



Sarah Allen, Bristol, Rhode Island, 1785.

Ann Parker / Avon Neal

GRAVESTONE CARVINGS IN EARLY NEW ENGLAND

*An introduction to the
exhibition of rubbings*

by

Avon Neal and Ann Parker

"Sarah Allen, Bristol, Rhode Island, 1785." There are 5 suns on 1 small stone. The central figure is trumpeting a song of resurrection as 2 tiny accompanists point Heavenwards and the legend reads, "Saints Arising." Gravestone rubbing by: Ann Parker and Avon Neal.

Just as the North Coast Indians carved totem poles, the Vikings cut runic inscriptions on massive monoliths, and the Romans, Egyptians, Chinese and Mayas decorated their tombs, so the American colonists followed a traditional pattern of commemorating their dead with stone-graven images.

Here, perhaps for the only time in the annals of early American design, the artist was free to create an object representing his feelings, beliefs and philosophy. In almost all other areas of Colo-

nial crafts, the first consideration was utilitarian; houses, tools, utensils, and furniture were quite often beautiful, but it was in gravestone carving that the artist in that rigid society achieved truly dramatic force.

Relatively unknown to the public, these carvings by anonymous stonecutters convey an astonishing variety of pictorial images, not only reflecting attitudes of their time, but reaching beyond them in vision and originality.

The rubbings provide graphic

renderings, faithful in size and texture, of the original stones. We work with a modified Oriental method, using heavy-bodied inks applied with silk pads which vary in shape and size to conform to a stone's peculiarities of texture and carving.

We work slowly, blending colors to get earth tones, going over every surface repeatedly as we build color and work the ink into our paper. Our aim is a graphically exciting reading, achieving a dimension beyond what is usually expected in this medium.

As artists, we first became interested in New England burying grounds simply because the carved headstones were so exciting. We found ourselves repeatedly delighted by new discoveries and distressed by the number of fine stones defaced or destroyed by vandalism, neglect, and the ravages of the elements. With the knowledge that every severe winter adds to their deterioration came the realization that these carvings must be recorded. We are convinced of their importance, not only as reminders of our na-

tional heritage, documenting and footnoting history, but as an invaluable record of symbolism and design created by craftsmen in early America.

This exhibition, in the Rotunda Shop of the Museum of History and Technology, continues through July 28th. There is also a sales-exhibit of American crafts on the Mall during the Festival.