

A mystery solved

1774 child's gravestone found and restored

By Gail McCarthy

» Staff Writer

When Debra and Mark Roman bought a house in Rockport more than a decade ago, she found something most unlikely after the closing — a 1774 gravestone from Gloucester, in six pieces, left on the front porch.

“We looked at the house many times because it needed a lot of work and we never noticed it — and we would have noticed it because I am huge Halloween fanatic and anything macabre would have caught my eye,” Debra Roman recalled.

“We came back to meet the contractor after we closed and we were on

More Information

There are many historic gravestones in need of repair, and if anyone wants to make a tax-deductible donation, they can make a check payable to “Gloucester Historic Burial Grounds,” and mail to: Gloucester DPW; attn: Rose LoPiccolo; 9 Dale Ave., Gloucester, MA 01930.

The city cemetery advisory committee is always looking for volunteers; anyone interested can send an email to: gloucestercemeteries@yahoo.com.

If anyone has a gravestone in their possession, Christine Maney, a member of the city cemetery advisory committee, asks people to call the Department of Public Works at 978-325-5600 to notify the department and Maney will arrange to pick up the stone — no questions asked. She added that the cemetery advisory committee is a subset of the Department of Public Works. Or an email can be sent to Maney at: gloucestercemeteries@yahoo.com, and she will make arrangements to retrieve any found gravestones no matter the condition of the stone.

The committee is always applying for grants at local and state levels to help fund such repairs.

while Roman continued her outreach over the years starting with the stone's discovery in November 2013.

And just last week, that headstone,

the porch to look at the loose boards, and I said ‘What is that?’ It was a tombstone and it looked real. It was broken up, but it was laid out together like it should have been.”

Roman was correct in assuming it was authentic.

“It's the last thing you'd expect to find and I guess we inherited her,” she said. But once I was set on the fact that it was real, I was going to try to find out where she belonged.”

So the gravestone of 10-month old Eliza Gorham ended up in a perfect-sized gift box for safe keeping



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Rob Surabian of Gravesite Restoration kneels next the headstone of Eliza Gorham which he has restored. A Rockport couple found the gravestone in a house they had just purchased. It dates to before the Revolutionary War.



COURTESY PHOTO

The six pieces of the pre-Revolutionary War gravestone of Eliza Gorham of Gloucester.



COURTESY PHOTO

Debra and Mark Roman found a 1774 gravestone, in six pieces, on the front porch of a Rockport house they bought more than a decade ago.

» Gravestone

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dated Aug. 29, 1774, was reset in First Parish Burial Ground off Centennial Avenue in Gloucester, the city's oldest public cemetery, which dates to 1644.

Christine Maney, a member of the city's cemetery advisory committee, expressed the committee's gratitude to restorer Rob Surabian of Gravesite Preservation.

Perseverance and research

The Roman family was living in New Jersey at the time of the home purchase and Debra's initial attempts to find out where the gravestone belonged were unfruitful.

"It was never going to end up at the dump," she said. "I was raised to respect things and I could see it was real. It was years of looking up leads and failing and looking again."

In 2022, the family moved to Rockport permanently.

Debra Roman first assumed the gravestone came from a Rockport cemetery.

The woman who previously owned the house was a celebrated artist, Marilyn Conover, whose work even made the cover of Time magazine, but in her later years she had been moved to a nursing home.

"I wondered if maybe someone gave it to her who thought she could repair it or incorporate into an artwork but probably unlikely. I would love to know how it got here and that remains a mystery," Roman said.

As databases for cemeteries and gravestones have grown over the years, Roman eventually got lucky with a hit on a computer search when she put in the words verbatim that were on the headstone. That's when she learned that it belonged in Gloucester.

After a series of calls, and some happenstance, she ultimately was connected with Maney, who was unaware of this missing stone.

"But I was not surprised, because there are many missing headstones in the 14 city-owned cemeteries. But I was thrilled to hear that she had a stone that she wanted to return," said Maney, who retrieved the pieces and stored them at the Department of Public Works.

When the Romans learned that it would take some time to find the money to repair the stone, they offered to pay for it to speed up the process.

The couple's Mount Pleasant Street house, built in 1798, had other historic surprises in store for them.

When they ripped out a kitchen wall, they found a note that said, "you be



COURTESY PHOTO

Rob Surabian restored the brownstone gravestone of Eliza Gorham, who died 1774.

cursed just like JFK was cursed." They found shoes in another wall, a common custom of centuries ago.

And during the years of the search for its proper resting place, the gravestone became a subject of some humor when one of Debra Roman's close friends came to Rockport for a visit.

"My friend, who is easily spooked, was staying in my guest room — where at the time the headstone pieces were laid out under the bed, and when my friend went to unpack and put her shoes and luggage under the bed, she says, 'What the heck is this tombstone doing under here?' and I had forgotten about that so I moved it under my bed. She says 'I know you like Halloween, but this is a little much — only you would have a gravestone on your porch,'" Roman said.

On Eliza Gorham

Maney shared these

details she learned about the Gorham family.

Solomon Gorham was the father of Eliza Gorham. Solomon was born in Boston in 1748, the 13th child of 15. His parents were Col. John Gorham and Elizabeth Allyn of Barnstable. Col. Gorham died in London of smallpox in 1752. Mrs. Elizabeth Allyn Gorham of Boston married Col. John Stevens of Gloucester in 1754 and moved her family to Gloucester.

Solomon was married to Sarah Giddings in 1772 by the Rev. Samuel Chandler of First Parish. During the American Revolutionary War, Solomon served under Capt. Daniel Warner's Company, which was stationed in Gloucester for the defense of the seacoast. Solomon served from 1775-1776 and was promoted to first lieutenant.

Solomon and Sarah Gorham had four children, Eliza (1773-1774), John (1777-1778), Christopher (b. 1779), and Judith Gorham Lancaster (1784-1864).

Solomon Gorham died at age 47 in Gloucester in 1795. Currently, information on Sarah Giddings is unknown.

Eliza's headstone was brownstone (a type of sandstone) whereas her brother's and father's headstones are slate.

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