Town Pound and Revolutionary War Cemetery. 2. Continue Town Survey of Old Homes. 3. Restoration of signage within Town Cemeteries.	2015
grafton	Restoration of the small bank sign that hung on the Grafton Bank located at the Mill Villages Park in South Grafton.	2014
Gloucester	Oak Grove Cemetery - Rehabilitation and Restoration of the Cemetery: Improve the front entrance with signage and landscaping; hire a map maker /and/or landscape architect to examine the historic plans of the cemetery and create new ones which will allow us to install granite street markers and historic plantings throughout the 11 acres; create a brochure including a map; and to complete the assessment of Bradford Chapel.	2014
Chelmsford	Signs to identify the four distinct historic villages that make up the town.	2014
Northborough	Information Signs for Historical Commission: Informational signs identifying the historic nature of the Old Howard Street Burial Ground and the Brigham Street Burial Ground.	2014
Stoughton	Historic Homes Signage: Acquire and install decreitive signs on historic houses throughout the town of Stoughton.	2014
Ashland	Creation, outreach, purchase & installation of up to 124 historic "circa" plaques on properties identified in the 2010 community-wide historic properties survey.	2013
Deerfield	Veterans Street Sign Project: Research and "book" preparation detailing the lives of 24 deceased veterans from Deerfield from the Spanish American War.	2013
Ashland	Purchase & installation of 54 scenic road signs to identify the town's existing 17 scenic roads.	2013
Medway	Historical Markers: Money is to used to purchase more Historical Markers to be set around town. Project Completed and all signs installed May 2015	2013
Newburyport	Newburyport National Register of Historic Places Signage: Design, manufacture and installation of five signs at gateway entries into the Federally-listed Newburyport Historic District.	2013
Agawam	Replace deteriorating Ann Sullivan Memorial sign	2012