

Tombstone, Pink Cemetery, Mansfield, CT

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“A parent’s withered hope is here
Fractured love looms o’er the tomb
Here faithful friendship drops a tear
And goodness mourns her favorite dream”
-Epitaph of Francis Dimock, died 1854 at age 21

This epitaph, deciphered from eroded stone, gave one student a tangible connection to the past. The textures, sounds, and smells experienced on a trip to a local cemetery made “sensing” the past easier and helped students experience the past in a different way than reading documents in the classroom. For this tombstone, the emotion and care behind the inscription, the cost of an expensive stone, and the family buried in a nearby grave gave one student entry points to put flesh on the bones of our classroom discussions about family life, class, and economic change in the early 1800s. Other students studied different headstones, but found their own ways to connect to their subjects. Our class “cemetery project” fit within the curriculum of a US History to 1877 survey course at the University of Connecticut, but also helped students develop multidisciplinary skills and prepare for future advanced coursework.

Through the early part of the semester, students built skills in document analysis and writing with primary sources. While most of the course followed a typical survey course’s broad content scope, I wanted one focused unit that gave students a better chance to explore a narrow topic and build skills needed for advanced courses within the major. Two cemeteries close to campus that dated to the mid-1700s provided that opportunity. During the fall semester, we focused on the decades surrounding the Revolutionary War, 1760s-1780s, and the spring project focused on the era of the Market Revolution and early industrialization in the 1830s-1850s.

Before taking students out in the field, I laid groundwork with several focused lecture segments, assigned primary sources, and a secondary source selection that showed social dynamics and economic changes in New England in the designated time period. These helped teach narrative and concepts, particularly the structures of class, events of the early Revolution period, or the economic structures of farming and early industrial work.

Students selected their tombstones in one concentrated day of field work. After an introduction to the site and selected examples of different tombstone elements, they wandered the cemetery to find a tombstone with something that caught their interest. Deciphering archaic language and interpreting the symbolism of ivy, trees, skulls, or flowers engaged students who usually did not participate in the classroom. They marveled at the long lifespan of some individuals, while seeing the short lifespan on some children’s gravestones drove home the realities of disease and injury in a different era. Changes in tombstone materials and decorations showed changing trade networks and cultural expectations. Locally-sourced slate headstones transitioned to marble or granite quarried in Vermont and by the early 1800s Calvinist exhortations of faith became emotional expressions of devotion and love such as that on Francis Dimock’s headstone.

Back in the classroom, students devoted all of one class day and part of another to detailed research on their individuals and their lives. They used online databases such as Ancestry, pamphlets and records from the town historical society, and secondary sources to build on whatever elements of their individual’s lives they found most interesting or accessible. Some students found digitized probate inventories to reconstruct a person’s wealth and occupation. Others used information on a person’s extended family to illustrate common family sizes or ages of marriage. By doing their own primary source research, often for the first time, students learned to relate their findings to secondary sources or course narratives.

Finally, students used their research and photographs to build an online exhibit as part of an ongoing local history partnership with the town's public library. The library hosts an Omeka database, a basic platform for cataloging items and creating small exhibits. Students wrote up their findings to create a varied picture of local life during the 1700s or 1800s, relating specific local individuals to larger social trends, then created a site as part of the class exhibit. Building their site on the Omeka platform exposed students to basic principles of web and exhibit design. They had to adapt to the interface to create a user-friendly and visually appealing site. Once complete, the University of Connecticut History Department and Mansfield Public Library helped publicize the exhibits. A similar exhibit could also be built using Google Sites or WordPress.

Through the story of Francis Dimock and other local residents, students found a new way to explore the past and see how the big narratives of a US history survey look in lived reality. They also built that experience into a lasting artifact that taught multidisciplinary skills in research, writing, and design. Through this project, the loving epitaph Francis Dimock's parents carved for their daughter helps a new generation understand the past in new ways.