

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

For NPS use only
received JUN 5 1985
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Continuation sheet 58 North Kingstown NHA Item number 7

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NAME: Old Narragansett Cemetery
LOCATION: Shermantown Road
OWNER: Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island
275 North Main Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

CONDITION: Good; Altered (by weathering); Original site

DESCRIPTION:

The Old Narragansett Cemetery lies in southwest North Kingstown on a site known as "The Platform" because of its elevation on a knoll, a topographical feature now difficult to discern due to growth of trees and bushes in the twentieth century. The cemetery is to the east of the site of the Narragansett Church, constructed in 1707 and moved five miles north to Wickford in 1800. There are about 110 graves marked with stones of slate, fieldstone, granite, and marble. The largest monument is a twelve-foot, granite, Latin cross erected in 1869 to mark the graves of the longest serving eighteenth-century rectors, James MacSparran and Samuel Fayerweather. A number of the members of the early congregation are buried here, though many families used private burial grounds on their own farms. Closed to burials in the 1880s, the cemetery is maintained by the Rhode Island Episcopal Diocese, and is surrounded by a nineteenth-century stone wall that excludes some adjacent slave graves. A narrow path leads about 285 feet south from the road to the cemetery.

Most head and foot stones are slabs of marble, slate, and fieldstone. Those of fieldstone have suffered greatly from exposure to the elements, their inscriptions obscured by weathering. Slate monuments, popular in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, are ornamented with winged heads and skulls, masonic emblems, and scrollwork. One of the most elaborate slate tablets covers the table tomb of Christopher Philips, a prominent early colonist and close friend of Reverend MacSparran. A few brownstone and granite markers also date from the eighteenth century. Most marble monuments postdate the relocation of the church, and are quite simple in design.

All monuments face west (with the exception of the MacSparran/Fayerweather memorial which is inscribed on the four sides of its base), and are arranged roughly in rows running from north to south. The cemetery is owned by the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island and maintained by an endowment. The property includes an adjacent, one-acre lot that connects the cemetery to the road and was probably the site of a dwelling for cemetery caretaker; it was torn down in 1918.

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PERIOD: 1700-1799, 1800-1899
AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE: Religion, Sculpture
SPECIFIC DATES: Early 18th century through 1880
BUILDER: None

SIGNIFICANCE:

The Old Narragansett Cemetery is significant not only for its age (it is one of North Kingstown's oldest burying grounds) but also for the length of its use, the variety and good condition of most of the markers, and for its ability to document the presence here of a eighteenth-century community center, now otherwise without physical documentation.

Grave markers here date from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth century; many are fine examples of the carver's craft, decorated with motifs reflecting changes in artistic fashions and in the perception of the relationship between God and man. Many of the stones are signed, including some slate markers from the workshop of noted Newport stone carver John Stevens.

The Narragansett Church (now St. Paul's), whose former site adjoins the cemetery, was once the center of the religious life of the entire Narragansett region. The Narragansett Church was founded with the aid of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, an active British missionary association, which sent a minister to the Narragansett country in 1702. Optimism about the area's future, probably inspired by the prosperous planter society that was developing, is indicated by the choice of Narragansett region over Little Compton and Tiverton, other Rhode Island communities that petitioned for assistance at the same time.

The church was erected in 1707 following a typical meetinghouse plan, with entry and pulpit on the long sides and exposed interior framing. A large scroll pediment over the entrance was one of the earliest uses of a classical architectural motif in New England. The pulpit hosted a rapid succession of ministers until the arrival of the Scotsman James MacSparran, an active writer, teacher, physician, and minister, who remained at the church from 1721 to his death in 1757. His house was located just past the North Kingstown line and was known as the "Glebe," following English custom. MacSparran's energetic work increased the importance of the church and his home as the center of intellectual and social, as well as religious, life in the Narragansett region.

Samuel Fayerweather succeeded MacSparran, but his tenure was not as happy. The Church of England was resented by some colonists as a symbol of the mother country and, by 1774, anti-British sentiment was so intense

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that Fayerweather closed the church. He continued to preach occasionally in private houses until his death in 1781.

The church was used during the war as an American barracks, and it was not until 1787 that religious services again convened in the building. During the war, however, funding from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel had ceased and the congregation had dwindled. Only eleven members attended a meeting in 1799 during which a vote was taken to move the edifice to Wickford, the nearby seaport. (The building, which was entered on the National Register on July 2, 1972, and is in the Wickford Historic District, was used regularly until 1847 when a new structure was built nearby.) The move reflects the shift in population which had taken place during the church's century-long history, as the prosperous agricultural life of the eighteenth century gave way to the increasing development at Wickford.

ACREAGE: c. 1.2 acres

QUAD NAME: Wickford, R.I.

UTM REFERENCES: A 19 293200 4599130

BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION:

The boundary is defined as the lot lines of the cemetery lot shown on Assessor's Plat 25 (surrounded by lots 2 and 3) and Plat 25, lot 2, and includes the cemetery which is surrounded by a stone wall, some slave graves outside the wall, and the site of a (now demolished) caretaker's house.

LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE: State

Photo numbers 49-50