

## Inscriptions of Our Past

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A selection of inscriptions on American gravestones from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are illustrated. A brief introduction comments on the urgent need for their recording before further damage is inflicted upon them.

To anyone who cares about American art forms, it is clear that our early gravestones constitute a rich heritage and that many of them are of museum quality. Nevertheless, unlike museum objects which are restored and sheltered by institutional curators, they are destined by their very nature to remain scattered over half a continent at the whim of the elements and the merciless defacing by vandals whose physical energies, coupled with ignorance, are making many a burial ground a battlefield.

The virtually endless symbolic art inherent in so many of our gravestones has fascinated generations of onlookers but never so much as during the last few years as the country is taking stock of all its native arts in anticipation of the Bicentennial in 1976. Very little documentation exists on early American gravestones; a few books have appeared but they leave much to be desired in one way or another being confined to a particular area or to a particular chronology and for the most part badly illustrated. We have embarked on this current project in order to alleviate this sorry situation, travelling extensively from Massachusetts to Virginia in search of specimens of this fascinating art form. A most comprehensive collection has evolved comprising thousands of examples in the form of black and white and color photographs in addition to several hundreds of plastercasts and metallic impressions.

The alphabets used on our earliest gravestones were those found in seventeenth-century books that made the journey across the

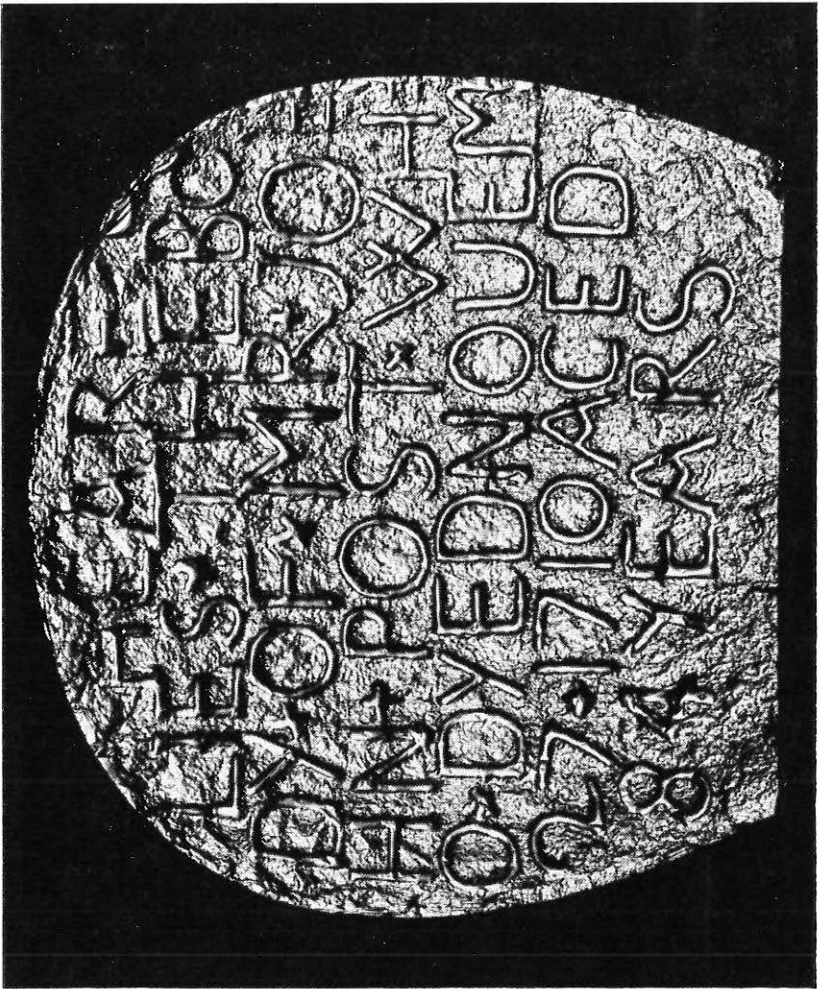
Atlantic. However, through necessity, a freer interpretation of the letterforms soon surfaced under the strong influence of the broadsides, primers, and proclamations of the time. Their execution in a hostile medium by the artisans who carved them is a miracle considering the simple tools available. Be it slate or redstone, quartzite or sandstone, these durable materials still afford us the opportunity of appreciating these early gravestones as perhaps the most genuine of all American folk art forms.

A quick look at what little remains on gravestones in some of our old burial grounds will convince anyone who cares of the urgency in recording this legacy before more gravestones revert to eroded, frittered, and characterless slabs of stone. We have found our endeavor a most exciting and rewarding proposition, and we urge others to seek out and record examples in their own areas.

Large or small, crude or sophisticated, erudite or illiterate, lengthy or abbreviated—these gravestone inscriptions tell us of the talent and resourcefulness that existed in our not-so-distant past and of a breed of artisans who catered to the common man's quest for some immortality.

Crudely-cut stone displaying a minimum of inscription: date, initials and age.  
Kingston, N.Y., 1712.





Semi-circular gravestone; metallic impression shows more than the stone original its crude but very effective lettering carving. Norwichtown, Conn., 1710.



Metallic impression of gravestone carved in Boston and most likely the work of Joseph Lamson; over-all design is well-integrated. Stratford, Conn., 1713.



Footstone detail with unusual type handling. Milford, Conn., early eighteenth century.



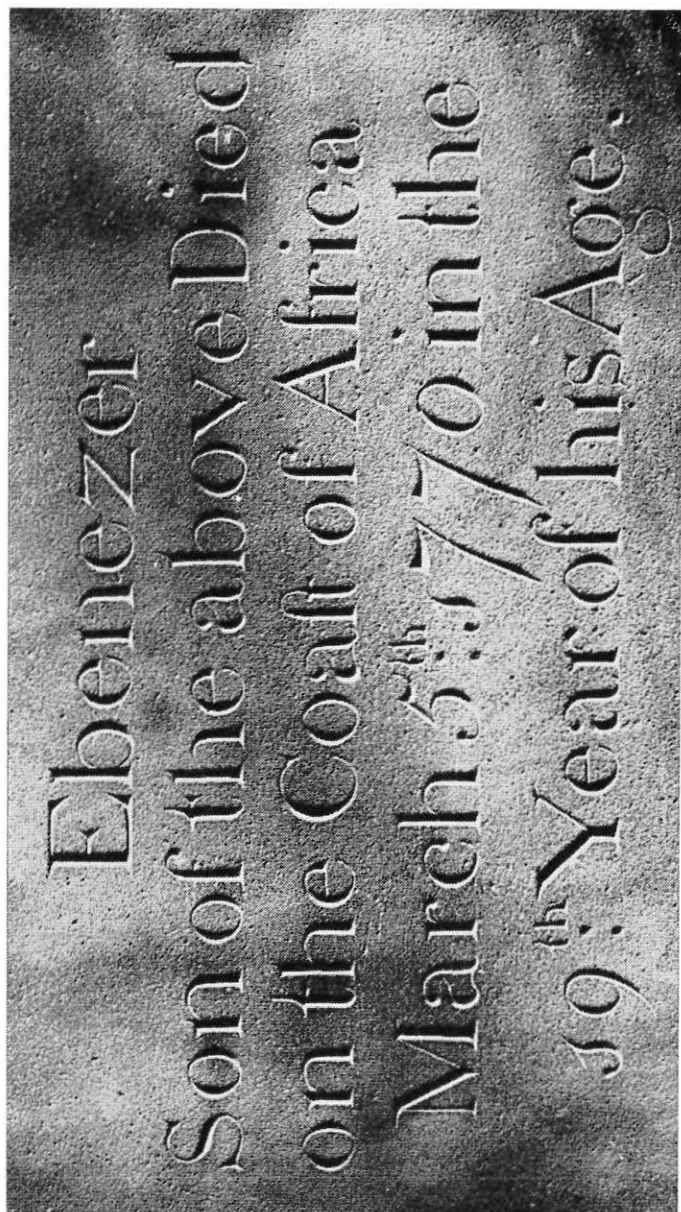
Plaster cast detail of the inscription on Hannah Waterman's gravestone.  
Norwichtown, Conn.



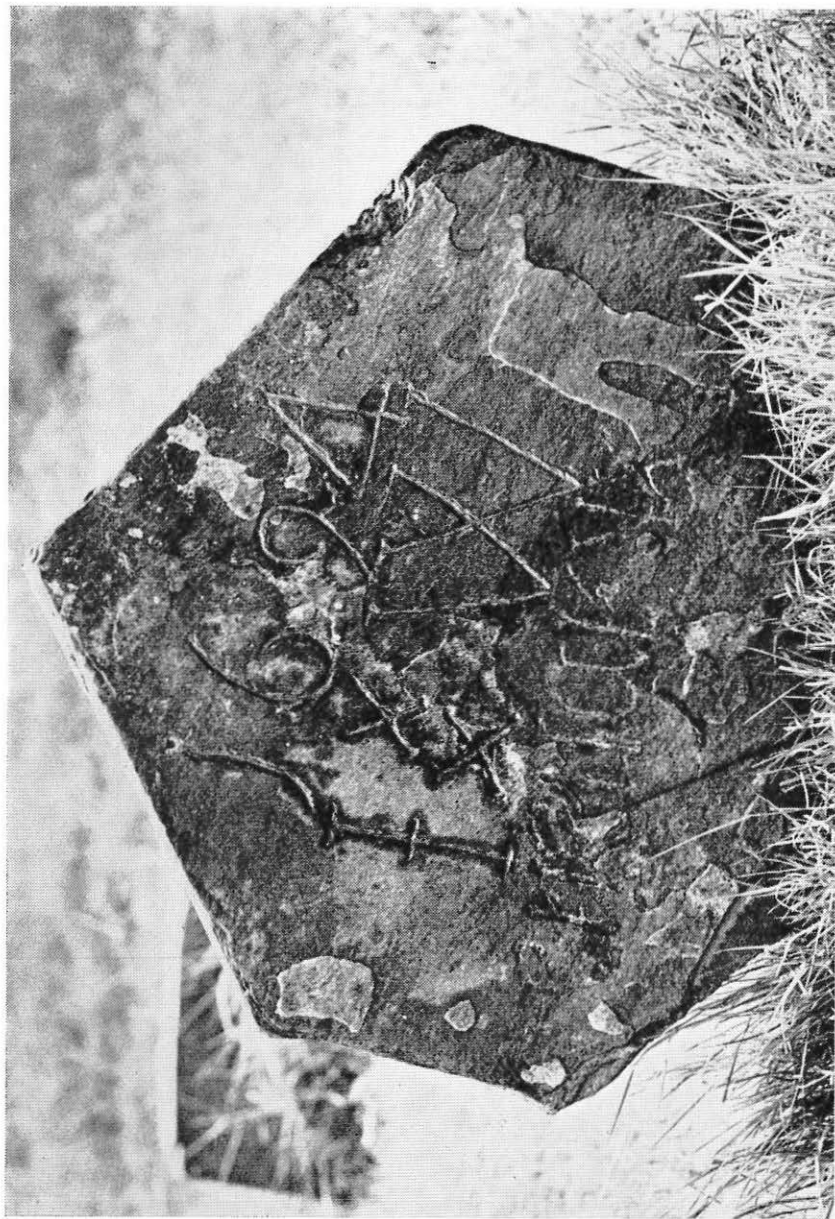
Strong type emphasis for six children who all died within the span of one month. Bristol, R.I., 1756.



Plaster cast detail of gravestone with still-visible rule lines for lettering surrounding the Adam & Eve design. Bristol, R.I., 1767.



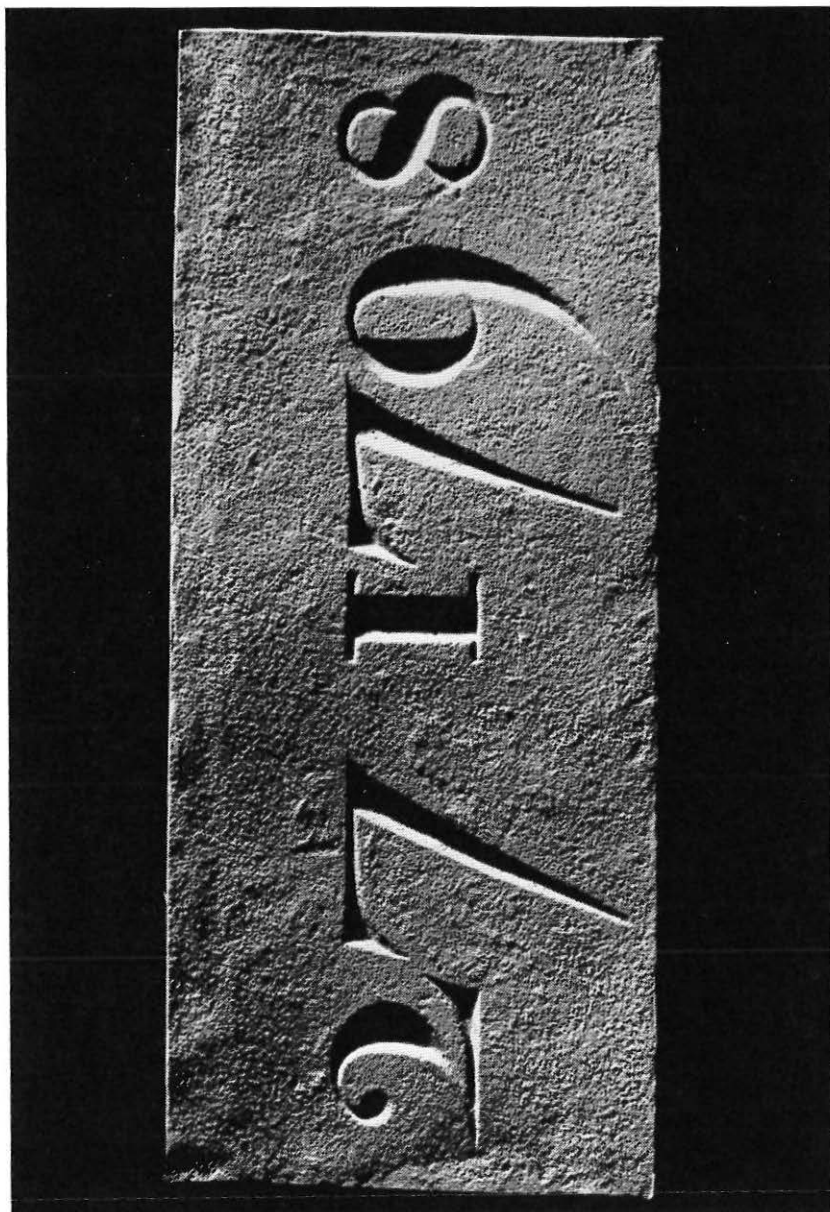
Lettering detail showing high degree of type knowledge. Huntington, Long Island, N.Y., 1770.



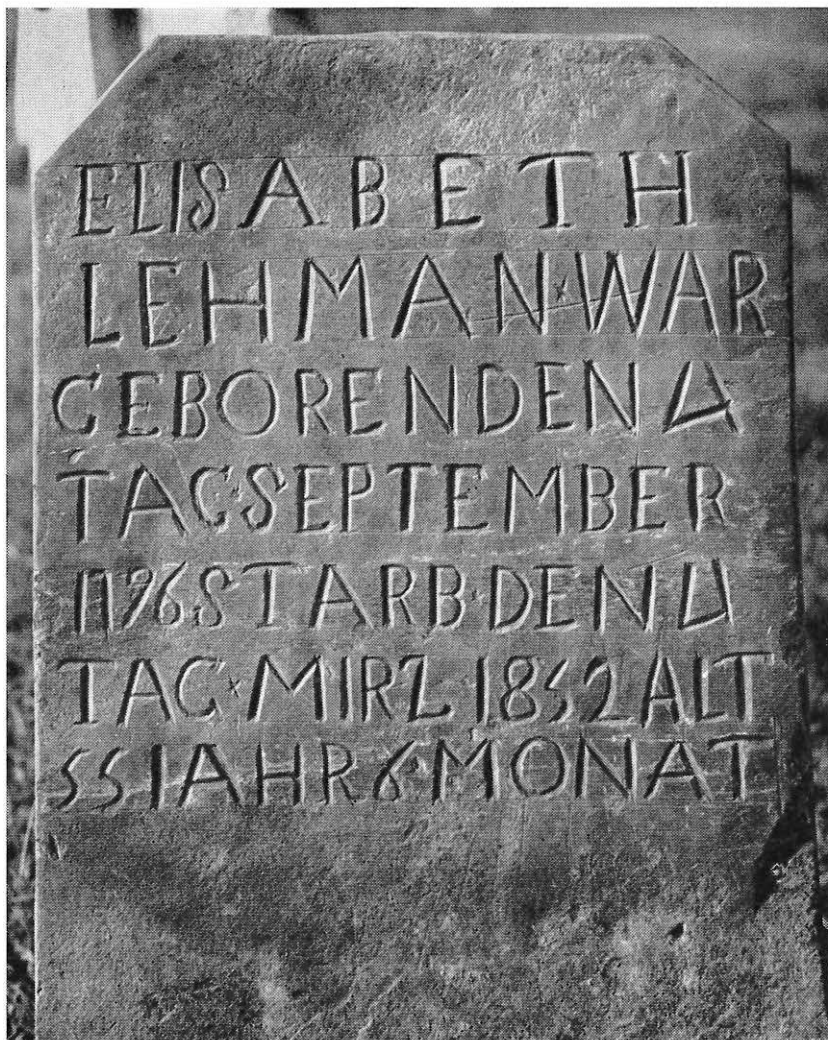
Small cryptic gravestone, very unusual and badly frittering away. Stratford, Conn., 1694.



Very effective type handling with some rather striking lettering innovations.  
Middletown, Conn., 1696.



Plaster cast detail of elegant type handling. Elizabeth, N.J., June 27, 1798.



Small gravestone—obviously “home-made” and touching in its simplicity. Mannheim, Pa., 1796.