

Cemetery Art

Using Tombstones & Symbols for Genealogy

Tombstones & Genealogy

- Clues tombstones can assist with
 - Personal and family data
 - Status in the community
 - Religious beliefs
 - Military Service
 - Affiliations, interests, and hobbies

Gravestone Terminology

- **Stele** is a stone or wooden slab or monument; **Relief** is a work of art/sculpture with raised figures; **Kerbset**, think of a curb. Long, narrow stone or concrete laid end to end to form a **kerb/curb** aground a gravesite; **Footstones** are 18th century markers usually containing the deceased initials and year of death; **Mortsafes** were heavy iron cages placed over the grave of a newly deceased person to deter theft.

Types of Graves

- Traditional, Crypt (an underground burial place, most often beneath a church), Mausoleum (a building, especially a large and stately one, housing a tomb or tombs)

Types of Gravestones

- Common types: Limestone, Marble, Granite
- Very old types: Fieldstones, Sandstone, Slate, Wood, Concrete
- Factors for choosing different stones include:
 - **Physical weathering** (freezing/thawing)

- **Chemical** (acid rain/atmospheric gases)
- **Biological** (microbes/plants that make the stones their home)
- **Geography and economics** factored into tombstone selection as well.

Tombstones and their imagery

- Deaths Head – Chosen by 17th century Puritans who avoided attributing human form to spiritual beings such as God, angels, or spirits
- Colonial America (17th – 18th century) Winged Death, winged Cherub, Willow and Urn, hourglass, and later portrait stones. These were used less frequently and the images were often generic, representing the deceased persons age range and sex.
- Victorian Era America (1837-1901) – Emphasized customs and practices associated with death. Examples include Angel of Death, Star of David, the Dove, Maple Leaf, Flowers, Horseshoes, swords, as well as Egyptian Symbols.
 - Revival Styles (Greek, Gothic, Italianate, Classical, and Egyptian) are also seen on older American tombstones
- 1900's United States began the time period that included Sears and Roebuck "Tombstone Catalog", detailing the costs of engraving. Ads often featured children's names/ages due to one out of five children not surviving to adulthood.
- Contemporary Gravestones are made with the same types of materials, but the ability to make the gravestone more personalized is aided by technology and the artists creativity.

Symbolism

- They can give us clues as to the ethnic, religious, and/or organizational affiliations of the deceased and their community
- Military markers and Societal Affiliations are common on headstones
- Occupations: The Medical field, firefighter's emblem, and the Scales of Justice are just a few occupational symbols
- Lambs and sleeping cherub angels are often associated with the graves of children
- Plants
 - Ivy = Friendship, Laurel = accomplishment and heroism, Oak (leaves and acorn) = power/authority/victory, Thistle = Scottish descent, Trees = faith, the Tree of Life

- Animals
 - Butterfly = short life, Dove = innocence and/or peace, Lion = courage, watchfulness, strength, and Roosters = awakening, resurrection, vigilance

Hints and Tips

- Symbols have various meanings depending on the time period and location
- Investigate cemeteries of your ancestors to find possible connections to other lines
- Headstones were often added at a later time, cost being the biggest hurdle. Due to the delay, errors with dates, spelling, etc. are prone to occur

Tombstone Preservation

- Make sure to know the cemetery's rules on preservation. Many prohibit guests from doing more than taking a photograph
- The type of stone will determine what you can and cannot clean with. It's important to do your research
- Three things you should not do:
 - Never brush or scrape the stones
 - Use distilled water when appropriate, but never chemicals
 - If the stone shows signs of chipping, scaling, flaking or other deterioration, do not do ANY brushing or scraping!

Further Research

- Cemetery Resources
 - Billion Graves – <https://billiongraves.com>
 - FindAGrave – <https://www.findagrave.com/>
 - Interment.net – <http://www.interment.net/Default.htm>
 - County GenWeb Pages – <https://www.usgenweb.org/>
 - Digital State Archives <https://sites.google.com/site/statearchives/home>
- Tombstone Iconography
 - Mid-South Genealogy & History Network
<https://us/msghn.org/symbols.html>
 - Cyndi's List
<https://www.cyndislist.com/cemeteries/monuments/iconography/>

- Magnolia & Peaches
<http://www.magnoliasandpeaches.com/dynamictree/cemetery/search/DocLst.asp>
- Olive Tree Genealogy
<http://www.olivetreegenealogy.com/misc/grave.shtml>
- Library Resources
 - Published resources – by location and topic
 - Periodicals – AGS (Association for Gravestone Studies) Quarterly, MARKERS XXXIII
- Field Guides
 - “Stories in Stone” by Douglas Keister
 - “Translating Tombstones” by Minda Powers-Douglas