

By Tom Howard

# Restoring East Granby's Smallpox Cemetery

It was the dreaded smallpox that killed 60-year-old Joshua Holcomb and, presumably, his one-year-old granddaughter Ruth Ford, when they died within a month of each other in 1784 in the Turkey Hills district of Simsbury (now East Granby). Three other of Holcomb's grandchildren died of unknown causes in the next decade: Caleb at age 2 in 1788 and his twin sisters Amarilla and Boadica Holcomb, who were just a year old in 1793. They were all laid to rest in the hilltop family cemetery on the east side of the Holcomb property. The spot, just off Hatchett Hill Road and yards away from the Blue-blazed Metacomet Trail, has come to be known as East Granby's smallpox cemetery. But for decades its story was, well, buried.

Joshua and Ruth died a difficult death. Smallpox was an insidious disease that marked even its survivors and patients' caregivers. It hit the youngest and the oldest hardest. Likely the whole extended family was exposed. Symptoms would not appear for 12 days; then fever, backache, headache, nausea, and malaise would strike, followed over two weeks by a rash and fluid-filled pustules on the skin that would then rupture and scab over. The disease was very painful, and it was easily spread to caregivers, without whose help dehydration and infection would set in.

About a third of those who contracted the most serious form of smallpox died from the disease. Among those who survived, scarring and blindness were common. On the other hand, those who did survive gained lifelong immunity to the disease. Isolated pest houses allowed patients to be cared for under quarantine conditions. (Read more about smallpox in colonial Connecticut in "Hospital Rock," Spring 2004, [connecticutexplored.org/issues/v02n02/hospital.htm](http://connecticutexplored.org/issues/v02n02/hospital.htm).)

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Joshua would have known the dangers of this disease. It was a persistent killer until a cowpox vaccine, developed in 1796, provided immunity for 98 percent of those who received it. However, epidemics still occurred with some frequency in 19th-century Connecticut. The 30 smallpox-specific cemeteries in 29 Connecticut towns are testimony to the victims, who were usually buried in family plots in isolated places. After vaccination became an effective option, smallpox victims were more commonly buried in conventional community burial grounds.

Joshua's and the children's families were spared, and about a decade after the twins' deaths, those relatives moved west: the Fords to Steuben County, New York, and Caleb and Marcy Holcomb to Ashtabula County, Ohio in Connecticut's Western Reserve, leaving their deceased infants behind.

For 150 years, the headstones—one each for Joshua and Ruth, and a shared stone for Caleb, Amarilla, and Boadica—marked the graves. Surface indications lead us to believe there were other burials and likely headstones in the cemetery, but the people interred there remain unknown.

In 1939, after a quarry developed nearby, the then-owner William A. Seymour apparently gave permission to a local stone collector, William Eli Talbot, to remove the last three remaining memorials. The collector then cemented them into a cellar wall as part of the foundation for a building he used for his workshop behind the house he had built in about 1935 in nearby Bloomfield. Talbot had lived in East Granby, a half mile from the cemetery, as a boy. As an adult he worked as a plumber and was skilled at working with wood and stone. Talbot died March 12, 1973, at age 86.

Photographs from 1932, now in the East Granby Public Library's archives, show where the stones originally lay. The 1937 edition of the *Connecticut Walk Book*, a guide to major hiking trails in the state published by the Connecticut Forest and Park Association Inc. (CFPA), notes, "Of interest on . . . Hatchet [sic] Hill, a smallpox burial ground of the 18th century, with curious inscriptions." The removals did not go unnoticed. The 1940 edition refers to the site as "a cemetery of the 18th century where smallpox victims were buried. Vandals have removed the headstones from time to time until not one is now left." Though reuse of gravestones was not unknown in the past, this description indicates that the practice was frowned upon by 1940. Legislation enacted since then protects graves and historic burial grounds.

Jessie Smith of Suffield, a trail volunteer whose observations are included in the *Walk Book*, and local folks also knew of them. Curious historians interviewed some of those people in the 1970s and 1980s. The quarry company (now Galasso Materials LLC, formerly Tilcon/Roncari) and the East Granby planning and

zoning commission were made aware of this ancient cemetery by me in 1993 and again in 2013 as Galasso's quarry expansion plans were being considered. The cemetery was officially designated by the town in January 2013 "as historically significant to the Town of East Granby," and a 200-foot ridge line was set aside by Galasso to protect the cemetery from encroachment. The town approved a Ridgeline Protection Zone in January 2014 to provide further protection.

Last October, after 74 years, new memorial stones for Joshua, Ruth, and the Holcomb children were placed on the graves. The installation of these new granite headstones righted the wrong done years ago. ▶

The original gravestone mortared into the foundation of William Talbot's workshop in Bloomfield. The stone is covered in chalk to facilitate making a transfer print or rubbing. photo: Thomas Howard



The original gravestone for Caleb, Amarilla, and Boadica Holcomb, 1932. History Room, East Granby Library



The new gravestone for Caleb, Amarilla, and Boadica Holcomb, 2013. photo: Thomas Howard



## Explore!

**Saturday, June 7, 2014, 10 a.m.**  
Rededication ceremony at the East Granby Smallpox Cemetery, part of Connecticut Trails Weekend and sponsored by East Granby Land Trust. For more information visit Connecticut Forest & Park Association's Web site, [ctwoodlands.org](http://ctwoodlands.org), or pick up a copy of the Connecticut Trails Weekend brochure at the East Granby town hall.

**Connecticut Trails Weekend, June 7 & 8, 2014**  
Hundred of events statewide offer opportunities to explore Connecticut's trails, forests, parks, preserves, and more. Organized by the Connecticut Forest & Park Association. For an events listing visit [ctwoodland.org](http://ctwoodland.org).