

FORM E- BURIAL GROUND

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125



Sketch Map

Draw or duplicate a map of the burial ground showing its location in relation to the nearest cross streets and/or major natural features. Show all buildings or major features within the burial ground, and between the burial ground and the nearest intersection. Label streets including route numbers, if any. Indicate north.

See attached assessor's map

Assessor's number USGS Quad Area(s) Form Number

C3	Plympton	B	801
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Town Plympton

Place (*neighborhood or village*) Plympton Center

Address or Location Main Street at Palmer Road

Name Hillcrest Cemetery

Ownership *Public* *Private*

Approximate Number of Stones 1000

Earliest Death Date ca. 1706

Latest Death Date ca. 2003 (active)

Landscape Architect none

Condition Fair. Some stones are leaning, sinking, broken, and/or exhibit biological growth.

Acreage 14 acres

Setting Located near the town center, at the intersection of Main Street and Palmer Road. Plympton Green to the south, residential area to the north, woods to the east. Gently sloping terrain with a few unpaved drives/paths and scattered plantings.

Recorded by Joanna M. Doherty

Organization Dept. of Conservation and Recreation with Plympton Historical Commission

Date (*month/year*) July 2003

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Town
PLYMPTON

Property Address
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Area(s)	Form No.
B	801

VISUAL / DESIGN ASSESSMENT

Hillcrest Cemetery occupies 14 acres of gently sloping terrain on the east side of Main Street, near its intersection with Palmer Road, within the Plympton Green Area (MHC Area B). About six acres contain burial plots, while the remaining land is occupied by woods. The cemetery is located immediately to the north of the Plympton Green (MHC , 1702) and near the First Congregational Church at 254 Main Street (MHC #18, 1830). It is bordered by residences to the north and a wooded lot to the east. The southern, triangular section of the cemetery comprises the original, eighteenth-century burial ground. This portion of the cemetery was included in thirty acres of land that were surveyed and laid out in 1702 for use by the ministry and as a training green and burial ground. The cemetery probably did not receive its first burial until around 1706, when an acre of land was cleared by Benjamin Soule and Isaac Cushman for use as a burial ground for the town (Sherman 1907:7; *Plympton 275th Anniversary Celebration* 1982:3). Indeed, a survey of the cemetery that was conducted by the Plympton Historical Society in 1979 and 1980 found the earliest surviving headstone at the time dated to 1706 (Bricknell 1980). The burial ground was expanded just before 1900 and again in 1905. The additional property was known as Hillcrest Cemetery, a name that is now applied to the entire burial ground (Wright 1973:58; Wright 1977:194).

The oldest burials in Hillcrest Cemetery are located within the southern section of the cemetery – particularly the area across the street from the Plympton Public Library at 248 Main Street (MHC , ca. 1905). A cut granite wall runs along the west and south edges of this section of the burial ground. The eastern boundary is delineated by a fieldstone wall. The 1979-1980 survey by the Plympton Historical Society documented about 575 legible, surviving headstones in this section of the cemetery. The vast majority are slate headstones dating from the eighteenth and early-nineteenth-centuries, many of which display skull and wings and willow and urn motifs, laid in rough rows with their decorated sides facing west. The gravemarkers are generally in fair condition; many are leaning, sinking, broken and / or covered with biological growth. Although families are typically grouped together, there are very few family plots demarcated by curbing or fencing, with the notable exception of the Wright family plot, located at the southern end of the cemetery, which is surrounded by decorative, cast-iron fencing in deteriorated condition. The Soule family tomb, a mound tomb with a granite retaining wall and marble door set into an opening with a large, cut-granite lintel, is located nearby, at the southwest corner of the cemetery. Vegetation in this section of the cemetery is limited to a few scattered evergreen trees. While there are no drives or paths, there are three pedestrian entrances: one near the oldest burials (across the street from the library) and two on the southern edge, providing access from the green. The entrance across from the library and the easternmost entrance on the southern edge are marked with iron gates.

The original, eighteenth-century burial ground contains many early and notable gravemarkers. Most are slate slabs featuring a semi-circular tympanum, though round-arched and rectangular slabs are also present. There are numerous stones carved by Nathaniel Fuller, a Plympton resident who has been described as “one of the hardest-working early New England stonecutters,” with stones surviving throughout Plymouth and Barnstable counties (Benes 1969:13). Active between about 1710 and 1750, Fuller is credited with creating a rural, regional style adapted from the Boston stones of the period – his characteristic geometric, heart-shaped skulls set against a background of wings reference the traditional skull-and-wings motif found in urban areas. Though his style evolved over his 40 years of practice, Fuller’s work typically features elliptical eyes, a mouth in the shape of a small heart and a narrow chin. Geometric patterns fill the borders of his stones (Benes 1969:13-16). Examples of Fuller’s work at Hillcrest Cemetery include the headstones of William Coomer (d. 1741) and Elizabeth Parker (d. 1743), daughter of Reverend Jonathan Parker.

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Town
PLYMPTON

Property Address
MAIN ST AT PALMER RD.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
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BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s)	Form No.
B	801

The burial ground also contains gravemarkers carved by Ebenezer Soule (1710-1792), son of Benjamin Soule, one of the burial ground's surveyors in 1706. Ebenezer began carving headstones sometime after 1754 and, though he never apprenticed under Fuller, was influenced by his work (Benes 1969:13, 29). His son Beza and possibly Ebenezer were also carvers. Members of the Soule family settled in various New England locales, and examples of their work can be found in Plymouth, Worcester, Deerfield, Barre, Hinsdale, NH and Bennington and Brattleboro, VT (Forbes 1989:85-86). (Both Nathaniel Fuller and Ebenezer Soule have been studied by James Deetz, who explores the evolution of their work and the development of a regional iconographic style centered around Plymouth [Deetz and Dethlefsen 1967; Deetz 1996]).

Other notable gravemarkers in Hillcrest Cemetery include that of Reverend Jonathan Parker, which features a portrait of the deceased in ministerial dress. Identified on the stone as "Minister of the Gospel," Reverend Parker served as Plympton's second minister from 1731 until his death in 1776 (*A History of the First Congregational Church* 1998:16). Willow-and-urn motifs are evident on stones from the early to mid-nineteenth century, including the double headstone for Asaph Soule (d. 1823) and Mary Soule (d. 1820) and the stone that marks the grave of Sarah S. Bryant (d. 1850). A series of stones for members of the Ellis family, including that of Mary Ellis (d. 1846), feature a stark rendition of a Neo-classical mausoleum.

The newer, northern section of the cemetery is divided into four quadrants by dirt drives that provide three entrances from Main Street. The two southern entrances are marked by wood gates. A fieldstone wall runs along the west edge of the cemetery, buffering it from Main Street. A granite boulder, inscribed with "HILLCREST / 1706" is located along this edge, midway between the two gated entrances. Generally, burials in the southwest quadrant date from the late nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries. Those in the southeast quadrant are mostly from the mid-twentieth century. The northwest quadrant contains graves from the mid- to late-twentieth century, while the most recent burials are concentrated in the northeast quadrant. There are hundreds of gravemarkers, most of which are large, granite headstones that are rectangular or have a slightly rounded top and are set into granite bases. There are several family plots with monuments and a few flush markers are located among the more recent burials. Two unmarked mound tombs, which appear to date to the nineteenth century or earlier, are located in the northern section of the cemetery. One is sited at the north end of the eastern path. The other is located at the edge of the original burial ground, and is probably the former town tomb. Research suggests that the tomb may have been moved from a location closer to Main Street in the early twentieth century, though this is unconfirmed (Wright 1973:57). It features a cut granite retaining wall and a steel, paneled door. Vegetation in this section of Hillcrest Cemetery consists primarily of scattered evergreen trees and shrubs, though some deciduous trees are located along the perimeter wall.

HISTORICAL,NARRATIVE

Hillcrest Cemetery was established in 1702 and surveyed in 1706, receiving its first burial soon after. Except for a small burial ground in the northern section of Plympton, it remained the **only** cemetery in town for about 150 years, until the establishment of the First Congregational Church Cemetery at 254 Main Street (MHC 1850) in 1850 (Sherman 1907:7; *Plympton 275th Anniversary Celebration* 1982:3). The earliest burials, located near the intersection of Main Street and Palmer Road in the southern section of the cemetery, are marked with slate headstones laid in rough rows.

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Town
PLYMPTON

Property Address
MAIN ST AT PALMER RD.

MASSACHUSETTSHISTORICAL COMMISSION
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BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s) Form No.

B	801
---	-----

Hillcrest Cemetery contains graves of Plympton's earliest settlers, including the town's first minister, Isaac Cushman (minister from 1698-1732) and members of the Wright, Soule and Parker families. The burial ground continued to develop in this pattern for the entire eighteenth century, with rows of markers, no circulation paths and little vegetation. The town tomb and hearse house – described by town historian Eugene Wright as "a bleak plain little building" – were located along the Main Street edge of the cemetery, across the street from the present-day Plympton Public Library at 248 Main Street (MHC ca. 1905). The first known improvement to the cemetery occurred in the 1880s, when the split granite perimeter wall was erected on the south and west edges of the burial ground (*A History of the First Congregational Church* 1998:7-9; Wright 1973:57; Wright 1977:417). It is assumed that the iron gates that mark the pedestrian entrances to the burial ground were installed at the same time.

Shortly before 1900, the burial ground was expanded through the acquisition of a two-acre abandoned field to the north. Another acre of abandoned farmland was added in 1905. The burial ground acquired the name Hillcrest Cemetery around this time; the granite boulder along the Main Street edge of the newer section of the cemetery, inscribed with "HILLCREST / 1706," may have been intended to announce the new name. The fieldstone wall that runs along the west edge of the new section of the cemetery was likely added as part of the cemetery expansion. Also around this time, the hearse house was removed and the town tomb may have been relocated, to its site on the southern edge of the new cemetery, abutting the old burial ground (Wright 1973:57). No formal design or planting plan was implemented. Like the old burial ground, the new section displays scattered trees and shrubs amidst rows of graves. It contains many more family plots and monuments, however, reflecting its later dates of development.

The death dates on gravestones provide a record of how the new section of Hillcrest Cemetery developed. Generally speaking, the two southern quadrants were used first: the one abutting Main Street contains burials from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while the other contains burials from the mid-twentieth century. Mid-to late-twentieth century burials dominate the northwest quadrant, while the most recent burials are located in the northeast quadrant of the new section of the cemetery. Although the First Congregational Church Cemetery (established 1850) took some pressure off Hillcrest Cemetery in the mid-nineteenth century, it remains the largest cemetery in town. A survey of the old section of the burial ground conducted by the Plympton Historical Society in 1979-1980 noted over 575 legible headstones (Bricknell 1980). The newer section contains hundreds more, and continues to accept new interments.

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INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Town
PLYMPTON

Property Address
MAIN ST AT PALMER RD.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s)	Form No.
B	801

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INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Town
PLYMPTON

Property Address
MAIN ST AT PALMER RD.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s) Form No.

B		801
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INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Town
PLYMPTON

Property Address
MAIN ST AT PALMER RD

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s) Form No.

B	801
---	-----

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CRITERIA STATEMENT

The oldest and largest cemetery in Plympton, Hillcrest Cemetery contains approximately 1000 headstones, roughly half of which date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The cemetery contains slate, granite and marble headstones marking the graves of early settlers and members of prominent Plympton families. There are numerous examples of the work of the noted carvers Nathaniel Fuller and Ebenezer Soule. Hillcrest Cemetery therefore provides a valuable record of the early development of the town and contains examples of important funerary art. Though some markers have been damaged and/or are deteriorated from age, the cemetery overall retains a high level of integrity and is individually eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C. The boundaries of the nomination would need to be determined during the nomination process; it may be preferable to list the original burial ground but not the newer section to the north. Please note that Hillcrest Cemetery is located in the Plympton Green Area (MHC Area B), also recommended for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Town
PLYMPTON

Property Address
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Area(s) Form No.

B	801
---	-----



General View of Hillcrest Cemetery, showing original burial ground



General View of Hillcrest Cemetery, showing original burial ground

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Town
PLYMPTON

Property Address
MAIN ST AT PALMER RD.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
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Area(s) Form No.

B || 801



General View of Hillcrest Cemetery, showing Soule family tomb and original burial ground



General View of Hillcrest Cemetery, showing newer section to north of original burial ground

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Town
PLYMPTON

Property Address
MAIN ST AT PALMER RD.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s) Form No.

B	801
---	-----



Gravemarker of William Coomer
(d. 1741)



Gravemarker of Elizabeth Parker
(d. 1743)

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Town
PLYMPTON

Property Address
MAIN ST AT PALMER RD.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
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BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s) Form No.

B	801
---	-----



Gravemarker of Reverend Jonathan Parker (d. 1776)



Gravemarker of Asaph Soule (d. 1823) and Mary Soule (d. 1820)

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Town
PLYMPTON

Property Address
MAIN ST AT PALMER RD.

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MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s) Form No.

B	801
---	-----



Gravemarker of Sarah Bryant
(d. 1850)



Gravemarker of Mary Ellis
(d. 1846)

