

## Scrub Pines, Brambles Conceal Stones At Graves Of Victims Of Dread Scourge

**Markers Recall Fight Against Plague Here Back In 1872—  
Health Board Then Felt That Glen Should Be  
Cleared And Property Set Apart**

In a settlement as old as Provincetown there are few spots that have no story to tell of romance, of courageous deeds, or of tragedy. Some of these have been long forgotten, gone with the memories of old Cape Enders laid away in the sands of Provincetown cemeteries. There are places in and around the town which, though stripped, silent, and barren now, give one a distinctly uneasy feeling of being in the midst of unseen people and activities. One of these is where Helltown used to be, and another is the grass-grown site of the old Long Point settlement. The buried forest out on Mayo Atkins Road starts one wondering what else lies below the shifting sands of this strange country, and sometimes, out along the Great Shore near Peaked Hill, it seems as though the cries of drowning, freezing seamen can be heard.

One afternoon, not long ago, George Rogers and Manny Snow were the guides to produce proof of a story they had been telling—that in a little glen, at the base of a sand dune, near the far corner of the old Evans Field, may be found a number of small marble markers, each numbered, as well as the mounds of graves.

### Epidemic Victims

It is George Rogers' belief that the victims of a terrible smallpox scourge in 1872 lie buried here and that the record giving the names for the marker numbers has probably been destroyed or lost.

On the other hand, Town Clerk George S. Chapman thinks the small marble stones mark the graves of unidentified Italian seamen washed ashore after the tragic wreck of the bark Giovanni, lost in a furious northeast gale and snowstorm three miles north of Highland Life Saving Station on March 4, 1875. The Giovanni, bound from Palermo, Italy, with a cargo of sumac, nuts and brimstone, had only a few miles to go to her destination in Boston when she was wrecked with the loss of all lives in "the graveyard of the Atlantic," off the tip of Cape Cod.

However, the site of the graves is a considerable distance from the back shore and there seems no reason for carrying the bodies of the dead seamen so far. And as they were not identified there would seem no reason why the stones should be

numbered. Moreover, it is a known fact that so great was the fear of smallpox in the old days that burial in cemeteries was forbidden and many now living can vividly recall the old "Pest House" which stood for many years in a corner diagonally across Evans Field, and it was here that the unfortunate victims were confined, either to care for themselves or to receive such care as could be given by one who had recovered from the disease. Further support given to the belief that the stones mark smallpox dead is found in the reference to graves in the vicinity of the Pest House in the annual report of the Town of Provincetown for the year ending December 31, 1872.

The spot is not easy to find now as it is hidden in a tangle of brambles and scrub pine, but once these have been penetrated the stones are seen, arranged in what evidently must have been a semi-circle. How many there were originally is now a mystery. There are fragments scattered around of those that have been broken and others have been removed. Numbers 6, 8, 9, 10, however, are still in place, and with but little effort the quiet, pretty little glade might be restored as a spot of interest in Provincetown's long and eventful history.

In fact, this is just the recommendation of Jonathan Cook, David Smith and Alexander Manuel, members of the town Board of Health in the Town Report for 1872.

### Reference In Town Report

"There are," these officials state, "not remote from the Pest House, several graves of those who have died of Small-pox. Some of them were our own fellow citizens who, under former rules, were excluded from a Christian burial within our Cemeteries, and some were strangers, who, though faithfully and even tenderly cared for in their last moments, died where no loving hands of relatives and friends, could lay their corrupting mortal remains beneath the willow or the cypress, nor strew flowers on their graves."

## Lost Graveyard Marks Epidemic



PHOTO BY PAUL KOCH

A small graveyard virtually in the wilderness, about a half mile from Evans Field, bears witness to a tragedy that struck the town in 1800, leaving the nameless graves of its victims.

The 14 gravestones are without names, bearing only numbers from one to 14. They mark the burial places of smallpox victims who died in an outbreak of the disease here 168 years ago.

Cemetery Superintendent Frank Flores, who had heard of the smallpox epidemic and the isolated burial plot, spent years, he says, trying to find it. He found it eventually on the Northwest side of Evans Field, "just about buried in the wilderness."

The cemetery superintendent got the story in some detail from an aged man named Joseph Holmes who died four years ago.

"Joe Holmes lived near the spot where the public farm had once been located," says Mr. Flores. "His home was known as the Joe Holmes Farm. He'd been a farmer for years before he later became a fisherman."

Joseph Holmes related to Superintendent Flores what apparently had been well-established local lore with which the one time farmer had been especially familiar because he lived near the site of the "smallpox home" that functioned during the epidemic.

"When someone got seriously ill

with smallpox," Mr. Flores tells the story he heard from Joseph Holmes, "he was taken from his home to a public farm or home that came to have the name of the 'smallpox home.' It was on the North side of what is today the Catholic Cemetery. "When people ill with smallpox passed away at the home they were taken in a truck to this special plot for burial. Smallpox was highly contagious and funerals weren't held for them. Neither were their names engraved on the headstones."

In the hasty disposal of the dead and the absence of the customary recordings of their names on tablets, there were also no dates inscribed on the stones. But Joseph Holmes had considerable local lore passed down from generations and the story he knew and told Mr. Flores had 1800 as the year of the epidemic.

The cemetery superintendent found the burial plot he had long been searching for, he says, during the administration of the late Town Manager Walter Lawrence. He made efforts to have the Town do something about the unnamed graveyard but they were unsuccessful.

He finally took the matter up with officials of the Cape Cod National Seashore after the Seashore was established. "They said," he recalls, "If you will clean up the brush,

put a fence around the plot and make it presentable, we will maintain it."

"Since then," he adds, "I've been trying to get the Town to do something about it."

Mr. Flores believes it is the Town's duty to show respect to the memory of the smallpox victims by tidying up their burial place. "They were citizens of the town, just like the rest of us," he points out, "and entitled to our respect."

As to what happened here in 1800 there is no official record. Events of that year and of many other early years in the life of the town were lost to history when the first Town Hall burned sometime after 1800 and with it a store of vital records. But the small, isolated, graveyard with its numbered head stones supports the story of the smallpox epidemic and a frightened community that buried its dead far from the populated area of the town.