

From Gravestones to People: Mortuary Archaeology and Microhistory at North Cemetery, Portsmouth, NH (1753-1926).

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Introduction

Cemeteries—and thus graves—are important cultural and historic resources and they can also act as windows into the lives of people in the past (Giles and Williams, 2016). Graves and cemeteries can tell us about:

- Demographic information about the individuals who lived in a community
- Ethnic and religious information
- Socioeconomical status

Graves do not just tell us about an individual; they can also tell us about a town or society and how they change through time (Giles and Williams, 2016). Here, I will explore the historic North Cemetery, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire (1753-1926), and discuss what we can learn about this time-period and the people that were buried there.

Research Questions

What can the grave markers at this cemetery tell us about the individuals who lived in Portsmouth in this era? And within that:

- What can certain demographics like age or sex tell archaeologists and historians about the community?



Figure 1: Aerial photo with a box around North Cemetery (image courtesy of Nathaniel Kitchel)

North Cemetery

- Portsmouth, NH
- Established in 1753 (City of Portsmouth, 2025)
- Active until 1926 (City of Portsmouth, 2025)
- Second oldest burying ground in the city
- Land was bought by John Hart
- 1800 graves total (Figure 1)

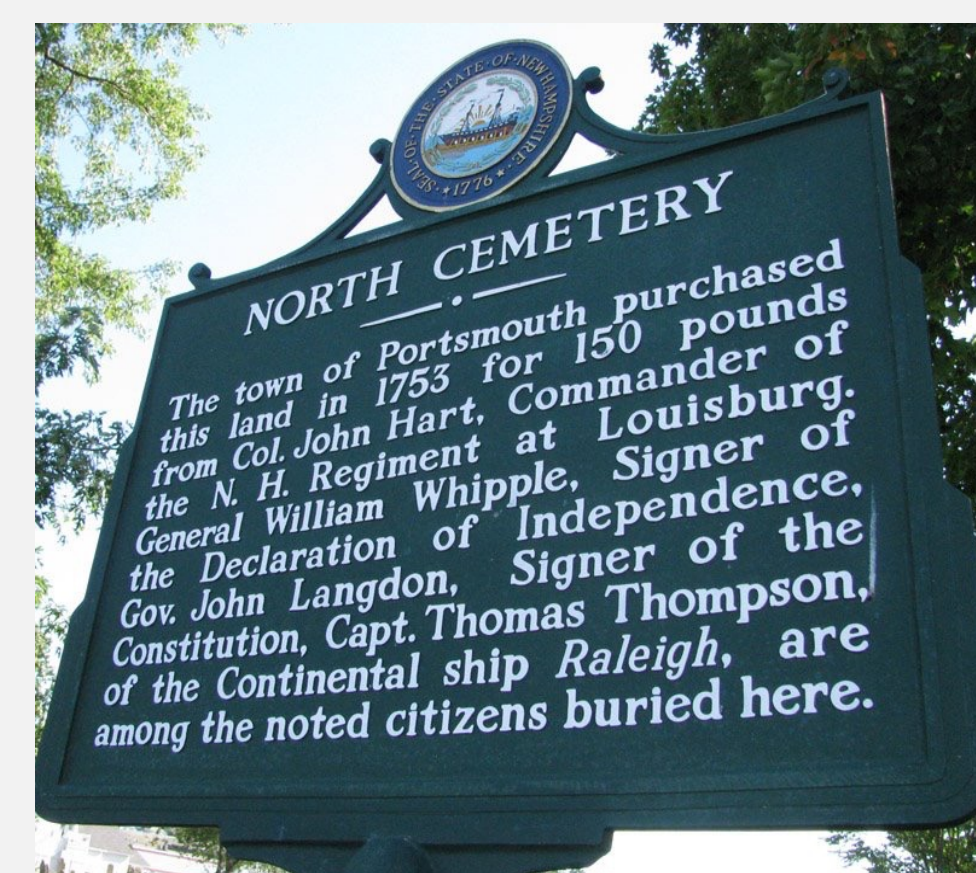


Figure 2: Sign of North Cemetery

- There are many historical figures buried there, including two founding fathers (John Langdon and William Whipple), one of the first Jewish resident of Portsmouth (Abraham Isaac), and free and enslaved African residents (Prince Whipple and Pomp Spring).

Methods

Survey of graves to collect data on:

- Inscriptions
- Motifs
- Material and condition of the graves
- Demographic information of those interred in the North Cemetery (age and sex)

Archival Research

- Transcribed records of graves of those buried in North Cemetery (Fig. 3 and 4)
- Compiled in Excel to quantify summary statistics and trends over time

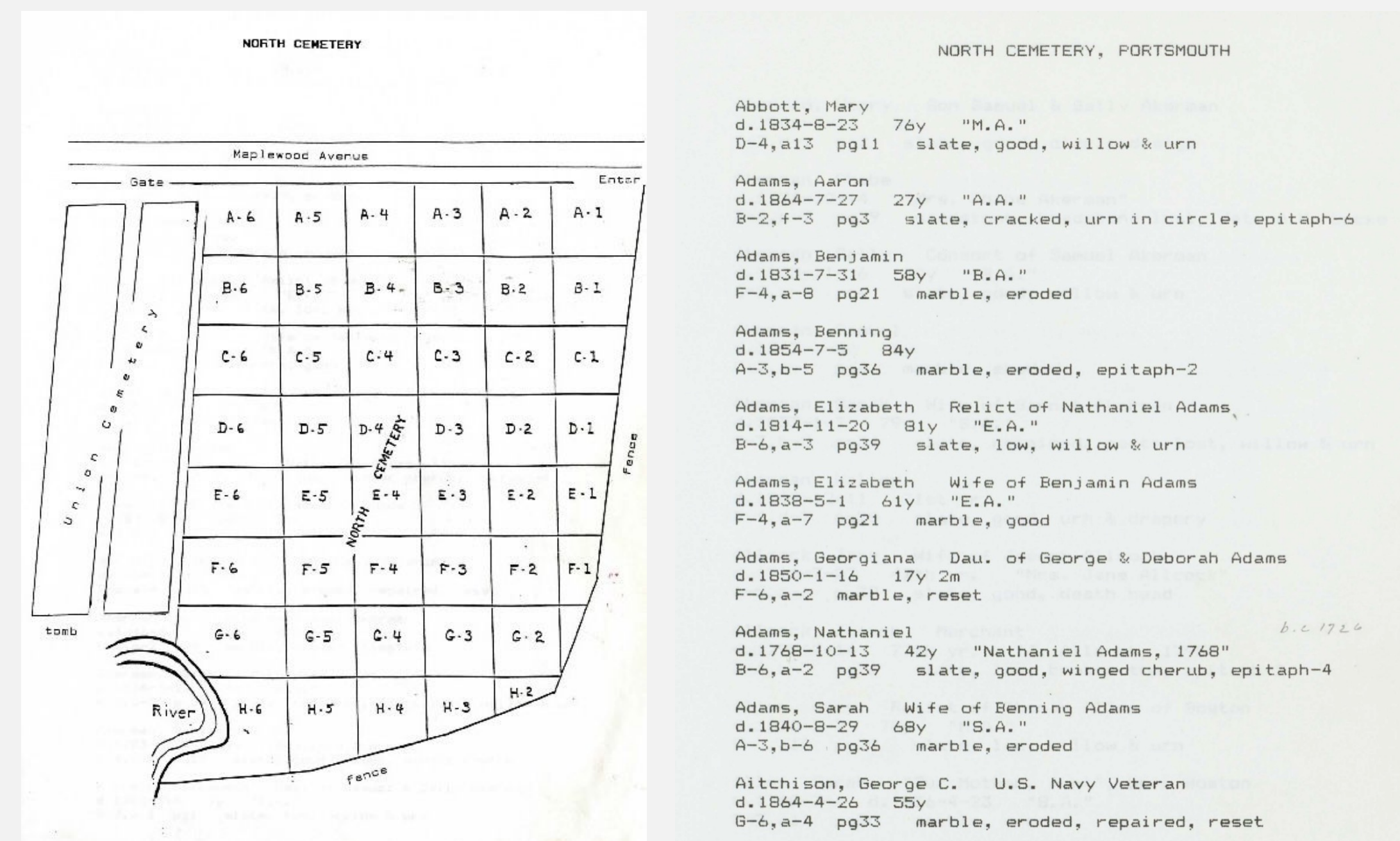


Figure 3: Left: North Cemetery burial map. The letters and numbers are a way to break the cemetery up into a grid so it is easier to identify the location of graves.

Figure 4: Right: A page from the North Cemetery burial records with a list of grave markers. Each entry has the individual's name and lifespan. On top of that these records include information about grave marker materials, current condition of the marker, and motifs on the marker.

Results

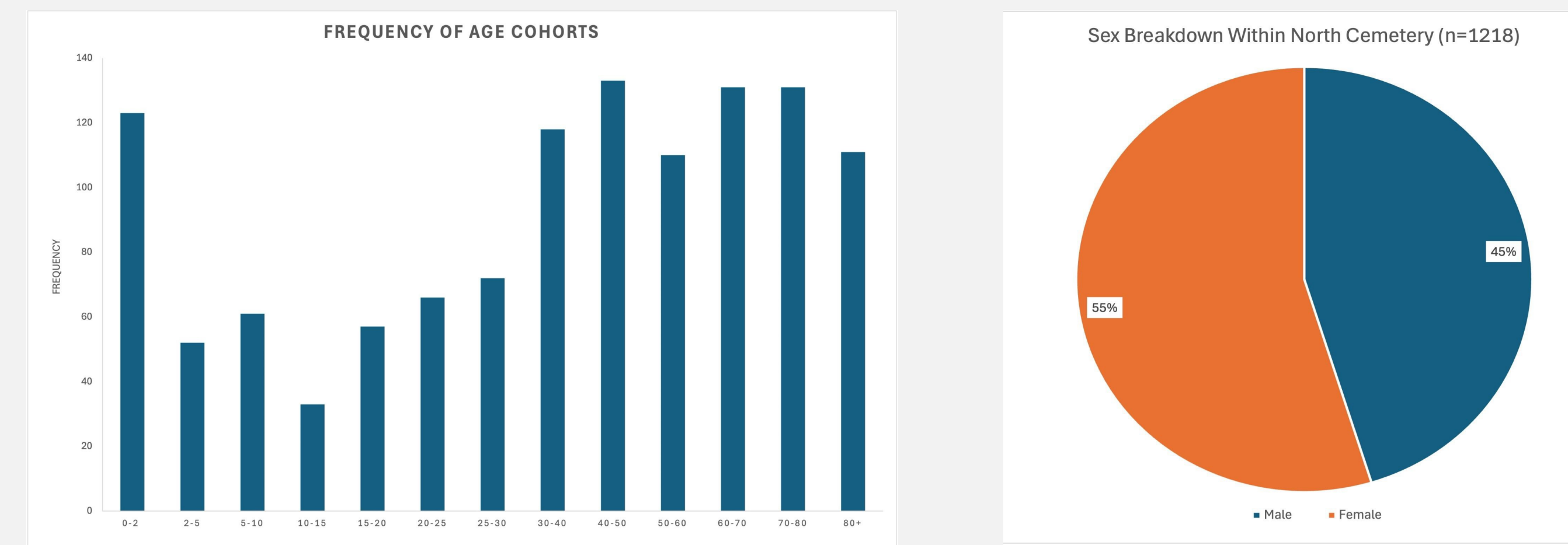


Figure 5: Graph of age-at-death in North Cemetery; the graph shows a high infant mortality rate. The age at death evens out once people reach the 40-50 range.

Figure 6: Graph of the breakdown of sex in North cemetery, showing a nearly even sex ratio at the cemetery. Sex was established using the historic naming conventions of the time.



Figure 7. A) William Whipple's grave (granite slab on top of a table tomb; no motif; in good condition; lengthy text describing his accomplishments in the government); B) Walker children's grave (urn with sprays (willow); slate; good condition, a little leaning but otherwise good condition); C) Prince Whipple's grave (no motif, marble, eroded); and D) Abraham Isaac's grave (Willow and urn, slate, good condition).

Discussion and Conclusion

Demography

- The most common age cohorts are 0-2 years old (infants and young children) and those of older adults (40+ years old). This shows high infant mortality and the expected attritional deaths of the elderly.
- The examination of sex ratios reveals a nearly even split between female and males. This suggests there was no significant selective pressures increasing one sex's likelihood of death over another.
- These demographic data—particularly the age-at-death data—are not atypical for this time-period. High infant mortality was common and has decreased from the 1840s to today (McDevitt-Irwin and Irwin 2025).

Microhistories

- William Whipple's grave (Fig 7A) shows his importance due to its size and the type of grave. His grave is a sarcophagus—or large above ground coffin structure—that draws attention to his burial location and highlights his importance to his descendants.
- Abraham Isaac's grave (Fig. 7B) shows how motifs, especially the Willow and Urn, were of social significance instead of religious significance. The Willow and Urn motif symbolized sorrow and mourning.
- Prince Whipple's original grave marker was a wooden cross, which eroded over time. A group of veterans replaced his grave marker with a present marble one (Fig. 7C). The only other thing on his marker, other than his name, was the fact he was a Revolution War veteran. This shows that they could have believed this was an important aspects of his identity.
- The Walker children's grave (Fig. 7D) show the reality that many people shared graves with their loved one. The children were close in age and died only a few days apart from each other, likely from a disease outbreak or other widespread mortality event. Epidemics of various disease were common across New England during the period of their lives.

Conclusions

Historic cemetery studies and mortuary archeology help us learn about past individuals and the world they lived in. It is a nondestructive way to find this information which is unique for archeology; this offers a sustainable and ethical option before or instead of traditional excavations.

Acknowledgement

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Citations

