

# THE CTHULHU PRAYER SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

## Fourth Meeting of The Providence H.P. Lovecraft Friends' Group

JUNE 10, 2001 — For the fourth successive month, writers, artists, composers and others who are fans of the writing and mythos of H.P. Lovecraft, America's greatest horror writer, gathered at the Union Station Brewery in downtown Providence for the Cthulhu Prayer Brunch. The managers of this micro brewery, famed for its excellent cuisine, assured us that our own outdoor tables would be ready, despite the scandal caused by the disappearance of a patron's infant during our last visit. Our own "Cthulhu Table" would be set and ready with its multitentacled party favors, and the Elder Gods would receive an appropriate burnt offering in the kitchen.

Attendees for past Cthulhu Prayer Brunches included founder Brett Rutherford, Providence's Gothic poet and small press publisher; Carl Johnson, Providence-born actor noted for his Lovecraft re-enactments; artists Pieter Vanderbeck, Pierre Ford, Jennifer Booth and Riva Leviten. Also: Joseph Cherkes, publisher of *Haunts* magazine, poet Thomas D. Jones, rare book librarian Allison Rich, and classical scholar and teacher Jacob Rabinowitz.

The planned afternoon outing is a journey to Providence's Old North Burial Ground, to visit the grave of Sarah Helen Whitman, the poet and one-time fiancée of Edgar Allan Poe. This is a followup to our truncated visit last month. This time we will indulge in some gravestone studies and impromptu poetry reading.

The Cthulhu Prayer Brunches are intended to be both social and intellectual, bringing together both fellow creative artists and Lovecraft fans of all ages. Most brunches will be followed by field trips to Lovecraftian sites, film viewing, poetry/fiction readings or discussions. Artists engaged in Lovecraft-related work are encouraged to bring their work to show and share. Artists and writers may also submit work excerpts, poems, graphics files, shameless promotions of their work, and personal ads for trans-dimensional relationships.



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## PROVIDENCE'S NORTH BURIAL GROUND: 300 YEARS OLD AND LOOKING ITS AGE

by Brett Rutherford

In Providence's literary, artistic and Gothic circles, there is usually talk of only one city cemetery: the splendidly-maintained Swan Point, where H.P. Lovecraft is buried. Sitting on the banks of the Seekonk and surrounded by handsome streets and a stone wall, it is the ideal of "garden cemeteries." But Providence's *first* burial ground, huge and full of historic graves, sits nearly forgotten off North Main Street. It is the resting place of Sarah Helen Whitman, founding father Stephen Hopkins, the famous (and infamous) Brown family and many other notables.

Last month, members of the Cthulhu Prayer Society had a brief glimpse of this neglected and forlorn 110-acre cemetery when we went — alas, too late in the day! — to place flowers on the grave of poet Sarah Helen Whitman. We arrived just before 4:00 pm, when the gates were about to be sealed. Although some of us would have been pleased to spend the night, others were not eager to be trapped behind a wrought-iron fence in a sinister neighborhood.

Today we return to the North Burial Ground, armed with a little history, and a map to show us how to find the grave of Edgar Poe's beloved Helen. Although Providence was settled in 1636, the town did not get around to creating a civic burial ground until 1700. Since many families owned large plots of land, it was customary to bury the dead on one's own property. Some churches also had burial grounds for their congregations.

The cemetery had no official records until 1848, so the exact number of burials may never be known. Anywhere from 10 to

20% of the graves before the 19<sup>th</sup> Century had stones; the rest were known by relative location only, gradually forgotten by successive generations. The bones of sailors, servants, slaves, criminals, strangers, orphans, widows and the poor, although segregated by class and race, soon became a promiscuous earthwork of skeletons and rotting pine.

The well-to-do of Providence did not seem to care for the North Burial Ground. Its creation was regarded as a civic necessity, but also as a utility. The town fathers declared that the then-22-acre plot of land could also be used for military training.

No one, in fact, was known to be buried there until 1711, when John Whipple, who lived on adjacent land, was interred. His stone still remains, with a second stone added, confirming this to be the Burial Ground's first occupant. The burial ground's first grave was dug by eighteen-year-old Epinetus Ballou. A stone grave marker for Mr. Whipple was not made

## MISKATONIC UNIVERSITY DRINKING SONG

created for  
THE FIRST CTHULHU PRAYER  
BREAKFAST

*Yog-Sothoth! Yog Sothoth!*  
Bless our broth!  
*Tekelili, Tekelili!*  
Bend the knee,  
Drink the tea!  
*Nyarlahotep! Nyarlahotep!*  
Nothing rhymes with Thee!  
*Azathoth! Azathoth!*  
Not more broth?  
*Herbert West?* Be my guest!  
*Dexter Ward* — but not possessed!  
*Ech Pi El! Ech Pi El!*  
Taste the ale!  
*Cthulhu! Cthulhu!*  
Union Brew! Union Brew!



The uncut grass gives North Burial Ground plenty of atmosphere in the autumn. Photo taken last October.

until 1723, executed by Newport stone carver Phillip Stevens.

Nearby are stones for two earlier Whipples, Captain John Whipple (1617-1685) and his wife Sarah (1624-1666), which appear to pre-date the 1711 "first burial," but these bodies were moved here later, with new stones carved for the occasion. (The lesson — do not always believe what you read.)

By 1725, only 18 documented burials had occurred in the burial ground, clear sign that home burial was still preferred. The burial ground land was used for a town animal pound. A whipping post and stocks were set up there, too. The Rhode Islanders may have been rebels against the Puritans, but they were still Englishman, fond of dispensing corporal punishment for such offenses as reveling on the Sabbath.

Gravestone carving became a Providence profession with the arrival of John Anthony Angel, who came from Portsmouth, RI in 1747. Other gravestone carvers were George Allen, Seth Luther, and Stephen Hartshorn.

Finally, the idea of a civic burial ground caught on. As the population expanded and land grew scarcer and more valuable, it became plain that having Grandpa in the backyard was an impediment to business and real estate. The burial ground underwent expansion, with some houses along its edge vacated, the owners often settling for an exchange of land. The burial ground underwent successive expansions in 1747, 1764, 1776 and 1867.

The creation of Benefit Street, cutting across many vertical plots of land running up College Hill, also resulted in the relocation of a number of family plots to the North Burial Ground, with the endorsement and encouragement of the city fathers. Providence's Quakers also acquired a designated part of the burial ground for themselves, moving their graves from Olive Street. Many other historic grave plots wound up in Swan Point Cemetery, which explains how a garden cemetery opened in 1846 has stones from the 18<sup>th</sup> century!

The first North Burial Ground overseer was hired by the city in 1804, the grimly-named Uriah Hopkins. He was paid \$10 a year for his duties, which included keeping the paths clear for carriages. He also had a small problem worthy of a



Providence poet Sarah Helen Whitman. Photo from The Providence Athenaeum.



Gravestone of Sarah Helen Whitman's parents, Capt. Nicholas Power and Anna Power.



The rather tiny and nondescript grave marker for Sarah Helen Whitman, in the Power family plot. She deserves better than this!

Lovecraft tale: depredations by Brown University medical students who needed cadavers for their anatomy studies. Grave robbing became such a problem that the state government had to pass a law against it, providing for a \$5,000 fine and up to six years in prison for grave robbing. The problem was sufficiently real, for the legislature came back again and stiffened the penalties and added provisions against defacing or damaging gravestones, monuments and mausoleums.

The grim and utilitarian grounds gave way, in mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, to the inspiration of Cambridge's Mt. Auburn, the first "garden cemetery," suitable for strolling, carriage rides, and the appreciation of planted trees and flowers, sculptures and fountains. The city hired Niles Schurbach, who had designed Swan Point Cemetery, to landscape North Burial Ground and make it into a model cemetery.

The layout of the north end of the cemetery, despite the air of neglect that hangs over it today, gives one a clear impression of the park-like atmosphere sought by the designer. Along North Main street is a splendid marble double staircase, added in 1899 using stone left over from the construction of the state capitol.

The eastern half of the burial ground includes the Quaker field, as well as several "potter's field" areas for burial of the indigent. There is one ominous obelisk which marks the burial plot for a home for elderly women, marked, "The last resting place on earth for poor women." Fancy having to read that as your friends were being lowered into the ground!

Burials were segregated. The hated Irish were not buried with the Protestants of English descent. When written records of burial commenced in 1848, the journals had notations indicating, "Irish," "Scottish," or "colored." In fact the first entry in these journals, according to historian John Sterling, is for one William Dixson, March 21, 1848, 36 years old and "colored."

A wooden fence was built around the burial ground in 1822, at a cost of three hundred dollars. This fence was still well maintained at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today's high iron fence is now sadly typical of urban cemeteries, fencing the dead in and protecting the graves from drug-and-rock-music crazed teenagers.

The burial ground, although it does not have many large monuments and mausoleums, has much to offer admirers of tombstone art. In places it is overgrown, affording opportunities for atmospheric photos. And there are splendid specimens of tombstone carving to be seen. There are an estimated 164 gravestones from 1700 to 1750, and more than 900 more before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Over 100,000 persons have been buried in the North Burial Ground since 1700.

For more information about the North Burial Ground, including a complete map and index of burials before 1848, see John E. Sterling's book, *North Burial Ground, Providence, Rhode Island: Old Section 1700-1848: 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*. It is published by the Rhode Island Genealogical Society, P.O. Box 433, Greenville, RI 02828. The Providence Public Library and the Library of the Rhode Island Historical Society have a wealth of material to assist in further studies.

### NEXT MEETING

SUNDAY JULY 22nd

11:30 am, Union Station Brewery Exchange Place, in Kennedy Plaza. Program to be announced for "field trip" after the brunch.