Visitors to Peters Hill at the Arnold Arboretum may have noticed a number of rustic headstones clustered beneath the trees near the Walter Street border. How did people come to be buried there so long ago and how did this sacred spot become part of our landscape?

Three centuries ago, farmers in the western part of Roxbury, Massachusetts, found it increasingly difficult to travel to the town center more than three miles away for their devotions. So in the summer of 1706, they submitted a petition to the General Court requesting the creation of a second parish. Though their petition was rejected, the neighbors were undeterred, and they soon built a meeting house with space for a burial ground on Walter Street.

Evidently the town fathers were not pleased with this development, and in April 1711 the offenders submitted a lengthy petition asking forgiveness for their “wrong disorderly steps” and compassion for their “late hour of temptation.” At a town meeting that May, the petition was accepted and the boundaries for the Second Parish were officially laid out. Burials in the churchyard began about that time, and the oldest surviving stone—dated 1722—bears the name Anna Bridge. Continued growth of Jamaica Plain brought about the 1769 formation of the Third Parish of Roxbury (today the First Parish of Jamaica Plain) at the intersection of South and Centre Streets. This location was close enough to the Second Parish that the parishioners decided to take down their meeting house in 1773 and move further down Centre Street toward Dedham.

The burying ground, however, remained in place and continued to accommodate burials into the 1800s, as surviving headstones attest. An inventory in the middle of that century counted 49 stones marking 54 individual burials, as well as at least one crypt. At some point in its history, the site was enclosed by a stone wall. In 1867, development near Stony Brook unearthed remains of Revolutionary War soldiers who had been buried on what was then part of the Loring Estate. They were disinterred and reburied in a tomb at the Walter Street burying ground. Road improvements in 1903, including the widening of Walter Street, resulted in the loss of approximately 300 square feet of frontage, the rebuilding of the perimeter wall, and the relocation of remains of 28 individuals.

Also in that year, the Sons of the American Revolution dedicated a monument to the Revolutionary War soldiers interred in the burial ground, which still honors them today.

In February 1923, the Boston City Council authorized the removal of the wall on the two sides of the lot bordering the Arnold Arboretum. They also approved the planting of trees, and a number of the native tulip trees (Liriodendron tulipifera) growing there date to this period. Nearly 25 years later, in May 1946, the Boston Park Commission turned over responsibility for maintenance of the burying ground to the Arboretum. Today, in addition to the tulip trees, visitors can enjoy specimens of dawn redwood (Metasequoia glyptostroboides), Japanese cypress and Atlantic white cypress (Chamaecyparis obtusa and C. thyoides), alternate-leaved dogwood (Cornus alternifolia), and several rhododendron varieties.

The Walter Street Burying Ground is a peaceful and contemplative place of big trees and dappled sunshine, and many of the surviving headstones are fascinating relics of early American stonework. Make this quaint and historic remnant of the Arboretum’s past a destination on your next visit.

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**Resting Beneath the Tulip Trees**

**Walter Street Burying Ground Offers a Glimpse of the Past**

*Lisa Pearson, Interim Library Supervisor*

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Headstones marking the earthly remains of Hannah Baker (left) and Captain John Baker (center), dating to 1776 and 1781 respectively, are among the grouping of markers gracing Peters Hill.