

The mystery of a missing Hatfield gravestone is solved, inspiring a song written just in time for Memorial Day

By Rob Wilson

When Liz Denny set out to clear brush and tidy up her back yard last October, she found more than fallen leaves and twigs. Her rake scraped over a flat stone that lay under a few inches of loose dirt and leaves. A closer inspection revealed that this was no ordinary rock. The small rectangular marble slab appeared to be a gravestone.

As she brushed away the dirt, the name “Alice” emerged. The stone and the inscription had been worn away by age and the elements. It looked, to the amateur genealogist, as though it dated to the 19th Century, a time when smaller stone slabs often were to mark children’s graves.

The discovery set Liz on what, she recently reflected, would evolve into a mission to solve the mystery of who the stone memorialized. The information that she ultimately uncovered about Alice and her family also would inspire her wife, songwriter Julie Pokela, to collaborate with Northampton singer and composer Justina Golden on a song written in the imagined voice of Alice’s grieving mother. (A link to the song is contained at the end of this article.)

When Liz realized what she had found while raking, she wondered if she might have an overgrown and forgotten family cemetery in her backyard. It was possible. She said that the King Street home she and Julie had purchased two years before was built in 1870, a time when residents of rural communities might bury deceased family members on their property.



In addition to the concern she felt about what might lay underground in her back yard, Liz emphasized she also felt “honored” to have found the gravestone.

“The moment I understood what was lying there, it seemed that I had discovered something significant, and that I was meant to be the one to try to finish some important unfinished business,” she explained.

That business, Liz decided, would be to find out more about Alice’s life and family and to try to search out and inform her family descendants of the discovery. She determined that, if Alice was interred on her property, she would honor her with a proper backyard gravesite.

An examination of the area under and around the marble marker turned up no evidence anyone was buried there. But how could she be certain whether or not Alice's final resting place was in her back yard?

A former Hatfield Cemetery Commission member helps out

Liz, who is on the Board of Directors of the Hatfield Historical Society, approached Kathie Gow, then-curator of the Historical Museum, for guidance. She suggested talking to Joe Lavallee, former Hatfield Cemetery Commissioner. Joe was eager to participate. He now serves as the Hatfield cemeteries caretaker so, in his own words, "I can continue caring for these incredible places" and help people to locate the final resting places of deceased family members and friends.



Hatfield has a comprehensive computer database and detailed maps of cemetery gravesites that Joe created for five Hatfield cemeteries. (The cemetery records and maps, he added, are available on the town's website.) His search of every "Alice" listed as buried in Hatfield indicated that a deceased two year old named Alice Bolter had been interred in 1863, in the West Street Cemetery. Further research revealed the Bolters had moved to Amherst after Alice's death and that they replaced the original gravestone

in 1899.

Liz found only a few letters of the inscription were legible on the weather-beaten 1899 stone. However, Joe's database included many 19th Century gravestone inscriptions, transcribed from handwritten records he found searching for old cemetery documents at the Hatfield Town Hall. The inscription on the West Street gravestone read:

Alice G. Bolter
3-16-1863
Daughter of Zeba and Christina Bolter
2 yrs. 3 mos. & 24 days.
"The Lord Hath Need of Her"

The fact that Alice was just a toddler when she died, Liz knew, was consistent with the original gravestone's size, approximately ten inches wide by two feet high. Her genealogical research had taught her that children's graves often were marked with small gravestones in the 19th Century.

While it is not absolutely conclusive, Liz believes that the evidence accumulated with Joe's assistance strongly indicates that the slab that she discovered was Alice's original gravestone. Joe shares her opinion. So much so that he trimmed the broken marble slab that Liz found and affixed it to the 1899 monument in the West Street Cemetery.

Liz's recent research indicates that Alice's father emigrated from Quebec, her mother was born in New York or New Jersey, and that Alice had eight or nine siblings. She believes the father is of French Canadian ancestry and that his French surname was changed to Bolter by US customs officials or that he changed his name after arriving. So far, Liz's search for living Bolter family descendants has been unsuccessful, but it continues.

Nevertheless, Alice Bolter is remembered today in Hatfield. To mark Memorial Day, Liz and Julie recently left a flower arrangement at her grave.

The King Street couple probably never will know exactly how Alice's original headstone ended up in their backyard. Joe explained that, into the 20th Century, old and broken gravestones in rural communities often were repurposed or thrown away when they were replaced. These often ended up in Hatfield backyards, barns and gardens, he wrote. He's even assembled and epoxied together whole headstones from their broken and discarded pieces.



Julie Pokla (left) and Liz Denny, sitting behind the 1899 gravestone in West Street Cemetery. There is no cemetery record of who is buried next to Alice and the smaller stone is badly worn. Joe LaVallee was able only to distinguish the initials SMB. Because of that, and the fact the two stones are close together, he thinks a Bolter is buried there. If so, that person—likely one of Alice's siblings—was interred after 1899, the last year entered on the handwritten records he'd found.

A song linking Alice's 1862 death to the Civil War

Julie, like Liz, knew she had a mission to perform the moment she saw the gravestone laying in her back yard: She needed to write a song about Alice.

As information about Alice began to emerge and she was identified as a two year old child who had died in 1863, during the American Civil War, Julie started visiting Forbes Library to read

issues of local newspapers published at that time, to get a feel for the life and language of people living in and around Hatfield during Alice’s lifetime. Writing the song, she focused on the inscription carved into Alice’s 1899 memorial, “The Lord Hath Need of Her,” imagining the explanations her parents might have for her death.

“The country was in the middle of the Civil War, and 24 of the 108 men from Hatfield who joined the Union military died in service,” Julie wrote in an email. “I thought Alice’s parents might have believed that their little girl was needed to provide comfort to the soldiers whose last days were filled with the horrors of war, and so I incorporated that idea in the song.”

Songwriter Justina Golden collaborated on Alice’s lyrics with Julie. In a written overview about her involvement on the project, she described the experience, from helping to write lyrics through arranging the instrumentation and voices and singing the song, as a “remarkable journey.”

Once she read Julie’s lyrics, Justina continued, “the music began to pour from my mind.” To complement the religious sensibility of the Civil War era conveyed throughout the song, she incorporated a melody from “Be Thou My Vision,” a traditional Christian hymn.

Ultimately, Julie wrote the song in the voice of an elderly and a devoutly religious Christina Bolter, Alice’s mother. The lyrics reveal Christina’s thoughts and hopes as she looked back on the meaning of her daughter’s death and her own impending passing. The mother also was readying to “cross the river”—the song’s repeated image for crossing from life to death—and reunite with her daughter. The song’s final two verses envision that reunion:

*I will cross the river, though the water is wide
The bridge will be open with Alice as my guide.*

You can listen to a recording of the just-recorded song “Alice” by clicking here: <https://youtu.be/MVaoTHLyeBU>. Justina sings and plays the guitar, accompanied by guitarist Bob Castellano.

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Alice

Lyrics: Julie Pokela
Music: Justina Golden
Vocals and guitar: Justina Golden
Guitar: Bob Castellano

Chorus

I can't cross the river, the water is wide
And the bridge to heaven is closed on my side.

V1

I hold my granddaughter and search in her eyes

They remind me of Alice when she was this size
A gift from the Lord on the Christ child's birth
But called back to him after two years on earth.

Chorus

I can't cross the river, the water is wide
And the bridge to heaven is closed on my side.

V2

After 2 years, 3 months, and 24 days
The Lord took her back, from my embrace
Why he needed her then, I still do not know
But I yearn for her touch when our world fills with snow.

Chorus

I can't cross the river, the water is wide
And the bridge to heaven is closed on my side.

Bridge

We weren't the only ones grieving those years
Throughout our small town there were families in tears
Their men took up arms to free the enslaved
And many were buried in faraway graves.

Chorus

They crossed the river, though the water was wide
And the bridge from heaven had opened on their side.

V3

After all these years I can't help but feel
That the Lord needed Alice to help the soldiers heal
When I cross that bridge to the light I will see
Alice and her soldiers waiting for me.

Chorus

I will cross the river, though the water is wide
The bridge will be open with the light as my guide.
I will cross the river, though the water is wide
The bridge will be open with Alice as my guide.

