

Lost Bulkeley Tomb

Gershom Bulkeley (1709-1788) was the grandson and namesake of one of the most famous and prominent surgeons in New England (Dr. Gershom Bulkeley 1635-1713) and the son of the Reverend John Bulkeley, first Minister of the Colchester Congregational Church. Bulkeley family members founded Aetna Life Insurance Company, helped establish the National Baseball League and served as a Senator and Governor of the State of Connecticut. Prior to moving to the Hartford area to be near business and political associates, the family resided in Colchester, where the earliest Bulkeley ancestors were buried in the town's Ancient Burying Ground behind the First Congregational Church and Bacon Academy. However, based on extensive Bulkeley family genealogies and extant tombstones, many ancestors remained unaccounted.

Over the years, the Ancient Burying Ground had lapsed into disarray. Teenagers vandalized the Bulkeley Tomb in the 1920s, removed "skulls" and paraded around town during Halloween holding them aloft on poles. Horrified, the town fathers purposely sealed up the tomb and buried it under sod to prevent further entrance. As a result, the Bulkeley tomb vanished from sight and public memory.

An effort to restore the neglected cemetery was organized by the Colchester Historical Society in 2002. Landscaping revealed fallen tombstones obscured under high grass, including three large fractured marble slabs recovered from the cemetery's west side. When assembled, the slabs read, "The Tomb of Gershom Bulkeley and his Descendants." With the rediscovery of this abandoned tomb, the Bulkeley family petitioned the state archaeologist to conduct archaeological and forensic studies in hopes of identifying their nameless ancestors interred within the structure.

Twenty-nine out of 30 individual remains were positively identified through archaeological recovery, forensic examination and family genealogical records. Life stress pathologies, oral health and diseases diagnosed from skeletal analysis yielded evidence of medical and dental care associated with their socio-economic wealth. Upon completion of the forensic examination and review of the family history, the tomb was restored to its 18th-century condition and a new memorial stone was carved listing the names of the dead. The restored tomb was dedicated during a Bulkeley family reunion in 2003 honoring their newly identified ancestors.