

Cemetery Symbolism in Stone

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Sometimes it is said that “Dead men tell no tales”. However, the more one learns about tombstones and the information that they can contain, one will find that often there are many “tales” to be found.

Some of the information that can be found is blatantly obvious – names, dates and sometimes even addresses or a picture of the deceased. However, often missed are the subtle messages that are found as part of the symbolism used on the tombstone itself or surrounding markers. These symbols can give you information about religion, group affiliations, hobbies, personality, marital status, military service or ethnic origin.

The following is a compilation of some of these symbols and their meanings. Keep in mind that often the meanings are subjective and can represent many different things.

ANIMALS

Many grave markers display carved or three-dimensional animals and these have strong symbolic meanings. The following are some of the most commonly encountered symbolic animal designs:

ANT: Christian industry

BATS: the underworld

BEE: resurrection, the risen Christ; chastity

BIRDS (sometimes only wings): souls

BIRDS FLYING: souls flight back to God

BUTTERFLY or CHRYSALIS: resurrection; Christian metamorphosis; The meaning is derived from the three stages of the life of the butterfly—the caterpillar, the chrysalis, and the butterfly. The three stages are symbols of life, death and resurrection.

DEER (or STAG): the faithful thirsting for God

DOG: Signifying the loyalty and that the master was worth loving; short life. At the feet of medieval women, signifies the loyalty and inferior place of each in the chivalric order.

DOLPHIN: portrays the idea of resurrection

DRAGON: being defeated by St. George, depicts triumph over sin

DOVE DESCENDING: Holy Ghost

DOVE: peace; innocence; purity; messenger of God carrying soul to heaven. Seven doves represent the seven spirits of God or the Holy Spirit in its seven-fold gifts of grace. When shown with an Olive Sprig it means hope or promise.

EAGLE: fierceness; ascension: the heavenly conveyor, national emblem of the United States: a military professional, Civil War casualties

EAGLE WINGED: St. John, the Evangelist

EGG: regeneration

FISH: Christ; plentifulness, faith

FOX: cruelty; cunning

FROG: resurrection or sometimes sin and worldly pleasures

HORSE: Courage or generosity

LAMB: Christ; Redeemer; meekness: sacrifice; innocence; most common 19th century child's marker

LAMB WITH BANNER: resurrection

LION: strength; courage; royalty; power; guardian; fallen hero. Symbolizes the power of God and guards the tomb against evil spirits.

LION (winged): St. Mark the Evangelist

OWL: suggests wisdom

OX (winged): St. Luke the Evangelist

PEACOCK: immortality; eternity; resurrection; incorruptibility of the flesh

PELICAN: feeds young with own blood; redemption through Christ

PHOENIX: immortality; baptism

RAM: sacrifice

ROOSTER: the awakening from the fall from grace; repentance

SHEEP & GOATS: Christians and non-believers

SERPENT: symbol of death

SNAKE: sin; Satan; fall of man

SNAKE (hooped or in a circle): eternity

SPHINX: strength and protection; guards entrances

SQUIRREL: Christian forethought; spiritual striving

SWALLOW: indicates a child or motherhood

BODY PARTS

ARMS OUTSTRETCHED: the plea for mercy

BREASTS: the Divine, nourishing fluid of the soul (17th century); the church; the ministry; the nourishment of the soul

EYE OF GOD or ALL-SEEING

EYE: symbolizes the all-knowing and ever-present God.

HANDS: Hands in some form are very common on grave markets. Symbol of leaving

-Hands, clasped: Many times these hands all seem to be in the

same, but look for a number of interesting characteristics. First, most of the hands show the right hand in a grasp with fingers overlapping the other hand while the left hand is open. This could symbolize that the devotion of these two is not destroyed, a close bond between individuals, unity and affection even after death. Clasped hands are also symbolic of a farewell or last good-bye. Look at the cuff to distinguish between a man's or woman's hand (woman would have a frilly cuff.) The person who died first holds the other's hand, guiding the spouse to heaven.

- Hand of God plucking a link of a chain: represents God bringing a soul unto himself.
- Hands holding:
 - *A chain with a broken link* symbolizes the death of a family member.
 - *A heart* - symbolic of charity and is common on 19th century memorials. It is typically seen on memorials of members of the Independent Order of Odd fellows. Charity
 - *An open book* - the embodiment of Faith
 - Hand pointing:
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 - *Downward* - mortality or sudden death. (Possibly a depiction of a secret Masonic handshake.)
 - *Upward* - the reward of the righteous, confirmation of life after death. Heavenly reward, ascension to heaven.
- Hands praying: connote devotion
- Two hands touching at thumbs - The hands are making the "Live long and prosper" gesture that Mr. Spock used on Star Trek (Leonard Nimoy is Jewish, and that's where he got it).
The Cohen was the priestly caste. They perform a few specific functions in Orthodox Judaism, and have a few unique restrictions: they are

not supposed to remarry or touch a dead body, for example. People who are Cohen often have Cohen as their last name. This is the hand gesture made by Cohen at the end of services in Orthodox synagogues.

HEART: Love, mortality, love of God, courage and intelligence.

- *Bleeding* - Christ's suffering for our sins.
- *Encircled with thorns* - the suffering of Christ for our sins (often Catholic)
- *Flaming* - signifies extreme religious fervor
- *Pierced by a sword* - the Virgin Mary, harkening to Simeon's prophecy to Mary at the birth of Christ, "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul." It can also be used to represent charity.

FIGURES

ANGEL: messenger between God & man; guide. Angels signify spirituality. They guard the tomb, guide the soul, pray for the soul in purgatory, and direct the living visitor to think heavenwards. Two angels, saints of the Catholic Church, can be named as we find them: Michael, who bears a sword, and Gabriel, who toots a horn. Angels shown without one or the other of these artifacts belong to the nameless legions of personal guardian angels and other decorations.

ANGEL FLYING: rebirth; guardian angel

ANGEL TRUMPETING: call to the resurrection

ANGEL WEeping: grief

CHILD or CHILDREN: usually represent the untimely death of the innocent. They may be shown mourning a parent, but if holding a skull that means they are dead themselves.

CHILD SLEEPING: Victorian death motif

DEATH'S HEAD WINGED: mortality

EFFIGES: the soul

EFFIGES (crowned): personal reward of righteousness

EFFIGES (winged): the flight of the soul

FATHER TIME: mortality, the grim reaper

FOUR EVANGELISTS: Matthew, winged man; Mark, winged lion; Luke, winged ox; John, winged eagle

IMPS: figures, some winged, some not, doing funeral related tasks; mortality

MAN (winged): St. Matthew the Evangelist

TRUMPETERS: heralds of the resurrection

WOMAN WEEPING: mourning; recalls myth of Niobe, whom the gods turned to stone as she wept for her slain children

LATIN PHRASES

FUGIT HORA: "hours are fleeting", "time flies"

IHS: monogram or symbol representing the Greek contraction of "Jesus": sometimes regarded as an abbreviation of the Latin phrase meaning "Jesus, Savior of Men"

INRI: often seen on a banner of latin cross: "Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum". Latin for Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews (John 12: 19-22)

MEMENTO MORI: "remember death"

TEMPUS ERAT: "time is gone"; "time has run out"

XP: Chi Rho-first two Greek letters of the word "Christ"

OBJECTS

ALPHA & OMEGA: first and last letters of the Greek alphabet symbolizing the beginning & end of all things, see Revelation 22:13

ANCHOR: hope, life eternal; may signify seafaring profession. An anchor with a broken chain stands for the cessation of life.

ANVIL: martyrdom

ARCH: triumph, victory in death

ARK: church; salvation

ARK OF NOAH (rare): refuge, salvation

ARMOR: protection from evil

ARROW: martyrdom, mortality

ARROW QUIVER: warlike

BABY'S CHAIR: small, empty furniture symbolized unfulfilled lives of children; represented the child now gone; with small shoes on chair - connection to childhood, symbolized inability to achieve adulthood

BANNER: victory; triumph

BATTLE AXE: martyrdom

BELLS: call to worship

BIBLE: resurrection through the scripture; the clergy.

- A single Holy Bible is often found on Christian stones.
- Two holy books on Mormon headstones indicates the Bible and the Book of Mormon
- Three holy books - the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine & Covenants

BOOK: faith, learning to read and write, a scholar. It may represent the Book of Life. A popular form is the book as a double page spread. see also Bible

BOOKS (stacked): knowledge

BRANCH SEVERED: mortality

BUGLES: resurrection; the military profession

CANDLE BEING SNUFFED: time, mortality, loss of life.

CANDLE FLAME: life

CANDLESTICK: Christ; devotion

CELTIC CROSS: circle on it symbolizes eternity

CIRCLE: eternity; or earth

CLOCK (rare): passage of time, mortality

CLOUDS: the divine abode

COATS OF ARMS AND

CRESTS: lineage, status

COFFINS: mortality

COLUMN (broken): sorrow; broken life, the eventual ruin or decomposition of us all. It often represents the loss of the Family head.

COLUMNS (with doors, archway): heavenly entrance

CRESCENT MOON: Virgin or the deceased was probably a Muslim.

CHRISMA: a cross like shape formed by a combination of two Greek letters, chi (X) and rho (P) corresponding to CH and R of the word, Christ, hence a symbol for Jesus Christ.

CROSS: salvation. Christians remember the hope of resurrection

in the cross. The cross also appears in Japanese heraldry where it stands for the four quarters of the earth or the four cardinal directions.

CROSS (with rays of rising sun): glory

CROSS (with winding sheet): descent from cross

CROWN: reward of faithful, victory, triumph, glory;

righteousness; resurrection

CROWN ON CROSS: sovereignty of Christ

CROZIER: bishop

CUP or CHALICE: Usually used to represent the Sacraments or Eucharist

DARTS: mortality, dart of death

DOOR: entrance to heaven

DRAPERY OVER ANYTHING: sorrow; mourning

FIELD ARTILLERY (rare): the military profession

FINGER: pointing to heaven

FLAME: eternity

FLEUR-DE-LIS: Virgin; Trinity

FLYFOT: swastika

GATE: passage into heaven or afterlife

GARLAND: victory

HARP: Associated with David in the Old Testament; symbol of St. Cecilia, patron saint of musicians. Symbolic of worship in heaven, hope.

HOURLASS: The classic symbol for Time. Sometimes shown with wings. **HOURLASS (with wings)** Some say the resurrection of the dead. Others say it may be a reference to the saying "Time flies."

HOURLASS (on its side): time has stopped for the deceased

KEYS: Stand for spiritual knowledge or, if held in the hands of an angel or saint (especially Peter), the way to enter heaven.

KNOT: The interlaced Celtic knot represents resurrection and life everlasting.

LABYRINTH: The passage of life

LAMP: Like other light sources, lamps stand for knowledge and the immortality of the Spirit.

PINWHEELS: Originally appearing on the graves of children, pinwheels now can also be seen on

the graves of adults. The continual movement suggests constancy, perhaps of affection.

PITCHER: Jewish symbol, representative of washing the hands of the High Priests.

PORTALS: passageways to the eternal journey

PORTRAITS: stylized likenesses of the deceased

PYRAMID: symbolic of death

ROCK: steadfastness of Christ; stability

ROD or STAFF: Comfort for the bereaved.

ROSARY: devotion to Mary

SCALES: weighing of souls; justice

SCROLL: the law; Scriptures, honor and commemoration.

Symbol of life and time. Both ends rolled up indicates a life that is unfolding like a scroll of uncertain length and the past and future hidden. Often held by a hand representing life being recorded by angels.

SCYTHE or SICKLE: time, the divine harvest.

SHELL, SCALLOP: pilgrim; pilgrim's journey; resurrection, a traditional symbol of the Puritans.

SHIP: the Church

SHIPS' PROFILES: the seafaring profession

SHRINE: wisdom; knowledge

SHOVEL or SPADE: Death

SKELETONS: mortality, Death

SKULL: death; sin

SKULL (winged): A once common motif on New England tombstones.

It represented the flight of the soul from mortal man. Over a century, the skull grew skin and became a cherub.

SKULL (with crossbones): mortality

STAR: birth-life; Christ

STAR (five pointed): Star of Bethlehem; star of Jacob; divine guidance and protection

STAR OF DAVID: Recognized as the international symbol of Judaism.

SUN: God or Son

SUN (setting): death

SUN (rising): resurrection; renewed life

SUNS, MOONS AND STARS: the reward of the resurrection
 SUNDIAL: Intended to remind visitors of the nearness of the closing of the cemetery gate.
 SWORD: martyrdom; courage; warfare
 SWORDS (crossed): high ranking military person, possibly death in battle
 THREE: three points, three leaves, three of any thing indicate the Trinity
 TOMBS: mortality
 TORCH: zeal; enlightenment
 Until the church banned such things, most people were buried at night. Torches furnished the light which both allowed the gravediggers to see and the bearers to scare off evil spirits and nocturnal scavengers. Lit, the torch signifies life -- even eternal life. Extinguished, it stands for death. It can also stand for living memory and eternal life (e.g. an eternal flame).
 TORCH (inverted): extinction of life; death; mourning
 TORCH (upright): immortality, liberty, upright life, the scholastic world, the betrayal of Christ
 TRUMPET: judgment day; resurrection
 URN: Greek symbol of mourning
 URN (draped): death, sorrow
 URN (with flame): Undying remembrance
 WINGED GLOBE: a symbol of the Egyptian sun god, Re; on Victorian monuments it is symbolic of the power that can recreate and, with the wings, means, "God, Lord over all, creator."
 WINGED WHEEL: Holy Spirit
 YOKE: bearing burdens; service; patience

TREES & PLANTS

Flowers convey love, grief, happiness and other emotions. These symbolic connections of flowers with emotion are cross-cultural and their origins are unknown. During the 1800s, the use of floral symbolism became so popular that almost every flower known had a symbolic gesture attached to it. The following are

some symbolic references to common plants and flowers:
 ACACIA: immortality of soul
 ACANTHUS: heavenly garden. One of the oldest and most common cemetery motifs, acanthus is associated with the rocky ground where most ancient Greek cemeteries were placed.
 ALMOND: favor from God; Virgin birth
 APPLE: sin; Eve
 BAMBOO: the emblem of Buddha. The seven-knotted bamboo denotes the seven degrees of initiation and invocation in Buddhism. On Japanese memorials - symbolic of devotion and truthfulness.
 BELLFLOWER: gratitude
 BOUQUETS: condolences, grief
 BUDS: renewal of life
 BUTTERCUP: cheerfulness.
 CALLA LILY: symbolizes marriage.
 CEDAR: strong faith; length of days; success
 CINQUEFOIL: maternal affection, beloved daughter
 CORN: it was a country custom to send a sheaf to relatives on the death of a farmer. It may be used as an occupational symbol.
 CROCUS: youthful gladness
 CYPRUS: sorrow; death; eternal life, Roman symbol for mourning
 DAFFODIL: death of youth, desire, art, grace, beauty, deep regard.
 DAISY: innocence of child, Jesus the Infant, youth, the Son of righteousness, gentleness, purity of thought.
 DEAD LEAVES: sadness, melancholy
 DOGWOOD: Christianity, divine sacrifice, triumph of eternal life, resurrection.
 EASTER LILY: modern flower symbolic of resurrection
 EVERGREENS: immortality
 FERN: sincerity, sorrow
 FIGS: prosperity, eternal life
 FLEUR-DE-LIS: flame, passion, ardor, mother
 FLOWER: brevity of earthly existence, sorrow
 FLOWER (broken): premature death
 FORGET-ME-NOT: remembrance
 FRUIT: eternal plenty

FRUIT AND VINE: Jesus Christ; the Christian church
 GOURDS: the coming to be and passing away of all earthly matters
 GRAPES: Christ
 GRAPES AND LEAVES: Christian faith.
 HAWTHORN: hope, merriness, springtime
 HOLLY: foresight
 HONEYSUCKLE: bonds of love, generosity and devoted affection
 IVY: abiding memory, friendship, fidelity, immortality
 LAUREL: victory, triumph, glory
 LILY, LILIES: The virgin's flower, also the symbol of innocence and purity.
 LILY OF THE VALLEY: return of happiness, purity, humility.
 LOTUS: Egyptian water lily and ornament
 MORNING GLORY: Signifies the beginning of Life
 MYSTIC ROSE: Mother
 MOSS: merit
 MULBERRY: I will not survive you
 OAK LEAVES and ACORN: Oak leaves can stand for power, authority or victory. Often seen on Military tombs.
 OAK TREE: hospitality, stability, strength, honor, eternity, endurance, liberty. In smaller pioneer cemeteries, it is common to place children's graves near oak trees.
 OLIVE: peace; healing faith
 PALM: spiritual victory over death; martyrdom; reward of the righteous; peace
 PANSY: symbolizes remembrance and humility.
 PASSION FLOWER: the elements of the passion of Christ: the lacy crown—the crown of thorns; the five stamens—the five wounds; the 10 petals—the 10 faithful Apostles
 PINE: fertility, regeneration, fidelity
 PINEAPPLE: hospitality, good host
 POMEGRANATE: immortality; resurrection; unity; nourishment of the soul
 POPPY: symbolic of eternal sleep
 ROSE: condolence, sorrow; the brevity of earthly existence; of

English descent incited by the Tudor Rose.
Often 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

ROSE WREATH: Beauty and virtue rewarded
ROSEBUDS (joining) - strong bond between two people (e.g., mother and child who died at the same time
ROSEBUDS (several on same branch) - secrecy
ROSEMARY: remembrance

SHAMROCK: Ireland as country of origin
SHEAVES OF WHEAT: time, the divine harvest
STRAWBERRY: righteousness; humility
THISTLE: of Scottish descent; the inevitability of death, Christ's crown of thorns.
TREE: faith; life; the Tree of Life
TREE (felled): mortality
TREE (sprouting): life everlasting
TREE TRUNK (or broken): premature death or the shortness of life.
TREE TRUNK or STUMP
SHAPED STONE: usually indicates a member of The Woodmen of the World

VINE: Christian church; Christ; wine, the symbolic blood of Jesus; the sacraments
WHEAT: resurrection, bread and wine (Christian), fertility
WHEAT BUSHEL: body of Christ
WHEAT SHEAVES: the divine harvest, sometimes represents the aged.
WILLOW, WEEPING: grief; death (carried at Masonic funerals); earthly sorrow, the symbolic tree of human sadness, Nature's lament
WREATH: victory in death, saintliness and glory, eternity.
WREATH WORN BY SKULL: victory of death over life
YEW: immortality, sadness

POSSIBLE INDICATORS OF THE DECEASED'S OCCUPATION

BARBER: Barber Bowl (for bleeding) and Razor.
BUTCHER: an axe, steel knife and cleaver.
FARMER: Coulter (type of hoe), flail (threshing implement), swingletree (rod for beating flax), stalk of corn.
GARDENER: Rake & Spade.
MASON: Wedge & Level
MARINER: Anchor, Sextant & Cross Staff.

MERCHANT: Scales, some type of sign.
MINISTER: Bible
SHOEMAKER: Leather cutter's Knife, Nippers, Sole cutter & Awl
SMITH: Crown, Hammer & Anvil
TEACHER: Open Book.
WEAVER : Loom, Shuttle & Stretchers.

GEOMETRIC SYMBOLISM – from the Glossary of Victorian Cemetery Symbolism Website

Geometric forms are commonly found on grave memorials:

CIRCLE: The circle is pre-Christian and its original symbolic meaning has been adopted by Christianity. It is universally known as the symbol of eternity and never-ending existence. Extremely common on gravesites, its usual representation is a cross surrounded by circle. Two circles, one above the other, represent earth and sky. Three interconnected circles represent the Holy Trinity.

CROSS: There are many different types of Christian crosses worldwide, but only a handful are common in North America.

- **BOTONEE CROSS:** So named because of its modified trefoil (three-lobed) ends, represents the trinity.
- **CALVARY CROSS:** A Latin cross standing on three steps or blocks, it signifies faith, hope and love. Love is sometimes replaced by charity.
- **CELTIC CROSS:** The circle around the crosspiece symbolizes eternity. It's origin can be traced to the Celtic cultures of the British Isles. There is a legend of how St. Patrick when preaching to some soon to be converted heathens was shown a sacred standing stone that was marked with a circle that was symbolic of the moon goddess. Patrick made the mark of a Latin cross through the circle and blessed the stone making the first Celtic Cross.

- **EASTERN CROSS:** Used in Orthodox (Russian/Greek) Christian Religions, this cross upper horizontal shoulder representing the inscription over the head of Jesus. The lower slanting shoulder represents the footrest of the crucified Jesus.
- **FLEUREE CROSS / GOTHIC CROSS:** This flowered cross symbolizes the adult Christian by its more opened flaired out ends
- **GREEK CROSS:** It has four arms equal in length and is the traditional symbol of Christian faith. The equal length drawings of the cross is pre-Christian, and in paganism, represented the four elements—earth, air, fire and water.
- **IONIC CROSS:** Similar to the Celtic Cross, it's ends flair outward. The ionic cross signifies everlasting salvation, love and glory. The circle around the crosspiece symbolizes eternity.
- **LATIN CROSS:** One of the oldest symbols of Christianity and the most commonly used form, it is also the simplest in design. In early times, it was called god's mark

TRIANGLE / TREFOIL / TRIQUETRA: In Christianity, the equilateral triangle is the symbol of the Trinity. Other geometric shapes representing the Holy Trinity are the trefoil, the triquetra, the circle within the triangle, the triangle in circle and the triquetra and circle. To the ancient Egyptians, the triangle was an emblem of Godhead; to the Pythagoreans, it symbolized wisdom.

SQUARE: It represents the earth and earthly existence. Some monuments have a cube or square inverted to point the corners downward and upward. This illustrates earthly existence and the directions of earth and heaven.

PENTAGRAM: This is a five-pointed, star-shaped figure made by extending the sides of a regular pentagon until they meet. This figure pre-dates Christianity and was first known to be used by Pythagoras, the Greek philosopher. Later in the Middle Ages, the pentagram was used by magicians and sorcerers. It was believed that the pentagram offered protection against evil. Christianity adopted the figure and the symbolism to suggest the five wounds suffered by Christ on the cross. It is interesting to note that the pentagram is used by both Christianity and Wicca (witchcraft).

PYRAMID: Eternity. It was supposed that a pyramid-shaped tombstone prevented the devil from reclining on a grave.

SWASTIKA: Exact origin is unknown but it is considered one of the oldest and widespread symbols used. Commonly found on Buddhist memorials, it represents the seal of the Buddha's heart; the doctrine of Buddha; the round of existence. To the Chinese, the swastika had two forms symbolizing the male and female; clockwise and anti-clockwise. Also used by the Romans and later by the Nazi party in Germany during the Second World War.

For more information see the following websites or books (and many others) -

Web Sites

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

Cemetery Symbolism: A Wary Glossary
<http://www.alsirat.com/symbols/symbols1.html>

From Beyond the Grave: Cemetery Symbols
http://www.prairieghosts.com/grave_symbols.html

Glossary for Studying Cemeteries
<http://www.history.org/history/teaching/glossary2.cfm>

Glossary of Victorian Cemetery Symbolism
http://www.vintageviews.org/vv-tl/pages/Cem_Symbolism.htm

Books

Early American Gravestone Art in Photographs by Francis Y. Duval (Dover Publications)

Graven Images: New England Stonecarving and Its Symbols, 1650-1815 by Allan L. Ludwig (Wesleyan University Press)

Gravestones of Early New England, and the Men Who Made Them, 1653-1800 by Harriette Merrifield Forbes (Pyne Press)

Soul in the Stone: Cemetery Art from America's Heartland by John Gary Brown (University Press of Kansas)