

THE TOMBS AT HILLSIDE EAST CEMETERY

By J. Terry Holt

The west brick wall's a little shabby now. On the corner of the tomb several layers of bricks have separated from the brickwork. The main door of the Masonic tomb has dents, dings and patches on it. The cupola looks tarnished and dingy, obviously in need of repair. This is now. But once upon a time, a long time ago -

Cannons boomed from the Revenue Cutter *Swiftsure*, under the direction of Capt. Uriah Coolridge. The Cutter's crew was paying last respects to the late Dr. Samuel Ayer, the Surveyor of the Port of Passamaquoddy. Friends gathered together in prayer. Then the procession formed behind the horse drawn hearse. Next came the fine carriage with the widow and children. Behind them came the customhouse officers, the physicians, and friends who trod slowly up the hill to the graveyard. They were not going to an open grave. Instead the procession went to the Freemason's Tomb. There the Masons put their fraternal brother to rest inside the tomb. The tomb had been built only four years earlier. It still shined with newness. The bricks were painted to give the appearance of stonework along the broad western face. Sarah Ayer described the event, "My husband was laid in the tomb, and placed by the side of my father, the door closed upon him, and I returned to my now solitary dwelling, with an aching heart." The Freemason's Tomb was intended to be the final resting-place of Dr. Ayer. The year was 1832.

In 1819 the town of Eastport, Massachusetts, Maine not being a state yet, began the process of acquiring a new "burying ground." The new cemetery was haphazard at best. There were no established lots or paths. In 1828 the Masons attempted to establish some order out of chaos by building a tomb or "Sepulchre" for their Masonic brothers, their families or visitors of their order who passed away while visiting the town. It was a grand work for the times. First a sub-level had to be excavated. Then the brickwork for the various rooms had to be lain. Then earth was put over the tomb. The main entry room had an arched brick ceiling. This room appears to have been intended for funeral services. To each side were doors leading to burial vaults where the remains of the deceased were interred.

In 1829 a gentleman visitor to Eastport went to see the Burial Ground. He was very impressed with the Freemason's Tomb. "Other doors open to the several vaults, which are capable of containing about four hundred coffins. Some twenty or thirty bodies, I was told, had already been deposited there." He went on to say "This is the first and only one of the kind, that has come to my knowledge, built in the United States for this express object. And it reflects much honor on the liberality, generosity and affection of the Masonic Fraternity here, toward their deceased brethren, and others ...it ought to be recommended to Lodges elsewhere, especially to those in populous towns and cities to do likewise." This was written to a friend to the Westward and published in the Eastport Sentinel in December of 1829.

The number of coffins that could fit in the tomb probably would be less than four hundred. Still, it needs to be understood that the people of that era were shorter in stature and the coffins were made of pine, using less space than today's coffin. These old coffins would have been set in racks that may have been six or more coffins high and fourteen or more wide. They would have been on slides of some type. An example of how the system worked is from an entry in the diary of Sarah Ayer, June 1829. She reported, "Mr. Ayer got a chaise (a buggy), and took me out to ride. When we reach'd the burying ground, he fastened the horse and we got out. Having the key with him, he opened the door of the Free-Mason's-tomb, and we entered it. It was the first time I had ever entered one of these dwelling places of the dead, or seen a body after it had been buried. I scarcely dared to indulge the feelings that oppressed me. My husband raised the lid of the coffin that contained the remains of my poor father. He had been taken from the grave and laid in the tomb." Her father, Capt. George Connel had been buried in November of 1827 in the conventional manner at Hillside Cemetery.

The tomb was intended to be the permanent resting-place for some of the occupants, but temporary for others. In 1836 the selectmen were, for the first time, authorized to locate, layout and sell lots to the citizens of the town. Friends or family far or near could now obtain burial places for their loved ones and have them moved to a new site. With family lots being established some of the prominently interred were removed from the tomb and put in their

family lots. Later during the 1850's it appears more land for the cemetery was purchased. The selectmen appear to have been determined to remove some of those interred haphazardly and to put in many of the lanes we are familiar with today. These lanes were about five feet wide to allow horse draw hearses and carriages to go to a gravesite. What is known as the Town Tomb today may have been used to temporarily hold the former occupants of the "lanes."

The Town Tomb appears to have been a follow on to the Masonic Tomb, with its Masonic style cupola above the entrance. At what point it was built or turned over to private individuals is unknown. This tomb has been known by several names, particularly the Shackford Tomb. In 1859 the selectmen began to toy with the idea of purchasing this tomb, known then as the Hayden and Kilby Tomb. It would be more than thirty years before the town would acquire this asset.

Many of the town fathers graves are impossible to find today, such as Judge Burgin and Moses Norwood, due to this moving around. However, some city fathers graves are known just for this reason. Capt. John Shackford is presently buried in a part of the cemetery bought in 1858. He had passed away in 1840 and appears to have rested peacefully for many years in one of these two tombs.

A third tomb stood about fifty feet west of the two older tombs. This tomb stood entirely above ground and was built on a ledge. The location is marked with an urn. It is shown on a 1927 map of the cemetery and was called the Buckman, Prince and Weston Tomb. This tomb has been removed.

The exact reasons why the tombs had their occupants removed can only be conjecture at this point in our history. The probability of deterioration of the pine boxes, deterioration of the racks, and health risks would be likely factors for removing those permanently interred in the tombs. In 1900 the last remains were transferred out of the "Shackford" tomb, which was being rebuilt by the city. Freeman Varney rebuilt this tomb for \$535 in that year. At this point it became known as the Town Tomb and was used as a receiving or public tomb, for winter use. So the practice of using the tombs expressly for wintering over is only one hundred years old in Eastport.

The Freemason's Tomb may be a little beat up today. It is after all one hundred and seventy three years old. It has had presidential appointees interred within its walls. Sea captains, militia captains and generals and Revenue Marine captains, such as Uriah Coolidge, have resided within the walls of the Masonic Tomb. What other town in Eastern Maine has had a tomb built to hold so many caskets? What other town in Eastern Maine had "tourists" visit their cemeteries and tombs as early as 1829? How many towns or cities in Eastern Maine have civic structures built as early as 1828? The Town Tomb and Freemason's Tomb are special. Perhaps combined the two tombs are unique to this part of New England. A treasure does not have to be made of gold. The Eastport Tombs are historical and cultural treasures.