

Interpreting History at Cemeteries

Cemeteries have been a fixture on the American landscape as long as people have inhabited the land. Native American burial mounds dot the Mississippi River Valley and there is a plethora of monuments to fallen tribal leaders in the Southwest. The look and feel of graveyards have changed with time, those most familiar to us today were try based on styles carried to the continent by Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

More than sacred ground, cemeteries can act as a textbook of community history. Graveyards and markers provide researchers with a vast amount of detail concerning the life of the person whose remains may be buried below. Gravestones can tell us names, birth and death dates, occupations, ethnicity or nationality, and religious traditions. Sometimes the stones list survivors, and may describe the value or sentiment peers placed on the deceased's life. Looking beyond the writing, gravestones reflect community development, trade patterns, technological advancement, tragedies, theological evolution and changing artistic tastes.

Researching

Before you begin to search for cemeteries, identify what you are trying to find and why you think the answers may be found in a graveyard.

Public cemeteries are generally accessible and easy to locate. Most graveyards are marked and have posted rules for visitation and use. However, there are many small graveyards that are not marked on public maps. Some of these spaces are relatively modest in size and have not accepted burials in several years. Public officials either do not know of their existence or, more likely, do not want to promote visitation due to preservation and environmental issues. Private cemeteries also dot the country and tend to be located off the beaten path. Private cemeteries are managed by a church, foundation or family and are not open to the public without permission.

Finding a cemetery has become much easier with the help of the Internet. There are a number of resources available to assist you in your search. A list of several

private and government sites is located under Related to the right of the screen. Many of these web pages provide a break down of cemeteries by state and county. However, unless it is obvious from the cemetery title, only a couple of the sites mention the cemetery type.

A state or local historical society and preservation office will also be able to help in the search for cemetery locations. These institutions may provide information on the type, location, and rules for cemeteries in your area.

Prior to entering any cemetery, contact the caretaker/owner for permission to enter and conduct research. Be sure to explain all activities you will be performing, including photography and rubbings. Finally, remember that graveyards are sacred ground and should be respected at all times.

Interpreting Cemeteries

Interpreting cemeteries requires study on a variety of levels. While stone rubbings and photographs are important, it is also necessary to view the grave in the context of the entire cemetery and the cemetery within the layout of the town. This tutorial will begin with the individual gravestones and work out.

Studying gravestones is essentially the same as studying material culture. One must be able to view the stone in detail as well as in its entirety, and not overlook the importance of the most common features. Moreover, it is important to support your findings with other sources such as journals, diaries, and county and state records.

The following directions and questions will help you see the gravestone as a historical document.

- Read the writing on the stone. Look for names, dates, biographical information, poetry, inscriptions, and epitaphs, all of which are important to note and save for reference. What are you able to immediately conclude about the person memorialized by this marker? What language is the text?
- Look at symbols incorporated into the stone. Often, markers display symbols associated with age (for example, children's stones typically exhibit lambs), religious tradition, occupation, organizational membership, and military affiliation.
- Note the overall artwork on and of the stone. Early gravestones were carved in a fashion dictated by period fashion, local tastes, and the carver's ability. Therefore it is likely that you can piece together a chronology of style as you observe more and more stones. In some cases, small towns that traded heavily with large cities may have imported stones rather than carving them locally. The connection should be visible with enough observation. How is the artwork or style different of similar to those next to it? Was the design carved by hand with a chisel, was it carved by a machine, or was it etched

with a new type of technology? Sketch the design in proportion to the entire stone and include the writing.

- What type of stone was used for the marker? Wealthy or important people in the community used expensive stones such as granite and marble, while the poorer folks may have used wood, lime or sandstone. Government-issued military gravestones are uniform in design and made of marble, granite, or bronze. Military graves will be easy to identify.
- Note the size, shape and style of the gravestone. Measure the height, width, and depth. Don't attempt to climb a tall gravestone; it is better to estimate the measurements than to risk damaging the stone. Compare the stone with style guides and carver directories. Although the date of creation may be noted on the stone, these manuals can help place the stone in a local and national context.
- Finally, note the landscaping directly around the stone. How is it cared for? Note the vegetation and decoration. Were flowers placed or planted at the grave? Have visitors left photos or memorabilia behind? You may want to record and photograph this material, but never remove anything from a grave.

Now look at the grave in relation to the entire graveyard. This type of evaluation is called landscape architecture and is a useful tool for studying community attitudes, morals, norms, and values through the layout and design of the artificial or created environment. Begin by observing individual graves, move out to the graveyard, and then to the larger town.

- How old is the cemetery? How did you come to this date?
- Is the graveyard still in use? You can determine this by asking the caretaker or looking for fresh fills.
- Create a map of the graveyard on graph paper. Note the number of graves, the dates, occupations, and familial relationships. From this information, try to reconstruct the progress and development of the town by creating a timeline based on the graves. When did the oldest doctor in the yard die? Mayor? Blacksmith? When do you notice a major change in gravestone design and construction techniques?
- Looking at your map, note any patterns in the situation or alignment of the graves? Is there a dominant pattern? Does the pattern change over time? How might this arrangement be significant? Are there any graves that do not fit with the larger pattern? What is different about them, who are buried there and when? Often slaves, foreigners, criminals, and other people outside the mainstream were buried beyond the primary grounds.
- Be sure to mark all of the roads and pathways throughout the yard. How are they constructed? Do their paths follow a grid, are they determined by the natural landscape, or do they seem to be completely random?

- Does the cemetery have a fence and/or gate? In what style was it constructed? What type of material was used? Is the fence functional or decorative?
- Note all the buildings located in the graveyard. Where are they in relation to the graves? What purpose do they serve? How and in what style are they constructed?
- How well is the graveyard maintained? Does it appear as though regular maintenance is performed or has the cemetery been neglected?
- Where is the Graveyard located in the village, town or city? Is it in a place of prominence or hidden? Is it on a church, mosque or synagogue's property, a residential area, government land, or a secular space?
- How does the graveyard relate to the function of the surrounding property?
- Do you think the land was originally designated as a burial ground when the first grave was dug? Why or why not?
- Does the landscape architecture of the graveyard reflect that of the town? In what ways?
- What can you conclude about the people of the town that house and maintain the graveyard?

Exercise

Print the Cemetery Analysis Worksheet under Resources to the right of the screen. Go to a local cemetery and look at the gravestones and yard. Sketch a couple of markers that catch your attention. When you return, use field and style guides to identify the symbolism in the gravestone in order to better understand the deceased's life.

Map the graveyard on the other graph. Take a random sample of gravestones and note the names, dates and occupations that appear on them. Use this information to create a preliminary timeline of the town's history. Compare the map of the graveyard to a map of the town. What conclusions can you make from the research? Compare your timeline to a book on local history. How accurate is your work?

Additional Resources

National Cemetery Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs

<http://www.cem.va.gov/>

Saving Graves

<http://www.savinggraves.org/>

Virtual Cemetery, by Genealogy.com
http://www.genealogy.com/vcem_welcome.html

Interment.net
<http://www.interment.net>

The Tombstone Transcription Project
<http://www.rootsweb.com/~cemetery/>

The Association for Gravestone Studies
<http://www.gravestonestudies.org/>