Stone-carved graves are going extinct. A Somerville artist is bringing them back to life.

Salem native Andrew Carr wants to revive a nearly-lost New England art form — including recreating a pair of historic gravestones stolen from his home city.

By Spencer Buell Globe Staff,Updated October 24, 2023, 5:57 a.m.

8



Somerville artist Andrew Carr worked in his studio to carve the death's head piece on a replica of one of two historic gravestones that went missing in a Salem cemetery in 2010.JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Two years before the Declaration of Independence was signed, Anstiss Crowninshield's gravestone was laid in its place at the Old Burying Point Cemetery in Salem, right next to one that belonged to her husband, John, a powerful shipping merchant who'd died 13 years earlier.

Each stone had been crafted by hand in the distinct style of Puritan graves from that time, every letter and adornment carefully carved with a mallet and chisel.

There they stood for nearly 250 years, tributes to two members of one of Salem's most prominent families.



Somerville artist Andrew Carr worked in his studio to carve the death's head piece on a replica of one of two historic gravestones that went missing in a Salem cemetery in 2010.JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Then, about a decade ago, the memorials disappeared from the site, also known as Charter Street Cemetery. All that remains are two gravestone-shaped casings that show where the historic markers, believed to have been stolen, were once displayed. If ghosts truly do haunt Salem's graveyards, theirs have likely roamed there ever since.

That might have been the story for the rest of eternity were it not for Salem native Andrew Carr, who couldn't stand to see the gravestones — both prime examples of Puritan cemetery craftsmanship — simply vanish.

They're too precious, and endangered, to allow that, he said.

"It's so sad," said Carr, 39. "New England in particular has such a rich heritage of gravestones, and it's just disappearing. It's this beautiful art form that's just dwindling away."

This year, Carr, who lives and works in Somerville, has been painstakingly creating exact replicas of the lost gravestones, using precisely chosen materials and Colonial-era tools to recreate the originals down to the millimeter. It's what the missing landmarks deserve, he said, and it's all part of his mission to bring traditional New England gravestone carving back from the dead.

Carr got his start in the art world as a painter. A life-size portrait of Patriots coach Bill Belichick that was made by the Rhode Island School of Design graduate currently hangs in the team's Hall of Fame.

But during the early days of the pandemic — when "death was on my mind," he said — he found himself visiting the region's old colonial cemeteries, which he came to view as "outdoor sculpture gardens" filled with funerary artwork that is rarely made anymore.

"It's an endangered art form," Carr said.

Eager to try his hand at what he'd seen, he tracked down sample-size chunks of slate from a Pennsylvania quarry by telling them he was scoping out materials for a home renovation, and began spending his spare time in his tiny Somerville backyard, hunched over the slabs chiseling the word "DIED" into the hard stone surfaces in various fonts.



Andrew Carr walked through Charter Street Cemetery, also known as Old Burying Point Cemetery.PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

He studied the markings on gravestones he'd seen, including "death's heads" — the skull-like shapes flanked by wings that are common on Puritan graves — and practiced gently tapping out designs in tiny, dusty shards.

Soon, Carr started taking commissions, selling hand-chiseled numbers for houses and then tiny headstones for animals, including one for his family's golden retriever, "Bismarck."

The marble, slate, granite, and quartz samples began to accumulate at his workshop outside.

"It looked like a pet cemetery back there," he said.



Andrew Carr is working on two gravestones removed from these frames in the Charter Street Cemetery, also known as Old Burying Point Cemetery.PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

His neighbors didn't love it when he moved up to working on larger tombstones, and set up a heavy-duty gantry so he could hoist 300-pound rectangles of stone onto a workbench. They also didn't appreciate the sounds of tools clinking throughout the day and into the night. ("Oh, they hated me," he said).

Carr even experimented with his own, more modern designs, complete with deep grooves and pops of bright red, gold, and black paint.

Now he offers a custom gravestone service, which involves having long conversations with the families of the deceased, in order to match them with a style and mineral that fit their loved one's personality and the life they led.

"To me, your soul becomes a stone when you die. It's a final period on your life," he said. "I want to try to capture, as best as I can, their soul in stone."

Having outgrown the backyard, he moved his workshop to an old barn between Davis and Union squares. There's no heat or running water, but he

can chisel in peace. In December, he quit his day job as a graphic designer for a big box retailer, so he could pursue his new passion full-time.

“I hear such horrible stories all the time, like really scary stuff, about people who walked out their front door and had no idea they were about to die that day,” he said. “It’s like, follow your dreams, you know?”

Carr is a rare breed in the industry. While stone-carved graves were the standard for centuries, the labor-intensive practice has since been replaced almost entirely by sand-blasting, which involves using a machine to shoot grains of sand at rubber stencils, which create designs in stone in a matter of minutes.

Advertisement



Somerville artist Andrew Carr worked in his studio to carve the death’s head piece on a replica of one of two historic gravestones that went missing in a Salem cemetery in 2010.JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Very few still do it the old-fashioned way, said Michael Fannin, a Vermont sculptor who also makes hand-carved gravestones.

“There are only a handful of stone carvers left in this country doing the work by hand in the traditional manner,” said Fannin, whom Carr considers a mentor. “The trade might not be completely ‘dead,’ but it’s certainly on life support.”

As Carr honed his craft in Somerville and began to gain a reputation, he couldn’t shake the thought of the vacant stone casings at the Crowninshields’ burial site in Salem.

So he reached out to the cemetery last October and and offered to replace them.

The Old Burying Point is fiercely protective of its graves, now requiring that visitors not stray from a footpath that winds through it. But he got their blessing, and secured a grant from the Salem Cultural Council to pay for the materials.

Thankfully, he had an abundance of historical records he could refer to.

The originals were damaged in the Great Salem Fire of 1914, and then placed in stone casings that were left behind when the markers were later stolen. Carr was able to get precise measurements for his project by using the empty spaces as a guide.

High-resolution photos of the gravestones taken before the fire captured every detail, so he could study and replicate each cranny carved by the 18th Century stone-cutters, down to the dainty half-moon shaped serifs in the text and the peculiar shape of the death heads’ eyes.

“The eyes always looked surprised,” he said. “Like they were shocked to death.”



Andrew Carr worked on one of two gravestones removed from the Charter Street Cemetery in Salem.PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

He even took pains to find the exact style of slate used to make them in the 1700s, using leftover shards as a guide.

To track it down, he took trips to various slate quarries, both functioning and abandoned, and documented his journey on his YouTube channel, "Stones Over Bones." In the end he hauled back two big, blemish-free slabs of matching slate from a small quarry in Vermont.

"The amount of hours I've spent on this is just insane," Carr said.

He hopes to finish by the end of the month, and have them installed in the casings by the end of the year.

In the meantime, he's been leaving his Somerville studio during the weekends to work in the Salem cemetery, where he's giving demonstrations to visitors during the city's busy Halloween season.

Carr hopes some revelers will come away with a new appreciation for the ancient craft, and how much work went into the gravestones that pock the state's historic cemeteries.

His dream is to open a graveyard of his own, where "all the graves would be unique, and the only limitation would be that each one has to be hand-cut, beautiful, and interesting."

After all, he said, "you only live once."



Somerville artist Andrew Carr worked in his studio to carve the death's head piece on a replica of one of two historic gravestones that went missing in a Salem cemetery in 2010. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Spencer Buell can be reached at spencer.buell@globe.com. Follow him @SpencerBuell.