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The Changing York County, South Carolina, Tombstone Business, 1750-1850.

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In the mid-eighteenth century a number of inhabitants from Scottish (Scots-Irish), Welsh, English, German, and Huguenot ethnic groups began populating the York County, South Carolina, area (fig. 1). Although the period marked the beginning of the American cultural melting pot, religious and social differences still existed between these groups. Each maintained close ties to old work traditions. For example, the Scots-Irish, the predominant group, began building churches to perpetuate their beliefs shortly after their arrival in the piedmont region, and the first established churches in the area were therefore Presbyterian. Waxhaw Presbyterian Church and Fishing Creek Presbyterian Church in adjacent Lancaster and Chester counties (fig. 2), respectively, were organized in the early 1750s, and Bethel Presbyterian Church in York County was formally established in 1764.

In conjunction with the erection of community churches was the walling off of cemeteries, and tombstones began dotting the Presbyterian cemeteries in the 1750s. These tombstones manifested traditional designs, for tombstone art probably was one of the Scots-Irish settlers' strongest cultural links to their homelands. For most of the area's inhabitants, however, erecting a tombstone in that period was far removed from the rigors of everyday life. Most still lived in dirt floor cabins, made their own cloth, and went unwashed. The small number of extant eighteenth-century York County tombstones is a reflection on the majority of the population's inability to purchase them. Besides the cost of carving, there was a hauling fee and other funeral costs. Therefore, for those few

people who could erect a tombstone, it became a statement of economic and social superiority, and the few examples of York County tombstones that remain from that period read like a guide to the area's social circles. They also demonstrate a clear pattern of association with organized religion.

Figure 3. James White tombstone, attributed to Hugh Kelsey, Fishing Creek Presbyterian Church, Chester County, 9 May 1774. HOA 22", WOA 17 1/4".

Tombstones became more important religious and social symbols in York County in the late eighteenth century, marking burial sites, giving solace to loved ones, and heralding the spiritual characters of the deceased. Their erection also was a lasting tribute to the social and religious standings of those memorialized. James White's 1774 tombstone (fig. 3) at Fishing Creek Church marked the beginning of an increased demand for tombstones that served the above functions.

The proliferation of tombstones in York County during the late eighteenth century can be attributed to a higher death rate. This was a direct result of an influx of settlers between 1763 and 1780. To fulfill the demand, three local sources developed in the region. Hugh Kelsey, Samuel Watson, and the Bigham family began dominating the tombstone business in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and they executed most of the local tombstones prior to 1820. Each of these carvers manifested distinguishing carving features, and different styles and images defined their separate contributions. Both Kelsey and Watson were associated with their own communities and did little commercial carving. Their work was closely tied to their immediate families and churches. However, the Bigham family carvers of adjacent Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, established themselves as premier commercial carvers. Hundreds of their fine stones may be found throughout the United States.

The first of the local carvers to make a significant contribution to tombstone art and development in the region was Hugh Kelsey (1754-1817). The son of Robert Kelsey, Sr. (1715-1800), a Scots-Irish immigrant, Hugh settled with his family in Chester County. It is unclear how he learned his trade, but it is possible that he was influenced by members of his own artisan family. Samuel Kelsey, a Chester County blacksmith and Hugh's kinsman, also lived near Fishing Creek Church. During the southern campaign of the American Revolution, Samuel reported that in July 1780 he "was robbed of everything and the swords he had been manufacturing were carried off" by the British.[1]

Hugh Kelsey's work as a tombstone carver began before the American Revolution and continued until his death in 1817, although during the war he also supplied the local militia with holsters, sword scabbards, waist belts, and capes.[2] Most of his tombstones can be found at Fishing Creek Church. His earliest attributable piece probably was the circa 1774 James White tombstone with its wonderful images of "noble man," vines, and rosettes. Kelsey's tombstones are characterized by the thick, squat

Figure 4. Mary Brown tombstone, attributed to Hugh Kelsey, Fishing Creek Presbyterian Church, Chester County, 1779. HOA 25 1/2", WOA 18 1/4".

form demonstrated by Mary Brown's stone (fig. 4) of 1779. Kelsey represented her life with large rosettes, encircling vines, and, a bird, resembling a hummingbird, within a small branch atop the stone. Only his earliest stones feature these designs; by the nineteenth century his carvings had became far less detailed. In 1808, the year he executed Thomas Gill's tombstone (fig. 5) no expression of his eighteenth-century imagery remained. The stone, which cost the Gill estate $6, is devoid of decoration.[3]

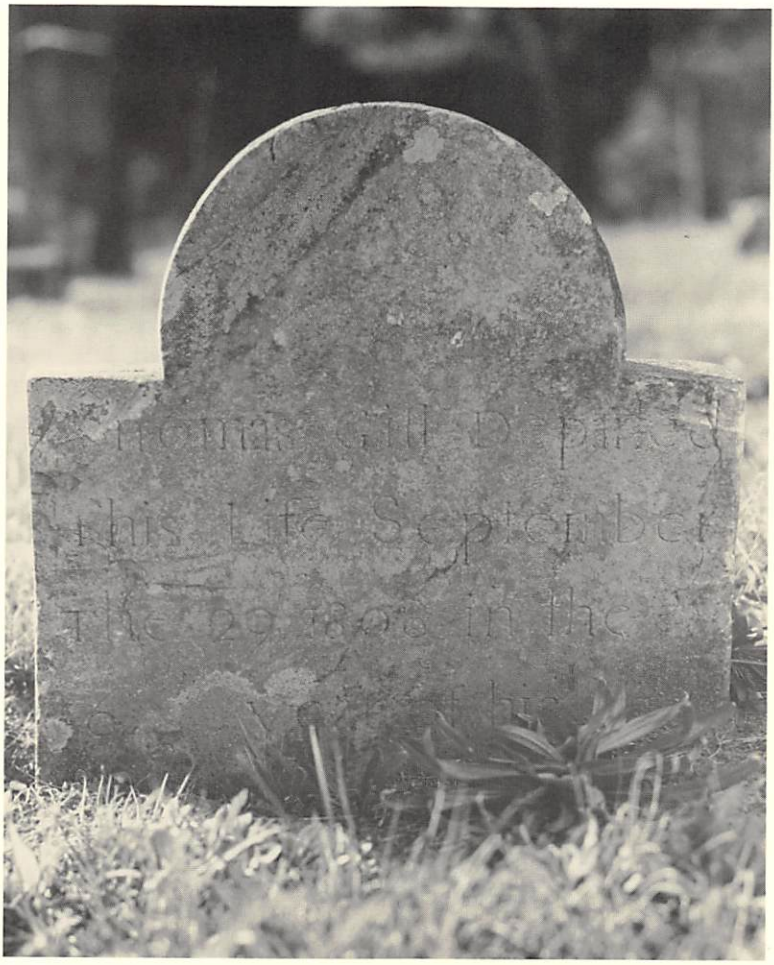

Figure 5. Thomas Gill tombstone, attributed to Hugh Kelsey, Fishing Creek Presbyterian Church, Chester County, 29 September 1808. HOA 15 3/4", WOA 16".

Kelsey died in 1817. His estate inventory listed "one lot of stone cutting tools" valued at $2.01 and $25 worth of assorted tombstones in various stages of completion.[4] It would have been helpful if this record had given the source of his stone and a reference to his knowledge of eighteenth-century designs. However, it does indicate that Kelsey was working with rough stones and not pre-cut forms. His headstones contribute toward the clarification of popular images acceptable to the local population and are important links to their Scottish heritage.

Figure 6. Hannah Watson headstone, by Samuel Watson, Beersheba Presbyterian Church, York County, 13 August 1790. HOA 30 1/2"; WOA 15 3/4".

Bridging the gap between Hugh Kelsey's perpetuation of Scottish traditions and the commercialization of early nineteenth-century carvers were the carvings of Samuel Watson of York County. Unfortunately, very little information on Watson's life is available. He cannot be considered a professional stone carver, for the few extant examples of his work are not polished and exhibit only a small degree of influence from outside the York County area. The tombstones attributed to Watson differ significantly from Kelsey's; they are characterized by less bulk and much stronger vertical lines. Many have high, sharp shoulders with round bead molding completing their edges. A 1790 tombstone (fig. 6) found at Beersheba

Figure 7. Hannah Watson footstone, signed by Samuel Watson. HOA 18", WOA 9 1/4".

Presbyterian Church, signed at the foot by Watson (fig. 7) and carved for his mother Hannah, features a primitive portrait surrounded by stars.

Watson's designs and workmanship appear to have been influenced by factors in his own community, particularly the work of the Bigham family. This is demonstrated by his use of slate as a carving medium and the application of images similar to those of Bigham headstones. The American eagle on Amarandahe Fullton's stone (fig. 8) for example, seems to be a poor copy of the Bigham's

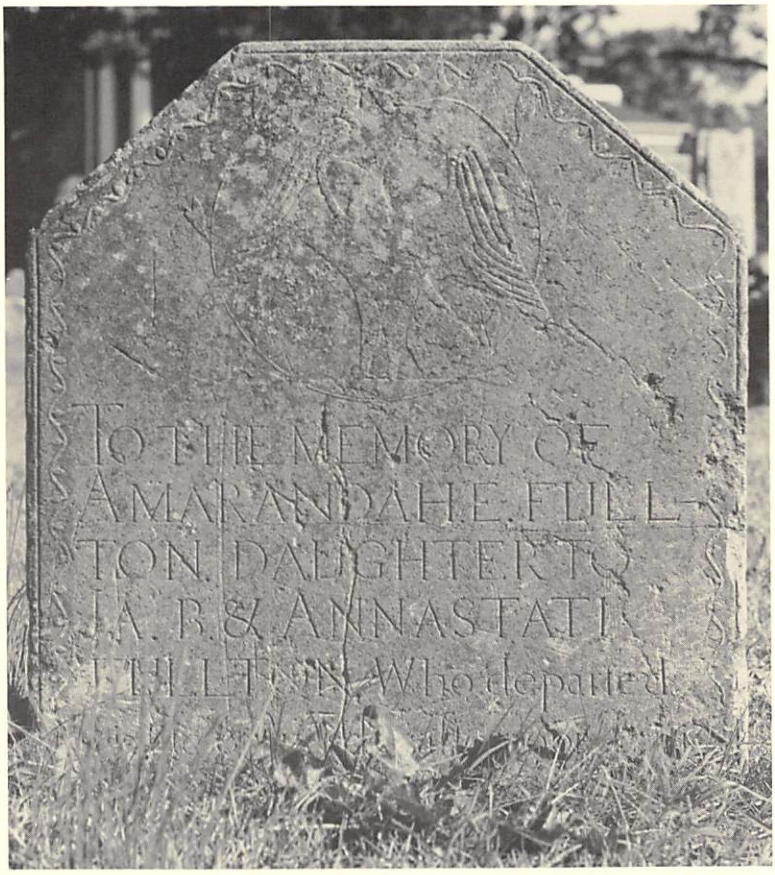

Figure 8. Amarandahe Fullton tombstone, attributed to Samuel Watson, Ebenezer Presbyterian Church, Rock Hill, [date buried]. HOA 25", WOA 22 1/2". That Watson was influenced by the Bigham family of carvers is evident in the similarity between this stone and that of Elisabeth Adams (fig. 10).

popular motif. Its detail is less clean, the proportions less appealing, and its appearance is more like that of a chicken than an eagle.

The Bigham family carvers of Steele Creek, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, were influential in shaping the York County tombstone traditions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Evidence establishing that at least six different carvers were cutting gravestones in the Bigham workshop has been found in various wills and legal documents. The oldest was Samuel Bigham, Sr.,

Figure 9. Alexander Love tombstone, attributed to the Bigham family, Bethesda Presbyterian Church, York County, March 1784. HOA 24", WOA 19 3/4". Alexander Love was an early political leader in York County. He was elected to the Second Provincial Congress in 1775.

who arrived with his wife in Mecklenburg County during the 1760s. Samuel Bigham, Jr., probably was the shop's most skilled artisan; he was proud enough of his abilities to punctuate his signature on legal documents with the initials s. c. for stone cutter.[5]

Examples of the Bighams' work can be found throughout most of York County's nineteenth-century burial sites. It is of high quality, exhibiting a wide variety of designs and styles. Sharp edging (fig. 9), clear images, and the use of a number of popular motifs

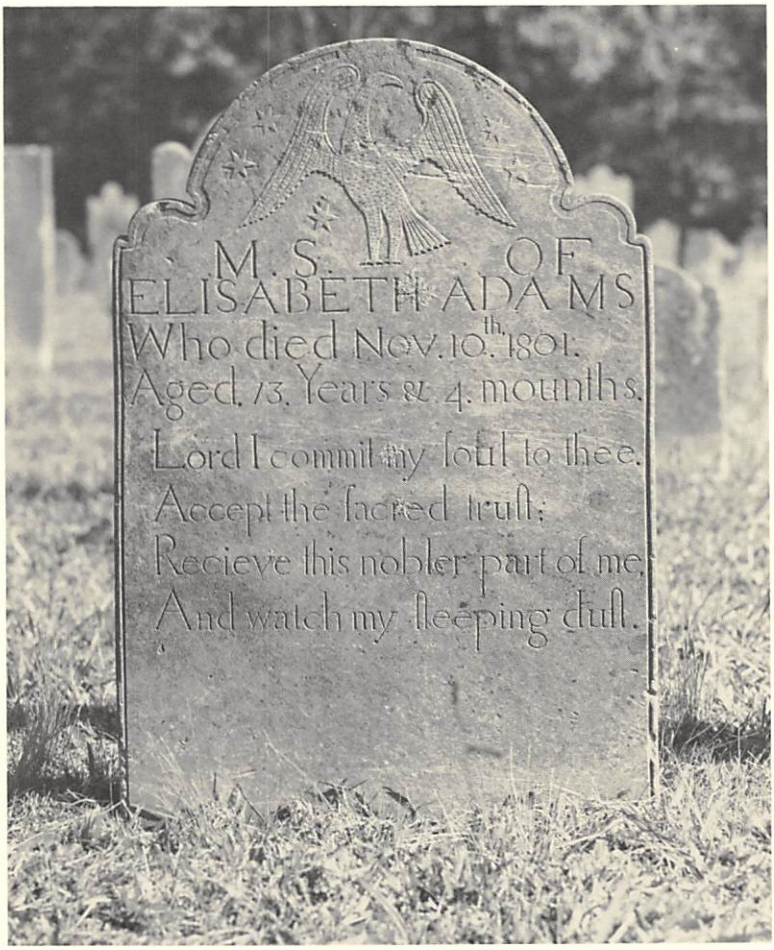

Figure 10. Elisabeth Adams tombstone, attributed to the Bigham family, Bethel Presbyterian Church, Chester County, 10 November 1801. HOA 25", WOA 16 1/2".

reflect a sophistication lacking in the work of Kelsey and Watson and place the Bighams in the category of professional carvers. Their carvings also capture in stone a point in America's past when ethnic origins were being supplanted by an emerging sense of national identity. The gravemarkers they created from 1750 to 1780 reflect the Bighams' northern Irish roots; those carved from the American Revolution until 1815 incorporated distinctly American symbols.[6]

Figure 11. Hugh Berry tombstone, attributed to the Bigham family, Bethel Presbyterian Church, Chester County, 30 August 1802. HOA 24", WOA 19 3/4".

Images used by the Bighams include coats of arms, animals, winged death heads, doves of peace, floral designs, all-seeing eyes, and American eagles (fig. 10). Early nineteenth-century Bigham carvings also include various combinations of geometric fan motifs and inlay lines (fig. 11). Other common Bigham traits are back carving, chamfered corners, and beaded edging.

Although leading families in Chester, Lancaster, and York counties purchased large quantities of tombstones from the Bighams well into the nineteenth century, their significant status as the area's leading carvers eventually foundered in the 1820s. Several factors were responsible for this erosion of their hold on the local tombstone business. Cultural differences became less distinct in the second quarter of the nineteenth century as members of various ethnic groups merged, creating a new social order and resulting in an unconscious simplification of norms that united much of the area's society. The economic changes that a new agrarian system — cotton production — created brought different patterns of social and religious behavior as a new class of farmers, merchants, and artisans emerged in the South Carolina Backcountry. These fledgling members of the middle class then became interested in the social order and community responsibility that came with church membership. According to Dr. George C. Rogers, Jr., the ranks of the region's churchgoers swelled in the early nineteenth century: "In 1799 only eight percent of white adults in the Upcountry were church members; by 1810 twenty-percent were church members."[7] The travels of this new class also exposed them to urban tombstone styles and funeral customs, and this awareness of style coupled with the growth of church membership resulted in an increased demand for headstones. A handsome tombstone became a popular symbol of dignity and importance.

The Bigham family apparently was either unaware of or unprepared for these changes, and as their business declined, brothers-in-law John Caveny (1778-1853) and James Crawford (1775-1842) of York County captured a majority of the tombstone business in the early nineteenth century. These men ushered in a new era of tombstone designs required by affluent planters and merchants. Their carvings manifested only a few ties to the eighteenth-century carvings of Kelsey, Watson, or the Bighams. Caveny's two earliest headstones, for example, retain a few traditional images which he combined with the nineteenth-century urban form. The earliest of his extant stones (fig. 12) found at Bethel Presbyterian Church and carved for James Jackson in 1807, features a winged death head that is clearly out of place on the nineteenth-century form. John McCall's stone (fig. 13) also executed in 1807 and signed by Caveny, is more elaborate, mixing Masonic symbols with a skull and crossbones and a traditional hour glass. These signed stones established Caveny as an engraver and served as advertisements for his work.

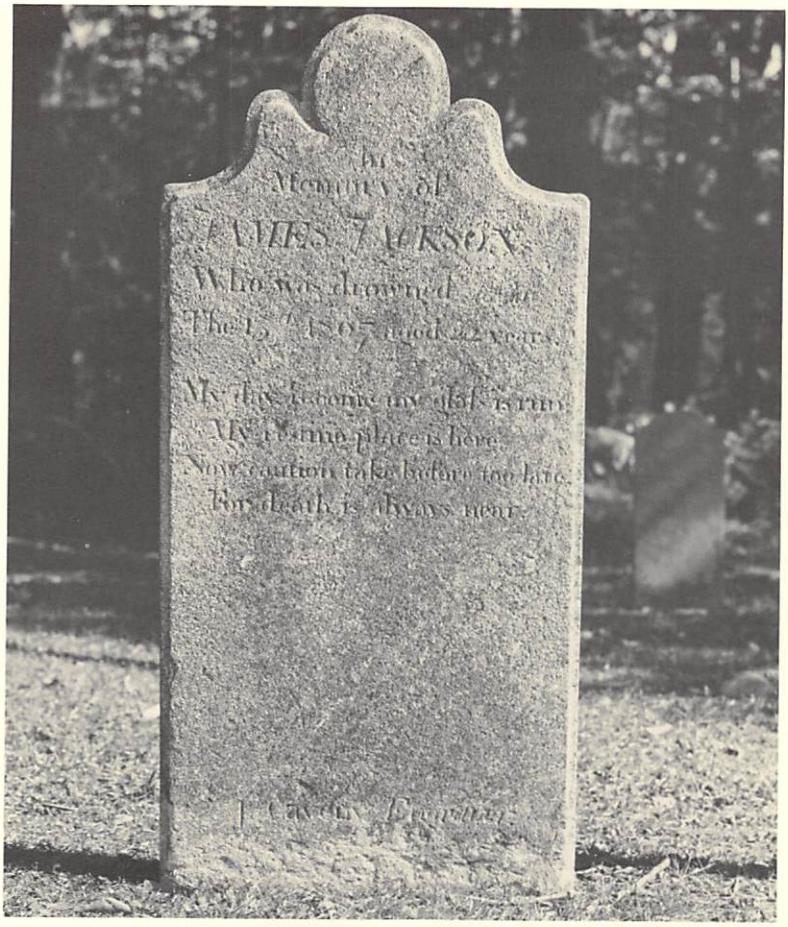

Figure 12. James Jackson tombstone, signed by John Caveny, Bethel Presbyterian, Chester County, 1807. HOA 46", WOA 21 1/2".

Figure 12a. Detail of Jackson tombstone showing Caveny's mark. Caveny identified himself as an engraver for advertising purposes.

Figure 13. John McCall tombstone, signed by John Caveny, Bethesda Presbyterian Church, York County, 10 July 1807. HOA 50 3/4", WOA 18 1/4".

In general, however, early nineteenth-century carvers made a clean break from eighteenth-century conventions. Avon Neal summed up the changes in the trade as follows: "Imaginative gravestone carving flourished . . . to the early 1800s; after that, the urn and the willow became standard motifs, and the art declined rapidly."[8] Most of Caveny's and all of Crawford's stones demonstrate their knowledge of urban styles and changing norms. Such conformity was also a reflection of the economic pressures wrought by competition from urban, particularly Charleston, carving firms. York County's earliest documented commercial tombstone, ordered for Mary Feemster in 1776, was an oddity in its time, but by the second decade of the nineteenth century, more local residents were turning to the use of commercial stones. This new market for urban carving firms rapidly developed in York County and was responsible for the introduction of new styles, images, and business relationships. In 1818 T. W. Walker, a leading Charleston tombstone carver, shipped the William Pettus family of York County a 357-pound tombstone. The stone cost the Pettus estate $41.65 plus an $8.03 hauling charge.[9] A headstone of local sandstone cut by Crawford the same year for local militia leader Colonel Frederick Hambright only cost $22, but apparently the local carvers' lower prices had little effect on the demand for commercial stones in York County. The Charleston firms owned by James Hall, T. W. Walker, and James Rowe all supplied stones to the area after 1810.[10] Twenty years later, Columbia stone cutters W. T. White, Boyne and Sproul, R. G. Brown, and Alex Brown also were shipping stones to York County.

A few York County carving families managed to contend with the city firms, mostly by following those trends set by their urban competitors, stifling their own traditions and creativity, and serving middle class clients who could not afford the stylish monuments imported by the wealthy upper class. A community of professional stone cutters grew up around the abundant granite sites near Kings Mountain in the northern section of York County during the nineteenth century. The Caveny, Crawford, Houser, Morrow, and Mullinax families all worked these quarries for financial gain, producing the majority of tombstones found in the region until the mid-nineteenth century. These local quarries also were important sources of material for carvers well into the nineteenth century. Henry Houser (1756-1822) and his wife Jane built a stone house about 1803 from sandstone quarried on their own property.[11] This vein also ran through John Caveny's property and the Crawfords'.

Figure 14. Eliza Lucinda McCall tombstone, signed by John Caveny, Bethesda Presbyterian Church, York County, 20 October 1829. HOA 58", WOA 24 1/4". This stone is an example of the changes in style wrought by urban competition. The masonic symbols and skull and crossbones of earlier traditions found on John McCall's stone (fig. 13), part of which is illustrated here, were replaced by the weeping willow 22 years later.

In 1842 James Crawford willed his sons "one half of my stone quarry tract of land lying on part of Kings Mountain near the memorial hill called the Battleground and the crowbar between him and his brother William for use of the quarry."[12]

From this community John Caveny emerged as the leading tombstone carver in York County in the 1820s, and his ability to accept new styles (fig. 14) and adapt to changing situations kept him in

Figure 15. Hugh Cain tombstone, signed by John Caveny, Beersheba Presbyterian Church, York County, 25 June 1839. HOA 45 1/2", WOA 21 1/2".

Figure 15a. Detail of Figure 15. Caveny's mark on Hugh Cain's stone resembles a silversmith's stamp.

business until his death in 1853. In the 1830s he and his son Robert C. Caveny (1808-90) introduced two unusual tombstone styles demonstrated by stones carved for Hugh Cain in 1839 (fig. 15) and Elias Carroll in 1843. The designs of these stones were drawn from earlier models, and if they had been carved twenty years earlier might have been more popular. For the most part, however, Caveny's work after 1820 became far less imaginative (figs. 16, 17, 18, 19). He adopted the high shoulder and tombstone profile used by his urban competitors, but continued carving them from locally quarried stone.

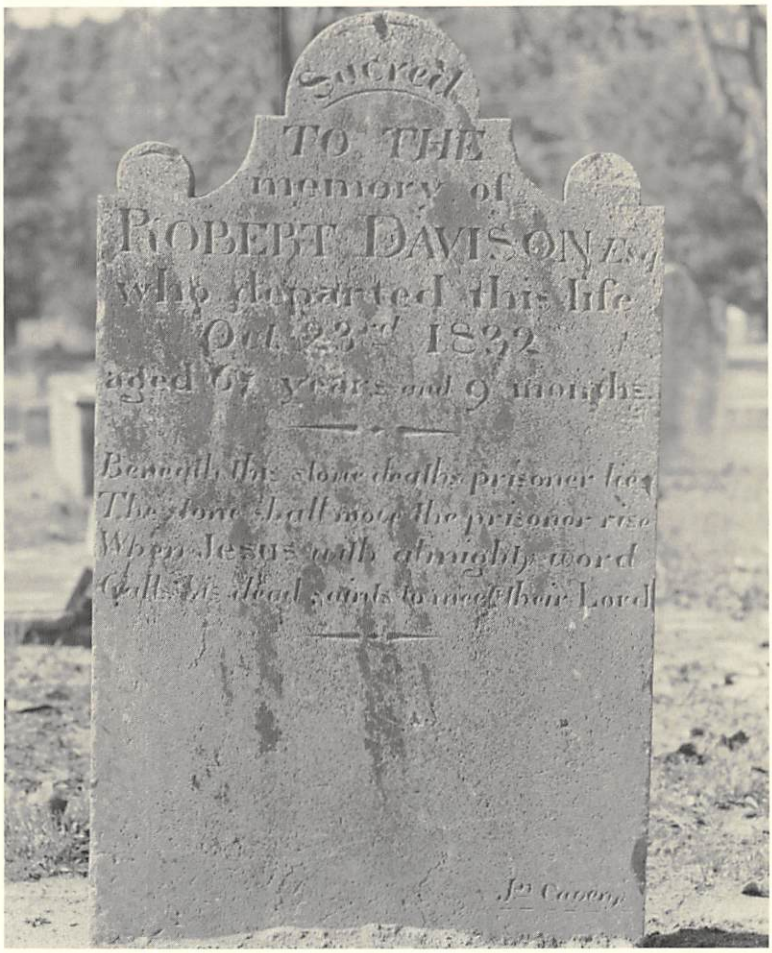

Figure 16. Robert Davison tombstone, signed by John Caveny, Bethesda Presbyterian Church, York County, 23 Oct. 1832. HOA 36 1/2", WOA 21 1/2".

Figure 17. Jonathan Sutton tombstone, by John Caveny, Beersheba Presbyterian Church, York County, 1838? HOA 36 1/2", WOA 22 3/4". According to an estate record, Caveny was paid for carving this stone.

Figure 18. Infant son of John and Mary Brown tombstone, signed by John Caveny, Beersheba Presbyterian Church, York County, 21 November 1836. HOA 35", WOA 9 1/2".

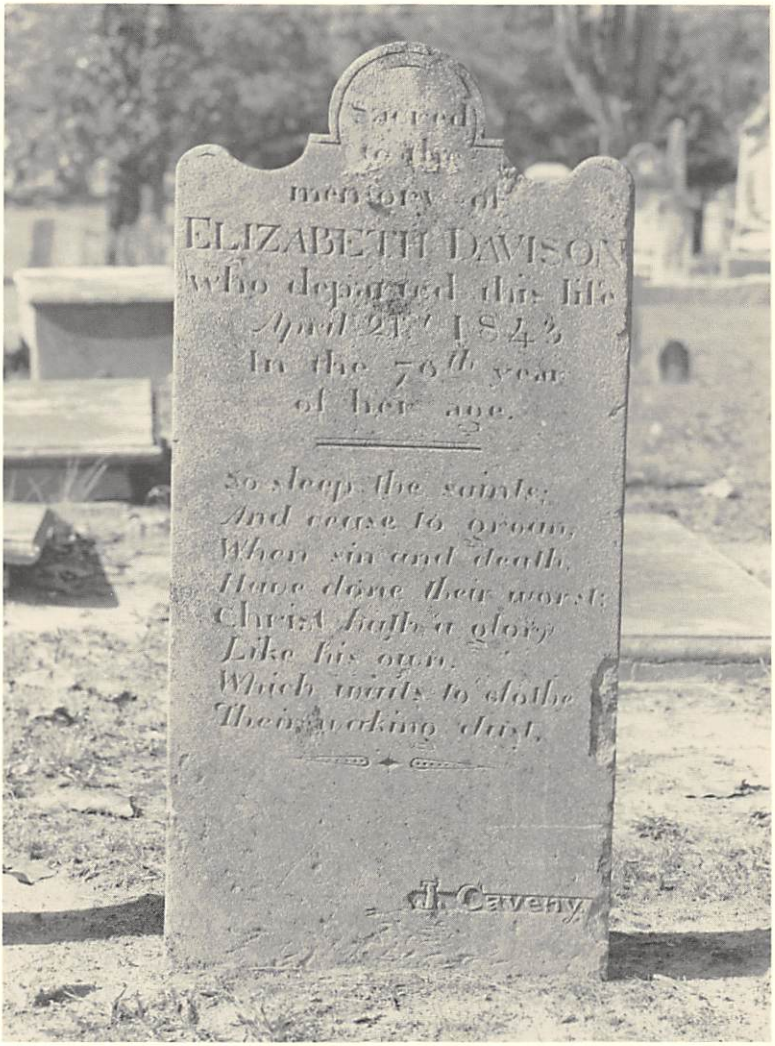

Figure 19. Elizabeth Davison tombstone, signed by John Caveny, Bethesda Presbyterian Church, York County, 21 April 1843. HOA 42 1/2", WOA 20 1/4".

James Crawford also managed to attract a large business by conforming his work to that of his competitors. Hambright's stone, for example, with its strong vertical silhouette, high shoulders, and half-round pediment, is Crawford's version of a popular nineteenth-century urban form. His sons Robert M. Crawford (1804-80) and William N. Crawford (1808-94) entered the business in the early 1830s. The work of both (figs. 20, 21, 22, 23) exhibited a high degree of imagination and good workmanship and brought about a renewed, albeit fleeting, emphasis on creativity. Most of their carvings were adaptations of such prevalent mid-nineteenth century images as the weeping willow.

It was at this point, about 1840, that the commercial monument business cornered the market. To stay in business many of the local carvers restricted their prices and coordinated their work with larger commercial firms by hiring themselves out as engravers. One of the earliest examples of such a joint venture was John Currence's 1827 tombstone; John Caveny engraved the imported stone.[13] In 1832 Caveny was paid $10 for engraving a stone purchased in Columbia.[14] Robert C. Caveny also was an engraver. In 1830 he was hired to engrave a commercial stone and earned $6.42 for his efforts. The same estate paid the monument company $18 for the stone and a hauling fee of $2.70.[15] The growing popularity of marble tombstones also contributed to the demand for engravers rather than full carvers. By 1845 the use of marble was so widely accepted that it had virtually supplanted other local tombstone materials such as granite and sandstone. Tombstone engravers themselves were even using marble for their own headstones. F. H. Morrow's marble headstone, engraved by John Caveny, had the following inscription: "Sacred to the memory of/Frederick H. Morrow/ an ingenious mechanic/ in Monument work/ Who departed this life/ Feb. 24th 1845/ In the 39th year of his age."

One new carver did manage to confront the overwhelming demand for commercial marble stones and introduce his carving techniques in the 1840s. Martin Mullinax, who grew up in rural York County, began carving stones from local material using his own interpretations of weeping willow and eternal flame motifs. Tombstones attributable to him can be located in outlying areas of York County; however, few examples of his work have been found in more populated sections. Mullinax's popularity was short-lived. By 1858 he had abandoned his carving career for the innkeeping business and ownership of the Mullinax House in York.[16]

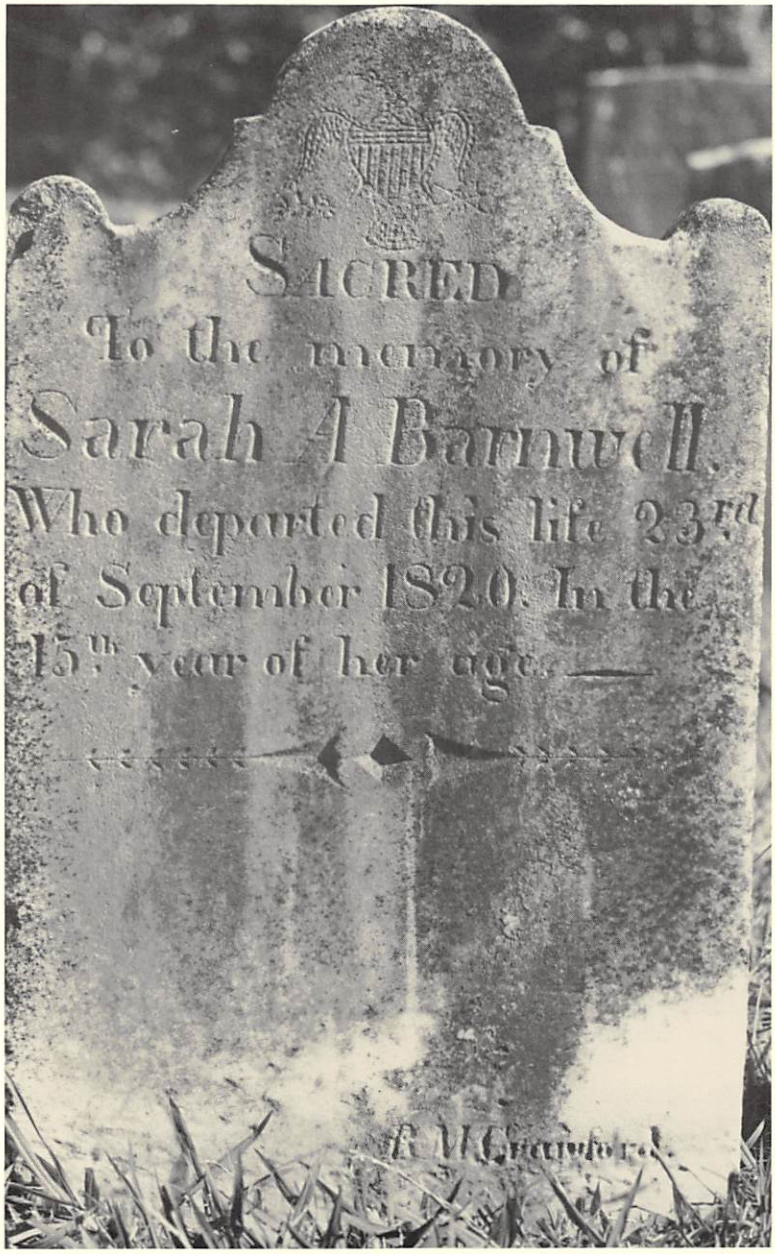

Figure 20. Sarah A. Barnwell tombstone, by Robert M. Crawford, Bethel Presbyterian, Clover, 23 September 1820. HOA 26 1/2", WOA 15 3/8".

Figure 21. James Quinn tombstone, by Robert M. Crawford, Bethany Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church, York County, 24 June 1846. HOA 35 1/4", WOA 16".

By 1850 the standardization of cut marble stones had engulfed the rural markets. These mid-nineteenth century stones, like their eighteenth-century counterparts, emulated architecture, but they were far less interesting. Most resembled public monuments on private property, reflecting the impact of the Greek Revival and Gothic styles. Obelisk tombstones also came into vogue. These factors further isolated local carvers, as did the demand for raised tombstone tablets rather than traditional upright stones. These tablets

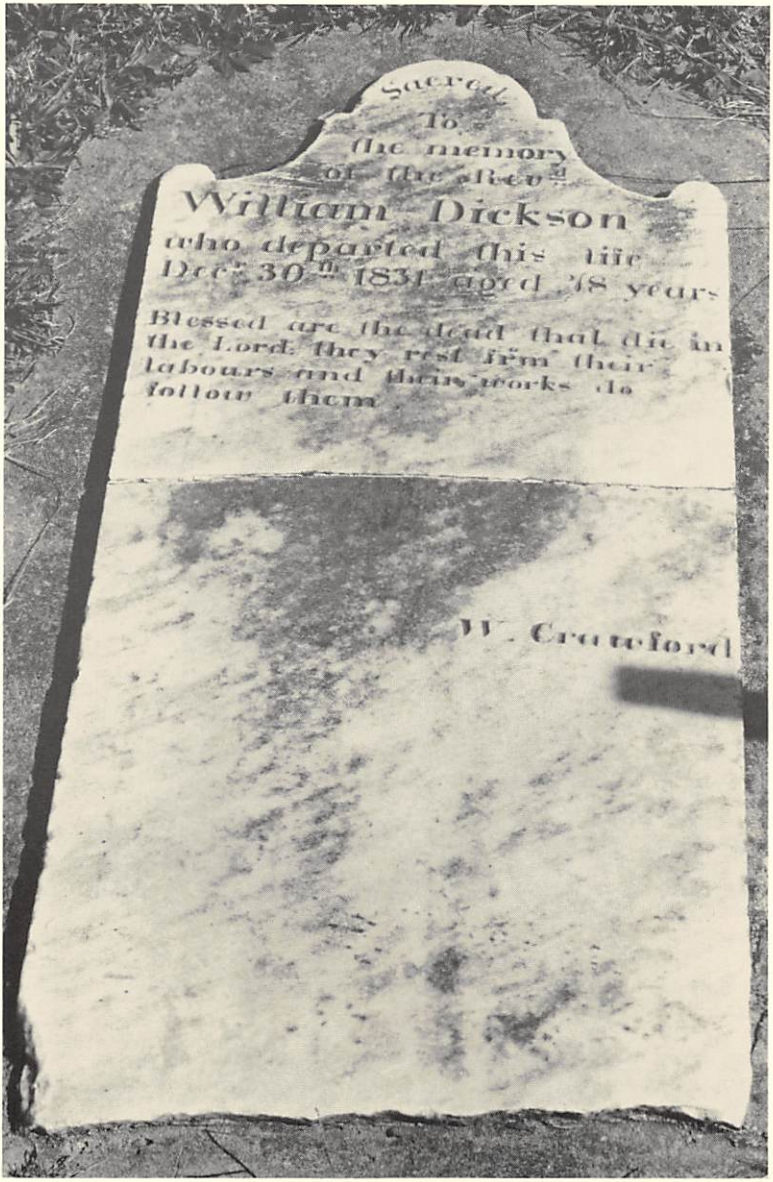

Figure 22. William Dickson tombstone, by William N. Crawford, Bethany Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church, York County, 30 Dec. 1831. HOA 49", WOA 22 1/4".

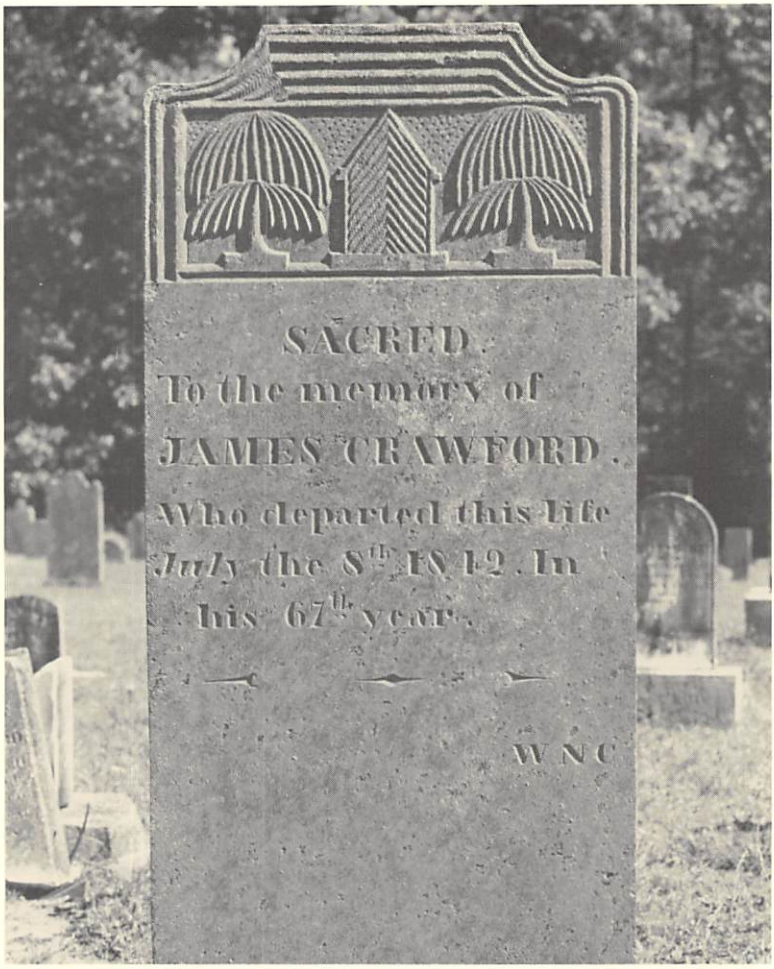

Figure 23. Detail of James Crawford tombstone, by William N. Crawford, Bethany Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church, York County, 8 July 1842. HOA 52 1/2", WOA 19 3/4".

began appearing before 1850; however, William L. McConnell's 1850 example was the first documented in York County estate records. It cost $47 and included the base and pillars provided by Richard Hare of Yorkville, a local brick contractor who had entered the monument business in 1846.[17] York County artisans did much of the engraving on these tablets, but with little of the area's earlier carvers' imagination or creativity, which had virtually vanished from the tombstone business by 1850.

Figure 24. Nathaniel P. Kennedy tombstone, signed by Richard Hare, Beersheba Presbyterian Church, York County, 14 May 1853. HOA 51", WOA 23 1/2".

Interestingly enough, more documented information about the York County tombstone business and other funeral trappings is available from written records in the two decades before 1850 than any other earlier period. In the years preceding the 1820s, probate papers rarely listed funeral costs as parts of estates settlements; in the 1840s records of such expenses were common. William Quinn's 1833 inventory was one of the first to have a separate entry for funeral expenses, stating that his coffin trimmings cost $5.[18] In 1836 an estate record included the following notation: "$25.00 was retained in hand for a tombstone and setting it up."[19] Such costs increased dramatically after 1840. In 1839 "burial cloths" for N. M. Folks's funeral were valued at $6.31 1/4.[20] In 1841 "coffin and trimmings" for Amos E. Moss cost $15, and an additional $9.41 was spent on his burial clothing. By 1845 funeral trimmings were being furnished to at least one estate for $20, and other expenses listed were: "digging the grave" at 62 cents, preaching the funeral at $5, and enclosing the grave for $5.12 1/2.[21]

Apparently, by the mid-nineteenth century, no expense was spared for a dignified and respectable funeral, and that included an impressive headstone decorated with urns, willows (fig. 24), and eternal flames. Local carvers either were reduced to mere engravers, like the Cavenys and the Crawfords with little, if any, input into the creation of these commercial monument, or they had left the business altogether like Mullinax. A representative entry from an 1842 York County probate record sums up the small role left to local carvers in the tombstone business at that time: Robert Caveny was paid $5.70 for "engraving the headstone," Boyne and McKenzie charged $11 for supplying the headstone, and Thomas H. Smith was paid $10 for the coffin.[22]

Wade Fairey is the Director of Historic Brattonsville in McConnells, South Carolina.

FOOTNOTES

1. Elizabeth F. Ellet, *Women in the American Revolution*, 4th ed. (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1975-6), 3:284.
2. Bobby S. Moss, *Roster of South Carolina Patriots in the American Revolution* (Baltimore, 1983), 525.
3. Probate Judge Records, File 21, Pk. 318, 1812, Chester County, South Carolina.
4. Ibid., File 33, Pk. 500, 1817.
5. Edward W. Clark, "The Bigham Carvers of the Carolina Piedmont: Stone Images of an Emerging Sense of American Identity," in R. E. Meyers, ed., *Cemetery and Grave Markers* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1988), 37.
6. Ibid., 32.
7. George C. Rogers, "Who is a South Carolinian?" *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 89, no. 1 (Jan. 1988): 7. Rogers cites Lacy Ford as the source of these statistics.
8. Avon Neal, "Gravestone Rubbing," *Americana Magazine* (Sept. 1974): 16.
9. Probate Records, File 35/1464, 1818, 336, York County, S. C.
10. Walker's tombstones were particularly popular in York County. Apparently he and his work were respected in Charleston, as well. When James Hall died in 1823, Walker was appointed executor of his estate and identified as a stone cutter. Wills, No. 36, 1818-26, 850, Charleston County.
11. Edwin Vearss and M. Adderstein, *Historic Structure Report: Houser House, Historical and Archaeological Data* (National Parks Service, 1974).
12. Probate Judge Records/ Wills, James Crawford, 1842, York County.
13. Probate Records, File 13/ 550, 1827, 167, York County.
14. Ibid, File 27/ 119, 1832, 1094.
15. Ibid., File 45/ 1119, 1830, 632.
16. *Yorkville Enquirer*, 21 Jan. 1858.
17. Probate Records, File 13/ 584, 1850, 53, York County.
18. Ibid., File 35/ 1527, 373.
19. Ibid., File 8/ 338, 1836.
20. Ibid., File 5/ 192, 1838, 305.
21. Ibid., File 3/ 118, 1845, 198.
22. Ibid., File 71/ 3503, 1942, 179.

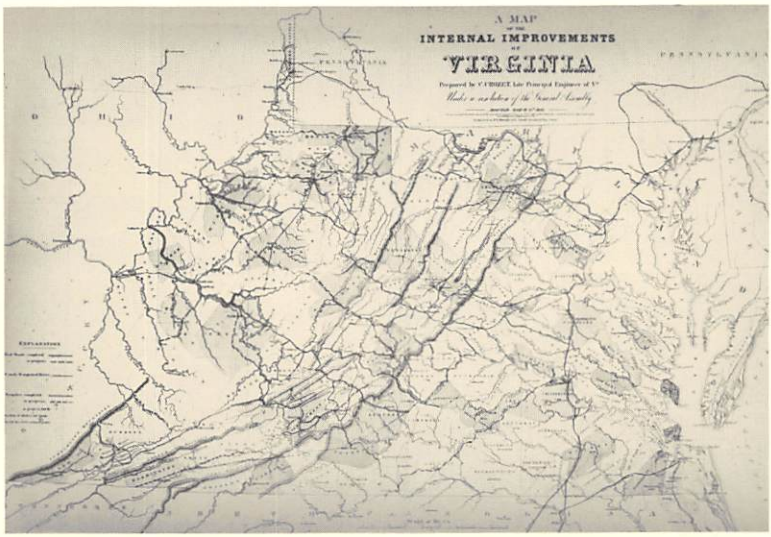

Figure 1. A Map of the Internal Improvements of Virginia, *by C. Crozet, engraved by P. S. DuVal, Philadelphia, 1848. Dimensions not recorded. Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, photograph by Wesley Stewart. Schoolgirl embroideries from 59 Virginia counties and cities have been located. Except as noted, the objects illustrated in this article are in the collection of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and the dimensions are of unframed pieces with height/length given first. Photographs by Hans Lorenz.*