



The "Fighting Armstrongs"

of Boston's Granary Burying Ground

The weathered tombs and headstones of Boston's historic Granary Burying Ground attract over one million visitors each year, most drawn to the gravesites of prominent seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Bostonians. Not far from the final resting places of the famous and near famous is a simple interpretive marker for "The Fighting Armstrongs."

The marker recounts the exploits of Colonel John Armstrong and his sons, John and Samuel, during the Revolutionary War. The three men marched into armed conflict together in 1776. Colonel Armstrong, age 55, lost his life during the disastrous defeat of colonial forces at the Battle of Long Island. His sons, who also served in the New York campaign, were both wounded.

The marker directs visitors to Tomb 192. Although over 40 people are buried in the tomb, only about a dozen are descendants of Col. John Armstrong. An attached granite tablet honors Col. Armstrong; his wife, Christian; and their children. The tablet, now missing, had been in the vacant niche on the left side of the tomb's above-ground structure.



Philip O'Brien of Princeton, Massachusetts, is a descendant of Colonel John Armstrong and his son, Captain John Armstrong. He is a fifth-generation grandnephew of Lieut. Samuel Armstrong and serves in his place in the Massachusetts Chapter of the Society of the Cincinnati.

The epitaph on Tomb 192 especially honors Col. Armstrong and his grandson George Washington Armstrong. According to a 1902 City of Boston cemetery's history, "The following inscription tells a long story of heroism and needs no comment."

Tomb 192

In Memory of

COLONEL JOHN ARMSTRONG,

The Patriot-Hero, and his wife

MRS. Christian Bass Armstrong,

and their six children [five surviving],

He and his two sons John & Samuel

marched to Long Island, N.Y. and were

there engaged in various battles with

the British Army, August 27, 1776.

Capt. John Armstrong was Father of

Governor Samuel Terell [sic] Armstrong,

The Col. was killed on the battle field,

Maj. Samuel Armstrong had a providential escape from the enemy's bullets while retreating. He was wounded, but continuing in the army until the Peace of 1783.

He served as Adjutant and Paymaster in the Eighth Regt. Mass. Inf'y. also as Aid-de-Camp to Gen. Jackson. He was an original member of the society of Cincinnati. He married Nancy, only daughter of Maj. Josiah Allen,

who served under Col. Ethan Allen, at the conquest of Ticonderoga and Crown Point,
GEORGE WASHINGTON ARMSTRONG,
Was born Feb. 22, 1792, He held a commission in the war of 1812, as 1st. Lieut. in 10th Regt. U. S. Inf. signed by James Madison Presd't U. S. and John Armstrong, Sec. of U. S. War Dept.²
He served in the Boston Light Inf. Co. (Tigers) Also as Ass's, Engineer on Fort Strong, and in Forts Warren & Independence [*sic*] and the Water Battery, He was Sec. of the War Office for fitting out Privateers and Letters of Marque.
He was a Franklin Medal Scholar in the class with the Hon. Edward Everett, in 1803,-4,
By him this memorial was inscribed in 1866.³

Colonel John Armstrong

John Armstrong was born in Portland, Maine, March 9, 1719/20, the son of James and Mary (_____) Armstrong.⁴ A few years before his birth, the family had fled religious prosecution in Northern Ireland. Devout Presbyterians, the Armstrongs and 120 other families departed Belfast aboard five vessels bound for Boston in 1717-18.⁵ A cooper by trade, John married Christian Bass, daughter of Samuel and Christian (Turell) Bass, on January 4, 1747, in Boston.⁶ They had five surviving children: John, Samuel, Rebecca, Anne/Nancy, and Ebenezer.⁷

According to a handwritten family record, Col. John Armstrong served in the 11th Continental Regiment under Captain Daniel Hitchcock from 1775-76. A 1776 military record noted that a Lt. John Armstrong was "in command and taking care of the sick at Orangetown," at a field hospital on the Hudson River.⁸ Another record, dated August 19, 1776, reported that Capt. Daniel Hitchcock promoted Armstrong to the rank of second lieutenant,⁹ just days before the John Armstrong memorialized at the Granary was killed in battle. However, conclusive evidence that these two John Armstrongs were the same man has not been found. An extensive search of military records has also not identified when and where the Granary John Armstrong was promoted to colonel.

Despite the gravestone inscription, official documents show no indication that Col. Armstrong, or his wife Christian (who died in 1805 at age 82), were buried in Tomb 192 or at any other Boston cemetery. One likely scenario is that, like many others who died in combat during the Revolutionary War, Col. Armstrong was buried on or near the battlefield.

Captain John Armstrong

In 1775 John Armstrong (1748-1794), the oldest son, had risen to the rank of sergeant in Col. Asa Whitcomb's company, serving for eight months at Prospect Hill. John was

commissioned an ensign on January 21, 1776, in Jeremiah Olney's company in the 11th Continental Regiment. He served until June 23.¹⁰

In 1779, John married Elizabeth Williams, great-great-great-granddaughter of Roger Williams—the freeman who arrived in Dorchester aboard the *Mary and John* in 1630, not the minister and founder of Rhode Island. John and Elizabeth first resided at the Dorchester homestead owned by the Williams family since 1694, then moved to Boston, where John died November 9, 1794, age 46.

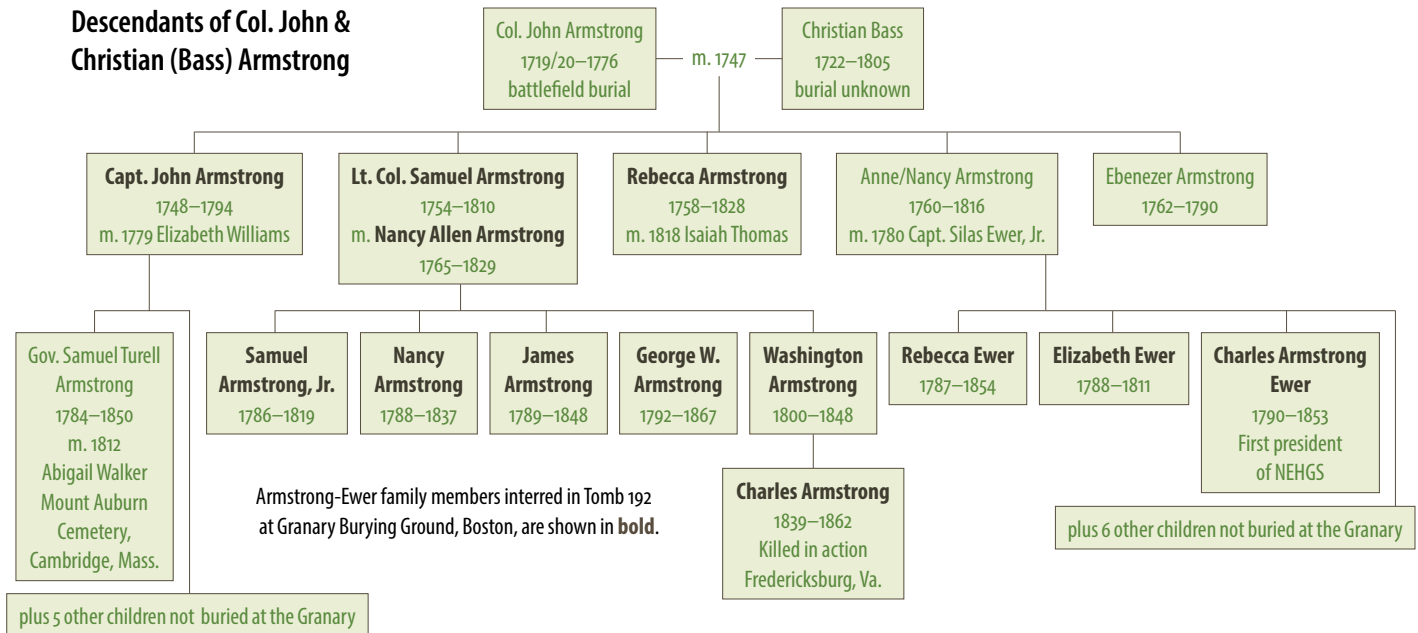
According to his son, Samuel Turell Armstrong, John was "in his person tall and slender, his health was feeble for several years before his death owing it was that by exposure in part at least while in the army." John "was entombed in Granary Burial ground on [the] Sunday following" his death¹¹—although no official City of Boston record indicates he was buried in the family tomb and despite a granite headstone in Dorchester's North Cemetery for John and Elizabeth (Williams) and four of their children. The bottom of the marker notes the memorial was "raised as a token of remembrance by an affectionate son"—certainly Samuel T. Armstrong, his only surviving male child.

Orphaned at 13, Samuel T. Armstrong became a Boston-based printer and book publisher. He entered politics as a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. He served as Lieutenant Governor under Governors Levi Lincoln and John Davis. Upon Davis's election to the U.S. Senate, Samuel was appointed governor in 1835. He served just under eleven months and became mayor of Boston in 1836. In 1839 he was elected to the Massachusetts Senate.¹² When Samuel died in 1850, he was not laid to rest in Tomb 192, but was buried in Cambridge's Mount Auburn Cemetery alongside his wife, Abigail (Walker) Armstrong.

Samuel T. Armstrong accepted membership in the New England Historic Genealogical Society on April 17, 1845, becoming one of its first members.¹³ The affiliation was likely encouraged by his cousin Charles Armstrong Ewer (1790-1853), who was elected the first president of NEHGS in 1845. Ewer was the son of Capt. Silas Ewer and Anne/Nancy Armstrong, who was a daughter of Col. John and Christian Armstrong.¹⁴ Charles Ewer never married but maintained close family relationships with his brother and two sisters. In addition to a successful career in publishing, Ewer had a role in several public works ventures in Boston, including the 1840s South Cove landfill project, which created the land for present-day Chinatown. Charles Ewer died in 1853 and was interred in Tomb 192. In 1945, to mark its centennial year, a grateful NEHGS installed a new tombstone over his grave to honor his role in founding the organization.

Opposite page: Tomb 192 and the Charles Ewer memorial, Granary Burying Ground, Boston. Photo by Philip O' Brien.

Descendants of Col. John & Christian (Bass) Armstrong



Lieutenant Samuel Armstrong

Like his brother John, Samuel Armstrong (1754-1810) served in Jeremiah Olney's company, in the 11th Continental Regiment, as a sergeant, from April 24 until November 18, 1776.¹⁵ He then served with the 8th Regiment of Massachusetts Infantry Continentals commanded by Col. Michael Jackson and Lieut. Colonel John Brooks. He became an ensign on January 1, 1777, a second lieutenant on October 7, 1777, regimental adjutant on June 1, 1778, and paymaster on April 27, 1780.¹⁶

Samuel recorded his experiences in his 80-page Revolutionary War diary, which is digitized and available in the American Ancestors Digital Library & Archives.¹⁷ The diary began July 17, 1777, and concluded June 19, 1778. Samuel wrote about a variety of topics, including moving supplies from Boston to New York; the fierce Battle of Saratoga; the surrender of General Burgoyne; and the tiresome march to Philadelphia and ensuing struggle to defeat Gen. Sir William Howe's troops. The journal concludes with Samuel's observations of life in Gen. Washington's six-month encampment at Valley Forge during the harsh winter of 1777-78. An entry near the end of the diary recounts an invitation to dine with Gen. Washington and other officers, an event that certainly warranted the simple exclamation mark Samuel used to emphasize the honor.

Samuel Armstrong was an original member of the Society of the Cincinnati, the nation's oldest patriotic organization, founded in 1783 by officers of the Continental Army who served together in the American Revolution.



Samuel's deep respect for his commander-in-chief is evident from the names given to two of his seven children. George Washington Armstrong, born in 1792, had a distinguished military career. He held a commission in the War of 1812, as first lieutenant in the 10th Regiment of the U.S. Infantry, and later served as the military engineer for Fort Warren on Georges Island and Fort Strong on Long Island, both in Boston Harbor. George Washington Armstrong installed Tomb 192's now-missing tablet in 1866. Another son, born in 1800, was simply Washington Armstrong. According to city records, both namesakes are interred in the family tomb, along with their brother Samuel, Jr., who fought in the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811 and served as a lieutenant in the War of 1812.

When Samuel died in 1810, he was laid to rest in Tomb 192.¹⁸ His wife, Nancy Allen, daughter of Major Josiah Allen, who served alongside Ethan Allen at Fort Ticonderoga in 1775, was buried with him in 1829.

Other Armstrong children

Rebecca, born in 1758, was the third child of Col. John Armstrong and Christian Bass. She was the third wife of the well-known Patriot and printer Isaiah Thomas, founder of the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester. The marriage lasted only two years before the couple separated. Rebecca was interred in Tomb 192 in 1828.¹⁹ The remaining Armstrong children, Anne/Nancy and Ebenezer, were not buried at the Granary.

Opposite page: Samuel Turell Armstrong. Courtesy of Philip O'Brien. Right: Charles Ewer inscription, Granary Burying Ground. Boston Landmarks Commission image collection, collection 5210.004, Boston City Archives.



On December 13, 1862, Charles R. Armstrong, age 23, was killed fighting for the Union Army at the Battle of Fredericksburg.²⁰ He was a member of Company D, 13th Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteers. His body was returned to Boston a month later and placed in the family tomb next to his father, Washington.²¹ The last Armstrong internment in Tomb 192 occurred March 26, 1867, when George Washington Armstrong, who had funded the family memorial tablet the previous year, took his place among the other “Fighting Armstrongs.”²² ♦

NOTES

- ¹ Boston (Mass.) Cemetery Department, *Historical Sketch and Matters Appertaining to the Granary Burial-Ground* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1902), 30. Available at Archive.org.
- ² This John Armstrong was not related to the Armstrongs buried at Tomb 192 at the Granary Burying Ground.
- ³ *Historical Sketch and Matters Appertaining to the Granary Burial-Ground* [note 1], 30.
- ⁴ John Armstrong birth recorded as March 9, 1719, Falmouth, Maine, “Maine Vital Records, 1670-1921,” Delayed returns for vital records, 1670–1891, FamilySearch, Familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-8979-KKC2.
- ⁵ “John Armstrong was one of the original members of the First Church, Portland, Me., which was gathered March 8th, 1726–7. The Rev. Thomas Smith, the first pastor, says in his journal that John Armstrong, with John Barbour, Robert Means, and others, who were original members, were some of the Irish emigrants who arrived in 1718, and passed the winter in Portland in very distressed circumstances, so as to be assisted by the government. The colony subsequently established itself in Londonderry [N. H.]” William Willis’ *Journals of Smith and Deane* (1849), 60, quoted in “Hon. Samuel Turell Armstrong,” *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 44 (1890), 140. AmericanAncestors.org.
- ⁶ *Boston, MA: Marriages, 1700–1809*. AmericanAncestors.org. (First published as *Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Boston Marriages from 1700 to 1751* [Vol. 28], Boston, Municipal Printing office, 1898. *Records Relating to the Early History of Boston, Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* [vol. 30], 1903.
- ⁷ “Hon. Samuel Turell Armstrong” [note 4], 140. This *Register* article mistakenly identified Anne/Nancy as “Mary,” an error repeated in other sources. Birth and death years for the five surviving Armstrong children given on the chart on page 42 are in *U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620–1988*. Ancestry.com. (Original data: Town and City Clerks of Massachusetts. *Massachusetts Vital and Town Records*. Provo, Utah: Holbrook Research Institute.)
- ⁸ *Revolutionary War Rolls 1775–1776*, Fold3.com/image/18394776, citing NARA microfilm M246, folder 87, p. 17. Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Services, 1980.
- ⁹ *Revolutionary War Rolls 1775–1783*, FamilySearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QL6Y-N3W7, citing NARA microfilm M246, Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Services, 1980.



- ¹⁰ Turell-Armstrong Family Papers, 1750–1848, Collection Ms S-846, Massachusetts Historical Society.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² See “Samuel Turell Armstrong,” at the National Governors Association website; nga.org/governor/samuel-turell-armstrong.
- ¹³ *NEHGS Membership Applications, 1845-1900*. AmericanAncestors.org.
- ¹⁴ Birth and death dates for the Silas and Anne/Nancy (Armstrong) Ewer family are in the Charles Ewer papers, Mss 81, folders 1 and 13, R. Stanton Avery Special Collections, NEHGS. Ewer’s ancestry is traced in Gary Boyd Roberts, “Eight NEHGS ‘Flowers of New England,’” *NEHGS NEXUS* 11 (1994):202-03, 205, AmericanAncestors.org.
- ¹⁵ Turell-Armstrong Family Papers [note 7].
- ¹⁶ *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War* (Boston: 1896), 295.
- ¹⁷ Lt. Samuel Armstrong Diary, Mss C 1058, R. Stanton Avery Special Collections, NEHGS, online at DigitalCollections.AmericanAncestors.org. For a transcribed version, see Joseph Lee Boyle, “From Saratoga to Valley Forge: The Diary of Lt. Samuel Armstrong,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 71 (1997): 237–70.
- ¹⁸ *Boston, MA: Old Cemeteries of Boston, 1649–1920*. AmericanAncestors.org. (*Inscriptions and Records of the Old Cemeteries of Boston*, Robert J. Dunkle and Ann S. Lainhart, Boston, Mass.: NEHGS, 2000.)
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Accounts of Charles Armstrong’s service and death are given in “The Battle of Fredericksburg; Dec. 11th–15th, 1862, Part 2; More Stories,” at 13thmass.org/1862/battle_fred_2.html.
- ²¹ *U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620–1988*. Ancestry.com [note 7], Interments by Undertakers of Boston, no. 1, Charles Armstrong.
- ²² *Ibid.*, Deaths in Boston, 1867, no. 86, George W. Armstrong.