



This tombstone for a young woman named Martha Chaplin can be found in Fitzwilliam Village Cemetery.

Pickin' & Pokin'

A 19th-Century New England Voice

Story and photos contributed by Dr. Murray McClellan

A tombstone in the village cemetery of Fitzwilliam offers a clue about how our ancestors spoke.

The oldest extant example of a human voice dates to 1860, when Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville made a ghostly 10-second-long "phonautograph" of a woman singing "Au Clair de la Lune." It was not, however, until Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph cylinder – patented in 1878 – that a reliable system to record the human voice came into being.

Over the subsequent decades, a lively commerce in the distribution of sound recordings spread across the globe, with Edison's cylinders being overtaken by the invention of the disc gramophone in 1887.

But how can we tell what people actually sounded like before the invention of recording devices? More particularly, how can we know how our New England ancestors spoke? Did they pronounce "park the car in Harvard Yard" with the famous Boston accent: "pahk the cah in Hahvuhd Yahd?" (Of course, they didn't have cahs to pahk, although Hahvuhd Yahd has been around

since 1638, when Harvard purchased a "Cow-yard row" from one Goodman Peyntree to form a "College Yard.")

Technically, this "Boston accent" is known as Eastern New England English. Two features of this dialect, which includes New Hampshire and Maine as well as eastern Massachusetts, is the dropping of r's after a vowel – which linguists term non-rhoticity – and the cot-caught merger, where the vowels in both words are pronounced identically.

One important clue about how early New Englanders spoke can be found in James Russell Lowell's "The Biglow Papers," published in 1848. In this satirical work, the Bostonian poet Lowell denounces the Mexican War

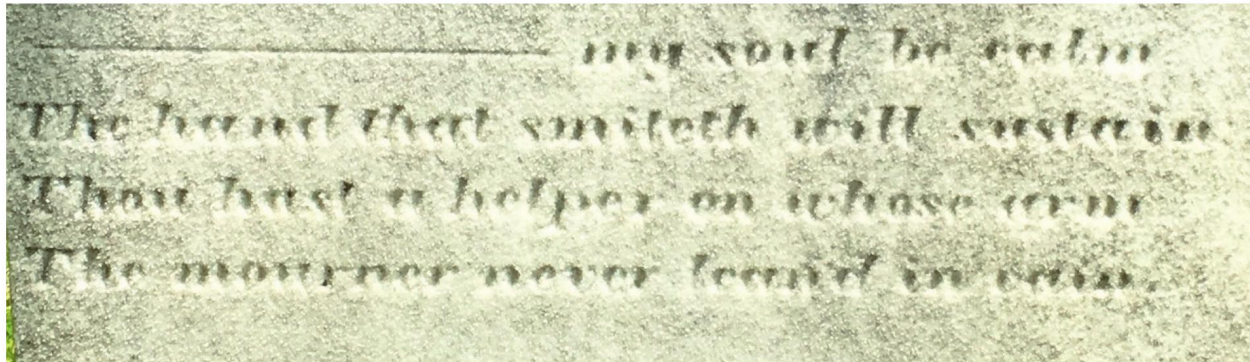
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The detail on Martha Chaplin's tombstone at Fitzwilliam Village Cemetery contains an 1836 poem.

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through the character of Hosea Biglow, a rustic poet whose New England accent Lowell tries to capture; for example:

*Ez fer war, I call it murder, –
There you hev it plain an' flat;
I don't want to go no fuder
Than my Testymet fer that;
God hez sed so plump an' fairly
It's ez long ez it is broad,
An' you've gut to git up airy
Ef you want to take in God.
–“The Biglow Papers,” No. I. A Letter, p. 5*

Another clue about how our New England ancestors spoke can be found on the tombstone of Martha Chaplin, located in the Village Cemetery of Fitzwilliam. This grave marker records the fact that Martha, the daughter of Moses (1777–1859) and Martha (1782–1867) Chaplin, died on April 14, 1840 at age 16. The fifth of six children born between 1803 and 1828, Martha was the first of the clan to pass away, her other siblings dying in 1844, 1870, 1887, 1893, and 1897.

At the bottom of Martha Chaplin's marble tombstone is inscribed a four-line poem rendered in neat italic script:

*_____ my soul be calm
The hand that smiteth will sustain
Thou hast a helper on whose arm
The mourner never leaned in vain*

These four lines are actually from the final stanza of a poem, “The Young Widow,” that was originally published in the August 1836 issue of *The Knickerbocker* and reprinted in *The Rural Repository* of November 1836. “The Young Widow,” whose author is only identified as “J.B.,” records the voice of a distraught widow who rejects calls for her to finish mourning the death of her husband:

*Ye bid me mingle in the dance,
And smile among the young and gay—
Ye say that grief will dim my glance,
And turn my raven tresses gray;
I care not, yet I strive to bow*

*In meekness to my lonely fate—
I dry my tears and smooth my brow
The while my heart is desolate.*

This melodramatically soppy poem is rendered in iambic tetrameter, with each of the six stanzas of consisting of eight lines with an ABABCD rhyme scheme, and with each stanza ending with the word “desolate.” The final stanza, which the Chaplin tombstone quotes, begins “And yet not so; my soul be calm—” and ends with the resolution:

*O! may that arm the pilgrim guide
By the straight path and narrow gate
To where the loved in bliss abide,
And hearts no more are desolate.*

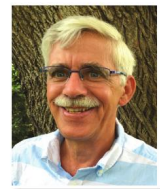
It is unclear how three-and-a-half lines of the obscure 1836 poem, “The Young Widow,” found their way onto Martha Chaplin's 1840 tombstone. Was the poem something that the young teenaged Martha or her family liked? And, if so, did they subscribe to *The Knickerbocker* or *The Rural Repository*, or to both?

Or if to neither, how did they see the poem? Or was this passage something that the stonemason had saved as appropriate for the grave marker of a young woman?

At this remove in time, we probably cannot answer any of these questions. We can, however, still appreciate the evocative lines engraved at the bottom of Martha Chaplin's tombstone. The words, originally in the voice of a young widow, have now become ours, as we are the mourner reassuring our soul that God, who can take away our loved ones, is nonetheless a steadfast arm on which we can lean in our grief.

And, amid the stillness of this quaint New England village cemetery we can – if we listen closely – hear an early 19th-century New Hampshire voice echoing across the centuries, rhyming “my soul be calm” with “on whose arm.”

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