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	SECTIONS	 MY SAVED 
NEWS ▶	METRO	
ARTS ▶	BUSINESS ▶	
SPORTS ▶	OPINION ▶	
LIFESTYLE ▶	MAGAZINE ▶	
INSIDERS ▶	TODAY'S PAPER ▶	
LOTTERY ▶	OBITUARIES ▶	
GLOBE NORTH ▶	GLOBE SOUTH ▶	
GLOBE WEST ▶	GETTING IN ▶	

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300-year-old headstone returned

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 08, 2013

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OLD NORTH CHURCH

The headstone of Mary Paine, who died Dec. 31, 1713, at 15 months old, was discovered by Roland McCandlish during a 1955 tour of Copp's Hill Burying Ground in the North End of Boston.

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Mary Paine died on New Year's Eve in 1713. At 15 months old, she had barely lived. But because of Roland - McCandlish, Mary's headstone saw the world.

In 1955, the then-20-year-old sailor snatched it from a tool shed at Copp's Hill Burying Ground in the North End of Boston and took it back to his ship, docked at the Charlestown Navy Yard.

From there, the vessel visited exotic ports of call, from Greenland to Haiti to Puerto Rico. When he returned home to California for good, he used the stone as a small but cherished table.

"I never thought of it as a tombstone; I thought of it as Mary," McCandlish, now 79, said by phone Thursday. "She had, through me, the life she never had. She was a part of my life."

Last week, Mary Paine's headstone came home to Boston — via UPS.

McCandlish, in declining health and thinking about a headstone of his own, decided it was time to send the headstone back. He packaged it up, along with a photo of himself as a young sailor holding the stone, and a letter explaining the tale of its travels.

He mistakenly sent it to Old North Church, near Copp's Hill, because he thought he had taken the stone from there. The Rev. Stephen T. Ayers, vicar at the historic church, was surprised when he opened the heavy package.

"We have offbeat things happening every once in a while because we're so prominent, but nothing like getting a headstone in the mail," Ayers said Thursday.

It was all a bit of a mystery: The letter wasn't signed, and the packaging had no return address.

Ayers did not expect to hear from the sender. But a few days later, McCandlish — who lives in La Quinta, Calif. — called.

The stone has been turned over to the city, which will keep it for now in the gravestone fragment collection at the Archives Building in West Roxbury. In the next several months, city officials will reset the stone in the cemetery where Mary Paine was buried 300 years ago.

Copp's Hill, founded in 1659, is Boston's second-oldest burying ground.

City officials do not plan to take any action against McCandlish.

"We're just happy that he returned it," said Kelly Thomas, director of the Historic Burying Grounds Initiative. "If that gravestone could talk, I'd love to hear the stories. It's been places that I haven't been."

Thomas said the slate stone is in good condition, and records confirm it belongs at Copp's. The headstone of Mary's mother, also named Mary, sits in the cemetery.

McCandlish said parting with the relic was not easy. They'd made memories together.

He recalled when his Navy captain found the headstone stashed in a filing cabinet on the ship and called McCandlish into his office to explain. The captain laughed at his story.

"He reacted differently than others might," McCandlish said. "He put it in the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet and said, 'We'll call it our dead file.' "

When McCandlish was in college at the University of California Santa Barbara, he and his friends would gather around the distinctive coffee table and “toast to Mary.”

He called the stone a “security blanket” for him. And he credited the stone for helping him find his eventual calling, working as an English teacher for 28 years. “I owe a lot to Mary,” he said. “She taught me a lot. She got me interested in literature and history.”

All these years later, he is not regretful about what some people might consider a disrespectful, even macabre, act.

The headstone “had been thrown at the back of a wooden shed when I found it. From my point of view, I rescued it.”

“Mary’s gravestone is probably the most traveled in history,” he said. “But, now it’s time to get Mary back home.”

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