

DANIEL FARBER

On May 23, 1998, the city of Worcester lost one of its most outstanding and magnanimous citizens. Most members of the American Antiquarian Society will associate the name Daniel Farber with his consuming passion for photographing and preserving the folk art of early American gravestones. His dedicated efforts to preserve this important cultural chapter of our national heritage resulted in the gifting of thousands of photographs to major museum collections. His contribution to gravestone studies was immense. Dan, as he was known by friends and colleagues, was a founding member and former president of the Association for Gravestone Studies (AGS), which now has over 1,200 members, among them scholars, artists, and historians. He devoted much time and energy to copying the Forbes file of 1,300 glass plate negatives of this long-neglected art form onto more usable and archival 4 by 5-inch modern film, now housed at the Society. In 1997, in collaboration with his wife, Jessie Lie Farber, eleven CD-ROMs, titled *Early American Gravestones, The Farber Collection of Gravestone Photography*, were produced. This series, now also available on the Internet as part of the Research Libraries Group's 'Cultural Materials' resource, contains nearly 15,000 well-documented images of early grave markers from New England, and other parts of the United States, Canada, England, and Ireland. The collection brings together the photographic work of researchers Harriet M. Forbes and Ernest Caulfield, as well as Daniel Farber's own, and provides an invaluable tool for the study of this remarkable subject. He was a benefactor and long-standing member not only of AAS, to which he was elected on April 19, 1967, but also of the Worcester Art Museum, the Worcester Historical Society, Tower Hill Botanic Garden, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Daniel Farber was born in Worcester in 1906 and lived all his ninety-two years in the city of his birth. He was the third child of Russian-born Rose (Barsky) Farber and Louis Farber, who had

immigrated to the United States from Poland as a young man. Struggling to establish himself in his new country, he decided to try his luck in the shoe business. He started the L. Farber Company, but only a short time later, before the company had any tangible success, he died as the result of a streetcar accident. His widow was left with business debts, five sons, and two daughters. Her two eldest sons took over the business, and, at the age of thirteen, Daniel joined them. After a few years, four of the five sons (one had died in his early twenties) were working together to make the business grow and prosper. Daniel, who had by then graduated from Worcester's Commercial High School (he later received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from Worcester State College), was in charge of the machine shop. He brought to this responsibility a flair for designing machinery and an understanding way of working with the men he employed. He became vice president of the company and for the next six decades worked full-time in the factory. In 1937 he married Juanita (Nita) Mae Dill, who, for many years was a prominent activist in civil rights and a member of numerous historical and cultural organizations. Their two sons, Louis and David, both of whom became involved in manufacturing, were raised at 11 Moreland Street. Louis joined the family business, while David, who died in 1997, headed his own company, Bestrest Mattress. When the L. Farber Company was sold in 1981, it had grown to be the largest supplier of leather insoles and shoe welting in the industry. This fact alone assured Daniel Farber an important place in the industrial history of Worcester.

The phenomenal success of the Farber family business afforded Dan the opportunity of becoming a highly respected philanthropist both within the community and abroad. He was an extraordinarily direct person who prided himself on going right to the point of anything he became involved with. His was a highly compassionate and outgoing nature. In all his generous financial giving, which amounted to a disproportionately high percentage of his income, he had a natural faculty for seeing a need, then organizing and backing programs designed to make concrete, posi-

tive differences in peoples' lives. For instance, one of his donations was of a large piece of property near his home to the city. On it, he constructed and maintained a soccer field, Worcester's first, which is known locally as Farber Field. Years later, he developed a recreational park on Bell Hill, which included not only another soccer field, but also wheelchair-friendly paths to make it accessible to residents of the nearby senior housing. He had gazebos and picnic areas built so that young and old alike could enjoy from that high point the beautiful views of the city he loved. He named this park after his second wife, Jessie Lie Farber, who worked closely with him on this and many other projects from the time they married in 1978 until his death. One of these joint projects involved designing and building an ecologically engineered house to fit their unique interests. It was planned to provide gracious living as well as a gallery for Dan's photographs, a large archival storage space for their research, and a gathering place often used by fellow students of gravestone art. The house, carefully situated with a magnificent view and in keeping with their mutual love for nature, was surrounded by acres of floral landscaping, each and every plant, of course, a perennial subject for Dan's camera. Also, confirming their interest in the folk art of early burying grounds, they adorned their garden with a small graveyard of replicated eighteenth-century headstones.

Pursuing his fascination with gravestone art, Dan sponsored and funded an archaeological dig in downtown Worcester in the 1960s to uncover a long-forgotten early burying ground. The plot was mapped, headstones identified and catalogued, and sixty-two graves were transferred to Hope Cemetery before the remaining stones were reburied beneath Worcester Common. His civic endeavors gained Daniel Farber a permanent place in Worcester's philanthropic pantheon. Dan's interest in using land to its fullest advantage involved him in ventures 'as far away as Latin America and Africa. In this latter case, a major financial contribution through one of his favorite charities, CARE, made possible a substantial desert reclamation and reforestation project

in Niger's Maggia Valley, which became a prototype for similar enterprises.

Daniel Farber was a free spirit. His renown, whether as industrialist, benefactor, or artist, endures predominately as photographer. He recalled taking his first picture at the age of eighteen, followed by what he considered his first 'composed' image, a self-portrait, in 1931. However, it was not until the early 1950s that he allowed himself time to start photographing seriously. Until then, his artistic impulse was hampered by a strong work ethic which could not justify the idea that spending significant amounts of time taking pictures was anything but a frivolous pursuit. But in 1953 he made several important discoveries that changed him from being a businessman with an interest in photography into a dedicated photographer who was also a businessman. Always a lover of nature, he experimented extensively recording flowers at close range. He was delighted to discover that by diffusing the focus on these tiny subjects he could graphically delineate their fundamental essence. He also realized that by taking elements from nature to make his own compositions, he could eliminate troublesome backgrounds. At Provincetown harbor that summer, he became enthralled with wavy reflections of boats he found tied up at the docks. Intrigued by the resulting abstractions, he worked for weeks at a time with telephoto lenses to capture these visions. When frustrated by inclement weather that kept him indoors, Dan installed a huge vat of water in his basement and, using multicolored lights and agitators, continued his experimentation with colored reflections. The original body of work became the lyrical fine arts statement he wanted to make and helped to affirm his artistic beliefs. From 1953 onward he devoted most of his creative energies to photography. We became friends with Dan in 1962 while researching our book, *Early American Stone Sculpture, Found in the Burying Grounds of New England*. By then, he was also deeply involved in photographing early American gravestones, which eventually became his largest body of work. In this endeavor he championed the use of large format view cameras and mirrors to

throw reflected sunlight onto the carved surfaces of shaded stones. As usual, Dan's penchant for innovation, which had served him so well during his years at the L. Farber Company, was apparent in almost every enterprise he undertook.

Dan had found his artistic voice in photographic imagery, and it became almost an obsession. Whether he was working with gravestones, botanical subjects, landscapes, reflections on water, or the subtleties of fine pewter, his images are imbued with the delight he felt when looking through the camera's lens. In a statement typical of his direct way of approaching any challenge, he wrote, 'I have only one criterion in evaluating a photograph: if it pleases me, it's good; if it doesn't, it's not.' Another time he said, 'My most compelling desire is to find and photograph the extraordinary hiding in the ordinary.'

Dan Farber loved to take pictures, but he also needed to have his photographs seen and appreciated. In this he succeeded admirably. Over a period of nearly five decades he had numerous one-man exhibitions, seventy in all, and organized four traveling shows that were seen in scores of galleries and museums, including the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Our National Heritage, and the Addison Gallery of American Art. His work was published in various magazines, and his nature studies were used on nineteen album covers for Columbia Records. In 1974 the book *American Pewter in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* was exclusively illustrated with his revealingly lit photographs. Undoubtedly, Dan's greatest contribution to American cultural history was the gifting, over a period of many years to 115 public institutions, of 34,000 black-and-white prints and 1,400 dye-transfer color photographs, as well as 14,000 negatives. Few photographers are as well-represented in museums throughout the United States. The great majority of these works depicted early New England gravestones. The most complete collections of this material can be found in the collections of the American Antiquarian Society, the Yale University Art Gallery, the Library of Congress, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Dan Farber never

stopped working. One of his proudest moments came late in his career with the 1991 publication of *Reflections on a Trail Taken, Photographs by Daniel Farber*. The introduction was written by his close friend Jonathan Fairbanks and the publisher was David R. Godine. This book allowed him to select many of his most cherished images and share them with a broad audience.

As Daniel Farber gave so much time and energy to studying other people's grave markers, it seems only fitting to describe his own memorial, which can be found in Worcester's Rural Cemetery. It is a beautiful slate marker carved by Nicholas Benson, third generation of the stonemason Benson family who have operated the historically famous John Stevens Shop in Newport, R.I., for over half a century. The entire crown of Dan Farber's stone is filled with a great spreading tree under which are the words: DANIEL FARBER, 1906-1998; His wife JUANITA MAE DILL, 1902-1978; His wife JESSIE E. GROSSNICKLE LIE, 1920. On the reverse, below Dan's distinctive signature, is the carefully chosen inscription: 'Nature was his God/Kindness his way/Photography his art.' A realistic rendering of Dan's camera hangs casually over the stone's shoulder, just as he might have slung it across a convenient headstone while perusing an eighteenth-century burying ground in search of exciting carvings to photograph. At ground level one sees incised his two favorite flowers, the aster and the dandelion.

The entrance to the newly created Systematic Garden at Tower Hill Botanic Gardens in West Boylston has another appropriate monument to Daniel Farber's memory. It is a large primordial pool, a loving gift of his widow, Jessie. The rocky environment of the pool's fountain is destined to become home to a rich variety of ferns, mosses, and algae, some of the earliest plant forms among Dan's favorites to have survived the earthly aeons. Dan would have loved these monuments, both of which directly refer to things that gave him great joy in life.

Dan Farber was a pioneer in the study of early New England gravestones. Through his photographs and tireless efforts to

make these folk art treasures known to the general public, he did much toward their continued study and preservation. Above all his other accomplishments, this is probably the one for which Dan will be best remembered.

Ann Parker and Avon Neal

JAMES JOSEPH HESLIN

James J. Heslin died on April 30, 1999, at the age of 82. From 1960 to 1981, he was director of the New-York Historical Society, having succeeded AAS's former librarian R. W. G. Vail in that position.

Heslin, who was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on June 25, 1916, married Phyllis Stacy Brissette in 1940. He was a 1949 graduate of Boston College, and held a master's degree in library science from Columbia and the Ph.D. from Boston University in 1952. After serving in the American history division of the New York Public Library and as assistant director of university libraries at the University of Buffalo, he joined the staff of the New-York Historical Society as assistant director and librarian in 1956. When he was elected to AAS on April 19, 1961, he and the Society's librarian, Clifford K. (Ted) Shipton were engaged in the correspondence that led to the microfilming of selected newspapers from the N-YHS's outstanding collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century newspapers for the *Early American Newspapers, 1704-1820* series.

During his tenure at the New-York Historical Society, its building on Central Park West was refurbished and air conditioned and new galleries were opened. Cataloguing procedures were revamped to make the collections more accessible to the public, and an education department was established. His last years there were marked by financial difficulties that led to a staff

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