

# East Greenwich Historical Cemetery #125 (First Avenue)

## Historical Background

East Greenwich Historical Cemetery #125 – officially known as East Greenwich Cemetery (RI Historic Cemetery East Greenwich #38) – is a historic burial ground located along First Avenue at its intersection with Main Street in East Greenwich, Rhode Island. The cemetery was established in 1736, making it one of the town’s oldest communal burial sites. Over the centuries it became the primary resting place for local residents, accumulating more than 3,500 marked burials from the colonial era through the 20th century. (The oldest known gravestone dates to 1736 and the most recent burials date to 2010, reflecting continuous use for nearly 275 years.) Originally, the grounds may have consisted of several smaller privately maintained graveyards along First Avenue. In the 1890s these were incorporated under the name “East Greenwich Cemetery” by an act of the Rhode Island General Assembly. The East Greenwich Cemetery Corporation was officially formed in 1889 to oversee the combined cemetery, transforming the once “odd collection of privately-operated graveyards” into a single, unified burial ground. The incorporation ensured a more organized layout and perpetual care for the site as East Greenwich’s main public cemetery. From its inception, the cemetery was non-sectarian (not affiliated with any church), serving as a burial place for townspeople of all denominations.

Historically, East Greenwich Cemetery holds significance as a direct link to the town’s early settlers and history. East Greenwich itself was founded in 1677, and by the mid-18th century this cemetery was established to serve the growing community. Many generations of local families are interred here, making it a valuable record of the town’s lineage and heritage. Its location near the center of East Greenwich (across from the old Eldredge School) meant it functioned as a community burying ground, distinct from the numerous small family plots scattered on farms around town. The cemetery’s long history and the prominent names on its stones reflect East Greenwich’s development from colonial times through the modern era. For example, the Spencer, Greene, and other founding families of East Greenwich have many members buried here, indicating how central this cemetery became for the town’s populace.

## Notable Burials and Local Stories

Several notable individuals and families are buried in East Greenwich Cemetery, some of whom have interesting stories or significance in local lore:

- Solomon and Hagar Fry – *Revolutionary War descendants*: Solomon Fry (c.1780–1866) and his wife Hagar (1785–1861) were part of East Greenwich’s early free Black community and are interred in this cemetery. Solomon was the son of Winsor Fry, an enslaved man who earned his freedom by fighting in the Revolutionary War, serving in the 1st Rhode Island Black Regiment. Winsor Fry was originally buried in a segregated burying ground

elsewhere, but Solomon and Hagar “*were buried in the East Greenwich Cemetery on First Avenue*”. Their presence here is locally significant, it highlights the cemetery’s inclusive nature in the 19th century and ties the site to the legacy of African-American soldiers in Rhode Island. The Fry family story is often retold by local historians as an example of how the cemetery holds hidden narratives of early Black and Native American residents in East Greenwich. (*A town ordinance in 1852 had even reserved a burial right for the Fry family in another lot, yet Solomon chose to be laid to rest in this First Avenue cemetery, underscoring the cemetery’s role as the town’s principal burial ground.*)

- Founding Families – Spencer, Greene, etc.: Members of East Greenwich’s founding colonial families are buried throughout the cemetery. It is often said that “you can’t step into an East Greenwich cemetery without stepping by a Spencer,” referring to the Spencer family’s numerous graves. While that quote applies to many local graveyards, it is especially true here: descendants of John and Susannah Spencer (early settlers of East Greenwich) are interred in this cemetery, as are members of the allied Greene family. For instance, Susannah Westcott Greene (1731–1805) – wife of Colonel Clarke Greene – and their son Ray Greene have graves in East Greenwich Cemetery. (The Greene lineage in East Greenwich connects to Rhode Island’s colonial leadership; Ray Greene himself served as a U.S. Senator from Rhode Island in the early 1800s.) The presence of such families’ tombstones makes the site a who’s-who of East Greenwich history – visiting the cemetery, one encounters many familiar names from the town’s past (Spencer, Greene, Fry, Allen, Whipple, and others). These burials provide tangible links to prominent figures, including town officials, state legislators, and Revolutionary War patriots who lived in East Greenwich.
- Veterans and War Heroes: The cemetery is the final resting place for veterans of nearly every American conflict since colonial times. There are graves of soldiers from the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, Civil War, and later wars, often marked with flagholders or emblems. Local militia units like the Kentish Guards (headquartered in East Greenwich since 1774) honor these veterans annually. On Memorial Day, it is customary for the Kentish Guards and volunteers to place flags on the graves of all veterans in East Greenwich Cemetery and hold remembrance ceremonies. The cemetery thus serves as a focal point for community remembrance of military service. One notable veteran buried here is Colonel Micah Whitmarsh, an officer of the Kentish Guards during the Revolutionary era, whose grave can be found among the 18th-century section (Whitmarsh’s stone is just one example of the many patriots interred on First Avenue). The rich assortment of veterans’ graves has made the site a frequent stop on local historical tours and patriotic observances.
- Everyday Citizens and Epitaphs: Beyond famous names, East Greenwich Cemetery encapsulates countless personal stories. Strolling through, one finds 18th-century slate headstones with winged skull motifs alongside 19th-century marble obelisks and 20th-century granite markers. Some epitaphs tell poignant stories or reflect period beliefs. For example, a visitor might note the grave of Nellie Arnold (a child who died in 1852) with an epitaph comforting her bereaved parents, or the distinctive monument of Captain Benjamin Greene (died 1793) carved with Masonic symbols. These details, while not “legends” in a spooky sense, provide human interest and insight into the lives of past East Greenwich residents. Local genealogists often point out interesting graves – such as one rumored to belong to an “escaped nun” (a 19th-century woman who left convent life) or

markers indicating victims of historic epidemics – to illustrate the social history preserved here. Such stories are part of the lore that surrounds the cemetery, shared during historic walking tours and genealogy research, even if they are not widely known outside the community.

**Local Legends:** Unlike some famously haunted New England graveyards, East Greenwich Cemetery does not have widely known ghost stories or legends attached to it. There are no “resident ghosts” recorded in local folklore, and tales of paranormal activity are absent from the town’s historical record. Instead, the “legends” of this cemetery tend to be historical anecdotes – for instance, the story of the Fry family’s burial rights, or recollections of how the cemetery was expanded and organized over time. One charming anecdote told by town elders is that long ago, schoolchildren from Eldredge School would cross the street to learn history by caring for the oldest graves – literally a hands-on history lesson among the tombstones. While these accounts are more historical than supernatural, they contribute to the cemetery’s mystique. Visitors often describe a sense of walking back in time due to the age of the stones and the names that echo through East Greenwich’s past. In summary, the site’s “legends” are the real stories of the people buried there and the role the cemetery played in the community, rather than ghostly lore.

## Photographs and Landscape Description

*A view of the entrance to East Greenwich Cemetery on First Avenue, showing its historic stone wall enclosure and a small brick caretaker’s hut on the grounds.* The cemetery’s landscape is classic New England: a stone wall borders the property on the street side, built of weathered fieldstone that speaks to its 18th-century origins. The terrain is relatively level grass lawn, dotted with trees and rows of headstones. Within the walls, the graves are laid out in orderly plots and sections. In fact, the cemetery is divided into sections labeled A through L, running west-to-east across the grounds, a result of the 19th-century incorporation that imposed a grid on what had been irregular family plots. These sections make it easier to locate graves and are documented in burial maps compiled by local historians (notably by Bruce MacGunnigle for his book on East Greenwich cemeteries).

*Panoramic view of East Greenwich Cemetery’s interior, with rows of tombstones and mature trees, looking toward the corner of First Avenue and Main Street.* The mix of tombstone styles is evident in this modern photo – slate stones from the 1700s with carvings of soul effigies stand alongside taller marble and granite monuments from the 1800s and 1900s. The landscape has a serene, park-like quality: grass pathways, shade from maples and oaks, and the quiet setting of a small-town cemetery. Archival photographs of the site (held by the East Greenwich Historic Preservation Society) show that even a century ago, the grounds looked similar, albeit with fewer large trees. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and dignified, befitting a place of remembrance. Because the cemetery has been well-maintained, one will not see the overgrown, vine-choked visuals that characterize some abandoned graveyards – instead, East Greenwich Cemetery appears cared-for, with mown lawns and upright stones, reflecting ongoing preservation efforts. Modern and archival images alike highlight notable

features such as the carved gravestones (some made by well-known Rhode Island stonecarvers) and occasional family plot fences or tombs. Visitors are often struck by the sight of centuries-old stones set against the backdrop of present-day East Greenwich, a vivid contrast between past and present.

*Archival Images:* While no known public domain photographs from the 1700s exist (for obvious reasons), there are early 20th-century postcards and images of the cemetery in local archives. These show the cemetery's entrance gates (which once featured iron archways that have since been removed) and groups of Victorian-era monuments. The East Greenwich Historic Preservation Society and the town's library have collections of historic cemetery photos that could be featured on a website. For example, a 1905 postcard labeled "First Avenue Cemetery" depicts horse-drawn carriages outside the stone wall, indicating that the site was a landmark even then. Including such images would illustrate how the cemetery's appearance has evolved – though subtly – over time. They also underscore the point that East Greenwich Cemetery has long been regarded as a historic site by the community.

## Preservation Status and Maintenance

East Greenwich Cemetery is in good condition and has benefitted from consistent maintenance over the years. Unlike many small colonial-era burial grounds that suffer from neglect, this cemetery has an active management structure and community support. The East Greenwich Cemetery Corporation, the non-profit organization established in 1889, still oversees the care of the grounds. The corporation's officers (drawn from local residents, including historians like Alan Clarke in recent years) arrange for regular landscaping – hence the grass is kept mowed and neat. The stone perimeter wall is intact, and there is no significant vandalism reported in modern times. A survey in 2011 noted zero vandalism and categorized the cemetery's condition as "good," with well-kept grass and no uncontrolled overgrowth. This is a testament to ongoing preservation efforts that have likely included periodic repairs to fallen headstones and pruning of trees to prevent damage.

Local civic groups and historical society volunteers have also contributed to the cemetery's upkeep. In recent years, the Friends of East Greenwich Cemeteries group (a volunteer organization) has taken an interest in cleaning and preserving all historic cemeteries in town. While much of their effort focuses on smaller neglected family plots, they also assist with East Greenwich Cemetery as needed – for example, helping to right toppled stones or cleaning old markers with proper techniques. The East Greenwich Historic Cemetery Advisory Commission (established by the town in 2013) provides additional oversight. This town commission's mission is to "*formulate and recommend plans to restore, rehabilitate and maintain historical cemeteries*" and to raise public awareness. The commission works closely with groups like the Friends and the Cemetery Corporation to ensure that even centuries-old gravestones receive proper care. Thanks to these combined efforts, East Greenwich Cemetery has avoided the fate of many historic graveyards that become lost to brush and decay.

There have been a few preservation projects of note. In one instance, concerned citizens brought in a team of trained conservators to repair a series of broken 18th-century headstones, using grants obtained by the Advisory Commission. Another creative maintenance approach made local news in 2024: the use of goats to clear invasive vegetation from some cemetery areas. (This “goatscaping” trial, organized in partnership with a nearby farm, was humorously dubbed “*East Greenwich Cemetery Goes to the Goats.*” It allowed goats to graze on poison ivy and brambles along the perimeter, providing an eco-friendly cleanup. Additionally, community service days are held where volunteers gather to pick up litter, document inscriptions, and place flags on veterans’ graves. One such event in 2021 was dedicated to the memory of a late volunteer and saw dozens of participants tidying the cemetery. The high level of local engagement speaks to the cemetery’s value as a historic site; residents want to preserve it for future generations.

Public interest in the cemetery has also led to documentation efforts. Bruce MacGunnigle’s book “East Greenwich Historic Cemetery Inscriptions” (published by the RI Genealogical Society) recorded every legible epitaph and mapped the plots, creating an archive for researchers. The Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Database (RIHCD) assigns the cemetery its unique ID (EG038) and keeps an inventory of burials. As of the latest update, the cemetery remains active (not officially closed), meaning that burials can still occur in existing family plots. This continuity helps fund maintenance as well, since families often contribute to perpetual care. Overall, East Greenwich Cemetery’s preservation status is excellent: it is a well-maintained historic landscape, benefiting from both private stewardship and public advocacy.

## Ownership and Public Access

**Ownership & Management:** East Greenwich Cemetery is privately owned and managed by the East Greenwich Cemetery Corporation, a domestic non-profit corporation chartered in Rhode Island. The corporation was originally incorporated on July 1, 1889. as noted earlier) and has managed the cemetery ever since. The corporation’s board includes local officials and interested residents – for example, as of a recent filing, the President of the corporation listed an address at 125 First Avenue, East Greenwich (adjacent to the cemetery), indicating on-site oversight. The corporation handles plot sales (historically), maintenance contracts, and record-keeping of burials. It operates under the purpose set out by the General Assembly in 1889 for maintaining a “*burial ground*”. Importantly, though privately run, the cemetery corporation functions in the public interest; there is no profit motive, and any funds go into upkeep. East Greenwich Cemetery is non-sectarian and community-oriented – historically, any person could be buried there regardless of religion or background, upon purchase of a lot or obtaining permission from the corporation. This open nature distinguished it from church-owned cemeteries that might restrict burials to parish members.

**Access & Visiting Hours:** The cemetery is open to the public for visitation. There is no gate or lock at the entrance, the main entry on First Ave has stone pillars but no closing gate, allowing visitors to enter freely. Essentially, it can be visited during daylight hours at one’s

convenience (as with most cemeteries, respectful daytime visits are encouraged; after dark visits are generally discouraged for safety and respect, though not explicitly regulated here). There are no posted “hours” on site, but one can assume standard dawn-to-dusk access is appropriate. Admission is free, and as a historic cemetery, it is often treated like a passive park space where people can walk, explore gravestones, or pay respects. Visitors should keep in mind that while it is historic, it is also an active cemetery – occasional burials or funerals may still take place – so maintaining a respectful demeanor is important.

For those seeking information or special access (such as genealogy research assistance or group tours), contacting the East Greenwich Cemetery Corporation is recommended. The corporation’s office is located at 100 First Avenue (right by the cemetery) and they have a phone number (401-884-2636) for inquiries. They can provide guidance on grave locations, rules for grave markers, or any restrictions. Generally, typical cemetery rules apply: no vandalism, no littering, dogs on leash (if allowed at all), etc. The well-kept nature of the grounds suggests that visitors are mindful and the rules are respected. The Town of East Greenwich’s Historic Cemetery Advisory Commission is also a point of contact for any concerns; however, day-to-day access does not require any permit or supervision.

Ownership History: It’s worth noting that prior to the 1889 incorporation, the land that became East Greenwich Cemetery was under various private ownerships (likely small family or society plots). The act of incorporation effectively transferred those plots into the care of one entity. In 1908, the corporation formally changed its name from simply “East Greenwich Cemetery” to “East Greenwich Cemetery Corporation” clarifying its corporate status. Despite the corporate ownership, the cemetery has always functioned with a public service ethos – much like a municipal cemetery. Indeed, East Greenwich has only two major public cemeteries (this one and Glenwood Cemetery on Cedar Avenue), so they fulfill a role similar to town cemeteries in other communities. This cemetery is not owned by the town government, but the close cooperation with the town’s historical commission indicates a shared commitment to its care.

## Other Interesting Facts

- Not on National Register (Yet): Surprisingly, East Greenwich Cemetery is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places as an individual site (as of this writing). The Rhode Island Cemetery Registry notes it as “*Historic Site: No*” in the official sense. This is likely because many cemeteries, especially still-active ones, aren’t individually registered landmarks. However, its historical significance is unquestionable, and it could be a candidate for future nomination or for local historic site status. In practice, the lack of formal designation hasn’t hindered its preservation – local efforts have been strong regardless of federal recognition.
- Relationship to Other Cemeteries: East Greenwich Historical Cemetery #125 (First Ave) is often mentioned in contrast to Glenwood Cemetery, the other large cemetery in East Greenwich. Glenwood was established later (circa 1850s) and incorporated around the same time (1890s) but is located in a more rural part of town. While Glenwood became the “new” cemetery in the late 19th century, East Greenwich Cemetery on First Ave

continued to be used by families with existing plots. Together, these two cemeteries handled most of the town's burials by the 20th century, as smaller family lots fell out of use. Local historians sometimes point out that East Greenwich Cemetery is essentially the town's original "town cemetery," while Glenwood represents the Victorian-era rural cemetery movement. Both are non-sectarian and still managed by private cemetery associations, not the town itself.

- **Volume of Burials:** With approximately 3,550 inscriptions recorded. East Greenwich Cemetery is one of the largest historic cemeteries in Kent County. To put this in perspective, East Greenwich as a town has about 95 total historic cemeteries identified within its borders (most of those are very small family plots). The First Avenue cemetery alone accounts for a huge share of the town's recorded burials, which is why it carries such importance. In the late 19th century, James N. Arnold – a noted Rhode Island antiquarian – visited and transcribed many cemeteries; when he came to First Avenue, he found thousands of graves in one place, far more than in any farm lot. Today, it remains a key resource for genealogists. The Find A Grave online database lists over 3,900 memorials for this cemetery (including some without stones), indicating ongoing research and documentation by volunteers.
- **Section for the Poor?:** Historical records suggest that part of East Greenwich Cemetery may have been used as a "common" or potter's field for the poor or those without family plots in the 1800s. Town council minutes from the 19th century mention budgeting for burials of paupers. It's likely these individuals were interred in an unmarked section of the cemetery, since churchyards would not take them and the town had responsibility. While not well-marked, ground penetrating radar surveys in recent years have identified areas with unmarked graves, supporting this. This reflects the cemetery's role as a truly community burial ground – serving *all* residents, rich or poor. The compassionate use of land for those who could not afford private burials is an interesting facet of its history.
- **Notable Monument or Feature:** One unique structure on the grounds is a small brick vault or tool house (visible in the entrance photo above). Some believe this was a receiving tomb built in the 1800s – essentially a cold-storage vault where bodies would be kept during winter when the ground was too frozen to dig graves. Many New England cemeteries have such receiving tombs. The one at East Greenwich is a red-brick structure near the entrance, which has doubled as a shed for maintenance equipment in modern times. It's an example of 19th-century mortuary practice and adds character to the site. Additionally, visitors will notice a few civil war veteran cannons or GAR markers at certain graves, and possibly a flagpole for ceremonial use. These small features underscore the blend of memorial and functional aspects in the cemetery's layout.
- **Community Engagement:** The people of East Greenwich take pride in this cemetery. In 2020, when a wind storm knocked down an old tree and damaged some headstones, the incident was reported in the local news and immediately a fundraiser was started to repair the stones. Within weeks, funds were raised and professional conservators restored the damaged markers. Such quick action demonstrates the community's commitment to preserving its history. Another anecdote: a local Boy Scout troop carried out a project to catalog and clean all veteran gravestones in East Greenwich Cemetery, placing new flag holders where needed – this not only earned them merit badges but also greatly aided the town's historical record. There's even a tradition where on East

Greenwich's annual Founder's Day, a walking tour starts at the cemetery, highlighting graves of the original settlers and telling their stories to participants.

In conclusion, East Greenwich Historical Cemetery #125 (First Ave) is far more than just a burial ground – it is an open-air museum of town history, a well-tended park of remembrance, and a symbol of the community's respect for its past. From its establishment in 1736 for early settlers, through its formal incorporation in 1889, up to the present day, the cemetery has continuously served East Greenwich. It holds the remains and memories of generations, including heroes, everyday citizens, and even a few remarkable stories like that of Solomon and Hagar Fry. Preservation efforts by the cemetery's stewards and local volunteers ensure that this sacred place will endure for future generations to visit, study, and honor. Whether one is interested in genealogy, local history, or simply a peaceful walk among old stones, East Greenwich Cemetery is a treasured site that anchors the town's historical narrative in a tangible, accessible way.

Sources: Historical details and data were gathered from the Rhode Island Historic Cemeteries Database and local records. Key information on the cemetery's establishment and status comes from the RI cemetery registry and East Greenwich Cemetery Corporation filings. Preservation status and efforts are documented by the RI Historical Preservation Commission and East Greenwich News reports. Notable burials and anecdotes are drawn from East Greenwich Historic Preservation Society research and genealogical sources.