

MY PATRIOT

Lost AND Found

One Daughter's 45-Year Search for Her Ancestors' Graves

BY NANCY MANN JACKSON



Carol Otis, M.D., a member of Estahakee DAR Chapter in Southeast Florida, grew up in her grandparents' home in Pasadena, California, surrounded by photos, portraits, samplers, books and belongings from previous generations of the Otis family. She revered her ancestors, especially Revolutionary War Patriot Stephen Otis, and had read about many of them in the 900-plus-page genealogy tome *The Otis Family in America*, written by her great-uncle William A. Otis.

"I grew up knowing my sisters and I were the last of our long branch of the Otis family," Dr. Otis said. "I felt an obligation to honor my forebearers' memories."

In autumn 1978, Dr. Otis drove to Halifax, Vermont, to find the graves of Stephen Otis and his wife, Lucy Chandler Otis, a *Mayflower* descendant. Despite ample records, she could not locate their graves. Halifax, with only 700 residents, a fire station and a school, had no one familiar with the Otis family, including Elisha Graves Otis, their famous grandson who invented the elevator safety brake.

"No one knew where the graves could be," Dr. Otis said. "They told me that there were 31 cemeteries in Halifax, so, in other words, good luck looking!"

A Four-Decade Search

In the late 1970s, Dr. Otis moved to Southern California to practice medicine. She did not continue her physical search, but she would occasionally look on the internet to see if anyone else had found their graves. They never showed up.

After retiring, Otis dedicated herself to finding the gravesites of Stephen and Lucy Otis. In 2018, she began corresponding

with volunteers in the Halifax Historical Society. Renewed interest in the Otis family had emerged after volunteers located the Otis homestead for author Andrew Carroll, who featured it in his 2013 book, *Here is Where: Discovering America's Great Forgotten History*.

Volunteers found a large monument to Elisha Graves Otis and his wife Susan in the Halifax Center Cemetery, but no other Otis graves were found there. Eventually, a 1950s-era document suggested the graves might be in the Whitneyville Cemetery in Halifax, with a plot map marking the initials S.O., L.O. and M.O. Connie Lancaster, an octogenarian member of the Halifax Historical Society, recalled seeing a grave marker with an O in the 1970s. Members of the group searched for several years but did not find the graves.

In September 2021, Dr. Otis and her husband, Roger Goldingay, traveled to Halifax to search for the graves with local volunteers. "The Whitneyville Cemetery was not in good repair and had many large trees growing and many toppled stones," Dr. Otis said. "Apparently, as the cemetery maintenance staff mowed, they would pile up broken stones in one area and keep mowing. Broken or toppled gravestones were put together in an area near where they mowed around them."

One morning, Dr. Otis, Goldingay and a local Historical Society member walked into the cemetery with a shovel and other digging tools. Following the plot sketch from the 1950s, they found three flat fieldstones very near where the possible Otis graves were penciled in on the plot map. They were on the phone with Lancaster, who remembered seeing the stones 50 years ago.

Stephen and Lucy Otis

"We started digging, and to our amazement, about 6 to 8 inches under the fieldstone and in several layers of Vermont loam, we found a piece of slate stone with the initials L.O.," Dr. Otis said. "We were dancing and shouting, 'We found it!'"

After finding the L.O. stone, the group dug deeper and found another piece of slate, in the same hole, with the initials S.O. "Then we were certain, after searching for more than 45 years, I had found their gravesites and part of their stones," Dr. Otis said.

The group also found another slate fragment with the initials J.M.O., marking the grave of James Madison Otis, grandson of Stephen and Lucy, who died at age 6 in 1813.

After locating the graves, Halifax committed funds to restore the cemetery, removing trees and setting gravestones upright. Stonecutter David Gillespie was commissioned to carve new gravestones for the three graves, spending more than a year designing and carving them in a Colonial style.

Dr. Otis also applied for and received a \$500 Stars & Stripes Forever Celebration Grant to help fund a dedication ceremony and the cost of the gravestones. In 2022, Dr. Otis and Brattleboro DAR Chapter, Brattleboro, Vermont, held a dedication ceremony with full Color Guard honors. The Halifax community joined in the weekend-long celebration.

Reflecting on the experience, Dr. Otis recalls it "with a mixture of joy, pleasure and thanks to the dedicated people in Halifax who cherished and kept their history alive so that we could find my ancestors' burial places." 🌿



Stephen Otis, born in September 1738, was the fifth child of James Otis and Sarah Tudor in Montville, Connecticut. His fifth great-grandfather, John Otis, arrived from England in 1636 and settled in Massachusetts. After serving in the French and Indian War, Stephen married Lucy Chandler in 1762.

In April 1775, Stephen answered the Lexington Call of Alarm, marching from Lyme, Connecticut, to Concord. He served in two other Revolutionary War campaigns and was falsely reported dead in the Battle of Long Island.

Around 1804, the couple moved to Halifax, Vermont, to live with their son Stephen Jr., his wife Phoebe and their six children. Stephen lived to the age of 93, and Lucy lived to the age of 98.

"My family and I knew Stephen's life story and we had copies of his letters and portraits of his children," Dr. Otis said. "Being the last in my branch of the Otis family tree, I felt a lifelong obligation to honor him and that turned into trying to find his grave."

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