



[www.shaftsburyvt.gov](http://www.shaftsburyvt.gov)

# Town of Shaftsbury

Municipal Offices

PO Box 409  
Shaftsbury, VT  
05262-0409  
(802) 442-4038

## Cemetery Department

### Why Do Some Old Headstones in Use an "F" Instead of an "S" on names?

For genealogists, historians, and cemetery stewards like myself, understanding the long s is important when documenting and preserving historic graves. Recognizing this letterform ensures accurate transcription of names and inscriptions and helps avoid misinterpretation of family records. When I first ran into the long s I did this research and learned about it as I first thought it to be a mistake in spelling or carving. It is not.

Visitors walking through Center Cemetery in Shaftsbury may notice that some 18th and early-19th-century headstones appear to use the letter "f" where a modern reader would expect an "s." Names, Biblical phrases, and words such as Rest, Blessed, or Jesus may look unfamiliar at first glance. This is not a carving error, damage to the stone, or an indication of poor spelling. Instead, it reflects a historical writing convention known as the long s.

During the 1700s and into the early 1800s, English used two forms of the lowercase letter "s." The long s (written as *ſ*) was used at the beginning and middle of words, while the familiar short "s" was used at the end. When carved into stone—especially after centuries of weathering—the long s often resembles an "f" usually without a full crossbar like this: "f". For example, Bleſed may appear today as Bleffed, and Reft as Reft.

This lettering style was standard throughout colonial New England, including Vermont. Many of the earliest settlers in Shaftsbury came from Massachusetts and Connecticut, bringing with them English printing, religious, and craft traditions. Stonecutters of the period often learned their lettering from printed materials such as Bibles, hymnals, and newspapers, all of which commonly used the long s well into

the late 1700s. As a result, gravestones in old sections of some cemeteries closely mirror the typography of the time.

In Shaftsbury, Center Cemetery contains some of the town's earliest burials, dating to the late 18th century, when Vermont was still a young and largely rural state. The presence of the long s on these stones helps confirm their age and places them firmly within the broader context of early New England settlement. Far from being a mistake, these inscriptions reflect careful workmanship and adherence to contemporary standards.

The long s gradually disappeared from English usage around 1800 as printing became more standardized and readability became a higher priority. As books and newspapers dropped the character, stonecutters followed suit. By the early to mid-1800s, gravestones in Vermont almost exclusively used the modern " s " we recognize today.

These stones in Center Cemetery are more than markers of individual lives, they are artifacts of language, craftsmanship, and early Vermont history. The long s offers a small but meaningful reminder that even the letters carved into stone reflect the time, place, and culture in which Shaftsbury's earliest residents lived.

Shaftsbury Cemetery Superintendent  
Jennifer Holley, 2026

 **A headstone example in Center Cemetery – [Susanna Cole](#) (Sufanna)**

 **Learn more about [burials in Vermont](#).**