

# **Dorchester North Burying Ground**

Boston Landmarks Commission Study Report



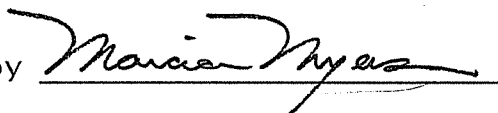
Petition # 37, Stoughton Street and Columbia Road, Boston

# Dorchester North Burying Ground



Boston Landmarks Commission

Report of the Boston Landmarks Commission  
on the potential designation of the  
DORCHESTER NORTH BURYING GROUND  
as a landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended

Approved by   
Executive Director      Date

Approved by   
Chairman      Date

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## 1.0 LOCATION OF THE PROPERTY

- 1.1 Address: Stoughton Street and Columbia Road, Boston (Dorchester), Ward 7.

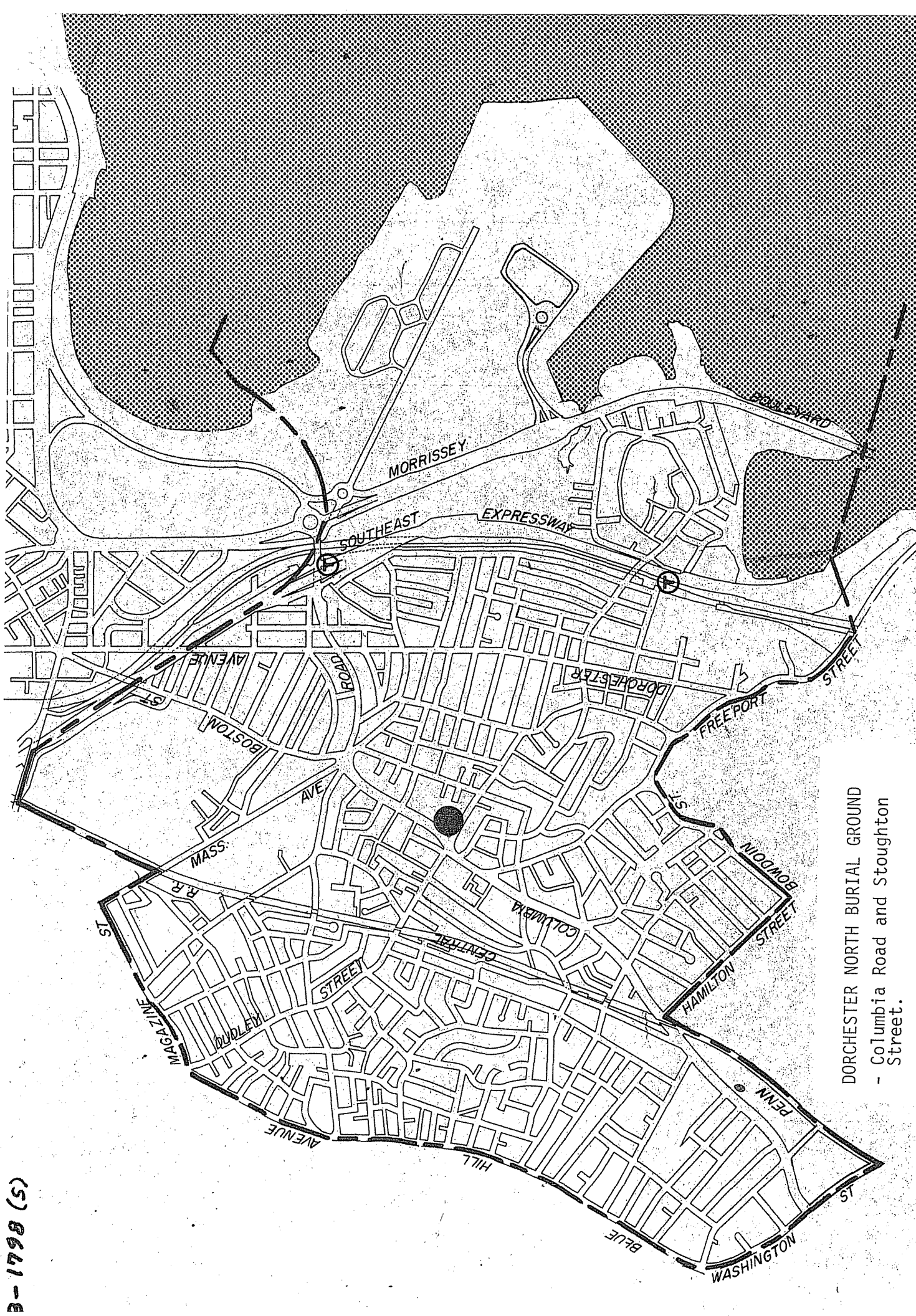
Assessor's Parcel Number: 3999

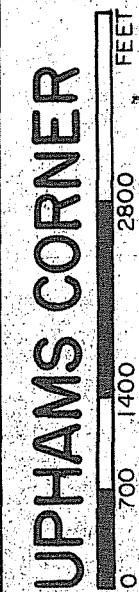
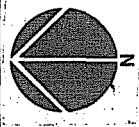
- 1.2 Area in Which the Property is Located:

The Dorchester North Burying Ground is located at the corner of Stoughton Street and Columbia Road. In the mid-nineteenth century this area became known as Uphams Corner, and served as Dorchester's marketplace. The west side of Columbia Road, across from the burial ground, is lined with late nineteenth and early twentieth century brick commercial structures. Some of these buildings are vacant. Columbia Road is a busy four-lane thoroughfare, and provides the main north-south connection between downtown Boston and Franklin Park. There are also brick commercial buildings on the south side of Stoughton Street; these are smaller in scale than those on Columbia Road. Some of these are also vacant. The east side of the burial ground is bordered by residential buildings; many of which are triple deckers. The Dorchester North Burying Ground was listed on the National Register in 1974.

- 1.3 Maps Showing Location: attached.

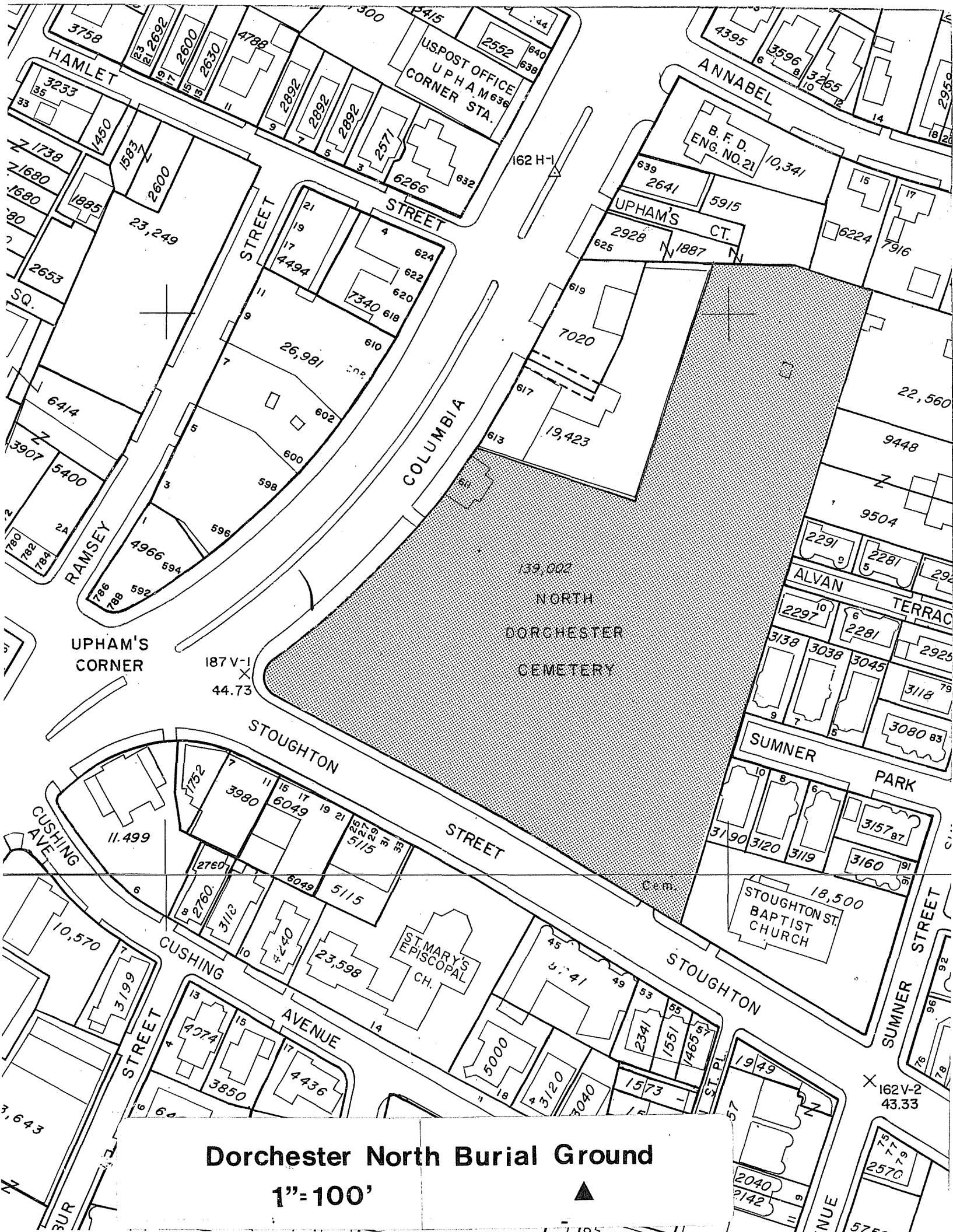
B-1798 (S)





# UPHAMS CORNER

DORCHESTER NORTH BURIAL GROUND  
- Columbia Road and Stoughton Street.



# Dorchester North Burial Ground

1"=100'



## 2.0 DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPERTY

### 2.1 Type and Use:

Dorchester North Burying Ground is a cemetery which contains graves from the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The burial ground is still active (in tombs to which descendants have title), but most interments take place at Dorchester South Burial Ground (1814) or Mt. Hope Cemetery.

### 2.2 Physical Description:

The Dorchester North Burying Ground was established in November of 1634. By tradition, the first burying place from 1630 to 1634 was located near the first meetinghouse (near the corner of East Cottage and Pleasant Streets), but there are no records to prove this. The original boundaries were about 80 feet on each side. Small parcels of property were added in 1694, 1718, 1727, 1741, 1745 and 1820. The final result is that the cemetery is roughly a parallelogram in shape with a rectangular rear extension; it contains 139,002 square feet.

For the most part, the graves are arranged in long rows parallel to Columbia Road. Some of the graves closest to Stoughton Street are aligned with that road. There are some large family tombs on the



eastern and southern edges of the cemetery. The mounds created by these tombs add interesting contours to the otherwise flat burial ground.

In 1834 there was renewed interest in the burial ground and a committee of six townsmen was chosen to work toward improving its appearance. Samuel Downer was the chairman, and moving force, of this committee. One result of the committee's work was that paths were laid out along the rows of graves. Trees, shrubs and flowers were also planted at that time. Today, the landscaping is rather haphazard, but the mature trees remain.

The Dorchester North Burying Ground has been enclosed in a number of different ways. In 1634 it was agreed that the cemetery should be "impalled with doble rayle." The rail fence was replaced by a stone wall at the end of the 17th century. In 1834, the improvement committee voted to repair and replace much of the original stone wall. Iron gates from the late nineteenth century mark the entrances at the northwest and southeast corners. In 1912, a new granite gateway was built to curve around the corner of Columbia Road and Stoughton Street. The entrance was designed in the Egyptian Revival style, which was considered to be appropriate for cemeteries because of the funereal purpose of nearly all surviving Egyptian architecture. Two earlier examples of this style which may have been influential are the entrances to the Grove Street Cemetery in New Haven, Connecticut (1845) and the Granary Burying Ground on Tremont Street (1840). A pair of slightly bulging

columns are set within the entrance. These columns have carved leaf-like capitals. The columns support a cornice with the inscription "1630 Dorchester North Burying Place 1912", a carved winged orb and a cove cornice. The top of the entrance ends in a peak. Iron gates stretch between the columns, and from each column to the side piers. Each side pier is decorated with a wreath that has a foliate branch cutting through it. The last change in the enclosure took place in about the 1920's (no documentation could be located to verify this date) when the stone walls were replaced with concrete ones. This wall is over eight feet tall and panelled. Several of the panels on the Columbia Road side have been replaced with iron gates which allow visual access to the burial ground.

There is a wide variety of funerary monuments assembled in Dorchester North Burying Ground. The materials used include slate, granite, sandstone, limestone and marble. The following motifs are found on the stones: skeleton heads, skeleton heads with wings, winged angel heads, doll-like heads set in a frame, and weeping willows drooping over either hourglasses or urns. Some of the markers from the 19th century take the form of obelisks. In general, the stones from the late 19th and early 20th centuries are without engraved ornamentation and larger in size.

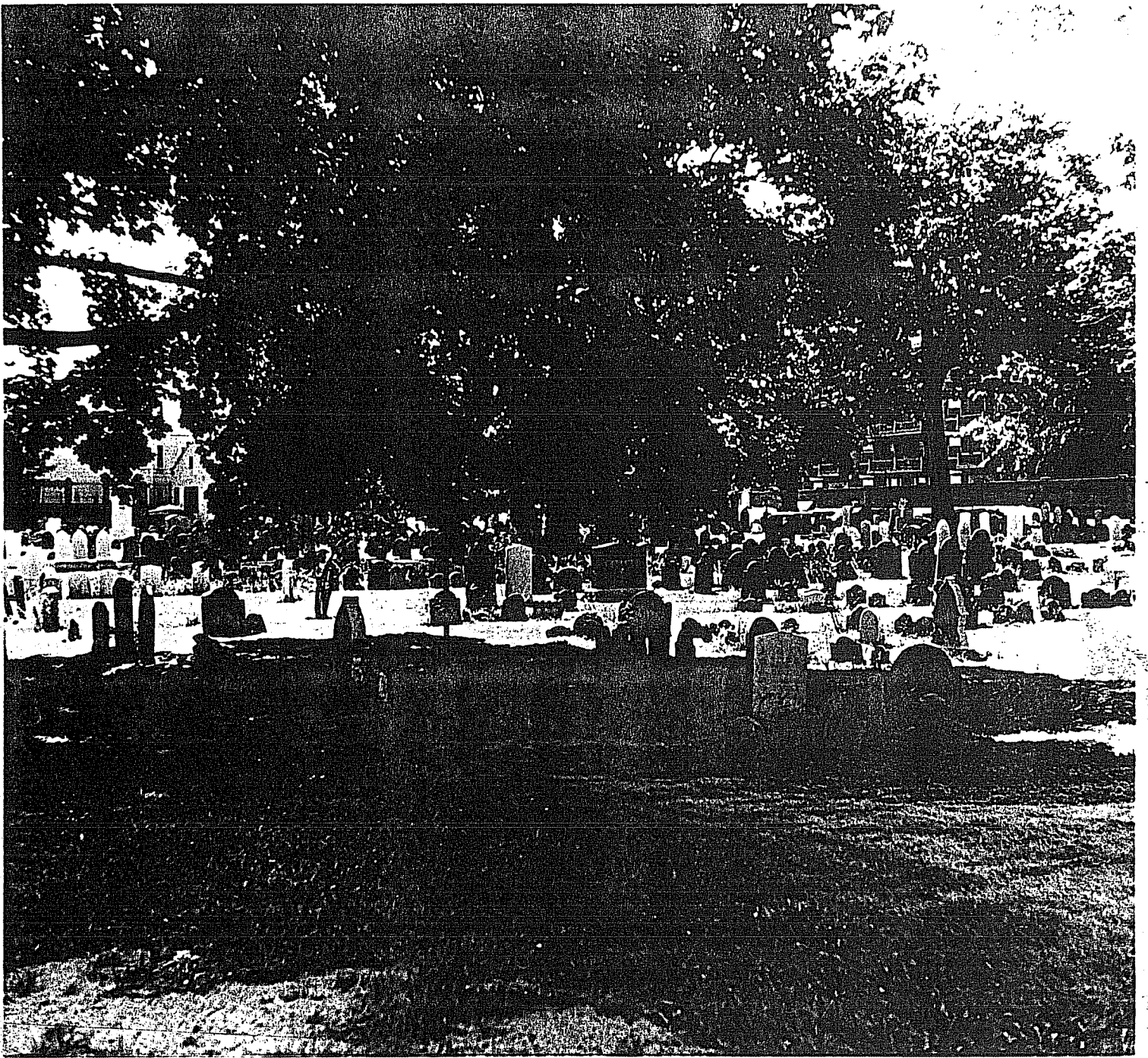
Many of the monuments are in very poor condition. Slate was used in many of the older markers, and the layers tend to "flake" away. Some of the slate stones have been broken into small pieces and are, therefore, totally lost. Many of the stones have been knocked

over and broken off their bases. Limestone was used in the mid-1800's; pollution has had a corrosive effect on this material and the stones appear to be melting away. There has also been some vandalism in the form of graffiti. It appears that there have been attempts to mend some of the stones, but they have been neither prudent nor successful.

2.3 Photographs: attached.

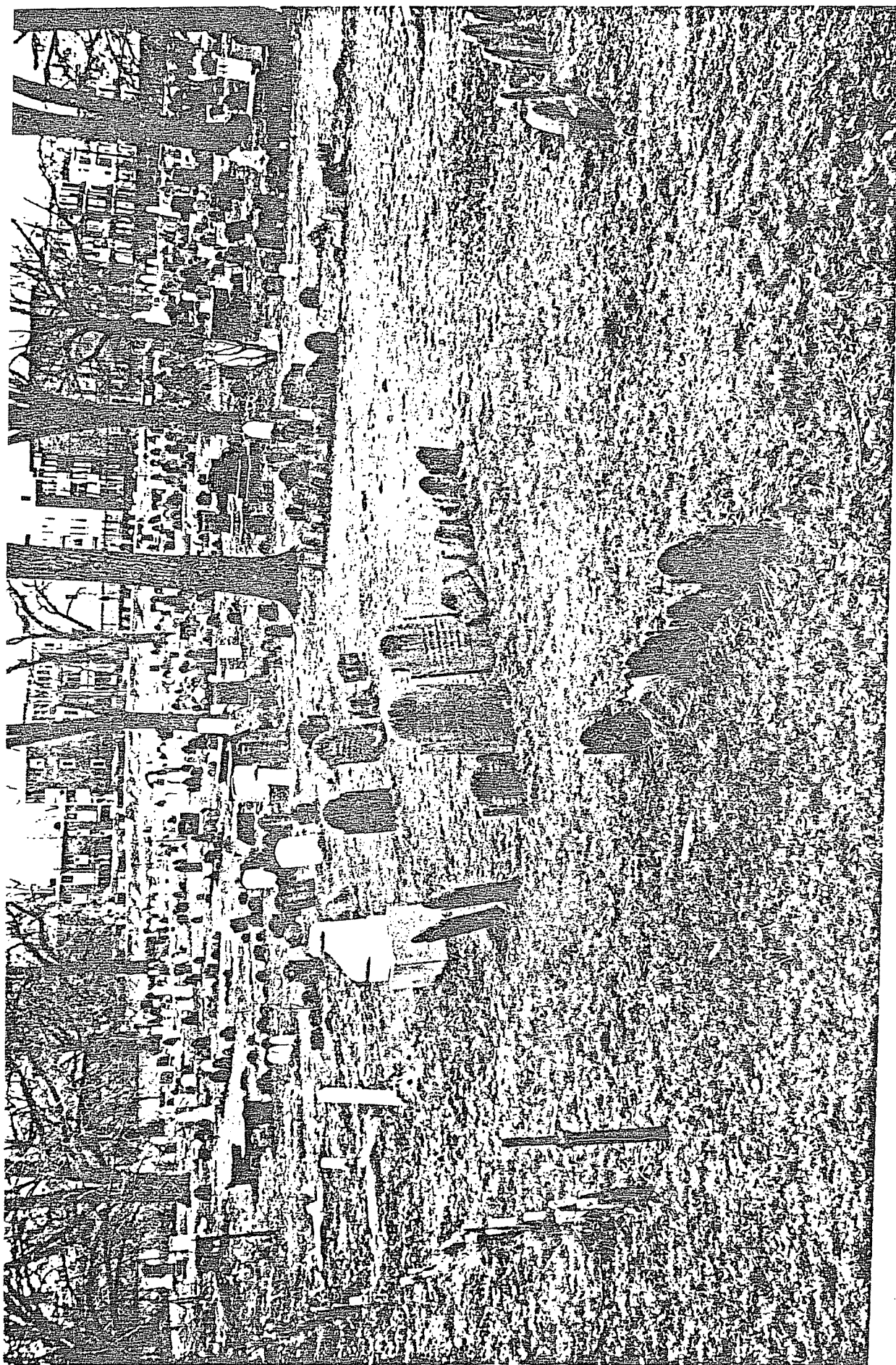


Dorchester North Burying Ground  
Columbia Road and Stoughton Street  
View through gateway in the southwest  
corner.



Dorchester North Burying Ground  
Columbia Road and Stoughton Street





Dorchester North Burying Ground  
Columbia Rd. and Stoughton St.  
View within cemetery toward  
gate at south west corner.

### 3.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPERTY

#### 3.1 Historic Associations:

The Dorchester North Burying Ground is Dorchester's earliest remaining landmark. It is the burial place of some of Dorchester's most prominent founding citizens. It is also one of only six seventeenth century burial grounds in Boston.

Dorchester was founded in 1630 and the burial ground was established four years later on the southern outskirts of the then agrarian community. The earliest date on any gravestone is that of Bernard and Joan Capen, bearing the date 1638. The original stone has been removed; it is now on display in the New England Genealogical Society. Bernard Capen was among Dorchester's original settlers who arrived on the "Mary and John" in 1630. The next oldest gravestone is the horizontal monument to Abel (1644) and Submite (1648) Clarke.

The two most prominent figures interred in the Dorchester North Burying Ground are William Stoughton and Richard Mather. William Stoughton was born in England in 1631. He was the son of Colonel Israel Stoughton, who was involved in the Pequot War. He graduated from Harvard in 1650. Later, he went to England and became a fellow of New College, Oxford. He returned to New England where he served as one of Sir Edmund Andros' Council and Lieutenant Governor from 1694 until his death in 1701. In addition, he was

Chief Justice of the Court which heard witch trials. Stoughton was a benefactor of Harvard, and he provided the funds for a dormitory, which bears his name. Richard Mather was another leading personality in Dorchester in the 17th century. He was born and educated in England. After 16 years in the English Church, he was suspended for non-conformity. Mather settled in Dorchester in 1636, and he served as the town's spiritual leader until his death in 1669. Four of Mather's six sons became ministers; Samuel and Increase were recognized as men of "learning and high consideration." Increase received the first degree of Doctor of Divinity conferred in America. Richard Mather died in 1669 at the age of 73 years.

Some of the other early citizens of Dorchester that are buried in the cemetery are: John Foster, who opened the first printing office in Boston; William Tailer, who was Lieutenant Governor in 1711, and again from 1730 to 1733; and Major General Humphrey Atherton. The grave of forty revolutionary soldiers, who died during the Siege of Boston, is commemorated by a boulder with a bronze tablet which was erected in 1903 by the Massachusetts Society, Sons of the American Revolution. Another interesting aspect of the burial ground is the four graves of black servants; three belonged to Robert Oliver and one belonged to the family of James Foster.

### 3.2 Artistic Significance:

The Dorchester North Burying Ground is unusual because it contains examples of funerary sculpture from the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th



centuries. The stone carvers in 17th century New England probably brought ideas for designs with them when they left England, Ireland or Scotland. It may seem strange that the strict Puritan clergy allowed images on gravestones when their use was prohibited in the meetinghouses. However, gravestone carving was considered a civil craft and, therefore, not within ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Before the Revolution, all gravestone designs were based on a metamorphic aesthetic, which emphasized the physical change imposed on human bodies by supernatural forces. The image used most commonly in the 17th century was the skull, a traditional medieval emblem signifying death. When the skull was coupled with wings, as it appeared in the late 17th and early 18th century, it became a symbol of both physical death and spiritual resurrection. Later in the 18th century, cherubim took the place of skulls. This change seems to indicate a shift in emphasis from mortality to immortality. After 1750, there was an increased use of portraiture on gravestones. As the colonies prospered, individuals were able to afford the luxury of personalized markers. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these early gravestones is the originality of each design. Even though the same symbols are used over and over again, each stone is distinct in the depth of the carving and the details used.

After the Revolution there was an awakening of strong republican feeling which manifested itself in the use of neo-classical symbols, such as weeping willows, urns, and hourglasses, for gravestones. The Unitarian and Methodist faiths were gaining membership, and the new neo-classical symbols were adopted by these religions.

Toward the end of the 1800's the stones became larger, and there was usually no carved ornamentation. The personal information carved in the stone was kept to a minimum. There was also a change in materials; slate was used in the 17th and 18th centuries, limestone was the dominant material in the early 19th century, and various colors of granite were used later in the 19th century and into the 20th century. Samples from every style of funerary sculpture appear in the cemetery, and the final result is a very interesting mixture of colors, shapes, sizes and textures.

### 3.3 Relationship to the Criteria for Landmark Designation:

The Dorchester North Burying Ground is clearly eligible for Landmark designation under the criteria established in Section 4, Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended, in that it is a property which:

- (a) is included on the National Register of Historic Places,
- (b) represents important aspects of the cultural and social history of the City, the Commonwealth and the Region, (c) is inherently valuable for study as a rare tangible example of the transition from the 17th to the 19th century in Dorchester.

#### 4.0 ECONOMIC STATUS

##### 4.1 Current Assessed Value and Property Tax:

Buildings:       \$ 24,000

Land:             \$139,000

Total:            \$163,000

Annual Taxes: The burial ground is tax-exempt under Code F because it is a cemetery.

##### 4.2 Current Ownership and Status:

The Dorchester North Burying Ground is owned by the City of Boston, and it comes under the supervision of the Department of Parks and Recreation.

## 5.0 PLANNING CONTEXT

### 5.1 Background:

Originally settled in 1630 by Puritans from Devonshire, England, Dorchester in the mid-17th century extended south from Boston almost to the Rhode Island border, with later towns such as Quincy, Dedham, and Foxboro being set off as population increased. The first nucleus of settlement was on Allen's Plain, the flat area between Savin and Meeting House Hills, leading up into Dorchester Neck - and more specifically, around the present-day intersection of Pond, Pleasant, and East Cottage Streets, just outside of Edward Everett Square. Other 17th century roadways in the area include the present Boston, Crescent, and Stoughton Streets. The intersection of Boston with Cottage and Pond Streets was originally referred to as "Five Corners". The Dorchester North Burying Ground, laid out in 1633 at the corner of Stoughton and Boston Streets, is the only other major topographical feature which survives in the area from the 17th century.

Dorchester throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries was essentially composed of small farms laid out in strips along a network of roads which connected small, rural settlements or milltowns (at Lower Mills and Mattapan Square). This area was also dotted with occasional country estates of the Boston gentry (though most of those were in Roxbury due to the lack of a direct land connection between Dorchester and Boston before the filling of the South

Bay). One of these which survives is the impressive Shirley-Eustis House (formerly Shirely Place) off Dudley Street near the Roxbury/Dorchester boundary, built by the Royal Governor William Shirley in 1747.

Toward the middle of the 19th century, a number of events and circumstances combined to change the face of Dorchester from a cluster of rural villages to a more densely settled middle-class suburb. Firstly, the emergence of a large middle-class of merchants and manufacturers, contemporaneous with the immigration of successive waves of Irish poor during the Potato Famines of the late 1840's and 1850's, created tremendous housing pressure in the central city. The railroad and the streetcar provided the agents for relieving this pressure. They served as relatively reliable and affordable transport into and out of town for the emerging middle-class wishing to leave the congested central city but lacking the means or the time for a private carriage and team of horses.

Many of these middle-class families built homes on Dorchester's hilltops, particularly Savin and Jones Hill, commuting first along the 1844 Old Colony line (which ran along the present MBTA Red Line right-of-way, with stops at Crescent and Savin Hill Avenues), and later by means of the post-Civil War New York and New England line (along the present Midland Branch). Clusters of small, mansarded, wood-frame "commuter cottages" sprang up around each railroad station.

In 1869, largely due to pressure from land speculators, Dorchester voted to annex itself to Boston, further opening itself to development. By this time, streetcar companies had begun to initiate regular service along major arteries. The first such line to pass through Five Corners was the Metropolitan Railway Company line along Boston Street between South Boston and Bowdoin Street, in existence before the Civil War. In 1878, Massachusetts Avenue (then called East Chester Park) was extended from Washington Street to Five Corners, and within a decade it too carried a streetcar line. By this time, many of the farm and remaining large houselots around Five Corners had begun to be subdivided and built up with modest, single and double houses, first in the Mansard and Italianate, and later in the Queen Anne style.

With the emergence of a new class of tradesmen and small shopkeepers (many of them the sons and grandsons of the Irish, French Canadian, and German immigrants whose arrival had created pressure for Dorchester's early residential development) and with the expansion and electrification of the streetcar lines, a new building form began to proliferate in the area: the three-decker, or freestanding, wood-frame, three-family house. Many good examples of this building form are found along the east side of the burying ground.

Some amount of residential development on remaining parcels continued in the area after World War I, as well as some commercial development along major arteries and intersections such as Dorchester Avenue and Uphams Corner.

Since World War II, with the advent of highway construction, VA and FHA mortgages and widespread automobile ownership, new neighborhood growth has occurred chiefly in the suburbs at the expense of older neighborhoods such as Dorchester. These older areas have in turn suffered from housing disinvestment and abandonment, population loss, and commercial center decline.

## 5.2 Current Planning Issues:

Uphams Corner has a population of about 14,900 persons. The major ethnic groups are Irish, Canadian, Italian, Spanish, Afro-American and Cape Verdean (in that order). The average income of the families in the area is slightly lower than the city-wide median. The juvenile and elderly populations are slightly higher than the City as a whole.

The majority of the neighborhood's 4,895 dwelling units are located primarily in one, two and three unit buildings. More than half of the residential structures needed repairs in excess of \$1,000 in 1973. Some aid to homeowners has come from the Housing Improvement Program and Neighborhood Housing Services. There has been some occurrence of foreclosed and abandoned buildings. The area still contains many gracious Victorian homes which are increasingly attractive housing opportunities. Triple deckers still provide comfortable housing for many of the neighborhood's residents.

The Uphams Corner business district is a focal point of the neighborhood. There has been a considerable loss of trade to commercial

facilities on Morrissey Boulevard, but convenience shopping services, banking and public agencies are still active in this area. Some storefront rehabilitation has taken place with technical assistance and rebates being provided by the City's Business District Improvement Program. Most of the customers arrive on foot or on one of the four bus lines that pass through the area. The buses originate at either Andrew Station or Dudley Station. There is no direct rapid transit access.

The renovation of the Strand Theatre through a \$1.5 million public works grant is expected to have a revitalizing effect on the business district. The theatre opened in November of 1979. Movies and performances that appeal to the multi-ethnic residents of the area are planned for the theatre.

Columbia Road (from Edward Everett Square to Midlands Tracks) is scheduled for total street reconstruction. The work will include paving, signalization, neckdowns, pedestrian crosslights, left-hand turn lanes, sidewalks (concrete except for red brick in the business district) and landscaping. Baker and Co., Inc., will begin construction in late April, 1983, and is scheduled to complete the project by the end of the year.

The Dorchester North Burying Ground is the only open green space in the neighborhood. Vandalism has been a major problem. The concrete wall, which surrounds the cemetery, closes it off from the view of patrolmen and passers-by. It has been suggested that a



wrought iron fence would both prevent vandalism and allow the residents to enjoy the area visually. There is local support for the rehabilitation of the burying ground. Community groups have spent some time working on the grounds. Still lacking is a comprehensive plan for the upkeep of the grounds and the conservation of the gravestones that would be necessary if the burying ground is to be maintained at a standard that is fitting considering its importance and antiquity.

Section 73 of Chapter 272 of the General Laws provides for fines and imprisonment for willful or malicious injury, defacement, removal, etc. of grave markers, tombs and their contents. Section 73A of that Chapter, if accepted by the City, could allow for removal of gravestones for repair or reproduction, in accordance with regulations promulgated by the State Secretary, by "community sponsored, educationally oriented, and professionally directed repair teams".

An important planning issue for the Burying ground is the one of stone conservation and the specific techniques used in this pursuit. Besides willful vandalism, accidental damage from lawn mowers and other maintenance equipment does occur intermittently. The damage done by environmental factors and air pollution is constant, but is more severe with some stone materials than with others. All of these cause the need for stone conservation. There are numerous techniques and measures that have been developed for stone conservation with varying degrees of success and failure. Other cities and towns have undertaken cemetery restoration projects ranging from

removal and reproduction and replacement of gravestones to very conservative projects in which certain types of stones have been treated for a long-term trial and observation.

## 6.0 ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

### 6.1 Alternatives:

The Boston Landmarks Commission may choose to designate Dorchester North Burying Ground as a Landmark, a part of a Landmark District or an Architectural Conservation District. However, the nature of the property and its significance, which is demonstrated by its inclusion on the National Register, indicate designation as a Landmark.

In spite of clear eligibility for designation, the Commission may also choose not to designate the property.

### 6.2 Impact of Alternatives:

Designation of the Dorchester North Burying Ground would serve at least two purposes; it would bring added recognition and public attention to the burial ground, and it would give the Landmarks Commission a role in protecting and determining the property's future.

## 7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The staff of the Boston Landmarks Commission recommends that the Dorchester North Burying Ground be designated as a Landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended.

The Standards and Criteria recommended for administering the regulatory functions provided for in Chapter 772, as amended, are attached.

## 8.0 SPECIFIC STANDARDS AND CRITERIA - Dorchester North Burying Ground

### 1. Intent

The principal goal of the Dorchester North Burying Ground Landmark designation is to conserve a section of Dorchester's physical fabric for its potential as an educational medium. The burying ground and its exceptional inventory of 17th, 18th and 19th century funerary sculptures constitute a rare tangible example of the transition from the 17th to 19th century in Dorchester.

- a. In general it is the intent of the designation to encourage the restoration of the burying ground; removal of gravestones, markers or tombs will not generally be allowed.
- b. New construction is prohibited in the Burying Ground.
- c. Under no circumstances will abrasive cleaning methods be allowed within the Burying Ground.
- d. The layout of the graves, tombs, paths, trees and grass areas shall be maintained wherever possible.

### 2. Headstones, Markers, Tombs \*

- a. No restoration, reconstruction, repair, maintenance work may be done without the approval of the Commission.
- b. No gravestones may be removed from the burial ground without the approval of the Commission.
- c. Broken pieces of gravestones should be retained; when appropriate stone conservation measures are determined and authorized in conjunction with the Commissioner of the Parks and Recreation Department, such gravestones should be repaired accordingly.
- d. Partically buried headstones may have turf around them removed only if the specifications for work to be done are approved by the Commission.
- e. Gravestone rubbing is discouraged but as an activity is not subject to review by the Commission. It is the policy of the owner, the Parks and Recreation Commission, not to allow rubbing.

\* Separate and additional authorization for restoration and repair of headstones, markers and tombs must be obtained from the Secretary of the Commonwealth.

### 3. Ground Cover and Topography

- a. The use of trees, shrubs and grass should be continued. A master plan should be initiated by the Parks Department for appropriate maintenance of existing plant materials and appropriate locations for additional plant materials.
- b. Existing trees may be removed only if diseased beyond cure.
- c. Planting of new trees or shrubs will be subject to review by the Commission. Consideration should be given to the type of planting that was there before. Allowances should be made for adequate light space for growth, considering ultimate height and spread. Other factors that should be considered when the shrubs or trees are chosen are climatic tolerances -- winter temperature and storms and summer drought, urban survival ability and maintenance requirements.
- d. Cutting of grass must not damage headstones or other historic elements. The use of power mowers, which have damaged the stones in the past, is discouraged, and the use of nylon line grass cutters is encouraged.
- e. Except for uncovering headstones, no change in topography in the burying ground will be allowed.

### 4. Walks and Paths

- a. The paths laid out by the 1834 Improvement Committee should be maintained in their present form, that is, unpaved.
- b. The small signs which mark the paths should be retained. These signs should be straightened and repaired as needed. Where the signs are missing, they should be replaced with duplicates.

### 5. Walls and Gates

- a. If a new fence is installed, it should be made of wrought iron and be similar in style to the gates on the southeast and northwest corners.
- b. The gates at the northwest, southeast and southwest corners should be retained and their upkeep should be integrated into an overall maintenance plan.
- c. If the wall, or any portion of it, is not replaced, it should be repaired as needed and kept free of graffiti.

### 6. Lighting

- a. Illumination should be adequate so that it contributes to the safety

of the cemetery.

- b. Lighting fixtures should be selected with the approval of the Commission.

7. Buildings

No buildings of any type may be erected in the burial ground.

8. Miscellaneous

- a. No motor vehicles of any kind, except maintenance vehicles approved by the Department of Parks and Recreation, shall be permitted in the cemetery at any time.
- b. It is recommended that special events be permitted only if organized to prevent damage to grass, plantings, gravestones and other features.
- c. No uses shall be allowed if they disrupt the burial ground's present use as a cemetery.
- d. Maintenance of existing gravestones and tombs, and maintenance and replacement of trees and walls should be done in a manner consistent with the burial ground's character. No new elements shall be permitted if they alter open spaces.

## 9.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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