

"Boss Hammond, African-American Stonecutter"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

For many years members of the Carroll County Genealogical Society have recorded gravestone inscriptions in dozens of cemeteries throughout the county. Their efforts have resulted in the publication of four volumes of local cemetery inscriptions which are valuable resources for compiling a family genealogy or conducting local history research.

Spending time in a cemetery also spawned a research project for volunteer Mimi Ashcraft of Westminster. She was intrigued by a number of distinctively carved gravestones found in several New Windsor area cemeteries and wanted to identify the maker. Her search revealed that the stones were carved by a free Black named Sebastian "Boss" Hammond:

"In the 1830s and 1840s a tiny workshop on the Carroll-Frederick border turned out tombstones for residents in the New Windsor area. Now, 150 years later, those stones attest to the superb craftsmanship of their maker, Sebastian (Boss, Boston, Bostian) Hammond. He left no signature on his work, but administration records in Carroll County show the executors of several estates paying him between \$11 and \$21 for grave markers.

It is likely that Boss was born a slave about 1795 in Frederick County. He was free in 1840, a landowner and head of a household. By 1850 he owned more than 70 acres, had 8 children, raised tobacco, grain, and livestock and called himself a "stonecutter." He lived near the intersection of Roop and Buffalo roads just over the Frederick County line until his death in 1893 at the age of 98. He and his wife, Marcella, are buried in Fairview Cemetery beneath tombstones he made.

Cemeteries at Lingamore United Methodist Church (Unionville), Greenwood Church of the Brethren and Winter's Lutheran Church contain the largest collections of Hammond grave markers. Because Boss chose to work with a very fine-grained dark rock resembling slate, his tombstones have resisted the weathering which wreaks havoc on marble in this climate. Their surfaces are still as satin smooth as when he polished them and the names, dates and verses are as deep and crisp-edged as the day he cut them.

Hammond used two basic shapes for his tombstones—a simple rectangle with concave corners and the more elaborate design seen in the accompanying photograph. Beautiful lettering was his trademark although family tradition says he didn't read or write and depended upon his patrons to print the information they wanted. His artistry was revealed in the tasteful flourishes he added to enhance individual letters and the decorative motifs he chose to fill empty space. He didn't just copy an epitaph, he created a "picture" using the words as elements of design. Then he framed his "picture" with a border groove which followed the outline of the stone.

Where Boss got his stone and what tools he employed to cut, polish and engrave it remain a mystery. There are many outcroppings of similar rock near his home which he might have quarried. His property included a small creek, so he may have harnessed waterpower for some of his work. It appears that most of his carving was done between 1830 and 1850. Those stones erected after 1850 (such as his tombstone and his wife's) were probably unused or incomplete items lying around his workshop which were finished by others.

If you are out for a drive in the New Windsor area, stop at one of the previously-mentioned cemeteries and admire the sophisticated creations of this nineteenth-century black craftsman. The memorials he carved for his neighbors have become a memorial to him."

Boss Hammond's gravestones constitute the largest surviving body of work by a local free Black craftsman. The rediscovery of his works suggests that similar discoveries may remain to be made in other trades such as carpentry, cabinet making, blacksmithing, weaving, etc. No doubt the historical record will reveal the names and works of area craftsmen and women.

Photo caption: The 1835 gravestone of Adam Drach in St. Luke's (Winter's) Church near New Windsor was carved by free Black Sebastian "Boss" Hammond. Photograph courtesy of Mimi Ashcraft.