

Edward Taylor, Westfield's Man of Praises

--By Audrey Therriault, Westfield State University Class of 2021

The founder of Westfield's First Congregational Church, Reverend Edward Taylor is a man renowned as America's most influential colonial poet. Taylor devoted himself to that iconic church steeple on the green, and to the city where it resides. In his early life as a religious non-conformist, he was barred from teaching in his birthplace, Coventry, England, during the Great Rejection - a period when Puritan sympathizers were refused jobs by the state. Rather than compromise his beliefs, Taylor sought out higher education at Harvard College across the pond. Taylor reached the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1668, and his writing began to blossom during those traveling years. After he graduated from Harvard, Taylor was persuaded to move to Westfield, Massachusetts by an insistent Thomas Dewey, the church representative of Westfield who desperately needed to bring home a minister for the town (Poetry Foundation). With Dewey, he trekked miles across a snow laden Massachusetts to reach Westfield, his new and forever home.

Once Taylor reached Westfield, a small town in the depths of the mysterious western frontier, he began to serve as the minister of the First Congregational Church. On top of his duty to the church, he was an all-around handyman who served as a doctor, a farmer, and a clerk (Manino). He fell in love with his first wife, Elizabeth Fitch, a year after he organized the church formally, in 1674. They had eight children before her death in 1689. Taylor then remarried to Ruth Wyllys and had another five children. Of his children, not all survived, as was the unfortunate condition of the day (Grabo 13-14). Taylor wrote poetry of gloom and grieving. He wrestled with concepts of death, darkness, and disparity. This was heavily influenced by his

family and what they suffered. Yet in contrast, Taylor was able to find light in the walls of Westfield's church. Taylor was able to glorify God in his tribulations and still enjoy the beauty in life.

Taylor referred to some of his poetry as meditations, and made a collection of them as his life progressed. They were deeply rooted in Christianity. In Meditation 35, Taylor reflects on the beauty of his surroundings. Titled "Things Present," he examines how God's glory shines day to day:

"How Glorious then is he that doth all raise

Rule and Dispose and make them all Conspire

In all their Jars, and Junctures, Good-bad wayes

To meliorate the self same Object higher?

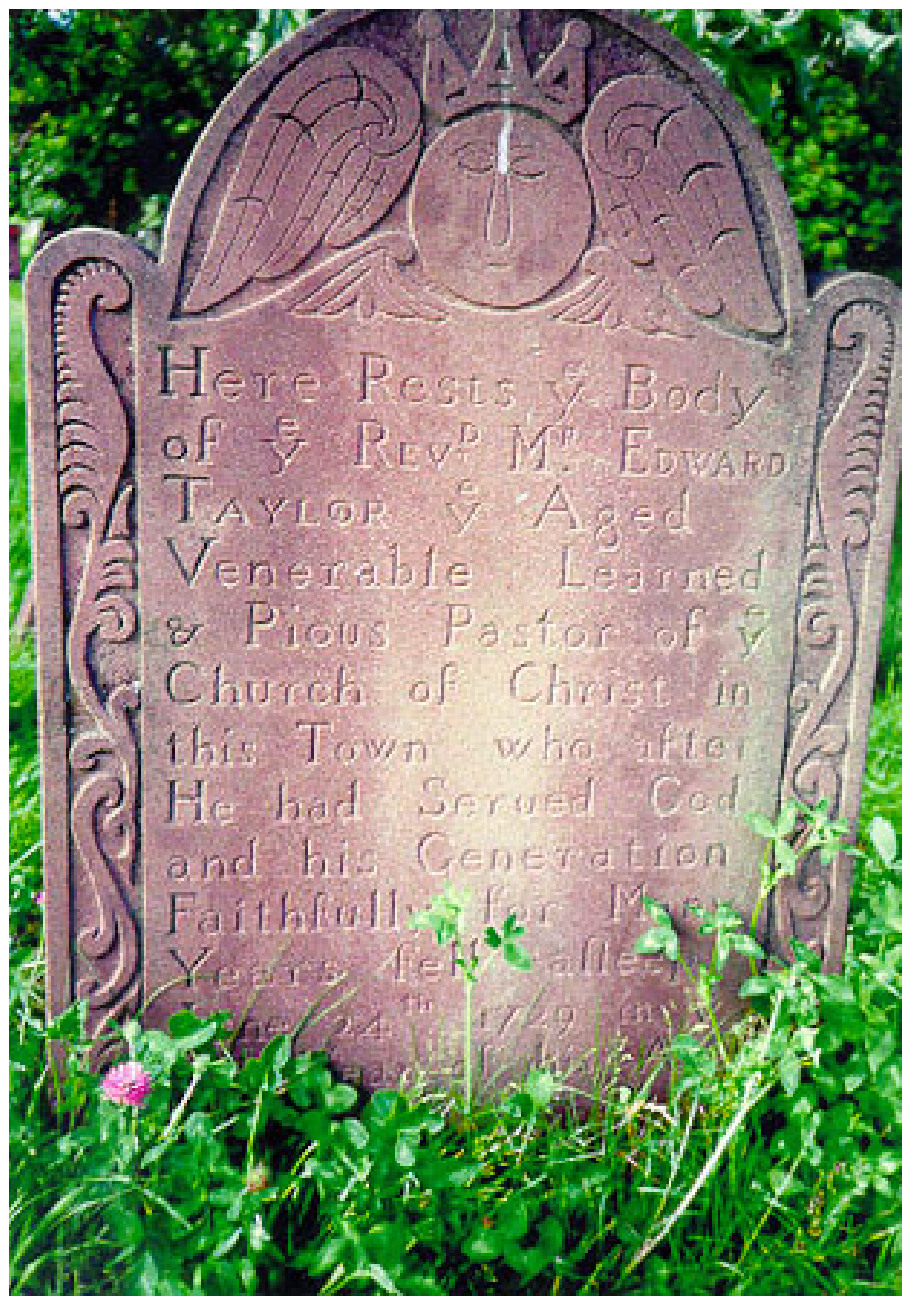
Earth, Water, Fire, Winds, Herbs, Trees, Beasts and Men,

Angells, and Divells, Bliss, Blasts, advance one stem?" (Carson).

This happiness in nature and beauty comes from a direct love of God. Admiration can be related to the world, but even more specifically, Westfield, where Taylor sat when he wrote his praises. Grabo, when writing of Edward Taylor's contemplative life, extols his influence saying, "... he casts the color and light of devotional tradition over the historically gloomy face of early New England" (Grabo 41). Taylor's writing held a spiritual power and jovial tone while also remaining true to the pains of the world. His perspective and discipline were what set him apart from all other men of his time.

In present studies of Taylor's works, one must not discount Westfield's outstanding significance in his life. Taylor is buried in Westfield's Old Burying Ground, but his original gravestone sits preserved next to the First Congregational Church (City of Westfield). His grave

represents his eternal presence in the history of Westfield. Tom Mayes, when discussing the importance of memory and old places, makes the point that, “People writing about memory have described the mechanisms that drive the connection between place and memory. Places serve as *mnemonic aids*—they remind us of our memories, both individual... and collective...” Edward Taylor will remain forever in the history of Westfield, and his commemorative stone (pictured below) is that aid to our memory as a collective Westfield community.



Picture provided by Harvard Square Library

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