

The Oldest Stones: Mary and George Vinson

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There always seem to be mysteries in a churchyard. If St. Mary's Church was not established until the 1840s, why are there two tombstones from 1797 and 1816? The graves of Mary Lawton Vinson and her son George sit close by the entrance to the church. How did they get there?

Did they come with the land that was donated to the church by Sarah Gibbs in 1849? We know that the St. Mary property came to Sarah Gibbs through the purchase of the land from Rouse Potter and other Potter heirs 1844. At one time all burials were in family plots on their farms. Portsmouth citizens are inventorying all these historic family plots today. Unlike Newport, which was more of an urban area, Portsmouth citizens did not adopt large cemeteries until the mid 19th century.

We can trace the deeds back from the Potters to Mary's husband, James Vinson. Mary's maiden name gives us a clue to follow. Mary was part of the Lawton family, one of Portsmouth's founding families. The Edward West Land Grant Maps show us that a "Daniel Lawton" had a grant for property that seems to be located just where St. Mary's is today. The Land Evidence records show that James bought the land from George Lawton in 1791. Was George a relative of Mary's? Perhaps. They did name one of their sons "George Lawton Vinson." The records transferring the property from George Lawton Vinson's estate, to the McLeod family and then to the Potter family call the parcel "Vinson Farm" – about 80 acres of land.

Was the Vinson family plot located where St. Mary's Churchyard is today? The database of Rhode Island historical cemeteries give us another clue. George H. Richardson recorded tombstone inscriptions around 1892. He records both the inscriptions for Mary Lawton Vinson and George Lawton Vinson in an earlier burial ground against the stonewall to the south of the parsonage. There were seven other unmarked stones there. It appears that some time after this recording, these two stones were moved to the proper St. Mary's Churchyard.

Who was Mary Lawton Vinson? The inscription on her stone gives us some clues. "Sacred to the Memory of Mary Lawton Vinson wife of Mr. James Vinson who died Feb.

17th 1797 in the 26th year of her age. She was in faith unshaken and in virtue unfeigned.” The stone was carved by “Henry Bull.”

Mary was born around 1772. A Newport Mercury article on the death of her husband



James, tells us that he was a merchant. James and Mary had two sons and the companion stone was for George Lawton Vinson, one of those sons. James Vinson had remarried when he died aboard ship in 1800 as he and his family were traveling from Charlestown to Boston. At this time we don't have any more information.

