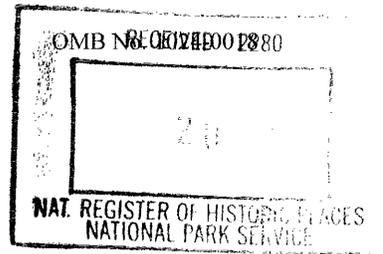


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM



OK
H21

1. Name of Property

historic name
Old Center Burying Yard

other names/site number Center Cemetery

2. Location

street & number 30 North Main Street not for publication ___
city or town West Hartford vicinity ___
state CT code ___ county Hartford code ___
zip code 06107

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination ___
request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and
meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets ___ does not meet the
National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ___ nationally statewide ___ locally. (___ See
continuation sheet for additional comments.)

[Signature] March 19, 2002
Signature of certifying official Date
John W. Shannahan, Director, Connecticut Historical Commission

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria. (___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the
National Register
See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the
National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain):

[Signature]
Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action
5/3/02

Old Center Burying Yard
Name of Property

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County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> buildings
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> sites
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> structures
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> objects
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)
N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Funerary

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Funerary

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

N/A

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation N/A
roof N/A
walls N/A
other N/A

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)
See continuation sheets

Old Center Burying Yard
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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

Art history _____
Religious history _____
Ethnic history _____
Cultural history _____

Period of Significance

1719-ca. 1880

Significant Dates

1719, 1839

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Bristol; Noah Webster, Sr., and Mercy Steele Webster

Cultural Affiliation

African-American

Architect/Builder

N/A

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)
See continuation sheets.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)
See continuation sheets.

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record

Primary Location of Additional Data

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: Connecticut State Library;
Noah Webster House Museum

Old Center Burying Yard
Name of Property

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Approx. 1 acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing	
1 <u>18</u>	<u>687660</u>	<u>4265850</u>	3 _____	_____	_____	
2 _____	_____	_____	4 _____	_____	_____	_____ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

The nominated property includes the entire cemetery at 30 North Main Street, as described in Hartford land records volume 3, page 276, and volume 87, page 192.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

The boundary includes the entire historical extent of the cemetery, both the original plot opened in 1719 and the contiguous private plot opened in 1839.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Diana Ross McCain
organization historian date June 17, 2001
street & number 262 Skeet Club Road telephone (860) 349-0182
city or town Durham state CT zip code 06422

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

- A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- A **sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

name Town of West Hartford, Connecticut
street & number 50 S. Main Street telephone (860) 523-3224
city or town West Hartford state CT zip code 06107

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.). Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Narrative Description

The Old Center Burying Yard is a small eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century municipal graveyard of slightly more than one acre. It contains approximately 155 gravemarkers, the majority dating from the eighteenth or the early nineteenth centuries. (Photographs 1 and 2) Several of the eighteenth-century gravestones have been creditably attributed to individual carvers who flourished in Connecticut.

The Burying Yard is located on North Main Street, a busy artery, approximately one-quarter of a mile from the intersection with Farmington Avenue, also a heavily traveled road. It is on the very edge of the commercial center of the large suburban town of West Hartford, in an area of predominantly twentieth-century commercial, public, and residential structures.

The Burying Yard is separated from North Main Street by a narrow expanse of lawn through which a concrete sidewalk runs parallel to the road. The Town of West Hartford has erected a metal marker in front of the Burying Yard identifying it as a historic site.

The Burying Yard is surrounded on three sides by a chain link fence, with a simple wrought-iron picket fence along the west side, fronting North Main Street. There is access for pedestrians only, gained through a swinging gate in the wrought-iron fence a few feet from the southwestern corner of the yard. The Burying Yard is surrounded on all but the street side by tall trees, apparently several decades old, and by bushes that together serve as visual buffers against an adjacent office building, condominium, and parking lot.

The northern three-quarters of the graveyard constitutes the older of its two parts. This section contains approximately 100 stones, dating from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These markers are primarily upright tablets of stone in a distinctive shape of a rounded top flanked by small "shoulders." (Photograph 3) The gravestones face west. There are half a dozen footstones, small markers, usually with minimal carving, that were placed at the foot of a grave.

The gravestones are scattered throughout this earlier section of the Burying Yard. The largest concentration of stones consists of several rows of varying numbers of markers that run north/south just to the east of the center of the section. Most of the earliest burials occurred, and thus most of the earliest surviving stones are located, within this concentration of markers. The terrain is flat, with only a few trees and bushes scattered throughout.

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The gravestones are in varying degrees of physical condition, ranging from excellent to seriously deteriorated, the latter the result of exposure to the natural elements, to modern environmental hazards such as acid rain, and to an incident of vandalism that occurred in 1990. Many stones retain enough of their original ornamentation to be considered representative of the funerary art of their era. The earliest stones in this section commemorate individuals who died in 1725, with the latest dating from 1868.

The earliest stones are short and plain, with little ornamentation. (Photograph 4) As the eighteenth century progressed, Connecticut gravestones increasingly were carved with decorative iconography. The almost universal motif is a human head flanked by wings. Often the stone features a carved decorative border as well. (Photograph 5) The complexity of the carving varies depending upon the date of the stone and the creative talent and technical skill of the cutter. Gravestone carvers developed their own distinctive, recognizable artistic styles. The Burying Yard contains stones attributed to some of the best-known carvers of eighteenth-century Connecticut, including Gershom Bartlett of Bolton (Photograph 3), Ebenezer Drake of South Windsor (Photograph 5), and the still-unidentified folk artist dubbed the “Glastonbury Lady Carver” by gravestone historian Dr. Ernest Caulfield.¹ (Photograph 6)

The most impressive gravemarker of the eighteenth century was a “tablestone” – a massive, rectangular stone slab resting atop stone legs. Although tablestones typically were carved only with inscriptions, and little or no ornamentation, their sheer size bespoke great expense, and they clearly conveyed the prominence of the deceased. There is one such tablestone in the Burying Yard – or, more accurately, the top slab carved with an epitaph and the foundation slab upon which stood the legs. Both slabs lie on the ground (Photograph 7); the legs are in the collections of the Noah Webster House/Museum of West Hartford History. The tablestone marks the grave of the Reverend Nathaniel Hooker, second pastor of the West Hartford Congregational Church. The Reverend Hooker, who died in 1770 at the age of 32, was a descendant of Hartford founding father the Reverend Thomas Hooker and of Connecticut Governor Joseph Talcott.

¹ Ernest Caulfield, “The Glastonbury Lady,” *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* 19 (October 1954): 51.

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The early nineteenth-century gravestones in this section of the Burying Yard are typically rectangular or shaped to resemble the eighteenth-century rounded stone with shoulders. They are carved with epitaphs and in some instances with Neo-classical mourning images such as an urn and/or willow tree (Photograph 8) that within a period of perhaps two decades around the turn of the nineteenth century almost completely supplanted the winged heads or faces that had dominated Connecticut gravestone iconography for more than a century.

Most of the gravestones are carved of brownstone, a soft sandstone quarried at various sites along the Connecticut River not far from West Hartford. Not only was brownstone locally available and easily transportable via the river, but it was also very popular for gravemarkers because of its relative "softness," which makes it easy to carve. (Photographs 4 and 6) A few stones are marble (Photograph 9) or schist (Photograph 3).

A large memorial boulder close to the center of the west side of the graveyard was placed there in 1923 by the Sarah Whitman Hooker Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. It bears a metal plaque honoring French soldiers who died in West Hartford during the American Revolution. (Photograph 10)

The northern three-quarters of the Burying Yard as it exists today was opened as a graveyard in 1719. The inevitable need for additional space for graves resulted in the purchase of a new plot approximately one-quarter of a mile north of the Burying Yard. Interments continued in the plot originally opened in 1719 until 1868.

The southern one-quarter of the Burying Yard as it exists today was added to that original eighteenth-century plot in the early nineteenth century. Known in the town records as the "private cemetery," the land was taken from property belonging to the Whitman family. It is laid out primarily in discrete family plots, an arrangement that came increasingly into vogue as the nineteenth century progressed.

The earliest burial in this section was in 1839, the latest in 1971. It contains approximately two dozen monuments. Some of the gravemarkers are made of brownstone, but most are of granite. There are three large rectangular monuments and four tall obelisks, including a pink granite one at the center of the Talcott family plot. Within the plot, which is surrounded by a simple fence consisting of a single iron bar, are gravestones for individual family members. (Photograph 2)

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The Old Center Burying Yard is a well-tended rectangle that is distinct, clearly identified, and free of intrusions. Despite its location almost in the commercial heart of a major suburb, it retains the atmosphere of the town's rural, agricultural, eighteenth-century origins.

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Significance

Summary

West Hartford's Old Center Burying Yard is significant in American folk art because it contains many fine examples of the gravestone carving that was the primary form of sculpture produced in New England prior to 1850. Changes in the religious iconography and the messages of the epitaphs on the stones document the evolution of Congregationalist theology in Connecticut during the 1700s and early 1800s. Interred in the Burying Yard is Bristol (ca. 1731-1814), an African kidnapped into slavery, who purchased his freedom and achieved as great a degree of prosperity and respect as a black man could aspire to in Connecticut 200 years ago. Bristol's life is unusually well-documented for an African American of his era, in primary and secondary sources located in or near West Hartford, including his gravestone. Also interred in the Burying Yard are Noah Webster, Sr. (1722-1813), and Mercy Steele Webster (1727-1794), parents of author and lexicographer Noah Webster, Jr. Their considerable financial sacrifice enabled their son to secure the advanced education that was the foundation for his historic career.

Historical Background

Present-day West Hartford was the West Division of the Town of Hartford when the first settler, Stephen Hosmer, took up residence there in 1679. By 1710 there were 164 residents in the West Division. Three years later the West Division became the Fourth Ecclesiastical Society of Hartford, entitling it to erect its own house of worship, hire its own minister, levy taxes to pay for religious expenses, and oversee all other related affairs. The Fourth Society remained under the secular control of the Town of Hartford until 1854, when it was incorporated as the Town of West Hartford.

Individuals who died prior to 1719 in present-day West Hartford would have been interred in the Ancient Burying Ground, established in 1640 in the center of Hartford, five miles away. In 1719 John Janes sold to the Town of Hartford a plot of land less than one acre in size near the Fourth Society meetinghouse to serve as a graveyard. That plot,

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located at present-day 30 North Main Street, comprises the northern three-quarters of the Burying Yard. The Burying Yard was the final resting place for most of West Hartford's inhabitants for more than seven decades, until the need for additional space for graves led to the opening of a second graveyard in 1790. Interments continued to take place in the Old Center Burying Yard until 1868.

In the early nineteenth century the Burying Yard grew one-third larger with the addition to the south of a section known in the town records as the "private cemetery." The land was taken from property belonging to the Whitman family, and was used for family plots.

A 1934 Works Progress Administration survey of the Old Center Burying Yard found 136 gravestones still standing in the section that was originally opened in 1719. The earliest stones were for individuals who died in 1725 (Photograph 4), and the latest for one who died in 1868. In 2001 approximately 100 of those 136 gravestones are still standing.

The 1934 WPA survey found approximately two dozen stones in the "private section" of the Old Center Burying Yard. The earliest burial in the private section occurred in 1839. Additional interments in the intervening decades have brought that number to more than 50, with the last burial occurring in 1971.

Important Gravestone Carvers and Carvings

Gravestones were the primary form of sculpture produced in New England before 1850. The Burying Yard contains numerous examples of the funerary art characteristic of eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Connecticut, including examples of the work of several identified carvers who developed their own original, distinctive artistic styles.

The earliest New England gravestones were made in the "plain" style, carved with a brief epitaph and little or no ornamentation. The tombstone for Samuel Sedgwick, Jr. (1691-1725), is an example of that style. (Photograph 4)

Ornamentation became increasingly common on Connecticut gravestones during the first half of the eighteenth century. The overwhelmingly predominant motif throughout this era was a human head, usually flanked by wings. The earliest versions of this motif consisted of a skull-like "death's head" with hollow eyes and a fearsome

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grimace. An example in the Burying Yard is the marker for Lieutenant Joseph Gillitt (1665-1746). (Photograph 12) Lieutenant Gillitt's stone is not as ghoulish as some death's heads, for it was made at a time when gravestone iconography was in transition to a less forbidding appearance, the result of fundamental changes in Puritan theology. The "death's head" slowly evolved over the course of the eighteenth century into a softer, more human, more appealing visage, with a sober, serene, or even euphoric expression, often topped by a "crown of righteousness." These "angel's heads" and accompanying decorative carving are rendered with increasing complexity, detail, and imagination as the technical skill and artistic creativity of gravestone carvers advanced. This transformation was gradual, with much overlap of death's head and angel's head.

An example in the Burying Yard of this transition from death's head to angel's head is the gravestone for Captain Samuel Sedgwick (1667-1735). (Photograph 6) This simple, enigmatic face is the work of an as-yet-unidentified artisan who flourished in the 1720s through the 1740s, dubbed the "Glastonbury [Connecticut] Lady Carver" by gravestone scholar Dr. Ernest Caulfield.

The Burying Yard contains three stones attributed to carver Gershom Bartlett of Bolton, Connecticut, whose stones Dr. James Slater describes as "among the most bizarre and strikingly original of any produced during the eighteenth century."² Bartlett carved the schist tombstones for Jonathan Cadwell (1735-1760) (Photograph 3), Ann Whiting Colton (1724-1760), and Jacob Merrell (1715-1771).

The gravestones for Samuel Stanley (1749-1787) and Anna Olmsted Stanley (1749-1780) (Photograph 5) are attributed to Ebenezer Drake of South Windsor, Connecticut. Drake was "one of the most popular carvers of the time," according to Dr. Slater, who contends that "no craftsman produced any finer folk stones" than Drake.³

The gravestone for Rachel Marshfield (1668-1754) is an impressive example of folk sculpture that represents a rare departure from the traditional iconography of eighteenth-century Connecticut gravestones. The unidentified carver used four separate symbols to depict the inevitability of death. An upright tulip representing life is followed by an hourglass symbolizing the passage of time. Next is a scythe, the traditional tool of the Grim Reaper, looming over the tulip, now lying on the ground after being mown down by death.

²James A. Slater, *The Colonial Burying Grounds of Eastern Connecticut and the Men Who Made Them* (Hamden, CT: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1987), 15.

³*Ibid.*, 80.

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Religious History

The shift from death's head to angel's head on Connecticut gravestones roughly parallels the infusion of fresh vitality and passion into Puritanism that occurred during the intensely emotional religious revival of the late 1730s and 1740s known to history as the Great Awakening. (Criterion A) That revival inspired serious challenges to calcified religious authority that some historians believe sowed the seeds for challenges to secular authority that led to the American Revolution.

Neo-classical imagery, such as an urn and/or a weeping willow, abruptly supplanted religious iconography on Connecticut gravestones at the turn of the nineteenth century. This trend reflected the intensity of the new nation's identification with the glories of classical civilizations. It may also represent the increasing secularization of Connecticut society taking place at the same time.

The epitaphs on some of the gravestones in the Burying Yard are succinct expressions of Connecticut society's core religious beliefs, and how they changed. That for Mary Mix, who died in 1745, is a forbidding warning about the inevitability of death:

*Behold of me as you pass by
As you are now so once was I
As I am now so must you be
Prepare for death & follow me.⁴*

By contrast, the epitaph for Thomas Goodman, Sr., who died in 1809, well after the transformation in religious outlook worked by the Great Awakening, is an expression of hope and comfort:

*Then why lament
All though from us hes torn
If happy now
We have no cause to mourn.⁵*

⁴ Barbara Cornelius, "Transcription of Epitaphs and Names and Dates for Persons Buried in Old Center Cemetery." Unpublished manuscript, 2001, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

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Significant Persons

In the Burying Yard stands a small rectangular stone (Photograph 11), its surface worn almost smooth by the elements, that originally bore the epitaph:

*In Memory of Bristol.
A native of Africa
Died March 11, 1814. Aged 83 years⁶*

Born in Africa ca. 1731, Bristol (or Bristow or Bristo, as his name was sometimes spelled) was brought to North America to be enslaved at some unknown time prior to the American Revolution. By 1775 Bristol was one of approximately 6,500 black slaves who constituted a very small minority of Connecticut's population of roughly 200,000.

On May 9, 1775, Bristol purchased his freedom from his owner, Thomas Hart Hooker of West Hartford. The manumission paper, in the manuscript collection of The Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford, reads:

Know all men by these presents that I Thomas Hart Hooker of Hartford in the county of Hartford For the Consideration of Sixty Pounds money Rec'd to my full satisfaction do by these presents fully freely and absolutely Release Manumit and set at full Liberty a Certain Negro man named Bristow from all my Heirs and Assigns forever and I do Grant to him the said Bristow his full Liberty and Freedom from me and my Service that he may go and come when and where ever he pleases without any hindrance or molestation from me or anyone Claiming from by or under me. As witness whereas I have Here unto Set my hand Seal the 9th Day of May Anno Dom 1775 in the 15th year of His Majesty's Reign. Signed Sealed & Deliv In the presence of Salomon Whitman, Mary Root. Thomas Hart Hooker.⁷

⁶ "Headstone Inscriptions, 126-1 Old Center or North Cemetery, West Hartford, Connecticut, Copied by F.J. Lawler, October 15, 1934," 5, Archives, History and Genealogy Division, Connecticut State Library, Hartford.

⁷ Thomas Hart Hooker, Manumission of Bristow, 9 May 1775, The Connecticut Historical Society Library, Hartford.

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The next day, May 10, 1775, Thomas Hart Hooker, 29, left his wife, Sarah, with their two small children, ages five and three, to join the Continental Army outside Boston. Hooker died in the army on November 26, 1775.

Local tradition claims that after purchasing his freedom, Bristol continued to reside with the Hooker family in their dwelling, today the Sarah Whitman Hooker Homestead, a historic house museum. A pamphlet on West Hartford history issued in 1848 by unidentified individuals, some of whom, theoretically, could have personally known Bristol, states his knowledge of agriculture was so great that local farmers sought his advice. This source also says Bristol could read and owned a small personal library.

Bristol managed to accumulate sufficient worldly possessions to justify writing a will, itself an extremely unusual step for an African American in eighteenth-century Connecticut. Dated December 23, 1790, the will reads:

In the Name of God amen

I Bristol late a Servant of Mr. Roger Hooker formerly of Farmington now Deceased Now a Freedman and an Inhabitant of the Town of Bristol in the County of Hartford and State of Connecticut being Weak in my Body but of sound Mind & memory blessed be God therefore and considering human Frailty have thought it my duty to make a Disposition of that Property with which Providence hath blessed me in this Life.

Imprimis, my will is that all my Just Debts and funeral Expenses be first paid and fully contented.

Further my Will is and I do hereby give and bequeath all my Estate both real and Personal unto Thomas Hart Hooker and Abigail Hooker Children of Thomas Hart Hooker Late of Hartford Deceased to them their Heirs and assigns forever in Equal Moieties.

And I do hereby anul revoke and make void all former wills by me made, and publish this one [?] for my Last Will and Testament.

And I appoint Mr. Roger Hooker of Farmington to be the only Executor of this my Last Will and Testament In Testimony Whereof I have hereunto Signed my Name & affixed my Seal in Farmington this 23d day of December 1790.

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Signed Sealed & Pronounced and Delivered by the Testator for his Last Will and Testament in presence of us} Bristol + his mark [That Bristol did not sign his will with his name does not necessarily contradict the report that he was literate or that he had a personal library. He might indeed have been able to read but not write, might have learned to read after he made his will, or he might have been too weak to affix his signature to his will.]

Allen Olcott

Seth Collins

William Judd⁸

Despite the poor health that prompted the drafting of his will, Bristol did not die until March 10, 1814. No inventory of Bristol's possessions has survived, but Thomas Hart Hooker, Jr., now a man of 41, and Roger Hooker posted a \$600 bond as executors of the estate, suggesting he left goods with at least a modest value.

No record of the settlement of Bristol's estate has survived. But since he left no specific directive in his will about the disposition of his body, save for the routine instruction that my "funeral Expenses be first paid and fully contented," it is reasonable to surmise that Thomas Hart Hooker, Jr., and his sister, Abigail, Bristol's two heirs, were responsible for the erection of a tombstone over the grave of the man they had known their entire lives, and with whom they apparently had established a close enough relationship for him to bequeath them all his worldly goods. That Thomas and Abigail chose to note Bristol's place of birth in his terse epitaph suggests Bristol himself retained pride in his native land. The pervasive racism with which Bristol had to contend throughout his life is tacitly demonstrated by the location of his gravestone: alone in a corner of the Burying Yard. This siting reflects the practice observed throughout Connecticut in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of interring blacks in a separate section of the graveyard, segregated from whites.

Bristol is likely not the only African American who lies in the Burying Yard. West Hartford First Congregational Church Records note the deaths before 1790 of three black individuals who it is reasonable to assume were interred in the Burying Yard. Bristol's gravestone serves as a symbol of those three people as well as an unknown

⁸ Bristol, Will, 23 December 1790, Hartford Probate Court Records, Archives, History, and Genealogy Division, Connecticut State Library, Hartford. Microfilm.

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number of other black residents of West Hartford in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The Burying Yard is the final resting place of Noah Webster, Sr. (1722-1813), and Mercy Steele Webster (1727-1794), the parents of Noah Webster, Jr., author of the “blue-backed speller” from which millions of American children learned to read, and of the pioneering *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. Noah Webster, Jr., was born in 1758 and grew up in his parents’ house at 227 South Main Street, West Hartford, just several miles from the Burying Yard. His birthplace is now the Noah Webster House/Museum of West Hartford History.

By the time he was 14, Noah Webster, Jr., yearned for a more advanced education than the local common, or public, school provided. He wanted to study under the Reverend Nathan Perkins, the First Church of West Hartford’s pastor. “Noah, Sr., hesitated because of the expense and because of the fact that the boy wasn’t the eldest. But young Noah persisted and insisted, and finally began his studies in 1772,” writes Webster biographer John S. Morgan.⁹

Noah, Jr., next set his sights on a degree from Yale College in New Haven, Connecticut. “Noah Webster, Sr., grew so interested in his second son’s career that he mortgaged the farm to pay the boy’s college expenses,” according to Morgan.¹⁰

Webster’s attendance at Yale between 1774 and 1778, during the turbulent early years of the American Revolution, supplied the intellectual foundation for his eventual life’s work as an educator and lexicographer. That experience also instilled in him a passion for American independence and self-sufficiency that would provide the inspiration for his great contributions to these fields.

Webster’s father also inadvertently set his son on the path to the field in which he would make seminal contributions to American culture. “After graduation from Yale, young Noah Webster came home to West Hartford, and to a shock,” writes Morgan. “Instead of his father giving him further financial support to study law, as he had hoped, the elder Webster gave him an eight-dollar bill of the Continental currency, so depreciated that it was worth about two dollars in silver. ‘Take this,’ Noah, Sr., said. ‘I can do no more for you.’”¹¹

⁹ John S. Morgan, *Noah Webster* (New York: Mason/Charter, 1975), 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

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The young Noah Webster turned to what he considered the temporary expedience of teaching school to support himself until he could accumulate the resources to pay for a legal education. Although Webster eventually succeeded in passing the bar in 1781, his experience teaching in three common schools in Connecticut had impressed upon him the critical need for improvement in public education that would help ensure American intellectual independence from Great Britain. He responded to this need by writing and publishing in 1783 his reading textbook known popularly as the “blue-backed speller” that would eventually sell more than 100 million copies, and by publishing in 1825 his *American Dictionary of the English Language*.

The Old Center Burying Yard is eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places as “a cemetery which derives its primary significance from graves of persons of transcendent importance, from age, from distinctive design features, or from associations with historic events.” (National Register Criteria, Category D)

The Burying Yard contains numerous fine examples of hand-carved gravestones, the primary form of sculpture in eighteenth-century Connecticut, many of them noteworthy for their distinctive designs developed and executed by creative, talented folk artists.

The evolution of the iconography on the Burying Yard’s stones reflects a fundamental change in Puritan theology that occurred throughout New England following widespread episodes of intense spiritual renewal that began in the 1730s, most notably the Great Awakening, the most significant religious revival in American history.

In the Burying Yard is interred an African-American man whose personal accomplishments, unusually well-documented life, and gravestone combine to offer a rare glimpse of life in Connecticut’s black community in the 1700s and early 1800s. Also buried here are the parents of Noah Webster, Jr., whose personal sacrifices made possible their son’s career as an educator and lexicographer.

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Section Captions Page 1 Old Center Burying Yard
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All photographs:

1. Old Center Burying Yard
2. West Hartford, Hartford County, Connecticut
3. Photo credit: Diana Ross McCain
4. June, 2001
5. Negatives filed with Connecticut Historical Commission, Hartford, Connecticut

Captions:

Overview of northern section of Burying Yard, camera facing northeast

Photograph 1 of 12

Overview of southern section of Burying Yard, camera facing southeast

Photograph 2 of 12

Gravestone of Jonathan Cadwell (1760), Gershom Bartlett, carver, camera facing east

Photograph 3 of 12

Gravestone of Samuel Sedgwick, Jr. (1725), camera facing east

Photograph 4 of 12

Gravestone of Anna Stanley (1780), Ebenezer Drake, carver, camera facing east

Photograph 5 of 12

Gravestone of Captain Samuel Sedgwick (1735), Glastonbury Lady Carver, carver, camera facing east

Photograph 6 of 12

Top and foundation slabs of tablestone of Rev. Nathaniel Hooker (1770), camera facing west

Photograph 7 of 12

Gravestone of Abigail Goodwin (1824), camera facing east

Photograph 8 of 12

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Gravestone of Noah Webster, Sr. (1813), and Mercy Steele Webster (1794), camera facing east
Photograph 9 of 12

Boulder commemorating French soldiers who died while encamped in West Hartford during the American
Revolution (1923), erected by the Sarah Whitman Hooker Chapter of the Daughters of the American
Revolution, camera facing east
Photograph 10 of 12

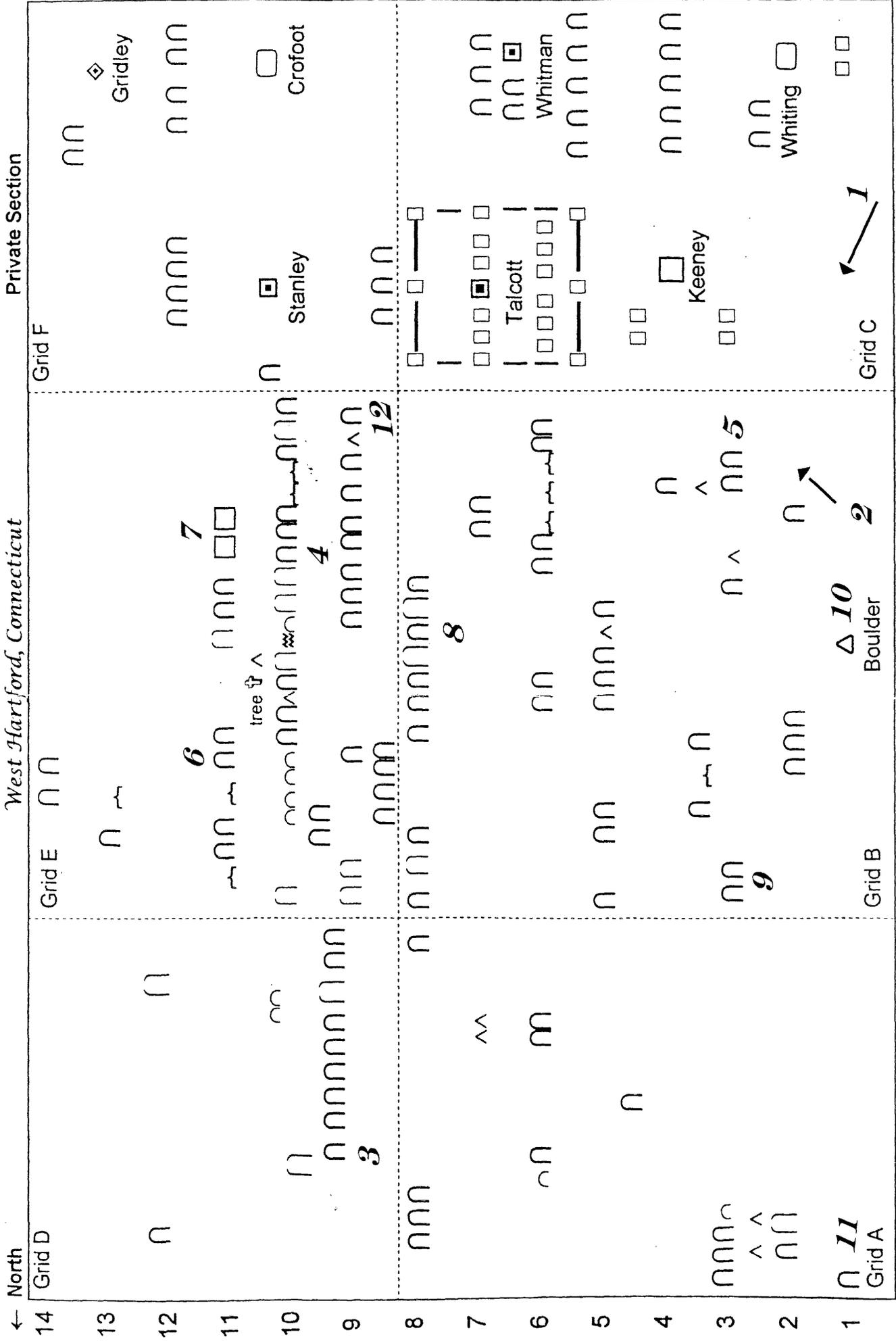
Gravestone of Bristol (1814), camera facing east
Photograph 11 of 12

Gravestone of Lt. Joseph Gillitt (1746), camera facing east
Photograph 12 of 12

Figure 1 Numbers correspond to list of photographs in Additional Documentation section of application.

OLD CENTER BURYING YARD
West Hartford, Connecticut

Reproduced from *Old Center Burying Yard*,
by Barbara Cornelius (West Hartford, CT:
West Hartford Historic District Commission, 2000)



- R
- o ^ Footstone
- w n Headstone
- o n Double Headstone
- o n Child's/small stone
- o n Broken stone
- o n Missing stone
- o n Obelisks
- o n Monuments
- o n Gate

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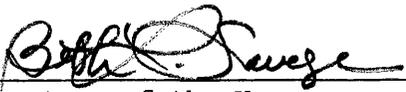
SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 02000421 Date Listed: 05/03/02

Center Burying Yard, Old Hartford CT
Property Name County State

N/A
Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

for 
Signature of the Keeper

5/3/02
Date of Action

Amended Items in Nomination:

8. Statement of Significance: Significant Person

The only individual who has been justified under criterion B for significant associations with his grave in this cemetery is Bristol, an African kidnapped into slavery who purchased his freedom. There is no other known extant property associated with him. This is not the case for Noah Webster, Sr., and his wife Mary Steele Webster, whose Hartford house is a designated National Historic Landmark.

This information was discussed with John Herzan, National Register Coordinator, CTSHPO, by telephone.

DISTRIBUTION:

- National Register property file
- Nominating Authority (without attachment)