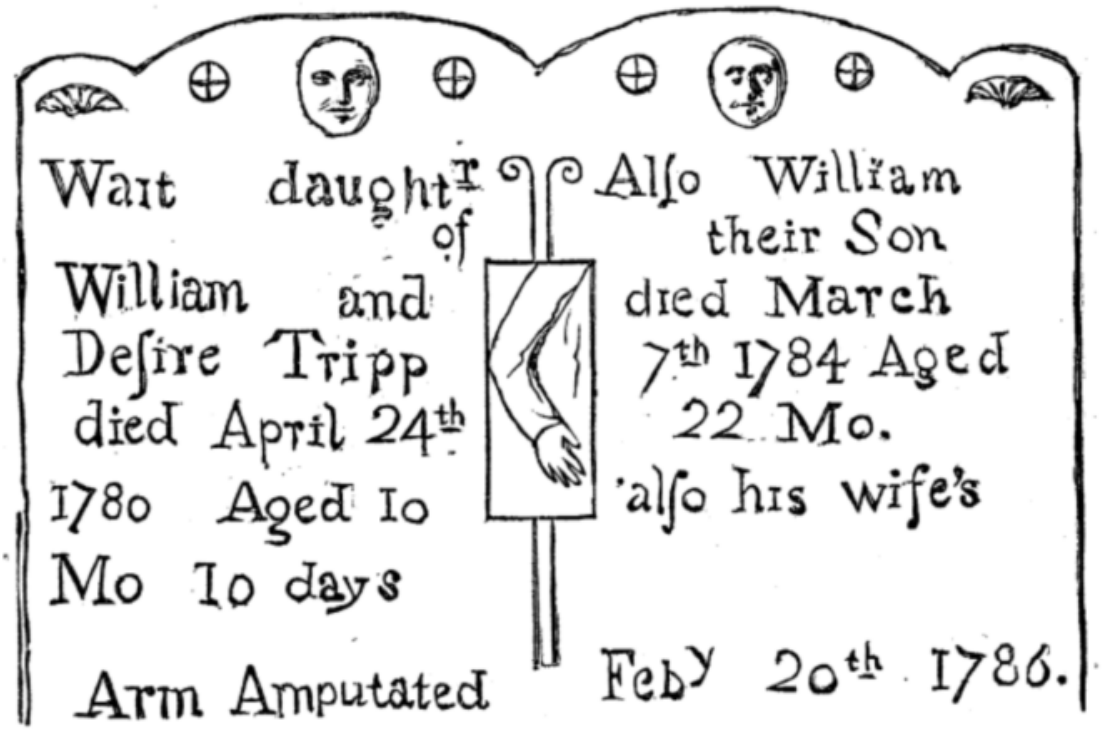
Object Lesson: Desire Tripp and Her Arm's Gravestone



Equipped with a map of Newport, Rhode Island's, famed Common Burying Ground in one hand and a camera in the other, I climbed the hill toward Desire Tripp's arm's gravestone. That's right: I was looking for a 1786 gravestone that commemorated a woman's amputated arm. I was told to keep an eye out for it among a row of Tripp family stones, but the stone—which was much more diminutive than I had anticipated—proved difficult to locate among the sea of slate slabs (fig. 1). As noontime approached I began to get hungry. I was considering trying again the next day when suddenly, the arm came into view (fig. 2). After reading the inscription that surrounds the arm—"WAIT daught./of/WILLIAM and/DESIRE TRIPP/died April 24/1780 Aged 10/Mo 10 days," and, "Also WILLIAM/their Son/Died March/17th 1784 Aged/22 Mo/Also his Wifes/Arm Amputated Feb 20 1786″—I plopped down onto the grass and began sketching the gravestone. I am not a skilled artist, but the exercise helps me wrap my mind around the objects I study (fig. 3). On that afternoon in May 2011, though, the record of the material world yielded more questions than answers. Who was Desire Tripp? Why was her arm amputated? Why did she bury it? What does the gravestone mean? These questions drove my research in the summer of 2011 as a fellow in historical interpretation at the Newport Historical Society. Ultimately, all but the most basic facts about Desire Tripp's life remained elusive. This makes Desire's arm's unusual gravestone all the more important: it provides a unique portal into her life through which we can investigate how

she dealt with impairment (or loss of a physical function of the body due to an event such as an amputation), death, and memory in late eighteenth-century Newport.

But it also figured into late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Newporters' interpretations of disability in everyday life. Historical memory, or how observers have interpreted and remembered history and the legacy of those interpretations, played a significant role in my wrestling with the gravestone's meaning. These memories do not always reinforce one another; often, they do not represent the "original" meaning (assuming we can figure that out) of a specific historical event or object such as the arm's gravestone. Like me, the observers whose interpretations I traced wrangled with the stone's unique attributes, such as the arm's realistic representation and the unusual coupling of a traditional memorial for two children with a memorial for an arm. The gravestone surely served as a memorial for Desire Tripp and her family, but, as I came to learn in the course of my research, it also served as a site of local memory for individuals who never knew the family personally.

A curiosity since at least the mid-nineteenth century, the gravestone commemorates William and Desire Tripp's two deceased babies, who died in 1780 and 1784, and Desire's arm, which a local physician amputated in 1786. What makes the stone so unusual is the fact that the carver to whom the stone's decoration is attributed—John Bull—carved a realistic representation of Desire's arm, oriented lengthwise, into the center of the stone (fig. 4).

What I uncovered about Desire Tripp and her family was not limited to the biographical details I found on the stone itself. Yet as is so often the case with early American women, what we can unearth about them comes from records associated with their male kin. Even the gravestone refers to Desire in reference to William. Legal documents such as deeds, newspapers, and the Tripp family gravestones indicate that Desire Tripp married the once-widowed William, a tanner, between 1770 (the year William's first wife Betsy *née* Robinson died) and 1780 (the year Desire's first child Wait was born). Records from the Second Congregational Church at the Newport Historical Society document William's active church membership through 1799. When he was not attending church, William Tripp's work life as a tanner likely consumed much time and energy. Tanning and currying, notoriously malodorous crafts, required substantial space and water. The Tripps' home and work site—on the outer limits of late eighteenth-century Newport—would have provided both of those assets. An 1802 real estate advertisement published in the *Newport Mercury* included a detailed description of the Tripp property:

> LARGE and commodious Dwelling House, with an excellent Tan-Yard, formerly occupied by William Tripp., situated in the centre, and on the west side of Broad-street, containing about half an acre of land, fronting three public streets, together with a Currying-house [where tanned hides were processed], and all the Out-houses thereunto

> belonging, which are many, and calculated for every conveniencey. The House has a good shop in the front, a paved yard, and an excellent well of water, which is never dry. The house will be sold separate from the tan-yard, or together, as may best suit the purchasers.

Additional details about the Tripps' Newport lives remain scarce. We can only imagine the personal stamp Desire put on this busy household and shop, particularly while William was out serving as the town corder of bark or as a state representative of Newport, as newspapers indicate that he did in the late eighteenth century.

1. The Common Burying Ground at Newport, Rhode Island, summer, 2011. Courtesy of the author.

These details provide hints about the Tripps' day-to-day lives. The arm's gravestone—nestled among a variety of stones at the Common Burying Ground that have many stories to tell—is part of their family history also. Many individuals entering Newport today by car pass by the city's oldest public graveyard, the Common Burying Ground on Farewell Street. Laid out in 1665, today the Common Burying Ground includes marked graves for nearly 8,000 individuals—including the Tripps—and one amputated arm. Richard M. Bayles, the antiquarian responsible for the encyclopedic 1888 *History of Newport County*, described the "Common Ground" as a place where one may visit "the graves of many of the early governors of the colony, that of a signer of the Declaration of Independence, the graves of our early merchants and clerical worthies" and "old sea captains." But there is more to these sacred grounds than clerics and captains. Grave markers such as that for Desire Tripp's arm contribute to our historical memory as it relates to the lives of ordinary Americans, particularly when little documentary evidence survives to help tell those stories. Further, all surviving grave markers are exceptional. It is difficult to estimate how many memorials were never erected due to an individual's lack of funds or marginal social status, let alone how many have disappeared over time.

The arm engraving aside, Desire's arm's gravestone is not unusual. Most late eighteenth-century New Englanders commemorated the dead using grave markers in

a variety of shapes and sizes. Wealthier individuals sometimes invested in table stones, which were oriented parallel to the ground, were several feet long, and were sometimes elevated. Most individuals chose upright grave markers perpendicular to the ground like the one that commemorates Desire Tripp's arm and her two babies. Many early Newport gravestones are slate; the resource was local, and slate can be split and worked easily into gravestones or roofing shingles. Elsewhere in New England, stonecutters made gravestones from fieldstone, sandstone, granite, or marble. Gravestone prices in late eighteenth-century New England ranged from about £1 to £10. No known documentation survives for the sale and production of the arm's grave marker or the carving. The gravestone that commemorates Desire's arm is among the smaller Common Burying Ground stones, suggesting it might have cost far less than £10. On the other hand, its unusual carving may have added to the stone's cost.

2a.Front surface of Desire Tripp's arm's gravestone, Common Burying Ground at Newport, Rhode Island. At left, left side stone reads: "WAIT daught./of/WILLIAM and /DESIRE TRIPP/died April 24/1780 Aged 10/Mo 10 days." Right side and bottom stone reads: "Also WILLIAM/their Son/Died March/17th 1784 Aged/22 Mo/Also his Wifes/Arm Amputated Feb 20 1786." Overall dimensions: 22″ H x 20.5″ L. Courtesy of the author.

2b. Back surface of Desire Tripp's arm's gravestone, Common Burying Ground at Newport, Rhode Island. Courtesy of the author.

Because Desire's arm's stone was and is so unusual, I was not surprised to be one of many who had inquired after Desire and her arm. The Newport Historical Society, where I was based that summer, boasts, among other treasures, a collection of genealogical inquires arranged by surname. One Tripp card recorded a 1917 *Newport Mercury* reader's inquiry:

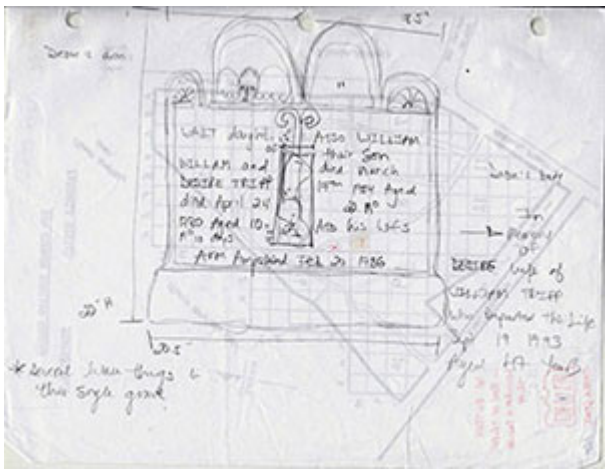
> 9036. TRIPP.—Who was Desire Tripp Wife of William, of Newport, R.I.? A tombstone in the old cemetery records the death of their daughter Wait, died April 24, 1780, aged 10 months and 10 days; also William their son died March 7th, 1784, aged 22 mo., also his wife's arm amputated Feb. 20th, 1786.—M.D.

Scholars have attributed the arm stone's carving to John Bull (1734-1808), a Newport carver whose work can be found as far afield as North Carolina. Bull apprenticed with John Stevens, another stoneworker operating in Newport, who ran what is known today as the John Stevens Shop where Nicholas Benson, a highly regarded contemporary artisan, practices his craft today (fig. 5). (The shop has been operating continuously since it was founded in 1705; many consider it to be the oldest continuously run artisan's shop in the United States.) Without Bull's stone carving business records or the Tripps' family accounts, we can only speculate on the sequence in which the carver executed the text and designs on the arm's stone. The stone also includes a "practice" engraving of the arm on the upper surface of the stone under ground. Practice engravings are not unusual, and likely served a variety of functions. The carver tried out a new design (such as a realistic rendering of an arm) without wasting materials, for instance, and the customer previewed the finished product. I had heard that the arm's stone featured a practice engraving, and so I confirmed it for myself by carefully excavating the stone (and subsequently putting it back safely and securely) one misty summer morning. In the course of viewing the practice engraving, I had hoped that I might find other clues to the stone's history such as the stone carver's initials or the cost of the stone, but to no avail (fig. 6).

Visual depictions (such as paintings) of women with prosthetic or amputated limbs were particularly unusual through the nineteenth century, and the realistic depiction of Desire's arm on the gravestone likely stood out among the sea of stylized "soul effigies." More typical gravestone designs included what are known today as "winged effigy" or "frontal moon" motifs adorning the upper portion of a stone's façade. Other popular contemporaneous motifs included winged skulls or death heads, winged faces, cherub or soul effigies, crests and coats of arms, and portraits. Carvers likely derived inspiration for standard imagery from contemporaneous print sources and other everyday objects such as furniture. In the case of Desire Tripp, Desire's identity as an amputee

inspired the addition of the arm to this stone.

But under what circumstances did Desire become an amputee? After documenting the gravestone, scanning Newport newspapers multiple times (the only mention of Desire is her death in 1793), paging through Newport Congregational minister Ezra Stiles' famously detailed diary, following every lead the NHS genealogy file presented, and noting other amputations recorded in physicians' daybooks, I had yet to find the answer to the question: Who amputated Desire Tripp's arm and why?



3. Sketch of Desire Tripp arm stone, by Nicole Belolan, May 2011. Sketch and photograph courtesy of the author.

4. Arm detail of Desire Tripp arm stone. Overall dimensions of arm carved within vertically oriented rectangular cartouche: 4.5″H x 1.5″L. Courtesy of the author.

After exhausting the local resources at NHS, I headed to the Rhode Island Historical Society to look through the Doctor Isaac Senter papers (MSS 165), hoping that a written or printed record of this event might have survived*somewhere* that would provide more information about Desire and her arm. This quest was a long shot, but I had good reasons for targeting Senter. He was a physician and surgeon who attended the Tripps' church and who practiced in Newport in the 1780s. As I leafed through Senter's 1786 daybook, past several entries for William Tripp in early 1786, my heart raced. Among the illegible

pharmaceutical concoctions and costs for services, I came upon the notation:

> "Trip Wm.to/Amputating wives arm."

I did my best to mask my excitement from the subdued researchers and reading room staff, carefully marked the page, and continued to look for more entries related to the Tripp family. But the pulse of victory subsided as I ruminated over the fact that the account book did not reveal why Senter amputated the arm. Even though Senter's record of the amputation was brief, it was more detailed than many of his other entries listing only the patient's name, a fee, and some medicines. Senter's daybook includes a price list for common procedures at the front, so I know that the £6 fee the Tripps incurred was standard for amputations. This fee would have been comparable to a month's wages for an artisan in a late eighteenth-century urban setting such as Newport. (The only other service Senter priced at £6 was for treating venereal disease.) An undated receipt tucked into the daybook near the amputation entry indicated that Tripp paid off part of his debt to Senter with potatoes, but there is no way to determine whether this payment went toward the amputation procedure. According to Senter's records, by the time William and his third wife Hannah Bennett moved to Vermont (where Tripp owned land) in the late 1790s, William had paid Senter in full for the debts he and his family had incurred over the years.

The records surrounding the Tripp family's medical treatment and Desire's amputation do not indicate why Senter, a respected physician who honed his surgical skills in the army, amputated Desire Tripp's arm in 1786. Because census records indicated that about a dozen individuals lived within the Tripp household that year, it is impossible to determine who within William's household received Senter's treatments, all of which were billed to William. We *do* know that, like today, eighteenth-century physicians amputated limbs for two primary reasons: illness or trauma. In addition, lower extremity (or leg) amputations outnumbered upper extremity (or arm amputations) four to one, and women were less likely to undergo amputation than men. For any late eighteenth-century woman, this procedure was unusual.

5. The John Stevens Shop, 29 Thames Street, Newport, Rhode Island. Courtesy of the author.

Desire likely shared many experiences with other amputees. Once the surgical wound healed, for instance, she would have been forced to adjust to a new physical relationship with the world. Desire may have used a prosthetic device—a technology that dates back to the ancient Egyptians. Yet the gravestone in the Common Burying Ground gives us a glimpse into how Desire

Tripp responded in a unique way to everyday life with one arm. Like her two children whose lives are also commemorated on the gravestone, Desire's arm could not be replaced. Wait, William, and the arm could only be remembered.

As unusual as the practice of burying a limb and putting its image on a gravestone struck me, I learned that Desire was not alone in burying her limb. Burying body parts dates back centuries and crosses cultures. No other contemporaneous gravestone of which I am aware features a similar depiction of an amputated limb, but some nineteenth-century gravestones that commemorate limbs have been made. One New Hampshire man remembered his amputated limb on a gravestone (sans a leg likeness) in Washington Village. Perhaps the best known buried limb in America belonged to Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson (1824-1863), a Confederate Civil War general. A grave marker erected in the cemetery at Ellwood Manor near Chancellorsville, Virginia, in 1903 commemorates the arm, which a surgeon amputated after the 1863 Battle of Chancellorsville. There is an ongoing debate as to the arm's precise interment location.

Why bury a limb? Like the men cited above, Desire Tripp may have opted to bury her arm for any number of reasons associated with religion and practicality. By burying her limb, Desire was probably following a common Christian belief that keeping one's body intact or in one place after death guaranteed resurrection and salvation. Further, according to folklorists, some individuals who experienced the (often painful) sensation that their missing limb was still present—which physicians labeled phantom limb syndrome in 1871—noted that burying the limb carefully in a conventional grave dissipated discomfort. More practically, burying the limb contained its natural disintegration process. We can only be certain that Desire Tripp—or more specifically, her husband, as it is *his*wife's arm on the stone—made a deliberate choice to mark the occasion of her arm's amputation on the same slate slab as the deaths of their two children. As fascinating as it might be to learn why Isaac Senter amputated Desire Tripp's arm, the gravestone itself conveys more cultural meaning about the past. No matter what Desire's and William's reasons for commemorating Desire's amputation, by making it a part of her eternal identity, engraved in slate, Desire was successful in ensuring that its memory lived on alongside that of her family. The arm's stone may leave us with more questions than answers, but it does suggest that Desire and William cared as much about remembering their children as remembering Desire's arm.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Desire Tripp's arm's gravestone had become a medical curiosity and a Newport oddity. The Civil War resulted in maimed male veterans becoming increasingly common presences in family life, on the street, and in popular print. Thus the gravestone may have attracted the heightened attention of observers as it became more relevant to their own lives. By this era, impairments of all kinds were more likely to be viewed as medical problems or disabilities requiring a cure rather than physical changes requiring minimal accommodation (or commemoration) in everyday life. Prosthetic innovation burgeoned due to the impairments sustained in the Civil War and an increase in industrial accidents in the late nineteenth century. It is possible that many

Americans who encountered Desire's arm's eighteenth-century gravestone were struck by a simple memorial for an amputation; they may have been more accustomed to nineteenth-century prosthetics, connected to the amputee's body, which were intended to restore functionality to a limb or other body part. We do not know if Desire Tripp used a prosthetic arm. We only know that she remembered the arm on a gravestone. For a generation that valued "curing" amputations, they may have deemed this remembrance futile without considering the non-bodily function it might have served for Desire. Perhaps for these late nineteenth-century observers, what was common sense to Desire Tripp was unusual to them. Whatever their motivations behind investigating and remembering the stone in their own way, these curious souls recorded their fascination with the gravestone in national magazines and in personal scrapbooks.

Following in the footsteps of eighteenth-century Newporters such as the Reverend John Conner and Ezra Stiles, just as I did recently, turn-of-the-twentieth-century locals visited graveyards where they sketched gravestones and recorded inscriptions. Inspired by publications such as *Harper's*and graveyard guides, locals and visitors alike made pilgrimages to Desire's arm's stone. Even today, the stone attracts real and virtual tourists, as two blogs featured the arm's stone in recent years.

6a. Overall Desire Tripp arm stone out of the ground. Courtesy of the author.

6b. “Practice engraving” of the arm on the upper surface of the underground portion of the stone. Courtesy of the author.

Contemporary and late nineteenth-century observers shared a fascination with the stone. In November, 1869, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine’s* “Editor’s Drawer” featured a rendering of the gravestone (fig. 7). (Some artistic liberty was taken with this sketch, as the arm appears to be wearing a sleeve.) The editor commented on the medical procedure the stone evoked, on the “perfect” quality of the Newport correspondent’s rendering, and on the gravestone’s merit as a work of art, but he left readers to speculate further on the history and meaning behind the grave. The same image was published in an 1884 issue of *The Newport Historical Magazine* where editors reinforced the arm’s stone’s popularity among visitors. Into the twentieth century, antiquarians continued to find the gravestone compelling. George H. Richardson included the arm’s gravestone in his turn-of-the-twentieth-century scrapbook, which is in the NHS’s collections, and antiquarian Robert S. Franklin recorded the stone with this photograph in a 1911 public presentation at the Newport Historical Society, the proceedings of which were published in a *Special Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society* (1913) (fig. 8).

Thus by the mid-nineteenth century, observers recognized Desire’s arm’s stone as a medical and artistic curiosity, an unusual feature on Newport’s vernacular landscape of memory. This is not surprising. Whenever I describe the gravestone to people, many grimace. One reason may be because they imagine an arm amputation without modern painkillers. (If all went well, Desire’s amputation would have taken about six minutes.) They may also find the gravestone as unusual as I did because we have become accustomed to blending such physical impairments into our lives so as to render them virtually invisible. Desire and ordinary eighteenth-century women like her often lacked the means or the need to hide impairments in everyday life. Far from rendering it invisible, Desire Tripp designated her physical impairment public and prominent in an enduring medium; it became part of a graven family portrait. Amputations were not uncommon, but Desire’s reaction to hers was.

Desire Tripp’s arm’s stone is unique, and commemorating the arm in stone was a cultural decision distinct from the medical decision to amputate the arm. Yet it evokes the fact that hundreds or perhaps thousands of Desire’s contemporaries who also transcended the initial illness or trauma that necessitated an amputation found ways to continue with their everyday lives. Desire’s gravestone embodies mainstream eighteenth-century ideas about bodies, dying, and death; it also suggests that perhaps Desire wanted to ensure that her amputation would be commemorated as prominently as clerics, captains, and soldiers—or simply alongside her children. Desire’s arm’s stone serves as a material reminder of death’s certainty. It suggests that Desire’s arm—like her dead children—could not be replaced. The stone interests me because of that which it excludes, Desire’s body and soul, but also because of that which it evokes. Desire’s stone captures how one ordinary Newport woman remembered an important event in her life, an event that shaped her identity until her death

in 1793 and that continues to capture our interest today.

Acknowledgements

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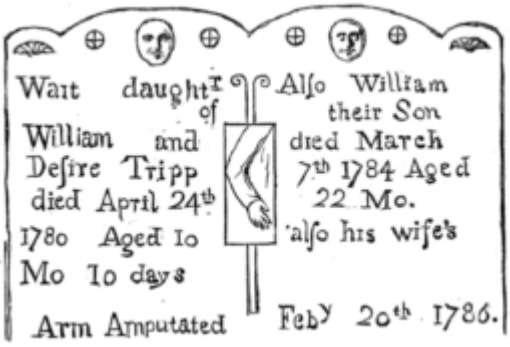

7. "Editor's Drawer" detail, November 1869, Harper's New Monthly Magazine, p. 931. Courtesy of the Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection, Ithaca, New York.

8. Detail from Special Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society (1913), page 13. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Further Reading

The classic text on death in early America is Margaret Coffin, *Death in Early America: The History And Folklore Of Customs And Superstitions Of Early Medicine, Funerals, Burials, And Mourning* (Nashville, 1976). For more recent interpretations of death and dying in early America, see Nancy Isenberg and

Andrew Burnstein, eds., *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2003) and Eric R. Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* (Philadelphia, 2010).

You can view images of northeastern U.S. gravestones (including stones in Newport) online through the Farber Gravestone Collection, an American Antiquarian Society database. For more information on identifying Common Burying Ground interments and associated religious affiliations, see the Newport Historical Society's Common Burying Ground mapping project Website. The popular Website www.findagrave.com also offers a searchable database of user contributed gravestone images and data from across the country. Of course, nothing beats a thoughtful stroll through one of the many historic burying grounds and cemeteries throughout the country.

To read more about how scholars have interpreted the meaning of things in early New England, see Robert Blair St. George,*Conversing by Signs: Poetics of Implication in Colonial New England Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1998). For more on gravestones in Newport, R.I., see Vincent F. Luti, *Mallet & Chisel: Gravestone Carvers of Newport, Rhode Island, in the Eighteenth Century* (Boston, 2002). The two blogs that have featured this gravestone include Caitlin Hopkins, "Desire Tripp's Amputated Arm," *Vast Public Indifference*, October 20, 2008, and Chris Quiqley, "Arms and legs," *Quigley's Cabinet*, June 8, 2009. The classic work on New England stone carving is Allen I. Ludwig,*Graven Images: New England Stonecarving and its Symbols, 1650-1815* (Middleton, Conn., 1966).

The scholarship on disability and the social history of medicine in America is a burgeoning field. A recent narrative of disability in America from the fifteenth century through today is Kim E. Nielsen's *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston, 2012). See also Robert Bogdan's new book on disability in photographs and movies: *Picturing Disability: Beggar, Citizen, Freak, and other Photographic Rhetoric* (Syracuse, 2012). A foundational anthology on the "new" disability history is Paul K. Longmore's and Lauri Umansky's *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York, 2001). A recent article by Thomas A. Foster on Gouverneur Morris's mobility impairment addresses cultural meanings of disability in early America: Thomas A. Foster, "Recovering Washington's Body-Double: Disability and Manliness in the Life and Legacy of a Founding Father," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32:1 (2012). David M. Turner's book *Disability in Eighteenth-century England: Imagining Physical Impairment* (New York, 2012), sheds light on the eighteenth-century English disability history story. For the most comprehensive compilation of prosthetics and lived experience, see Katherine Ott and David Serlin, eds., *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics* (New York, 2002). For more on prosthetics, see Alan J. Thurston, "Paré and Prosthetics: The Early History of Artificial Limbs," *ANZ Journal of Surgery* (2007): 1114-1119. For more on the history of prosthetic limbs, see Vittorio Putti, MD, "The Classic: Historic Artificial Limbs," *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research*, originally published in 1933, 412 (July 2003): 4-7, and J.F. Orr, W.V. James, A.S. Bahrani, "The history and development of artificial limbs," *Engineering in*

Medicine (1982): 155-161. For more on the history of burying body parts as it relates to phantom limb syndrome, see Douglas B. Price, “Miraculous Restoration of Lost Body Parts: Relationship to the Phantom Limb-Burial Superstitions and Practices,” in *American Folk Medicine: A Symposium*, Wayland D. Hand, ed. (Berkeley, 1976): 49-71. For more on bodies and limbs after death or dissection in America and Europe, see Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, 1987, (Chicago, 2000), especially “The Corpse and Popular Culture,” 3-29, and “The Sanctity of the Grave Asserted,” 75-99.

For more on “the body” as a historical construct, see Caroline Bynum, “Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective,” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 22, No. 1 (Autumn, 1995): 1-33. For more on the body and identity in early America, see *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, edited by Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill, 1997).

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