

## **Phase II Observations on the Tombs of Rev. John Sergeant (1749) and Abigail Dwight (1791), Town Cemetery, Stockbridge, MA**

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Phase II of the conservation of the tombs of Rev. John Sergeant and his wife Abigail, was carried out by conservation architect William Remsen and architectural conservator Ian Stewart, principals of Preservation Inc., and field associate Sarah Gwozdz in September 2023. Phase II consisted of carefully lifting the two inscribed slabs, placing them on temporary wood sleepers nearby, and conducting limited archaeological excavations underneath to discover any surviving parts of the legs and bases. Only small fragments of marble legs were found. These were too few and too incomplete to reconstruct the original legs or to even understand the original sizes and shapes of the legs.

The Rev. John Sergeant was the founder of the Town of Stockbridge, Massachusetts. After John Sergeant's death in 1749, his widow Abigail married Joseph Dwight. Abigail chose to be buried next to her first husband, who had predeceased her by 42 years.

These two tombs were originally constructed as 'table tombs'. Historic table tombs consist of large, horizontal, rectangular stone slabs (ledgers), with engraved inscriptions on the tops, which were supported by stone legs. This style of grave monument was relatively complex and expensive for the period. These two tombs were illustrated in an 1871 edition of Harper's New Monthly Magazine. In the engraving, the tombs were still standing up on stone legs.

At some unknown date in the distant past, both table tops collapsed. Because the north side of the Reverend's stone rested on top of the southern edge of Abigail Dwight's slab, her table top apparently collapsed first. The direction of collapse was from south to north. It is unclear if there was a chronological gap between the two tombs' collapse or if they failed at essentially the same time.

Because of the inherently precarious nature of the table tomb design, with very heavy slabs resting on poorly attached, marble legs, any destabilizing event could have made a table tomb rack, severing any rusted iron pins and bending the legs. This would put one side of each leg into tension. Marble is very weak in tension and the legs would have quickly and catastrophically failed.

The numerous very small flakes and fragments of the legs recovered from under the ledger slabs of both tombs support this failure scenario. Both stone slabs ended up with their inscribed tops face up and flush to the ground. There, they languished for decades, exposed to accelerated weathering and biological growths from high moisture levels, from being in contact with the ground, as well as mechanical damage from lawnmowers and people walking directly on the slabs.

Phase I consisted of preliminary cleaning of the stone slab tops, in place, plus limited excavations around the perimeters to determine if any traces of the original legs and bases remained. Excavations did reveal traces of marble fragments under the two slabs. The Town directed Preservation Inc. to pursue Phase II.



Existing conditions of the Rev. Sergeant's and his wife's stone slabs on the ground. (W. Remsen)



Phase I work included preliminary cleaning. This made the inscriptions legible again. (W. Remsen)



Phase I work included limited excavations around the slabs before cleaning. These revealed marble foundation stones, with stone wedges underneath to level and support them. (W. Remsen)



Because of the many unknowns associated with this project, it has been divided into several phases. As the results of each phase are analyzed, the best future course can be discussed and decided upon.

Phase II is now completed. Preservation Inc.'s recommendations for future work are listed below. The Town will decide on what course to take in the future.

### Phase II Work

The slabs were touching along their long axis and were also aligned at their eastern edges (short axis). The Rev. Sargent's slab, of high quality brownstone, was quite large. Its dimensions are 93 1/2" x 36" x 5 1/2" thick. With a typical weight of 150 pounds per cubic foot, this slab weighs approximately 1,750 pounds. It could only be safely moved with specialized equipment by experienced professionals.

Abigail Dwight's table top slab was fabricated of a high quality white marble measuring 68" long x 30" wide x 3" thick. With a typical weight of 162 pounds per cubic foot, this slab weighs approximately 580 pounds.

Before anything could be moved, bench marks were established to locate the existing locations of the two slabs and to allow the future relocation of the moved slabs. Strings were pulled along the east and south sides and benchmarks set 18" away from the northeast, southeast and southwest corners along lines extended from the slab sides. The benchmarks were 18" steel rebar, centered under the strings with a plumb bob. The rebar were pounded down below the surface so that they could not be disturbed by lawnmowing or pedestrians. The bench marks can be found by simple probing or with a metal detector.

To make finding the benchmarks simpler, the compass alignments of the slabs were measured. The east side was measured at 15° west of north and the south side was measured at 285°. In addition, the southeast corner of the Rev. Sergeant slab was triangulated by measuring from the two east corners of the square base of the adjacent tall monument. The southeast corner to the Rev. Sargent slab measures ~82 1/2" and the northeast corner to the Rev. Sargent slab measures ~67".

### Abigail Dwight Tomb

Because the Abigail Dwight slab was smaller and lighter, it was decided to move this one first. The slab had to be moved slightly to the north with wood levers to free it from the over burden of the Rev. Sergeant slab. The Abigail Dwight stone was then safely lifted and placed on 10" x 10 pine sleepers nearby. Initially only soil was seen under the slab. Clearing revealed two large, rectangular, foundation stones of marble. The eastern stone measured ~33" x 16" x 3" and was transversely fractured near mid-point. The western stone measured ~33 1/2" x 18" x 3". The foundation slabs were not precisely aligned to the slab, being only 10° west of north. This is 5° different from the alignment of the slab. The foundation stones were very roughly carved and were never intended to be seen. There were no mortises or evidence of metal pins, simply roughly flat stone. There was one very small trace of what appears to be bedding mortar for a leg base on the west foundation stone. There were several rough wedges of metamorphic rock and marble flakes under the foundation stones, presumably to level and support them when they were installed. Over time, the stones moved out of level.



The Abigail Dwight slab is in the process of being moved away from its original location. (W. Remsen)



Initially only dirt could be seen under the Abigail Dwight slab. (W. Remsen)



Careful excavations revealed two marble foundation stones. (W. Remsen)

The remains suggest that the legs simply sat on top of the foundation slabs and were held in place by gravity. There may have been small diameter, iron pins at the top. This is not a very stable design.

Excavations between the foundation slabs revealed numerous small fragments of white marble that probably came from the original legs. These were collected, washed, and photographed. See below.

#### Observations:

1. The leg fragments came from two types of marble; a pure white marble and a white marble with grey veins. Only a small amount of the grey marble was found.
2. Many fragments were stained from iron in the soil and had 'sugared' weathered surfaces'. These stones were in poor condition.
3. Most of the pieces are rough fragments. Many are conchoidal in shape, suggesting major force was applied rapidly. As there are no traces of impacts, the logical deduction is that the legs were placed in extreme bending, such as when the table tomb racked. When this happened, the upper portion moved while the bases were static. This would change the frame from a rectangle to a rhomboid parallelogram. The bending legs would fail in tension and would essentially explode due to the heavy loads. This single, one-time event would have been very quick and would result in the types of shattered fragments seen.
4. The marble leg fragments can be organized as follows:

a. Marble pieces with no finished edges of surfaces.	Quantity	77
b. Marble pieces with one finished surface.	Quantity	41
c. Marble pieces with two finished surfaces.	Quantity	2
d. Marble pieces with three finished surfaces.	Quantity	5
e. Marble pieces with visual traces of 1/4" iron pins	Quantity	3
f. Marble flakes showing weathering associated with iron	Quantity	2
	TOTAL	130
5. The largest fragment measured 9" x 5" x 2 1/4". Most were much smaller.
6. Where surfaces and edges were preserved, all were flat and straight. There was no evidence of any ornament of curved surfaces.
7. All the surviving marble leg fragments fit into a single 5 gallon bucket.
8. It is probable that not all the leg fragments were preserved under the slab. The recovered fragments would have made up at most 25% of the total amount of stone that would have been in the four legs. Fragments that ended up not under the slab were probably picked up and removed.

#### Conclusions:

1. The leg remains are far too fragmentary and incomplete to determine the original size and shape of the legs. As there are two foundation stones, there probably were four legs. The single surviving table tomb in the Old Section has six stout marble legs resting on a single massive foundation slab. This is a far more stable design.
2. Even if enough parts to reconstruct one leg survived, the pieces are far too weathered to successfully rebuild any legs.
3. The weathered remains have little informational content and little heritage value.

The first bucket of marble leg fragments from the Abigail Dwight Tomb was delivered to Mike Canales, Town Administrator, when he visited the site during the work.





The Abigail Dwight slab is safely sitting on wood sleepers to the right. The foundation stones have been cleaned. The closest foundation stone is cracked in half. (W. Remsen)



The leg fragments were cleaned and sorted. From L to R: No finished surface; 1 finished surface; 2 finished surfaces; 3 finished surfaces. Five iron stain stones are in the top right corner. (W. Remsen)

## Rev. John Sergeant Tomb

Preliminary excavations were carried out around the slab's perimeter and under the center portion of the slab in order to prepare spaces to insert lifting straps under the stone. Two foundation stones and quantities of white marble flakes.

The brownstone slab was far too heavy to move manually. The three person Preservation Inc. team utilized its 2 ton aluminum tripod, chain pull, steel load spreader, and cushioned nylon straps to pick up the slab. By utilizing a series of wood sleepers and repositioning the tripod, the slab was moved approximately 5 feet to the south and temporarily stored on 10 " x 10" wood sleepers. The slab can safely rest on these sleepers for a considerable time without concern. The slab is drier and better protected from lawnmowers and pedestrians up on the sleepers.

Once the slab was lifted, the tops of the two foundation stones and the adjacent areas were carefully excavated and cleaned. This revealed additional marble leg fragments including one important piece which apparently is most of the base of one leg. This fragment had been noted in the Phase I excavations, but the fragment had been left in place until the slab was lifted.

There were numerous stone flake wedges under the foundation stones, presumably to level and support them when they were installed.

The east foundation stone was roughly carved and measured 35 1/2" x 14 1/4" x ~2 1/2". On top of it survived traces of cement mortar and slate shims which had apparently been used to support and level the tomb's legs. The mortar must have been made from a natural cement, as it is darker and far harder than a pure lime mortar. The mortar traces showed that the leg bases were square and 8" on a side. This exactly fit the surviving leg base fragment. The 8" x 8" bases were set 4" in from the short sides and 11" apart.

The west foundation stone was roughly carved and measured 35" x 17" x ~3". This was 1" wider on the south side. There also were traces of 8" x 8" mortar on top of this foundation stone. The 8" x 8" bases were set 4" in from the short sides and only 8 1/5" apart. The unequal spacing between the legs on the east and west foundation stones would have made the tomb somewhat unstable. This apparently was an error in the original design and/or installation.

No traces of mortises and tenons or iron pins were found in the leg bases. Traces of small diameter iron pins were found in several marble fragments; they may have been from the leg top/slab junctions.

One marble fragment showed a finished surface with possible decoration. This may also have simply been where two saw cuts were slightly misaligned.

Additional finds included one 12" long, heavily rusted, iron object, several iron nails and lengths of flat iron straps. Several pieces of coal slag (clinker) were found. A single unworked fragment of quahog clam (*Mercenaria mercenaria*) was found. These mollusks were used by Native Americans to make wampum beads. These miscellaneous materials seem unrelated to the graves and may indicate that even in the mid 18th century this area was disturbed land with debris mixed in from various periods and activities.

The numerous leg fragments were collected, washed, sorted, and photographed.





The Abigail Dwight foundation stones are being cleaned and the green nylon lifting straps are being placed under the Rev. John Sergeant slab prior to lifting. (W. Remsen)



The 4,000 pound capacity tripod and chain pull are being used with a steel load spreader to evenly lift the Rev. John Sergeant slab. (W. Remsen)



#### Observations:

1. Some fragments were stained from iron in the soil and had 'sugared' weathered surfaces'. These stones were in poor condition.
2. Most of the pieces are rough fragments. many are conchoidal in shape, suggesting major force was applied. As there are no traces of impacts, the logical deduction is that the legs were placed in extreme bending, such as when the table tomb would rack. The legs would fail in tension and would essentially explode. This single, one-time event would have been very quick and would result in the types of shattered fragments seen.
3. The marble leg fragments can be organized as follows:

a. Marble pieces with no finished edges of surfaces.	Quantity	241
b. Marble pieces with one finished surface.	Quantity	61
c. Marble pieces with two finished surfaces.	Quantity	11
d. Marble pieces with three finished surfaces.	Quantity	4
e. Marble pieces with visual traces of iron pins	Quantity	3
f. Marble flakes showing possible decoration	Quantity	1
	TOTAL	321
4. The largest fragment measured 8" x 4 1/4" x 2". Most were much smaller.
5. Where surfaces and edges were preserved, all were flat and straight. There was no evidence of any ornament of curved surfaces, except for one fragment with a finished surface which might be very simple decoration or where two saw cuts were slightly misaligned.
6. It is probable that not all the leg fragments were preserved under the slab. The recovered fragments would have made up at most 30% of the total amount of stone that would have been in the four legs. Fragments that ended up not under the slab were probably picked up and removed.
7. All the surviving marble leg fragments fit into a single 5 gallon bucket.
8. It is probable that not all the leg fragments were preserved under the slab. Fragments that were not covered were probably picked up and removed after the collapse event.

The second bucket of marble leg fragments from the Rev. John Sergeant Tomb was delivered to Mike Canales when he visited the site at the end of the work. The small miscellaneous finds were included in the bucket in a zip lock bag, which should be kept open to prevent moisture problems.

#### Conclusions:

1. The leg remains are far too fragmentary and incomplete to determine the original size and shape, and even the number of legs, although four legs is probable based on the foundation stones.
2. Even if enough parts to reconstruct one leg survived, which they do not, the pieces are far too weathered to successfully rebuild any legs.
3. The remains have little informational content and little heritage value, except for the one substantial leg base fragment found. This should be retained and archived.



The Rev. Joh Sergeant slab has been lifted off the two marble foundation stones, which remain to be cleaned. (W. Remsen)



Ian Stewart is carefully lowering the slab onto the wood sleepers. (W. Remsen)





The east foundation stone retained traces of the slate and cement leg base support. (W. Remsen)



The west foundation stone also showed traces of the cement mortar bedding for legs. (W. Remsen)



The foundation stones for both slabs are cleaned. Rev. Joh Sergeant slab foundation stones are on the left. The two slabs are safely sitting on 10" x 10" wood sleepers nearby. (W. Remsen)





The leg fragments were cleaned and sorted. From L to R: No finished surface; 1 finished surface; 2 finished surfaces; 3 finished surfaces. Three iron stain stones are in the top right corner. (W. Remsen)



This is the leg base fragment from under the Rev. John Sergeant slab. It is the only leg fragment with any significant informational value and should be retained. (W. Remsen)





Three marble fragments (right) from under the Rev. Sergeant slab showed traces of iron pins. The fragment on the left shows a finished surface with possible decoration. (W. Remsen)



Objects found under the Rev. Sergeant slab included three iron nails, iron strapping, a long iron object, a piece of clam shell, and coal slag. These objects seem unrelated to the burial. (W. Remsen)

### Phase III Recommendations

1. As the surviving leg fragments are incomplete and inadequate to reassemble or even to theoretically reconstruct the shapes and dimensions of the legs for either tomb, it is not recommended to attempt to reconstruct the table tomb with legs. To do so would be conjectural and would falsify the historical record. In addition, the table tomb design is inherently fragile; the table tomb design was eventually dropped for practical reasons.
2. It is recommended to replace each slab in its original location on top of a new rectangular frame of granite curbing under each slab. The curbing stones would be approximately 6" wide x 12" tall. This would be set back 1/2" from the outer margins of the slabs and would fully support the slabs and keep them above the reach of lawn mowers. The slabs would be slightly sloped to ensure better drainage of rainwater. A 4" gap between slabs would permit cleaning. The original foundation stones would be picked up and reset on top of a layer of crushed stone wrapped in geotextile. This crushed stone would create good drainage under the foundation stones and the curbing, preventing frost heaving and movement.
  - a. Because one slab is marble and one slab is brownstone, granite curbs would indicate new work and differentiate old from new.
  - b. Granite is far more durable than either marble or brownstone, especially in direct contact with the ground.
  - c. Granite is available locally and can be secured far more quickly and cheaply than custom marble curbing. Custom marble stones can take months to get.
  - d. The surviving pieces of the original legs could be placed inside this granite frame, on top of the new crushed stone and under the replaced slabs, if no better locations are determined.
  - e. The use of low curbing to support failed table tombs is common in historic cemeteries. For example, many curb-supported slabs can be seen in the St. Phillips Episcopal Cemetery, which is similar in date to Stockbridge's Old Section, in Charleston, South Carolina.
3. This option should cost the Town far less than what it would cost to fabricate and install new legs. savings can be applied to other conservation work in the cemetery.
4. The surviving marble leg fragments, which have essentially no informational or heritage value, could be placed inside the appropriate granite frames and covered with the replaced slabs. This would provide a safe and dry location for the fragments and the Town would not need to worry about storing or preserving them. Such things are often thrown away eventually. Thus, the fragments would be securely and respectfully associated with their original tombs and would be available to future researchers if there ever was a need to see them again.
5. With the Town's agreement, Preservation Inc. will proceed with Phase III, which has already been approved. Phase III includes design development and installation components. As there are unknowns associated with the sourcing and fabrication of the granite curbing, Preservation Inc. will work with the Town to revise the scope of work and to develop a work schedule. The simpler curb design will most likely reduce the total costs for the Town.

Once the granite curbs are fabricated, Preservation Inc. shall install the curbing on a proper, well-draining, crushed stone base and replace the Rev. John Sergeant and Abigail Dwight slabs correctly in their original locations. This intervention will significantly improve the protection of the slabs and allow them to be viewed by visitors far into the future.