

Review

Cemeteries of Cranberry Isles and the Towns of Mt. Desert Island:

A Record of Names and Dates on Gravestones
in Cemeteries of Bar Harbor, Cranberry Isles,
Mount Desert, Southwest Harbor and Tremont,

By Thomas F. Vining
(Bar Harbor, Me: V. F. Thomas Co., 2000. 592 pp.)

Census Records of Cranberry Isles and the Towns of Mount Desert Island:

Volume 1 - 1790-1840,

edited by Thomas F. Vining
(Bowdoin, Me: V. F. Thomas Co., 2002). 139 pp.

The Pretty Marsh Cemetery is on the right hand side of the road just past the tidal inlet as you head towards Bartlett's Landing. It's a middle-sized cemetery as Mount Desert Island cemeteries go - squares off at about 60 X 60 yards, holds nearly 200 graves or makers in nine or ten fairly regular rows laid end-ways to the road.

I say "graves or makers" because some of the stones don't denote actual graves but memorialize people who aren't there, some of whom are men who were "lost at sea" The graveyard's central space is a harmonious set of terraces made, I suppose, not by digging down but by building up: a good deal of dirt must have been dumped on the granite ledges over the years. This raised area is pretty nearly full. A flat broad border separates the terraces from the surrounding woods. On the left, this strip hold relative newcomers - summer residents or retirees, 28 in one long rows at present writing. On the right, members of one of MDI's and Pretty Marsh's long-established families lie in a grove. The graveyard is well kept up by a private association that maintains it.

Freemans predominate - 52 of them, born or married to that name. Columnar monuments on the topmost terrace mark the graves of three males Freemans and their wives, who share the

space with Millikens, Branscoms, and Grays. Each of the three is names Reuben, and all Reubens were born in the eighteenth century.

Reuben 1 (1740-1812) fought in the War for Independence. Reuben 2 was a ship's captain who died (on land at age 79 in 1850. Reuben 3 died in 1859 at age 64. Grandfather, father and son, or so one infers from the birth dates. The captain had three wives: Rhoda R. and Polly L. died before he did; Margaret B. outlived him. Reuben 1 is the earliest Freeman and the cemetery's oldest inhabitant. The most recent Freeman grave is that of William H. Sr., who died in 1996. Long family histories are thus writ here in stone - not only of Freemans, of course, but also (to name the most numerous) of Athertons and Carters, Dodges and Smallidges and Smiths, as well as Millikens, Branscoms, Grays, and many more.

Not everyone feels at home in a cemetery, but I think Thomas F. Vining must have enjoyed cataloging the residents of this and other evocative funerary spaces where he roamed and ruminated. Reading and copying tombstones can be back-breaking, knee-cracking work: you have to get down on all fours to make out the effaced or lichen-covered markings on older stones like some of the slate ones at Pretty Marsh. But when you get up again and stretch, the breeze teases you hair and you can maybe catch the heron fishing where the sun gleams on the marsh that gives the place its name. There's peace for you. And although the road carries a lot of summer traffic to and from Bartlett's Landing, not much is happening in the yard itself. Mr. Vining checked it out in the spring of 1999; following his track four years, I found just one new grave.

I mention this cemetery because I have known it all my life, but it only one of 110 cemeteries and isolated family grave sites that Mr. Vining's survey records. His massive report lists the names of all identifiable decedents in all those places, large and small. It transcribes everything the stones say about dates or birth and death, age at death, and family relationships (husbands, wives, children), with notes on variant names spellings. It provides directions for finding the sites and gives historical and descriptive notes on each one. Mr. Vining's account of the research process reveals the care and time he took to make the record comprehensive and correct.

To be comprehensive in work of this kind isn't easy. Outlying ploys must be identified and hunted down, off-road in woods perhaps or in someone's back field. Expansive cemeteries like Bar Harbor's Ledge-lawn and Hillside or Southwest Harbor's Mount Height, the island's largest, pose the task of keeping track of where you've been and what you've done so as to leave no stone unnoted. Nor is it easy always to be accurate. Old stones break, crumble, and blur, and what the eye can read, the hand may not always perfectly record. Alert to the high risk of mistakes, Mr. Vining systematically double-checked his data by revisiting graveyards. The result, judging from the evidence for Pretty Marsh, is exemplary, my on-site sampling found only one or two minute slips.

No one before had done it until Mr. Vining did, it was work worth doing, and he has done it well. Genealogists will find this volume indispensable. Historians will depend on it. And for all of us whose loved one rest in these island burying grounds, this is the stuff by which family ties are blessed and family trees are made. At least one savvy friend has suggested to me that the book would be more serviceable still if it included cemetery plats that would help searchers to find their kind and enable genealogists to make out family groupings. I myself wish that gravestone artwork and inscriptions had been recorded. Pretty Marsh has only a few of the first but several nice examples of the second. One lays a gracious benison upon the resting place of Capt. Benjamin T. R. Freeman (died 1874, aged 68):

Thou art not in the grave confined,
Death cannot claim the immortal mind.
Let earth close o'er its sacred trust,
But goodness dies not in the dust.

Thomas Vining has given us so much that it seems churlish to wish for more. All who use his volume will know how deep a debt of appreciation is owed to his remarkable industry and skill making available so full and true a record of the passing of the living and presence of the dead.

Mr. Vining presents Census Records as a companion to Cemeteries

and as work in progress; his website (<http://www.vfthomas.com>) tells us that the next installment, for 1850, will be coming soon. The present volume, covering the first six censuses, transcribes the handwritten record made by local census takers as they went their rounds (by comparing their reports with the cemetery records one can follow them from place to place, though not without difficulty). For convenience sake Mr. Vining then alphabetizes the names in each census. Census takers named only heads of household (almost always male) and grouped household members, unnamed, by gender and age. For example, the family of Reuben Freeman in 1810 contained one man and one woman aged 26-45, three boys and two girls under age ten, and three boys and one girl aged 10-16. A quick cross-check shows this to be the family of our Reuben 2, then aged 39, and his durably productive first wife, Rhoda, 36. One of the 10-16 boys was fifteen-year-old Reuben 3, in all likelihood the oldest son.

Having learned to respect Mr. Vining's thoroughness and accuracy in his census of the dead, we trust him also with the roll of the living. He, however, properly advises readers to go wherever possible to the original documents or, like him, to consult microfilm copies. This is good counsel not only for fidelity's sake but to save wear and tear on fragile old records. He also points out that the processes of field recording and office transcribing were inherently imperfect in ways that cannot now be known or set right. For those that can be, he invites readers to send him corrections at info@vfthomas.com

The great fact is that readers with an interest in the early history of Mount Desert and the Cranberries, and the people who made it, now have available this basic demographic and personal data in usable form, along with the promise of more to come. As Mr. Vining rightly says, "Census records yield a glimpse ... of the composition of a town" and are "an ideal source for beginning to fill in the stories of those who have come before us."

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Pretty Marsh and Williamsburg, VA.