

# STORIES IN STONE

## *Decoding the Sentiment Behind Cemetery Symbolism*

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What Do We Think of When Someone Says  
'Cemetery'?

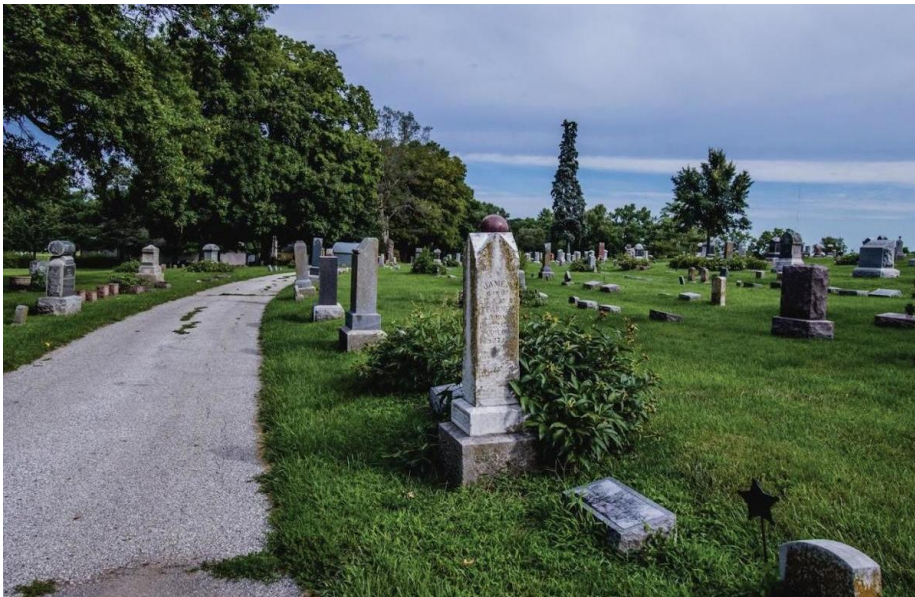




## What Are You More Likely To See?



## Let's Start The Tour



## Oldest Section of the Cemetery



1560 - 1920



*"Death Hath Promised to Come, and Come He Will Indeed"*



La Grande Danse Macabre (16th Century) By Jean de Gerson

- After the Great Plague, the concept of death takes on human characteristics
- Writers of the period report death as part of everyday life around them, and the church encouraged people to face death with heroism, acceptance and enthusiasm
- *"Doomed to One Common Grave, the Young, the Old, the Monarch, the Slave"*



The image displays three different gravestones, each with unique symbolic carvings. The top-left stone is a large, dark, rectangular stone with a heart and a cross. The top-right stone is a smaller, arched stone with a face and the inscription 'Memento mori'. The bottom stone is a large, rectangular stone with a crown, ewer, bookshelves, and a tree.

Freemasons tools and symbols

Memento mori

Winged Head

Crown, Ewer, Bookshelves, Tree

## What's in this section?

- Markers heavily influenced by orthodox Puritanism
- Stones are locally quarried or collected from the area
- Families buried in groups with separate stones or together in one spot with one headstone
- Burials adjacent to church, meeting house, or town common



## Mortality Symbols

- Skulls, winged faces, faces without a jawbone, faces, skeletons, bones, and hour glasses are prevalent in early headstones
- Adhere to puritan beliefs or depictions of the Black Death



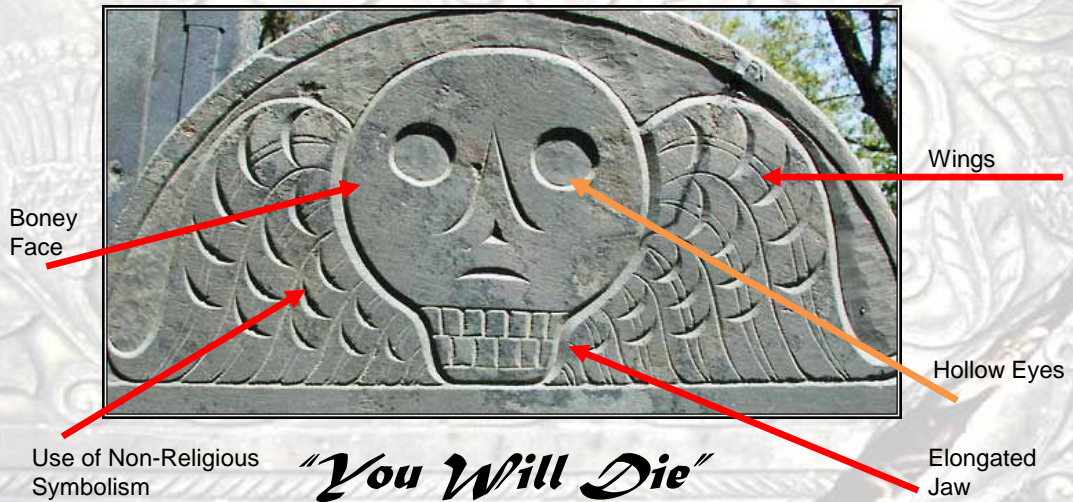
Skull and Bones

Hourglass



## Anatomy of Winged Death Head

The triumph of death over life



## Anatomy of Early Markers



## Anatomy of Early Markers



## Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Markers

By 1800, mortality concepts evolve and markers change shape and symbolism:

- Markers become taller and wider
- Neoclassic themes replace mortality symbols
- More details of person buried

Popular Symbols from 1800-1855

- Urns, Drapery, Mourning Figures, Weeping Willows and Fraternal Organizations



## Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Symbols



Urn and Weeping Willow Trees



Monument and Weeping Willow Trees



Masonic Symbols

## Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Symbols



Willow, Urn, and Poem



Neoclassical Urn and Pillars



## Mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century Markers

By 1855, markers begin to change to a rounded shape, as well as:

- Allegorical themes replace Neoclassic symbols
- More details of person buried included
- Iron Grave Markers become popular in many different places, especially in the United Kingdom
- White marble is popular, other materials such as granite, bronze, white bronze, metal, and sandstone markers also used
- Decorative flowers and large symbol become popular

## Civil War Headstones



- On March 3, 1873, Congress granted burial rights in national military cemeteries to all honorably discharged veterans of the Civil War (17 Stat. 605).
- An act of Congress of February 3, 1879 (20 Stat. 281), extended the privilege of government-provided gravestones to soldiers buried in private cemeteries (20 Stat. 281)

## Civil War Headstones



- Death toll invaded everyone's lives to such an extent that was completely overwhelming
- No infrastructure in place to account for dead soldiers or for shipping them home to their families
- Soldiers were buried in pits, and reinterred to individual graves

## Civil War Deaths Impact Cemeteries

- National Cemeteries
- Military Burial
- Government provides Headstones
- Reburial of Veteran Dead
- Federal Hospitals and Veterans Homes
- System for identifying Military Dead
- Aid for Veteran Families
- Next of Kin Notification
- Memorial Day



Burying the dead at Fredericksburg, Va., after the Wilderness Campaign, May 1864.



Arlington National Cemetery 1866



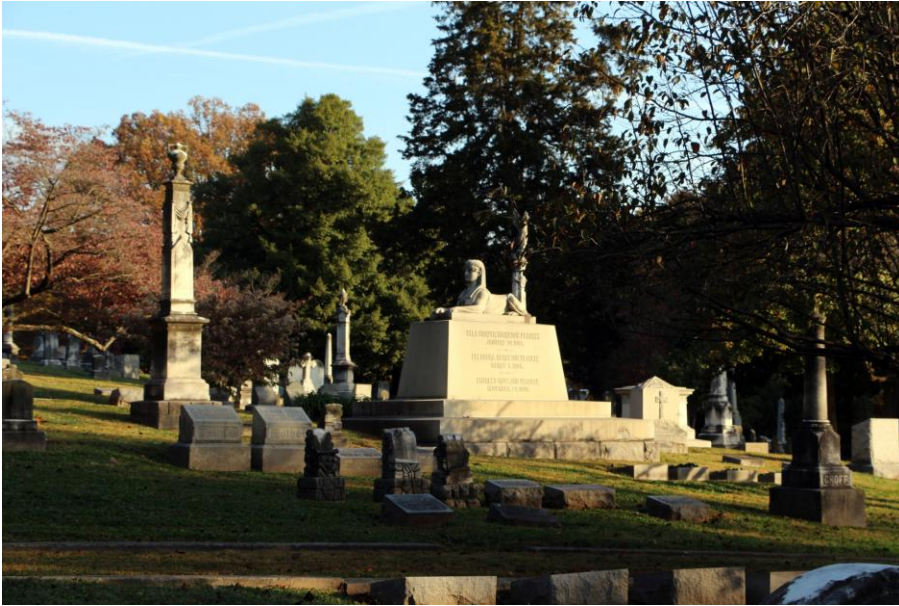
## Military Headstones



## Military Headstones



## Let's Turn the Corner



## What New Symbols Do We See?



Owl and Ivy



Sheaf of Wheat



Doves of Peace



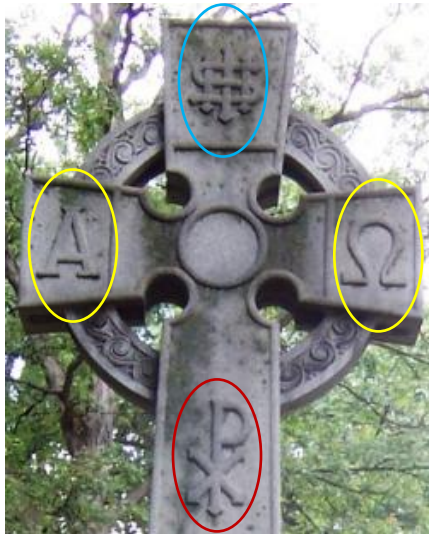
Lamb of God



Woodsmen of the World



## Alpha and Omega



Alpha & Omega, Chi Rho, and IHS

- The first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet
- Relates to three references in the book of Revelation – “beginning and the end”

## Chi Rho

- Oldest Christian Symbol (PX)
- First two letters of the Greek word for Christ
- When overlaid, the letters form a cross-like design
- PX is also abbreviation for Latin word “pax” which means peace

## IHS or IHC

- Overlaid ‘IHS’ (Greek) or ‘IHC’ (Roman)
- Abbreviation for phrase *in hoc signo vinces* or “in this sign you will conquer”

## Anchors



Anchor with Rope & Arm with Spyglass

- Embodiment of the theological virtue 'Hope'
- Hebrews 6: 18-19, “lay hold upon the hope set before us: which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast”
- The anchor symbol dates back to early Christianity, when it was used to disguise the symbol of the cross. It became a symbol for Christ and his anchoring influence on Christians. It's also a Masonic symbol for well-grounded hope
- More literally, anchors may mark the graves of dedicated seamen, who use the anchor to honor Saint Nicholas, patron saint of seamen, and to symbolize steadfastness

## Books



Book

- Book can represent a Bible or it can simply mean knowledge
- Open book may signify an open heart or mind, open to the word of God
- Open book also symbolize register book of deceased on earth or book of deceased in heaven
- Closed book usually indicates a completed life, virginity, secrecy, and mystery

## Broken Column



Broken Column

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## Clasped Hands



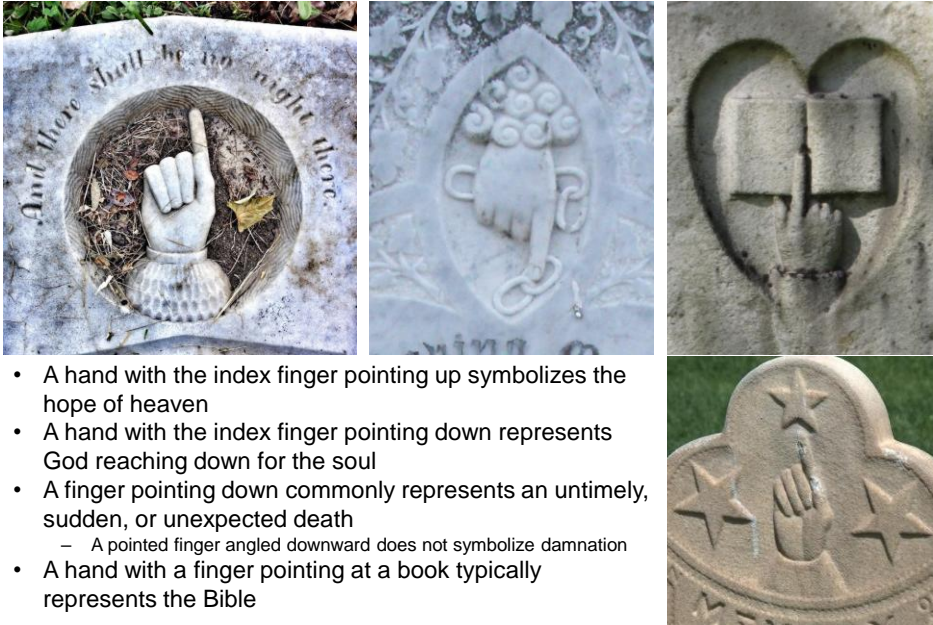
- Farewell to earthly existence and God's welcome into heaven
  - Also indicate a relationship between the deceased and the loved ones they left behind
- If the sleeves of the two hands are masculine and feminine, the handshake, or clasped hands, may symbolize holy matrimony, or the eternal unity of a husband or wife
- Sometimes the hand on top or the arm positioned slightly higher than the other indicates the person who passed away first, and is now guiding their loved one into the next life

## Gates Ajar



- Elizabeth Stuart Phelps published *The Gates Ajar* in 1868
- Phelps began writing her book in the final year of the Civil War, inspired in part by the death of her mother, stepmother, and her fiancé who was killed at the Battle of Antietam
- Second best-selling religious novel of the 19th century, with 80,000 copies were sold in America by 1900
- Themed as the deceased person is still in this world, and heaven's gates are ajar to allow the dead to visit and comfort the living

## Pointed Fingers



- A hand with the index finger pointing up symbolizes the hope of heaven
- A hand with the index finger pointing down represents God reaching down for the soul
- A finger pointing down commonly represents an untimely, sudden, or unexpected death
  - A pointed finger angled downward does not symbolize damnation
- A hand with a finger pointing at a book typically represents the Bible

## The Rise of Roses



Rosebud (children)

Rose in bloom with buds / Wreath of Roses

Roses were associated with the Virgin Mary, the "rose without thorns."

- Also a symbol of love, beauty, hope, and unfailing love
- Whether the rose is a bud, flower or somewhere in between indicates how old the person was at the time of death:
- Just a bud - normally a child 12 or under
  - Partial bloom - normally a teenager
  - Full bloom - normally in early/mid twenties. The deceased died in the prime of life
  - Rosebud, broken - life cut short, usually found with a young person's grave



## Sleeping Baby



Sleeping babies



Sleeping baby-in-a-half-shell

- Late 19<sup>th</sup> century experienced huge change in
- Comfort for grieving parents *"Not dead, dear mother, only sleeping."*
- Baby-in-a-half-shell available from 1870-1919
  - scallop shell symbolizes of transformation and the sleeping baby as a pure and innocent soul – a pearl ensconced in a protective shell
- Used exclusively on graves of children under the age of five
- Monument companies marketed marker nationally in the 1880s
- Sears Roebuck Catalog made sleeping baby and sleeping baby-in-a-half-shell by mail order in 1908

## White Bronze

- The Monumental Bronze Company produced zinc monuments for just forty years, from 1874 to 1914
- Peak sales occurred in the late 1880s
- Zinc resembles granite, and has the benefit of being much lighter, cheaper, and easier to ship
- Immune to weather conditions, as well as most moss, lichen, and other biological growth
- US government took over the factory to produce gun mounts and munitions during WWI
- Company continued to create replacement plaques or new plaques for monuments, but not full sized markers after WWI
- Hollow inside – used to store bootleg alcohol and drugs



## Portraits in Markers



Clasped hands, tree, portrait, with garlands



Portraits



## Portraits in Markers



Granite Headstone, Maiden Name, Portraits



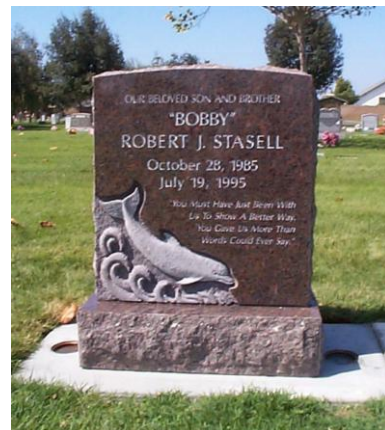
## Walk from the Old Section to the New Section



## Modern Headstones



Semi Truck



Dolphin

What do these have in common?



Symbolism Scavenger Hunt



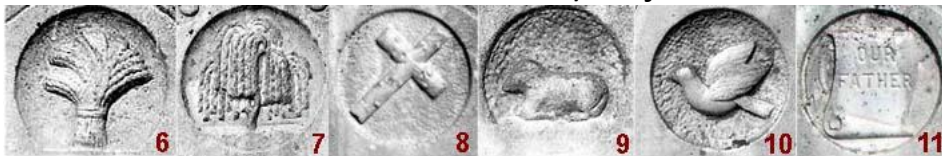


## Popular Symbols



1) Hands

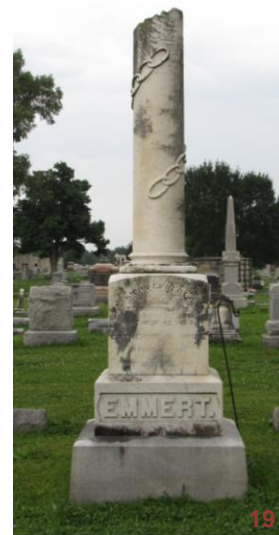
2) Objects/Animals



3) Flowers & Plants



## Popular Symbols



## Want to Learn More About Headstones?



- International Association of Cemetery Preservationists:  
<http://iacpinc.org/>
- Illinois Historic Preservation Handbooks:  
<https://dnrhistoric.illinois.gov/preserve/cemetery/handbook.html>
- FindAGrave: [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com)
- BillionGraves: [www.billiongraves.com](http://www.billiongraves.com)
- Epitaphs (Early American & Victorian)  
*Stories on Stone: A Book of American Epitaphs* by Charles L. Wallis
- Research  
*Your Guide to Cemetery Research* by Sharon Carmack

## Thank You!

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