

## CHESTER CENTER CEMETERY – CHESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

### A Collaborative Model?

> Analysis of the related *Find A Grave* Information <

This cemetery is an ideal candidate to evaluate the relevance of *Find A Grave* information. A survey of every head stone in the town was created by Francis O'Leary in 1981. All extant early vital records through 1850 for many MA towns (including Chester) were compiled and published by the NEHGS in 1900. The State started a system of mandatory vital record collection and reporting by the towns in 1841 - and all records through 1915 are indexed and available in full on-line.

Chester presents probably an almost unique opportunity to evaluate the accuracy of the *Find A Grave* on-line cemetery and burial data base. All the Chester head stones existing in 1981 are known and Massachusetts has probably the strongest genealogical documentary presence in the country. Very few people are aware of the head stone index.

My personal interest in this cemetery is from having two 1700 era immigrant ancestors and my very own Revolutionary War veteran interred in this yard. I live about seven miles away on the same road as the cemetery in Middlefield.

Chester Center Cemetery was established at the original early center of the town. It was the almost exclusive burial site from the 1760s through about 1840. At that time the rail road came through the town and the town center transferred to an area adjacent to the new railroad and at a site of early industrial activity – called Chester Factories. A new cemetery was established there at about that time. Chester Center became an agricultural cross roads and never regained its early stature.

*Find A Grave* lists 579 entries for this cemetery as of this date. 277 headstones are identified and photographed. The remaining 302 entries obviously come from a wide variety of sources. It is these 302 entries that I wish to evaluate as an indicator of how useful the service is for genealogical research. I also wanted a list of headstones that needed photographing or if unknown - then for inclusion in the data base.

I compared these 302 entries against the known head stones - and if not found there looked to the vital records for a Chester connection. If a head stone does not exist and Chester is listed as a place of death - then attributing a person's burial to this yard is a probability through 1840 and a possibility after that date. I am not aware of any early sexton's records that would clarify the early deaths and their place of burial.

Many burials were never commemorated with a stone and certainly stones have disintegrated or disappeared over the last 250 years. Many children died before the age of 5 and it was uncommon to mark their grave in the early years.

I anticipated that this cemetery would have been almost completely cataloged and photographed due to the high number of pre-1800 burials, Revolutionary War veterans and multi-generational family burials.

The evaluation of the 302 un-photographed entries:

- Valid Entries needing a Photograph = 155 (51.3%)
- Probable / Possible – No Head Stone = 92 (30.5%)
- Buried in other Chester Cemeteries = 15 (5.0%)
- Deaths not readily identified in the Chester Records = 38 (12.6%)
- Duplicated Entries = 2 (0.7%)

At this point I had a list of headstones attributable to *Find A Grave* activities. I then had to ask if there were headstones not yet identified. It was time consuming digging through the 1981 reverse index but was worth the effort as 35 head stone listings were found that had not been identified by data base submitters.

This means that there are 467 total head stones in this yard. The 277 already photographed are only about 59% of the total. I wouldn't have been surprised if over 90% had already been photographed.

What is amazing to me is there are only 38 (8.1%) questionable entries as compared to the 467 head stones. That is a very low error rate for a data base that is freely accessible by anyone and no proof or evidence required for submission. I suspect there is a high pride of ownership with many blossoming genealogies being maintained and expanded by a strong family presence. Corrections are easily submitted and to my experience are usually quickly corrected. People readily transfer ownership to dedicated descendants. This successful collaborative model should be applied to other genealogical areas.

This is my go to place for genealogy. I only hope Ancestry can keep their hands off this gem.

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