

# The Lost Cemetery

*By Jamie Eves • December 5, 2022*

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Four years ago, several of us went searching for the Lost Cemetery of Windham, CT. The Hale Collection, a compendium of American cemeteries and gravestone inscriptions compiled during the 1930s as a New Deal public works project, lists a cemetery in the southern part of the Town of Windham, CT, which it calls the Barber-Brooks Cemetery. When I heard from local sources that the cemetery was abandoned, all grown up with brush and trees, and located in an abandoned neighborhood on the south side of the Shetucket River, I organized an expedition to look for it.

The Barber-Brooks Cemetery does not appear on any old maps. The Hale Collection says that it has four marked graves, and at least two unmarked graves. (From the geography of the cemetery, we concluded that there are probably more than two unmarked graves.) I heard that it was somewhere near the old Mansfield-Windham-Norwich Turnpike, a long-abandoned highway that in 1832 was the main road connecting Windham Center to Norwich. The old turnpike branched off what is now CT-32 at Williams Crossing in the Town of Franklin, heading northeast. It crossed into Windham only a few yards south of the Shetucket River. (There is a sliver of Windham on the south bank of the Shetucket, squeezed between the river and the Franklin line, now uninhabited and difficult to get to.) The old turnpike crossed the Shetucket on Manning Bridge, washed out long ago. (One source said the bridge had washed away in the 1938 hurricane, but it actually disappeared before that, as it shows up neither on a 1925 topo map nor on a 1934 aerial photo.) The bridge was there in 1865, according to another old map. One possibility is that the bridge was washed out by upstream flooding caused by the Scotland Hydroelectric Dam, constructed in 1908 (but rebuilt in 1937). The turnpike crossed the river on the Manning Bridge and then connected to what is now Jerusalem Road in Windham, by which it wound north to Windham Center village.

As the Manning Bridge no longer exists, we hiked up the old turnpike at Williams Crossing. The road was still passable, although rough and eroded in spots. Just before we reached the Shetucket, we turned east onto the remnants of another old, 19th-century dirt road that roughly paralleled the river. One source told us to follow this road, cross Cold Brook (which had washed out a former short bridge — fortunately we found a spot where we could leap the brook), and turn left at the next intersection. There was plenty of evidence that this area, now grown up with trees, had once been inhabited, open farmland. The several roads, the many stone walls, and the 1934 aerial photo all told the story. (A 1950s aerial showed the area all grown over with timber.) The cemetery was on the east side of this new road, only a few hundred yards from the intersection and a few hundred yards from the river, at the foot of a steep, wooded hill. An 1865 map of Franklin showed that the farm of J. Downer had been nearby (both the house and the cemetery were in Windham, just over the border from Franklin), but we could not find a cellar hole.

The well built stone walls surrounding the cemetery were still in good shape. The gravestones were still legible. From the shape of the surface (rises and indentations), it looked like there were a number of unmarked graves. I planned to do more research on the “lost cemetery” and the abandoned neighborhood around it, and try to find out more about the people who were buried there. Until then, I share these photos of our adventure.