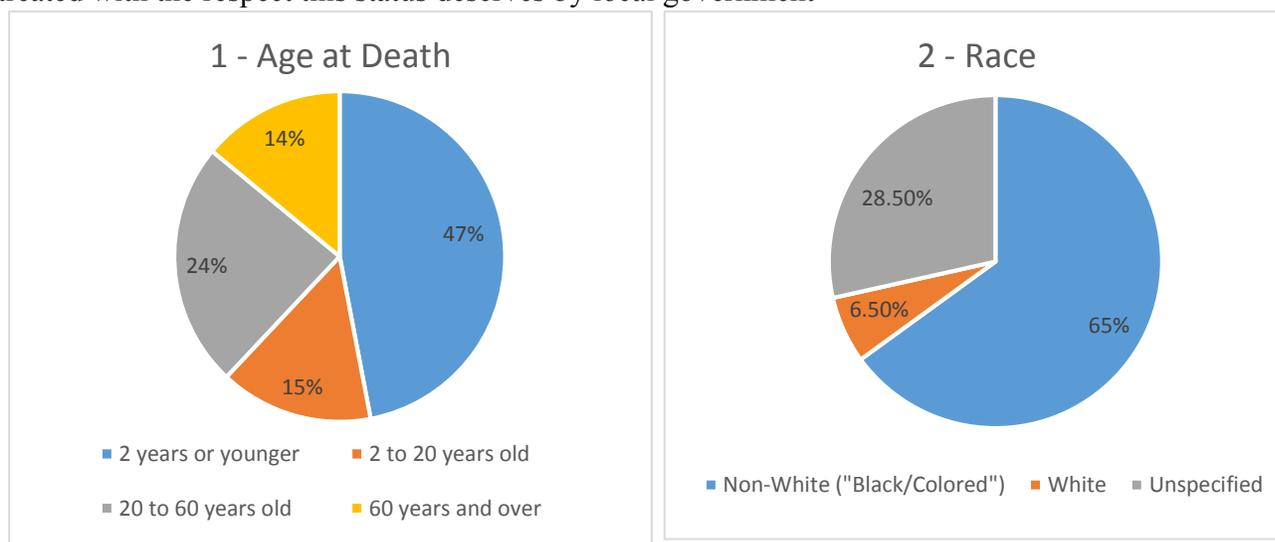


Prosopographical Analysis of Death Records Associated with the Old Towne of Flushing Burial Ground: 1881 to 1898

by Rudy Hartmann

While the Old Towne of Flushing Burial ground existed since at least 1840, death records for the Town of Flushing only survive between 1881 and 1898. After 1898 Queens was incorporated into New York City, the burial ground was ignored for several years during the changeover, and then a playground was built over it (as explained elsewhere). These surviving death records, from both the Town and Village of Flushing, are an exciting piece of evidence, particularly because only four surviving headstones with names on them survived to be described in the 1919 survey before the playground was built. The death records, meanwhile, list a full 290 persons who were buried at the site. Perhaps many hundreds more were buried there during times of peak use when epidemics flared up between 1840 and 1880.

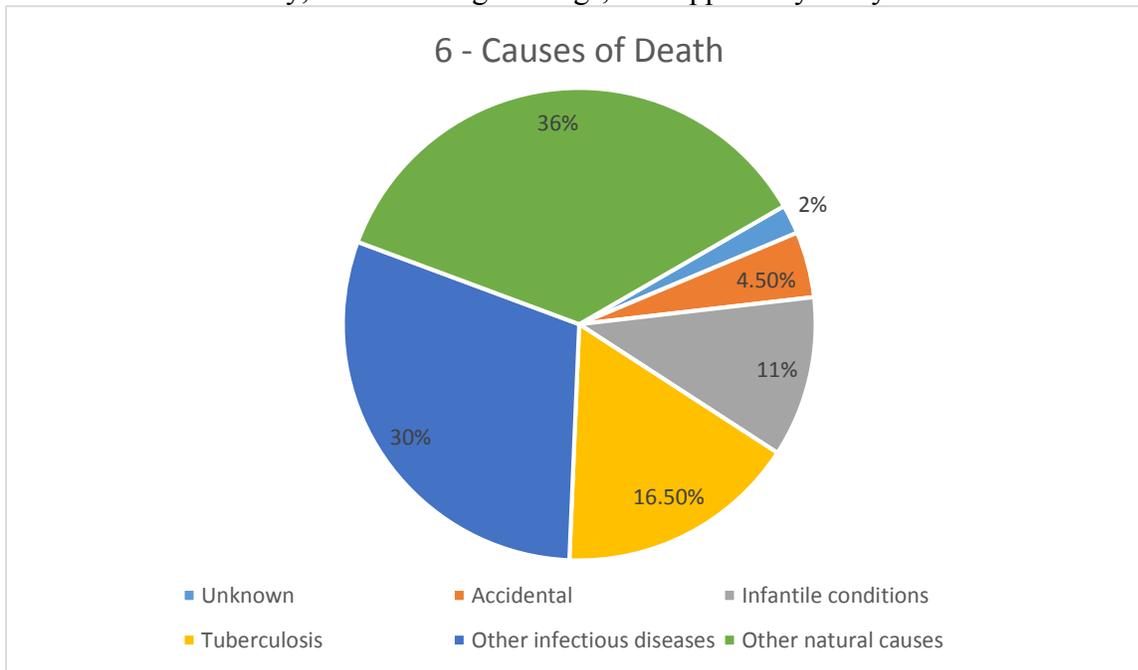
The death records, however, are not simply a list of names. They contain several small but key descriptions of the persons interred at the burial ground which provide rare glimpses into their identities and how they lived. This allows their lives to be studied using prosopography – that is, group biography. While one death record by itself is somewhat sparse, several hundred taken together can be studied for demographic patterns, even reconstructing several family trees. This information will help reinforce that the site is undeniably a historical cemetery, and should be treated with the respect this status deserves by local government



3 – Birthplace: Almost all 290 were from the Long Island/New York City area, predominantly Flushing itself, except for 28 persons. 14 were from Western Europe (Germany, Ireland). 1 was from Albany in upstate New York. 11 were from states in the former Confederacy (8 from Virginia). 2 were from the “West Indies” (one specified from Haiti).

4 – Marital age patterns: 36 married, of these the youngest died at 20. There is no way of discerning at what age the older ones married. 13 were 60 or older - roughly one third. 22 listed as widowed, of which 13 were over the age of 60. Altogether, 58 of the buried were married at some point, or 20%. Of these 58, 35 were listed as non-white, or about 12% of the total 290.

5 – Fertility rate is difficult to discern, but about a dozen different families interred at the site had 2 to 3 children, one or two families as many as 4 or 5. Epidemic diseases tended to wipe out entire households, however, so this may skew figures towards larger families who were struck down. Infant mortality, as seen in Age listings, was apparently fairly common.



Over one third died due to various infantile diseases or conditions, including stillbirth, malnutrition, rickets, etc. The next highest single cause of death, particularly for those above the age of 2 years, was tuberculosis – which by itself accounted for about one third of all deaths from infectious diseases, equal to half of the deaths caused by all of the others (such as cholera) put together. 47 died from Tuberculosis, 15 from Cholera, and 9 from Whooping Cough. There are multiple instances of tuberculosis wiping out entire households in a short time period. Influenza seems uncommon in this time period, only 4 persons are listed as dying from it.

“Other natural causes” includes a variety of conditions, of which heart disease was the most common, even in the young (17 persons). Also common were Nephritis/Bright’s Kidney Disease (11 persons), and Anemia (6 persons). Cancer was rarer, or at least rarely diagnosed – only 3 persons were listed as dying from cancer (one stomach, one ovarian, one uterine).

“Accidental” deaths consist of 13 disparate cases which were neither diseases nor natural causes. 6 unidentified bodies were found drowned off of Whitestone’s coast over the years. 2 babies were accidentally strangled, one man died of “Alcoholism”, one of “apparent suicide”, and one cause of death is listed simply as “murder” with no further description. One old woman froze to death in winter. Lastly, one man’s cause of death was given as “Accidental, being run over by the L.I.R.R.” – he fell onto the train tracks at Winfield Junction, which used to be the connection between the main and northern LIRR lines until it moved to nearby Woodside in 1929.

7 – Occupation: 60 out of the 290 persons listed as interred in the cemetery also had an entry made in the “occupation” column on their death records. This low number is unsurprising, given that 179 were under the age of 20, and another 60 over the age of 60: only 70 persons were 20 to 60 years of age. Some were simply left blank.

The most common occupation by far was simply “Laborer”, with isolated instances of a carpenter, mason, porter, riverboat pilot, etc. Among persons specifically identified as non-white (Black or Colored, the terms are used interchangeably), 31 are listed with occupations. Of these, 13 were listed simply as “Laborer”. The others included 2 waiters, a servant, a “farm worker”, a porter, 3 housewives, 2 housekeepers, a coachman, and 3 who worked on ships (a deck hand, a bayman, and a “chain carrier”). One man from Tennessee is apparently listed as an “M.D.” but it is unclear if this indicated he was a doctor (other persons in the death records buried elsewhere are more often just listed as “doctor”). Notably, one 26 year old man (William [Boney]) listed as immigrating to Flushing from Haiti is stated to be a “printer”, and thus was a skilled tradesman.

The most in-depth information concerns the few non-white persons whose occupation was not listed as simply “Laborer” or “Farm Worker”, but as “Farmer” – apparently owning their own farmland. Only “Farmers” are listed as non-white: James Bunn (Town list # 2598, who was born in Stony Brook), George Ames (who immigrated from Virginia), and William Horton (from Brownsville, L.I.). Charles Hicks, a neighbor of James Bunn’s, is also listed as a “Farmer” and was probably also non-white: Bunn’s daughter Julia later married Hicks’s son Valentine, and their children are listed as black (the Hicks name was very common, however, so it is difficult to discern more about his background). Both James Bunn and Charles Hicks are listed as living in the “Black Stump” neighborhood – part of Fresh Meadows. It began as a relatively recently created road made by Benedict Arnold during the Revolutionary War, to connect Flushing and Hempstead to the east. New farms were then radiated out from the road during the next 100 years. It is possible that several reasonably well-to-do independent black farmers moved to this newly opened area. The fact that James Bunn is listed not simply as a “Laborer” but a “Farmer”, implying that he owned his own farm, matches the evidence that his family could actually afford a stone grave marker at the cemetery, James’s being one of only four.

8 – Family trees: Several basic family trees can be reconstructed from the death records, specifically for the Jarvis, Franklin, Ames, and Bunn families

- Isabella Jarvis, daughter of Charles and Georgina Smith, married Theodore Jarvis. They had four children also buried at the site with Isabella: Clancey, Rubinetta, Theodore, and Florence.
- Benjamin Franklyn, who apparently moved to Boston from the West Indies, and from there to Flushing, was the son of Emmanuel and Patricia. He and his wife Naomie had four children buried at the site: William, Malone, and two babies named Franklin.
- George Ames was the son of Mark and Ada Ames. George and his wife Margaret had a son named Samuel, who was also later buried in the cemetery.
- The Bunn family tree is the most detailed that can be reconstructed. James Bunn, who is buried in the cemetery, had at least two children with his wife Marie: George and Julia, both of whom are buried in the cemetery as well. George and James both died of tuberculosis, Julia of typhoid fever. Julia married Valentine Hicks, and three of their small children are buried at the site as well: Clara, Ida, and Valentine. Thus three generations of this family are confirmed to have their remains laid in this cemetery.