

# How to Research a Cemetery

By Hal Horrocks

[Hal@HorrocksGenealogy.com](mailto:Hal@HorrocksGenealogy.com)

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## Cemetery Types

- Church Owned
  - Including churchyards located around the church and cemeteries run by the church
- National, State, and Local Owned
  - Owned by the government, federal, state, and local, maintained by our tax dollars
- Privately Owned
  - For profit organizations
- Family Cemeteries
  - Usually on private property

## Death and Burial Customs

- As far back as 60,000 BC, man buried their dead with pomp and circumstance
- Archeologists have found Neanderthals buried their dead with flowers
- Many early burial rites and customs were practiced to protect the living, by appeasing the spirits who were thought to have caused the person's death.
- Such ghost protection rituals and superstitions have varied extensively with time and place, as well as with religious perception, but many are still in use today.
- The custom of shutting the eyes of the deceased is believed to have begun this way, done in an attempt to close a 'window' from the living world to the spirit world.
- Covering the face of the deceased with a sheet comes from pagan beliefs that the spirit of the deceased escaped through the mouth.
- In some cultures, the home of the deceased was burned or destroyed to keep his spirit from returning.
- In others, the doors were unlocked and windows were opened to ensure that the soul was able to escape.
- In 19th century Europe and America the dead were carried out of the house feet first, in order to prevent the spirit from looking back into the house and beckoning another member of the family to follow.
- Mirrors were also covered, usually with black crepe, so the soul would not get trapped and not be able to pass to the other side.
- Family photographs were also sometimes turned face-down to prevent any of the close relatives and friends of the deceased from being possessed by the spirit of the dead.
- Some cultures took their fear of ghosts to an extreme.
  - The Saxons of early England cut off the feet of their dead so the corpse would be unable to walk.
  - Some aborigine tribes took the even more extreme step of cutting off the head of the dead, thinking this would leave the spirit too busy searching for his head to worry about the living.
- Cemeteries and Burial
  - Here are some of the most unusual rituals used to ward off spirits.....
  - The use of tombstones may go back to the belief that ghosts could be weighed down.
  - Mazes found at the entrance to many ancient tombs are thought to have been constructed to keep the deceased from returning to the world as a spirit....Since it was believed that ghosts could only travel in a straight line
  - Some people even considered it necessary for the funeral procession to return from the graveside by a different path from the one taken in with the deceased....So that the departed's ghost wouldn't be able to follow them home.
  - Some of the rituals which we now practice as a sign of respect may also be rooted in a fear of spirits.....
  - Beating on the grave, the firing of guns, funeral bells, and wailing chants were all used by some cultures to scare away other ghosts at the cemetery.

## Tombstone Humor

Sorry, space does not allow for putting in this information since it is graphical in nature. Those shown in the presentation were all taken from the internet. To see more of these and many more, just Google "Tombstone Humor" and "Interesting Tombstones". You can spend hours looking at these interesting tombstones.

## Tombstone Symbols

- Have you ever wandered through a cemetery and wondered about the meanings of the designs carved on old gravestones?

- Thousands of different religious and secular symbols and emblems have adorned tombstones through the ages.
- The symbols can indicate:
  - Attitudes towards death and the hereafter
  - Membership in a fraternal or social organization
  - An individual's trade or occupation
  - Or even ethnic identity
- While many of these tombstone symbols have fairly simple interpretations, it is not always easy to determine their meaning and significance.
- We were not present when these symbols were carved into the stone and can't claim to know our ancestors' intentions.
- They may have included a particular symbol for no other reason than because they thought it was pretty.
- While we can only speculate what our ancestors were trying to tell us through their choice of tombstone art, these symbols and their interpretations are commonly agreed upon by gravestone scholars.
- Different Tombstone Symbols
  - Alpha (A), the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and Omega (Ω), the last letter, are often found combined into a single symbol representing Christ.
  - The American flag, a symbol of courage and pride, is generally found marking the grave of a military veteran in American cemeteries
  - The anchor was regarded in ancient times as a symbol of safety and was adopted by Christians as a symbol of hope and steadfastness.
  - Angels found in the cemetery are a symbol of spirituality. They guard the tomb and are thought to be messengers between God and man.
  - The symbol of an elk head and the letters BPOE, represents membership in the Benevolent Protective Order of the Elks.
  - A book found on a cemetery tombstone can represent many different things, including the book of life, often represented as the Bible.
  - The Celtic or Irish cross, taking the form of a cross within a circle generally represents eternity.
  - A broken column indicates a life cut short, a memorial to the death of someone who died young or in the prime of life, before reaching old age.
  - Seen in both Christian and Jewish cemeteries, the dove is a symbol of resurrection, innocence and peace.
  - After the cross, the urn is one of the most commonly used cemetery monuments. The design represents a funeral urn, and is thought to symbolize immortality.
  - A hand with index finger pointing upward symbolizes the hope of heaven, while a hand with forefinger pointing down represents God reaching down for the soul
  - Ivy carved into a tombstone is said to represent friendship, fidelity and immortality.
  - Laurel, especially fashioned in the shape of a wreath, is a common symbol found in the cemetery. It can represent victory, distinction, eternity or immortality.
  - The lion serves as a guardian in the cemetery, protecting a tomb from unwanted visitors and evil spirits. It symbolizes the courage and bravery of the departed.
  - The mighty oak tree, often represented as oak leaves and acorns, signifies strength, honor, longevity and steadfastness.
  - The olive branch, often depicted in the mouth of a dove, symbolizes peace - that the soul has departed in the peace of God.
  - The most common of the Masonic symbols is the compass and square standing for faith and reason.
  - The inverted torch is a true cemetery symbol, symbolizing life in the next realm or a life extinguished.
  - In its generic form, as pictured here, the wheel represents the cycle of life, enlightenment and divine power. A wheel might also represent a wheelwright.
- Symbols at Copp's Hill Burying Ground – Boston, MA
  - Be aware of different symbols in different cemeteries. This will tell you much about the people that lived in the area and the time frames during the period of cemetery use.
  - This is especially prevalent in older cemeteries.
  - Copp's Hill Burying Ground is the second oldest cemetery in Boston. It was formed in 1645.
  - Symbols at Copp's Hill Burying Ground – Boston, MA
    - Winged Skull or Death's Head
    - Winged Face or Cherub
    - Urn-and-Willow
- There are literally hundreds of symbols and images that can be found on tombstones.
- These websites give you virtually everything you could want to see:
  - GRAVEN IMAGES: Gravestone Motifs & Their Meanings  
<http://www.olivetreegenealogy.com/misc/grave.shtml>

## Reading and Exploring a Cemetery

- Not all history is written on paper.....
- History abounds in Cemeteries.....
- People who bury their dead say as much about themselves and those who had died
- Acute observation with the eye of a detective will yield evidence:
  - the names of people buried
  - their family relationships
  - their religious beliefs
  - their social standings
  - their cultural symbols
  - their artistic ideals

## When Exploring a Cemetery

- Important
- Get permission to go onto private land
- Observe without altering
- Take photographs, make sketches, and/or notes
- Take nothing from the Cemetery
- Leave everything exactly as you found it
- Remember that you tread on sacred ground
- When you are exploring a cemetery, whether an ancestor is buried there or not.....
- Here are a few things you should do, and/or be aware of:
  - Be prepared
  - Look at the cemetery and its surroundings
  - Analyze the geography of the space
  - Focus on the markers
  - Gather evidence about the people buried here
  - Search for supporting documentation
  - Put it together – Conclusions

## Be Prepared

- If possible, try to find some history on the cemetery
- In this case, I had been in Key West a few days and did the tourist things and had a feeling for the local history
- I stopped by the cemetery before I did my exploring and they had a brochure.....
- The night before my visit I did some Gogging and read as much as I could about the cemetery.....
- I discovered that the cemetery was established in 1847 after the disastrous hurricane of October 11, 1846.
- According to prominent attorney and port inspector Stephen Mallory:

“The effects of the hurricane were terrible. The graveyard of this town on a high sand ridge on the southern part of the Island was entirely washed away, and the dead were scattered throughout the forest, many of them lodged in trees.”
- The hurricane also destroyed several other burial grounds, necessitating the establishment of a new city cemetery.
- Bring something to record what you find.
  - Digital camera and a cell phone with a voice recorder
    - Make sure that the camera DPI setting is on the highest resolution

## The Cemetery and its Surroundings

- Observe where the graveyard is located in relation to the landscape as a whole.
- In a city or out in the country?
- What type of cemetery is it?
  - National, local, for profit, family plot?
- Try to picture how the cemetery looked when it was open?
- The Cemetery and its Surroundings
  - If in a city, are there roads around it or do houses butt up against the cemetery?
  - Is it secluded?
- Analyze the Geography of the Space
  - Observe how the graveyard is defined.....
  - Are there walls..... What are they made.....
  - Are they fancy or plain.....
  - Crude or fine craftsmanship?
  - Observe the overall design of the cemetery.....
  - Are there artificially created features such as promontories and ponds.....
  - Stop for a moment and be quiet, look around -- what is the feeling of the place?
  - Are different parts of the graveyard used for different purposes.....
  - Look at the flora and fauna.....
  - Which plants are native and which have been imported.....

### **Focus on Markers**

- Observe the dates on the markers.
- What is the range of dates represented?
- How do these dates compare with the dates of other man-made structures in the surrounding area?
- What conclusions can be drawn about the cemetery beginning and periods of active use?
- Did a group of people die at around the same time, perhaps indicating an epidemic or disaster?
- Are there family plots?
- Are they in one area or spread around?
- Is there an area for paupers?
- Are there any really unusual ones?
- Are there any monuments indicating any historical events?
- Are there any really gaudy monuments?
- Observe the types of markers used.
- What are the markers made of?
- Are the markers made from local or imported materials?
- Do designs and materials vary according to the status of the person buried?
- Do designs and materials vary according to the dates of burials?
- Consider how changes in the markers reflect changes in technology.
- What tools were used to make the markers?
- Were they made by hand or by machine?
- At the end of the twentieth century, there was a revival of personal imagery through photographs of the deceased etched into stone.
- Observe the designs of the markers and their writing.
- What shapes are used?
- What symbols are used and what are their meanings?
- Do any of these seem to follow particular styles tied to particular periods?

### **Gather Info about Those Buried**

- Observe the languages on the markers.
- Observe the epitaphs.
- Is there genealogical information on the markers?
- Who is buried with whom?
- Look for evidence of recent visits
- What objects are left at the graves?
- Are the graves well-kept?
- But it might be fun to take down a few names and see if you can find them.....

### **Put it All Together – Conclusions and Findings**

- What makes this cemetery different than others?
  - A long city history with several different eras of the city's life, this is all reflected in the cemetery
  - The seemingly random scattering of gravesites in what looks to be the 'older' section of the cemetery
  - The use of so many crypts and their different sizes
  - So many family plots
  - Many of the older graves have no markers and are not kept up
  - So many of the Curry and Albury families came from the Bahamas
  - Put it All Together – Conclusions and Findings
  - Repair work being done out in the open
  - The use of white wash on some of the crypts
  - The late 1800's and early 1900's seems to be the time when the rich families were trying to outdo each other with monuments

### **Cemetery Records On-Line**

- Below is a partial list of on-line cemetery records:
  - <http://www.interment.net/> - Cemetery Listings around the world - Free online library of burial records from thousands of cemeteries across the world, for historical and genealogy research.
  - [http://www.genealogy.com/vcem\\_welcome.html](http://www.genealogy.com/vcem_welcome.html) - Virtual Cemetery, pictures of tombstones
  - <http://www.accessgenealogy.com/cemetery/> - US Cemetery Records
  - <http://www.findagrave.com/> - 68 million grave records- Browse descriptions and photos of graves of thousands of famous people from around the world. The site also lists over 12 million grave records for "non famous" ancestors.
  - <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~cemetery/> - US GenWeb Tombstone Transcription Project - Volunteers from across the U.S. have uploaded transcriptions and photos from thousands of cemeteries
  - <http://www.about.com/> - Several articles on exploring cemeteries