

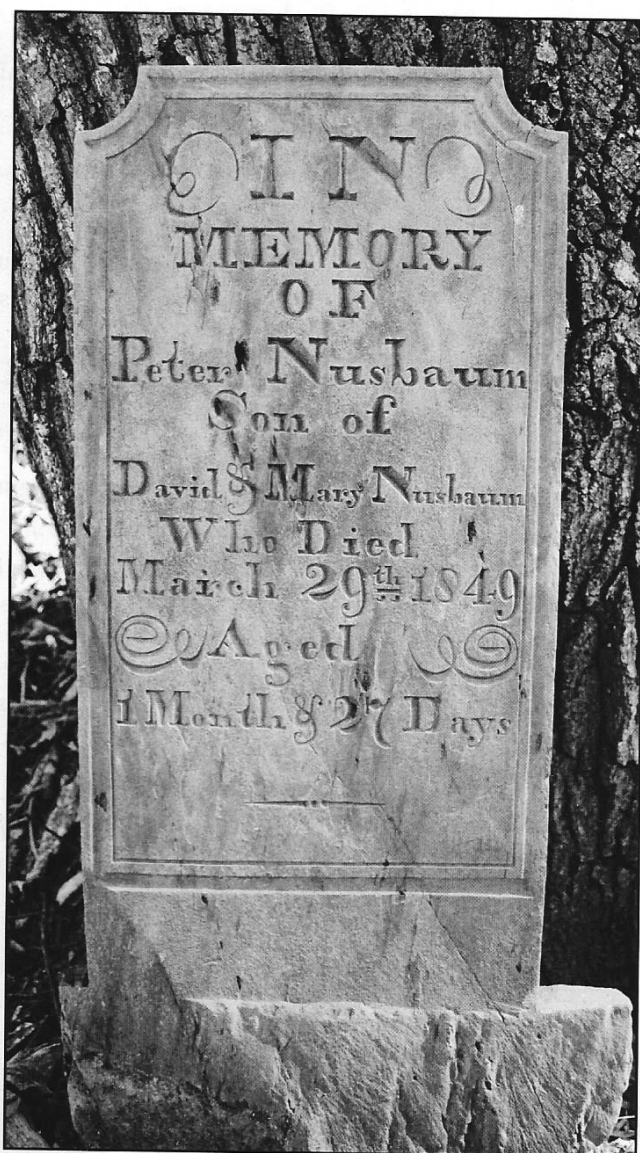
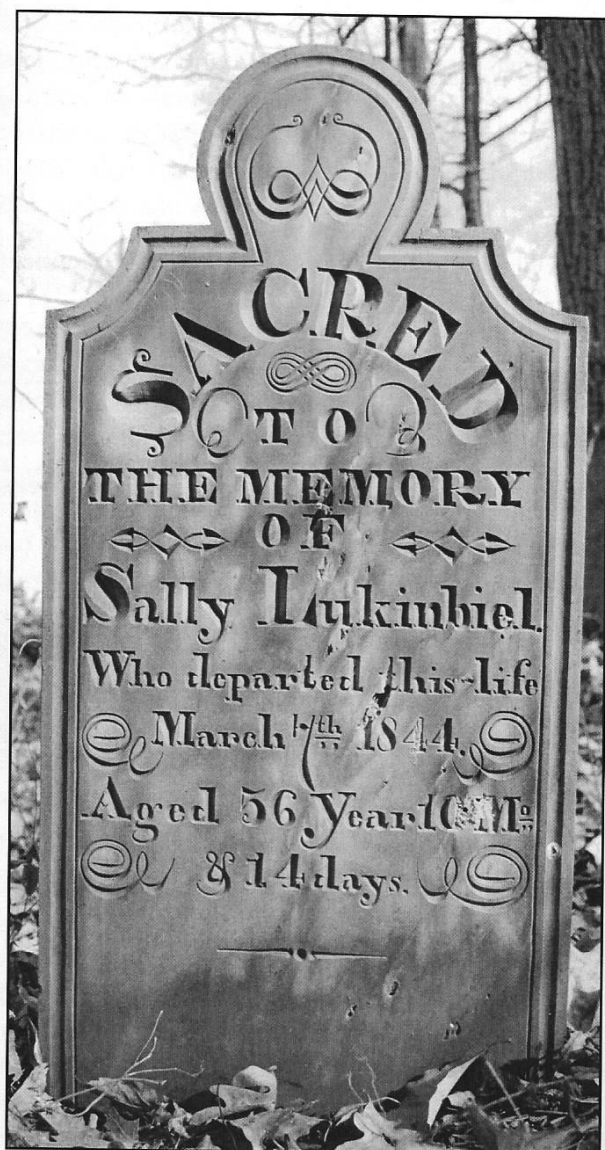
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God's Little Acre—America's most Significant Colonial African-American Burial Ground

Lewis Keen

Photos by the author

The Common Burying Ground¹ located in Newport, Rhode Island, is the final resting place for notable colonial Americans including: William Ellery, a signer of the Declaration of Independence; James Franklin, official printer for the Colony and brother to Benjamin Franklin; and William Vernon, instrumental in the formation of the colonial Navy. Likely the most noteworthy aspect of the site is the northern section, which is the largest marked gravesite for enslaved and free people of African descent in Colonial America. In later years, this site would be referred to as God's Little Acre. (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1. This sign designated the site was installed in April 2018 and replaced an earlier sign that was damaged in a storm.

Due to its deep sheltered harbor, by the 1750s Newport developed into an international shipping center. It was one of the five major port cities in America competing with New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Charleston. In addition to imports, locally produced products like rum helped fund the great wealth accumulated by Newport families. Rum production was an integral part of the colonial slave trade and might be considered the foundation of all business in the city. With the slave trade presence and the need for skilled and unskilled labor in Newport, it is not surprising that the city included among its residents the largest number of Africans in the colony.² The final resting place of these men, women and children would become God's Little Acre. Today the site contains more than 200 graves with

professionally carved stones for people of African descent. It is the largest and most significant marked site in the country.³

Beginning in 1705, Newport had its own grave stone carver, John Stevens. The Stevens family and shop carved stones for over one hundred years and the first three generation of Stevens are considered some of the most artistic grave stone carvers of Colonial New England. Of the more than 200 stones marking the graves of enslaved and free Africans in God's Little Acre, (Fig. 2) John Stevens carved two stones, his son John II carved 52 stones, his son William carved 43 stones, his son Philip carved two stones and his grandson John III⁴ carved 52 stones.⁵ Additionally, local carver John Bull is known to have created 19 stones in God's Little Acre. Pompe Stevens carved two stones, but his significance is that he was of African descent, not the number of stones he created. Pompe, enslaved to William Stevens, is believed to be one of the first African-American artists in the country. He was trained by William Stevens; their carving styles are similar. Pompe may have carved numerous other stones currently attributed to William.

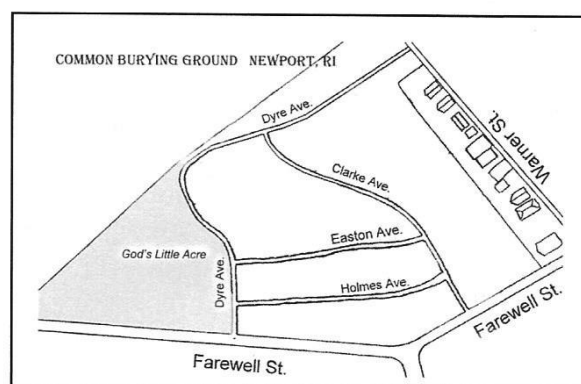


Fig. 2. A map of the Newport Common Burying Ground showing the location of God's Little Acre.

There are areas of God's Little Acre where no stones exist today and may be the site of unmarked burials. Stones could have been lost over time or never placed on these gravesites. The first known stone located in

God's Little Acre is for Hector Butcher who died in 1720. (Fig. 3)⁶ This stone, carved by John Stevens I, displays the design of other Newport stones and lacks any iconography in the tympanum. Hector is identified as a Negro servant, a designation appearing on about 24% of the stones in God's Little Acre.⁷ His owner, Ann Butcher, came from Barbados, an island associated with the colonial slave trade.



Fig. 3. The oldest stone is the site for Hector Butcher.

As with the majority of businesses in the eighteenth century, when John Stevens I retired the shop was inherited by his eldest son, John Stevens II. The stones carved by John Stevens II display the iconography that best represents the Stevens style of carving and is seen in the Violet Searing stone. (Fig. 4) The frontal, full-faced, bald effigy flanked by vines, is a design found on numerous stones carved by Stevens family members. This ubiquitous design appears on stones for people of all faiths, socio-economic groups, ages and genders. John's stone for Sarah Folger (Fig. 5) is an example of an effigy with a cap or smooth wig, a design he used on multiple stones. The stones carved by John II for Africans are no different for those carved for people of European descent.

William, the youngest son of the founder, would become the family's most productive carver and examples of his work are found in God's Little Acre. Like his brother's iconography, the images used in God's Little Acre are no different than those used elsewhere. William's style varies from his brothers in a number of ways and he was the only carver to detail eyelashes. The Dinah Tanner stone (Fig. 6) exhibits the eyelash element William used and is a good example of his work.



Fig. 4. A stone showing the style of the Stevens shop and carved by John Stevens II.

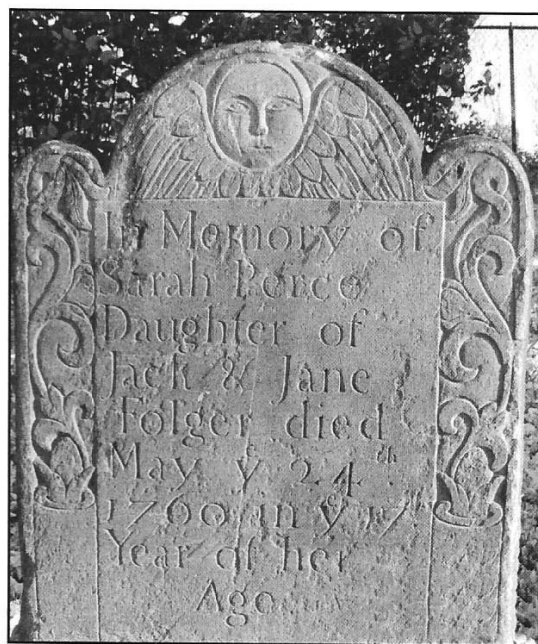


Fig. 5. A Steven's carved stone with a cap on the effigy.



Fig. 6. Details of a William Stevens face display his signature eyebrows.

It has been documented that one enslaved African working with William was Pompe.⁸ Researchers speculated for decades about an African stone carver in Newport and the Steven's shop. Based on the information available today, Pompe Stevens appears to be the colonial African stone carver in Newport. Two stones are attributed to him and his style closely resembles the work of William. The stone for Pompey Lyndon (1763-1765) (Fig. 7) is signed "Cut by P.S." and the conclusion is that the initials stand for Pompe Stevens. Caesar Lyndon, Pompey's father, wrote in his diary, "Our little darling Pompey was born ye 2 May 1763. Taken ill in the night this day with bloody flux September 5 1765 and died Wednesday morning about one quarter after nine o'clock being the 11th of said September 1765." Caesar was the personal secretary and clerk to Josiah Lyndon who served the colony as its clerk for nearly 50 years (1728-1777). The stone cut for Cuffe Gibbs (Fig. 8) states "This stone was cut by Pompe Stevens in memory of his brother Cuffe Gibbs." This is the only stone in Newport that is known to be for a person of African descent and carved by a person of African decent. Had Pompe not signed the stone as Cuffe's brother, the relationship of the two men would be unknown.



Fig. 7. One of two stones believed to have been carved by African carver Pompe Stevens.

Markers created by John Stevens III, grandson of the founder of the shop, are of special interest. Not only did he carve a large number of stones in God's Little Acre, but the style of the iconography noticeably changes from the work of other family members. John III was more artistically trained than other



Fig. 8. Pompe Stevens carved the stone and identified Cuffe as his brother.

family carvers, was purely a carver (not a mason like his father and grandfather) and worked in more modern times than his relatives. His stones evolved from the classic Stevens style to display three quarter effigies with new facial features and new designs on the side panels. In God's Little Acre, some of these changes to the effigies are viewed by many as exhibiting more African than European features. One such stone was created for Pompey Brenton⁹ (1717-1772). (Fig. 9) Pompe was, during his lifetime, elected as a Newport African Governor, a practice that started in 1756. His election might indicate he was a person in high regard in the community. Stevens also created a stone for Mintus Brenton (Figs. 10, 11), also suggested to display African features. Sadly, as seen in these images, this stone has been badly damaged. This tragic loss was the impetus for a renewed effort to preserve and protect the stones in Newport's historic burying grounds and specifically in God's Little Acre.

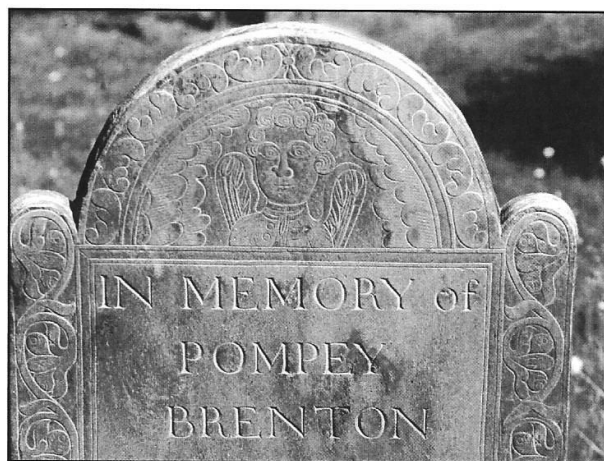


Fig. 9. A carving many find more African than European in design

Perhaps some good can come from the damage to this historic stone. Violet Hammond's stone is another some researchers have identified as displaying African features (Fig. 12) that was carved by John Stevens III.

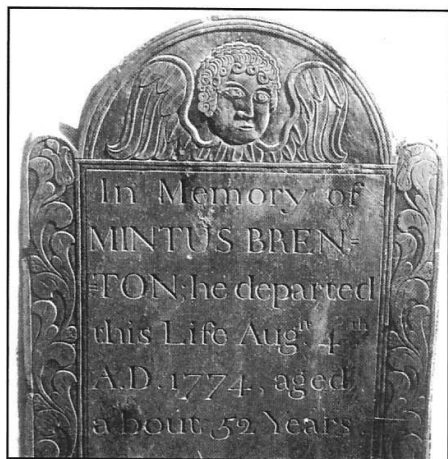


Fig. 10. Mintus Brenton stone before damage.



Fig. 11. Mintus Brenton damaged stone.

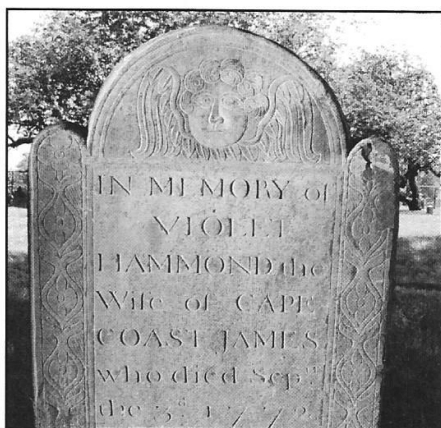


Fig. 12. A stone possibly exhibiting African features.

There are stones in God's Little Acre that illustrate the African tradition of naming boys for the day of the week on which they were born. This can be seen on the stone for Quash (Sunday) Dunbar. (Fig. 13) Boys with the name of Quamino were born on a Saturday and, likely, this African naming tradition is the origin for the name Charles Quamine Gardner (Fig. 14). He was the son of one of Newport's most important members of the African community, Newport Gardner, who was able to retain his African name, Nkrumah Mireku.

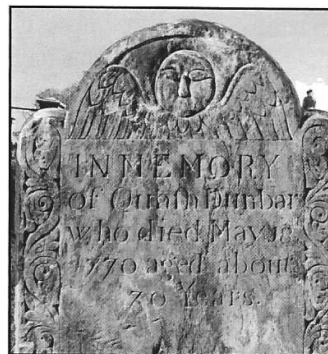


Fig. 13. The African naming tradition illustrated here for Quash (Sunday) Dunbar.

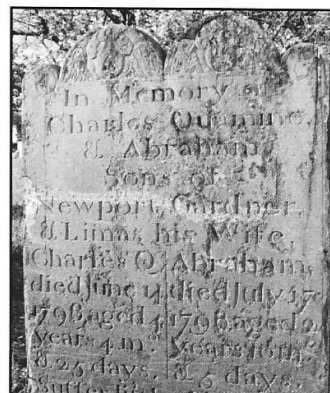


Fig. 14. Stone for children of Newport Gardner.

The Arthur Flagg stone (Fig. 15) raises an interesting question regarding names, African Americans and grave stones. When his son Solomon Nubia died (1785), both father and son's names are "Tikey." (Fig. 16) It's possible that after becoming a free man, Arthur changed his surname to Tikey,¹⁰ but the surname Flagg was the one used on his gravestone (1810) and also on the stone for his wife (1802). There is no evidence to clearly indicate why on the gravestones the family name would revert back to Flagg.

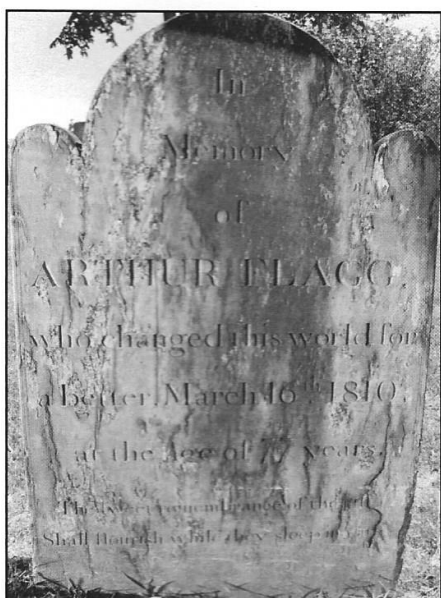


Fig. 15. The Arthur Flagg stone displays his English name.

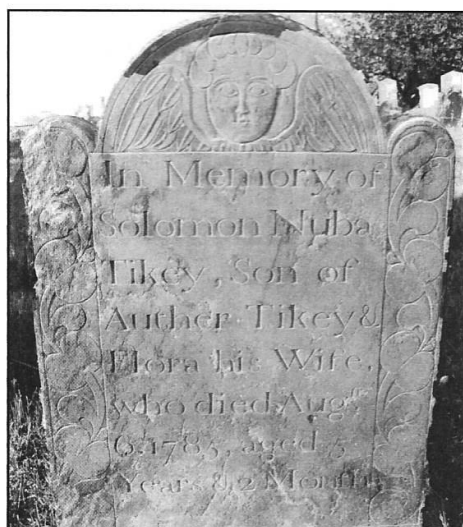


Fig. 16. Arthur Flagg's son's stone reflects his African name.

God's Little Acre is the final resting place for relatives of those who were once enslaved in colonial Newport. Ann Seixas (1796c-1881) (Fig. 17) is buried in God's Little Acre, daughter of enslaved African Peter Seixas. Her marker is located in the area where many of the enslaved Africans in colonial Jewish households can be found. Her parents were enslaved to the Seixas family, but there is no evidence where they are buried.

The stone for Toney Taylor (Fig. 18) displaying the latest style of John Stevens III, states that Toney was a

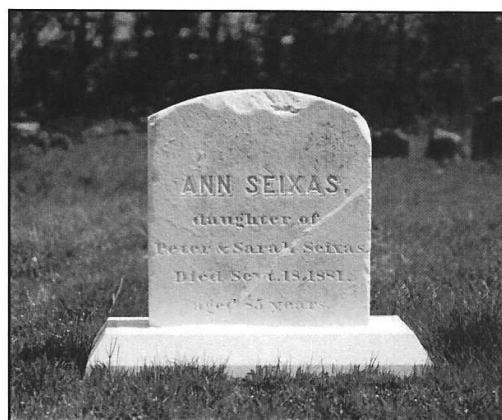


Fig. 17. Descendent of enslaved Africans.

member of the Baptist Church, but does not indicate that he served as the President of the African Union Society. In 1780 the African Union Society was established in Newport and was one of the earliest African-American organizations in the country. An offshoot of the society was the Palls and Biers Society that assisted African-American families with burials. Dutchess Quamino was able to buy part of the business in 1792, making her the first black woman invited to join a black male organization in New England.¹¹ She is mostly known for her baking expertise and was memorialized in the epitaph on her stone written by William Ellery Channing, Unitarian minister. (Fig. 19) He stated "In memory of Duchess Quamino, a free black of distinguished excellence; Intelligent, industrious, affectionate, honest, and of exemplary piety; who died June 29, 1804."

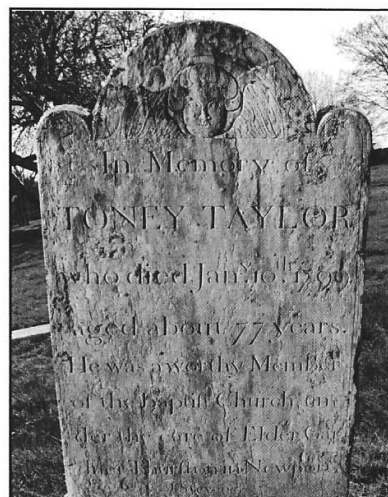


Fig. 18. Toney Taylor, President of the African Union Society, carved by John Stevens III.



Fig. 19. Duchess Quamino stone includes epitaph by William Ellery Channing.

Church affiliation is noted on some stones located in God's Little Acre and church documents provide important information about African-American families. Zingo Stevens is often documented as a member of the community who was enslaved as a mason in the shop of John Stevens II. Due to his affiliation with the Second Congregational Church and the information about Zingo and his family recorded by Ezra Stiles, we know about his children and three wives. While Zingo is not buried here, his wives and children are. The gravestone for Phillis (Fig. 20) is a fine example of the later work of John Stevens III.



Fig. 20. Family members of Zingo Stevens possibly exhibiting African features.

There are known burials in other sections of the Common Burial Ground for enslaved people of African decent. Tobe Brightman, (Fig. 21) Harry Easton, Murear Easton and Jeanette Phillips are buried in the southern section of the site, the opposite end from God's Little Acre. There are no known reasons for the burials outside of God's Little Acre. Perhaps the families felt that the enslaved were family members and should be buried with the rest of the family, or perhaps it was more economical to bury here. We do not know the reason why they were buried near the families.



Fig. 21. Tobe Brightman stone is not located in God's Little Acre.

With the guidance of the Newport Historic Cemetery Commission, the City of Newport embarked on a campaign to conserve stones located in God's Little Acre in 2017. While the emphasis was on slate, colonial stones, "newer" marble and granite stones were treated as well. The most frequent, significant and expensive work needed was on slate stones exhibiting delamination. (Fig. 22) Of the 57 stones recently treated, 13 were slate. The Daniel Jordon stone (Fig. 23) displayed a great deal of delamination, but after treatment its edge is now sealed against the elements. Some stones, like the Peg Bull (Fig. 24) stone had lost sculptural elements that were reworked. Other stones, like the Dinah Wigner on Wanton (Fig. 25) and Pompey Brenton stones, were determined to be historically or artistically important and in need of some cleaning and minor work.

A careful review of all the stones located in God's Little Acre determined that about 100 stones need some level of treatment. The remaining stones on site were either in good condition and required no work at this time or exhibited so much deterioration that any effort to conserve them would not be worthwhile.



Fig. 22. Stone displays delaminating slate layers.



Fig. 23. Slate stone after conservation work.



Fig. 24. Slate stone with some restorative work needed.



Fig. 25. Stone in good condition and received minor work and cleaning.

There are many reasons for the number of existing stones in God's Little Acre. Perhaps the most important one is that for decades they have been looked after by guardian angels. Keith and Theresa Stokes (Fig. 26) have monitored the site for years, researched the people buried here, and shared their stories with everyone who would listen. In addition to offering tours to the public and speaking to groups, a website, www.colonialcemetery.com, was created to share the information about this historic place. Their efforts helped place God's Little Acre in the national spotlight where it belongs.

Sharing the history of Africans and African Americans in the formation of the United States of America is important. Few documents provide us with information about these people or their lives. Gravestones provide one source useful in uncovering their history and documenting their contributions to society. God's Little Acre, the largest colonial marked burial site for free and enslaved Africans in America, contains more stones than in the rest of all New England.¹² The site is unparalleled as a source of historic information. The massing of these stones, as well as the individual memorials, provides us with insight into a world rarely documented.



Fig. 26. Keith and Theresa Stokes.

Notes

1. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places 1974.
2. Glenn A. Knoblock, *African American Historic Burial Grounds and Gravesites of New England* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2016) 11
3. Knoblock, 87. "the sheer number of headstones found here for the enslaved is much greater than all of the others known to exist in the rest of New England combined." and John Sterling et al, *Newport Rhode Island Colonial Burial Grounds* (RI Genealogical Society, 2009) 171: "it is the largest colonial burial ground for people of color in America."
4. The use of John I, John II, and John III is not the given names but a way for the author to differentiate between the three men for the reader.
5. John Sterling et al., *Newport Rhode Island Colonial Burial Grounds* (RI Genealogical Society, 2009).
6. Most of the images were photographed by Letty Champion and Barbara Austin.
7. Knoblock, 102.
8. Vincent F. Luti, *Mallet and Chisel* (New England Genealogical Society, Boston Massachusetts, 2002) 300.
9. Richard C. Youngken, *African Americans in Newport; An Introduction to the Heritage of Africans in Newport, Rhode Island, 1700-1945* (The Newport Historical Society, 1998) 15 and Knoblock, 107.
10. Knoblock, 18.
11. Knoblock, 73.
12. Knoblock, 87.

Lew Keen has served as the Chair of the Newport Historic Cemetery Commission (HCAC) since June 2016 when it was reactivated. In addition to presentations, tours, signage and events, the commission has guided conservation work on more than 150 gravestones. In addition to his cemetery work, Lew leads walking tours for the Newport Historical Society, provides presentations at Touro Synagogue and is active in the Newport Photographers' Guild. His website, ripnewport.com was recently launched to provide information for anyone interested in the historic burial grounds and cemeteries in Newport. His email address is keen1876@cox.net.

The Untold Story of Alexander Williams Beverly Baker



The sign for the cemetery that Alexander Williams is buried in.
Photo by Ken Zirkel.

While doing research on Rehoboth's Historic Burial Grounds, I came across a curious note in George Henry Tilton's Book, *A History of Rehoboth, Massachusetts*. Mr. Tilton was describing the Hix Cemetery on Brook Street. He mentions that two Civil War veterans are buried there, Charles Miller and Alexander Williams (colored). I quickly turned to the chapter in Tilton's book that lists Rehoboth Soldiers and Sailors of the Civil War. There he repeats the record from the Commonwealth: "Williams, Alexander. Seaman (colored). Died at Rehoboth almshouse. Buried in Hix cemetery, Oak Swamp." It didn't mention anything else about his service.

I don't know what piqued my curiosity, but I needed to find out more about Alexander Williams.

Our Veterans services officer does not have Alexander Williams on his lists of Veterans Flag Placements, not in Hix Burial Ground, or anywhere else in Rehoboth. To me, this means that no one had applied for a Federal Marker, since it appears he had few resources, living and dying at the Alms House, yet he was a veteran.

I made a trip to the historical library at the Carpenter Museum. They had Tilton's notes on his book and more information that yielded more clues.

Tilton's notes mention that Mr. Williams had lived with family in New Bedford and that he had a wife. Tilton also states Mr. Williams died at the Alms house in Rehoboth and is buried at Hix. The author has looked for a marker, but found none listed, and thus concludes there probably isn't one—yet.