Later memorial erected by the family, whose enclosed plot stands nearby. By the middle of the century, symbols from nature emerged. The finger pointing upward, indicating the supposition that the interred was heading for heaven, was popular; see the grave of Olive Hoxie, 1871.

An open book is seen on her husband Martin V. Kempton’s stone, symbolizing wisdom and religious dedication; both have comforting epitaphs. There are roses in bloom on the stone of Lydia Brown, 1856, suggesting that she died in the prime of life; a wish that she might rest calmly is carved at the bottom. Further back, in the row of Walker family graves, the stone of Rufus P., 1870, shows a broken flower, symbolizing a life cut short. There is an oak branch with an acorn on the marker of Lucy, 1882, associated with victory over death. Around the time of the Civil War, the very costly obelisk became a favorite monument for prominent families, usually for group burials. There is even a tiny obelisk, for a child, near the driveway. Lambs, the ancient symbol of innocence and of Christ, adorn the grave of Wm. Cady and other children’s graves. The thickness of gravestones grew at this time, until they approached the size familiar in the 20th century.

The notation below indicates that he was the first white child born in Coventry. Interestingly, he is buried in Hartford, and this is a much later memorial erected by the family, whose enclosed plot stands nearby. By the middle of the century, symbols from nature emerged. The finger pointing upward, indicating the supposition that the interred was heading for heaven, was popular; see the grave of Olive Hoxie, 1871.

Coventry Cemetery Commission expresses its appreciation to Commission member Linda Pagliuco and Coventry Historical Society for providing some of the historical background on Grant Hill Cemetery used in this brochure.
A Walk Through Grant Hill Cemetery

Grant Hill Cemetery was established in 1773. Historically, it has been known as Strong Cemetery, Minister Hill Cemetery, North Cemetery and Flint Yard.

Tombstones are meant to commemorate the departed, but contain much more information than names and dates, if you know how to interpret the iconography, or decorative artwork, for each element was meant to be symbolic. Equally interesting are the rhyming epitaphs found at the bottom of many markers, which convey a clear message to the reader. These also evolved with time, from grim to hopeful. This tour will point out some of the interesting symbols and epitaphs found on our oldest gravestones, and show how ideas about death changed over time.

Cherubs and Warnings

During the 18th century, the most popular motif in New England’s Christian burying grounds was the “winged cherub,” which probably represented the soul or spirit. We will begin our walk with the most prominent stones in this yard, those of the Reverend Nathan Strong and his wife, Esther.

Size alone would be enough to indicate that someone important within the community is buried here, but there are other signs of prestige as well, in the swirls and tassel decorations. Perhaps most telling is the mini-biography that covers this entire slab, which, because carvers charged for each letter, was very costly. Mrs. Strong’s companion stone is only slightly less elaborate, while those of their two daughters, to the immediate left, are simpler though still sizeable.

Not far to the left of the Strong markers is the informal plot of the Lillie family. These plainer stones are also typical of the late 18th century, and were made by Amasa Loomis, whose earlier work, in the older fashion, feature cherubs with large, plain wings surrounded by small scallops, and delicate floral borders along the sides. The Lillie stones illustrate the gradual change in attitudes toward dying that was underway at that time. Samuel’s stone, 1798, has one of Coventry’s most common epitaphs, beginning, “Death leaves a melancholy gloom,” reminding readers that soon they will join him. The 1811 stone of Lois, his daughter, reflects a more optimistic idea, “I hope to happiness I’m gone,” yet still ends, “but soon will follow me.” This wavering between the dire warning and hopefulness in the messages will be seen on all the Lillie family markers, and the many others that surround them.

Urns and Willows

The changes in epitaph style are accompanied by differences in shape, material, and iconography. The curvilinear granite adorned with the winged cherub is gradually supplanted by rectilinear shapes decorated with the classical Roman urn and willow, and simple line borders; marble will become the material of choice. The granite stone of Oliver Porter, 1819, is characteristic of the transition phase. His epitaph is eminently hopeful.

You will find many other examples, including the tall biographical markers of Ebenezer and Anna Hunt.

Also compare the two small graves of the French children (Oliver, 1791, and Delia, 1814) with their urns and contrasting epitaphs. See if you can spot some of the newer stones carved by Amasa.

Iconography Blooms

As the 19th century progressed, other styles developed. Stones were decorated minimally or not at all, with epitaphs omitted, of which there are many in this yard. A good example is the Ebenezer Carpenter marker, a small, plain marble showing a line of tiny flowers along