

Old Delhi Yarn Nov 2025

## Wandering Gravestones

More than once in my 50 years of experience with gravestones and cemeteries, someone has told me they discovered an abandoned gravestone. The first one for me was a Coffin Man gravestone. If you're not familiar with Coffin Man and the Coffin Group of gravestone carvers and would like to know more, please email me at [historian@villageofdelhi.com](mailto:historian@villageofdelhi.com).

Around 1996 I received a call from the director of DCHA, Liz Callahan, telling me someone had found an intact gravestone on the floor of their barn. People usually assume either the gravestone was stolen or someone was buried in a very inappropriate place. I went to see the gravestone and, to my surprise and delight, it was a Coffin Man stone, meaning it was carved by the itinerant gravestone carver now known as Coffin Man. The gravestone belonged to George Fisher, a Hessian soldier in the Revolutionary War, and one of the first settlers of Delhi in 1785. Mary Dexter, from Cortland, NY, named the carver 'Coffin Man' by the style of his carving and his use of a small coffin, or coffins, carved at the bottom of a gravestone. Mary was a tireless researcher in the field of itinerant gravestone carver identification and discovered several gravestones around Delhi. George Fisher was originally buried in Old Delhi Burying Ground but reinterred in Woodland Cemetery with a Victorian era

gravestone. The beautiful, hand crafted gravestone was removed and discarded on the floor of a barn.

Gravestones are unique in the world of art history because the artwork was contemporary and, for the most part, unsigned. Each carver, like each person, has a unique style of writing. Coffin Man frequently, but not always, carved a small upright coffin toward the bottom of the gravestone, sometimes with a small willow tree bending over the coffin. He also carved the number coffins for the number of bodies buried in the grave, frequently a woman with her child or children. Coffin Man worked in the Delhi area from 1800-1820.

That period was the late American Colonial era, shortly after the first Federal census in 1790, the time of settlement in upstate New York. When America was organized the Founder's wanted to show the world that the new Americans had sophisticated ideals. To that end they adopted Greco-Roman symbols in both memorial art and in architecture including decorative elements of interior design. The Willow and Urn are most familiar on gravestones. The Willow represents rebirth and the Urn represents earthly remains. Coffin Man was a primitive carver and used post Elizabethan wording like "Here lies the Body of", or in a later period simply "Here lies". In the tympanum of the gravestone, which is the arch space above the inscription, he carved the Willow and Urn or sometimes a stylized Urn. He used popular carving techniques, like walking the chisel, to create a zigzag

pattern, and stippling, a pattern of tiny dots, creating a frame around the name and dates of the inscription. Coffin Man traveled along the turnpikes around Delhi with 2 apprentices, thought to be family members, possibly son and grandson. Gravestone carving was a family business and apprenticeship was an accepted way to learn a trade. There's one Coffin Man gravestone still marking a grave in Delhi. All Coffin Group work in this area is found along turnpikes.

Robert Bates, Flats Cemetery, Delhi, NY.

Here lies Robert  
Bates Died August  
24 1818 AEt 53 y

