Wanton Crypt - Notes (to accompany presentation)

Michael Becker, November 2026

Clifton Burial Ground

The Wanton Crypt lies in the modern-day Clifton Burial Ground, also known as the Golden Hill Burial Ground (for the street it is on). Thomas Clifton left the burial grounds to the Quaker Society of Friends in 1675, but the section of the Burial Ground which contains the Wanton Crypt was not originally included in Thomas Clifton's land. That 90 x 25ft lot of land was separately owned, but in 1771 it was gifted to the Wanton brothers Joseph Jr. and William Jr. by James and Elizabeth Honeyman following the death of their daughter Abigail - Joseph Wanton Jr.'s wife. Over time, the two burial grounds merged into one, under the "Clifton Burial Ground" name.

Vault Construction + Wanton Family

Although the land had been a gift, William and Joseph Jr. were the ones who paid for the construction of the crypt. Expense records were not located, but might show who built the tomb, how it is constructed, and how much it cost. The John Stevens shop was contacted, but did not find any records of the Wanton family.

Abigail Wanton died on May 31 of 1771, and was temporarily buried in the Wanton family's older tomb on another property (unknown) while the new one was under construction. I could not find a construction date for the older tomb, but in addition to new interments, Wanton burials from the Common Burying Ground and even from Bristol were relocated when it was built. The old tomb was, according to the Wanton Brothers, rendered "totally useless due to its falling in", and contained newer Wanton family interments as well as relocated burials from Common Burying Ground and Bristol. The tomb was completed in under 3 months: on October 16, many remains were transferred from the old vault into the new one.

Pt 2: Vault Construction + Wanton Family

The family tree depicted here is not comprehensive; there are many Wanton siblings left out. I wanted to focus on people directly connected to the Wanton Crypt. Almost all of the individuals shown here are buried in the Wanton Crypt, with the exception of William Wanton Jr, who is buried in "Loyalist Burial Ground" in New Brunswick, Canada; Joseph Wanton Jr, who was alive when the document was created, and was likely buried in New York City's Trinity Church after his death in Manhattan in August of 1780 - although there does not seem to be a headstone or specific burial location noted; and Joseph Wanton Sr, who was also alive when the tomb was built, and was possibly interred after his death in July of 1780.

I could not locate documentation suggesting how long the Crypt was in active use for, but when Joseph Jr.'s 2nd wife Sarah died in 1787 (in Newport, after Joseph Jr. fled and left her there), her remains were interred in the Wanton Crypt. According to the plaque placed in Trinity Church by her second husband, William Atherton (who returned to his home in England after Sarah's death), it was Sarah's *ashes* that were placed in the Wanton tomb.



Memorial Plaque in Newport's Trinity Church

Based on this information, we know the tomb was accessible from its 1771 construction until at *least* 1787, and possibly after. It is possible that other Wanton family members (not included on the family tree here) who died around this period may be buried in the tomb as well, but I could not locate documentation on all of their burial locations.

Hand Drawn Map (2 Slides)

The map shown on the slides is a hand-drawn map in the Newport Historical Society Archives, which is an 1888 redrawing of an original copy (also held by NHS). The creator redrew the document to make the lines neater and the handwriting more legible, but it is also possible that he made transcription errors or mistakes if he misunderstood the original. I was unable to get a photo of the original map for use in this presentation, but it may be beneficial to visit the NHS archives and compare the two.

The primary focus of this document is the map, which depict the layout of the tomb. The text above the tomb indicates that the remaining piece of land without the crypt was used to bury "any of our (William and Joseph Jr's) friends", so while it is unclear if any individuals were buried there after the Wanton family lot merged with the Clifton Burying Ground, it is possible that some of the nearby burials were friends of the Wanton family.

The text above the map also lists 6 family members who were moved from the old vault into the new one: Governor William Wanton, his wife Ruth, their sons George and Capt. Benjamin, and Joseph Sr's sons John and Benjamin. Also mentioned are "the bones of many others" from the old ruined vault, although no names or numbers are added.

In the map of the Crypt, 4 coffins are included, labeled with initials. At the bottom of the full document, there is a list of these initials and descriptions of who they are: Joseph Sr.'s wife Mary Wanton (MW), their son John Winthrop Wanton ("I"WW), and Joseph Jr's 1st wife Abigail Wanton (AW). The text also mentions 3 of Joseph and Abigail's children: Ann, Dudley, and WIlliam, who were buried in separate coffins in the old vault, but buried in the new tomb together into one small coffin, placed on a shelf above Abigail's head.

John Winthrop Wanton's initials appear to be listed as "IWW"; which may represent a transcription error made in 1888. The listed details of his parents and his death year match, so it is definitely him, but the letters I and J were not considered interchangeable by the late 18th century. It is possible the 1888 transcriber misread the original document's letter J as an I, or that *my* interpretation of the transcriber's handwriting is incorrect.

While the 4th coffin is likely the coffin of Joseph and Sarah's children, it is confusing. It is unclear if the letters are intended to be "VS" or "SA", and the transcriber may have inaccurately copied the label, so I'm not certain what the original map intended. If the letters are meant to be "SA", it would make sense to refer to Sarah Atherton, Joseph Jr's 2nd wife - but she died in 1787; 16 years after the tomb was created. It would have been odd to add her coffin into the document later, and to not include any other family members who may have been interred there since 1771. Alternatively, and more likely, the coffin shows the location of Abigail's 3 children. The coffin appears to be smaller than the others, and near Abigail, so that information lines up. However, the choice of letters is unclear: the children's names are Ann, Dudley, and William - so "VS" is confusing. One possibility is that it could stand for the latin term "vidae supra", meaning "as seen above" - used to refer to information presented previously in a document. While the children are listed at the bottom of the document, not *before* the map, due to possible transcription mistakes I am cautious to rely too heavily on my interpretation of the 1888 transcriber's interpretation of the 1771 original document.

Bulkeley Tomb, Colchester, CT

The book *Newport, Rhode Island / Colonial Burial Grounds* (by the Rhode Island Genealogical Society) mentions two colonial New England tombs which are possibly similar to the Wanton Crypt. The first of these is the Gershom Bulkeley Tomb in the Colchester Burial Ground in Connecticut, which was likely used during the late 18 to early 19th century. However, one key difference is that the Bulkeley Tomb is under a mound, not on flat ground like the Wanton Crypt - so the vault's construction may be different, and the entrance stairs are definitely different.

In 2002, there was an excavation of the Bulkeley Tomb, which involved the CT state archaeologist, his students, community volunteers, and some living members of the Bulkeley family. When this tomb was opened, the floor was covered in a layer of deteriorating wooden coffin fragments, with human remains scattered among the piles of debris. The team cleaned up these deteriorating wooden fragments, restored coffin lids (such as the one shown at the top of the screen), and sorted the remains for placement in new coffins. In 2003 the remains were reinterred and the tomb was re-sealed.

The Colchester Historical Society webpage on the Bulkeley Tomb excavation has extensive photos of the tomb's original interior conditions and the cleaning and sorting process, but the majority of those photos include human skeletal remains, and I didn't feel it was necessary to include them. However, more information and photos can be found at https://www.colchesterhistory.org/colchester-history/the-discovery-and-excavation-of-the-gershom-bulkeley-tomb/.

Granary Burying Ground, Boston, MA

The second tomb *Colonial Burial Grounds* mentions is at the Granary Burying Ground in Boston, MA - a burial ground which includes multiple well-known colonial characters such as Paul Revere, Sam Adams, John Hancock, and Crispus Attucks.

In February of 2009, a tourist to the Granary Burying Ground stepped off the designated path and fell hip-deep into a hole. She had unknowingly stepped on the buried, broken slate slab that had covered the crypt's 18-inch wide granite stairs to Captain Jonathan Armitage's 8 x 12 ft tomb. No other remains were mentioned in the documentation I found, but based on the size, it is possible there were other family burials included - although this tomb is still significantly smaller than the Wanton Crypt.

I could not locate photos of the tomb's interior, but there is a photo from the Boston Globe showing two cones and a plywood board covering the tomb's opening. Additionally, I located a diagram attributed to a Boston Herald article in 1897, which supposedly depicts an underground tomb in the Granary Burying Ground. However, it is unclear if it depicts the Armitage tomb specifically, or a different buried tomb. In either case, as a flush-surfaced underground colonial tomb, it is likely similar in entrance and layout to the Wanton Crypt, but with a much different scale/proportions.

What Do We Know?

We know who 12 of the individuals buried in this tomb are: 10 family members from the old tomb, Joseph Jr's 1st wife Abigail, and Joseph's 2nd wife Sarah. We also know that there were "a number of other bones" brought over from the old vault, although we do not know how many. It is also unclear where Joseph Sr. was buried, but it is possible he was buried in this crypt with his parents, wife, and children.

Compared to the section of the Wanton family tree from FamilySearch, it is clear that there are many Wanton family members not included in the smaller tree I designed. Multiple of these family members have undocumented burial places, and it is possible they were buried in the crypt as well.