

MESSAGES FROM THE GRAVE: LISTENING TO YOUR ANCESTOR'S TOMBSTONE

©2011 Elissa Scalise Powell, Certified GenealogistSM, Certified Genealogical LecturerSM
www.PowellGenealogy.com

Tombstones are the last monuments to our lives on this earth. But they are being destroyed by acid rain, vandalism, weather and changes in land usage, which make them illegible or eradicate them altogether. There are signs that show where abandoned cemeteries lie and ways to read “illegible” stones that may be the last time a person may hear the tombstone “speak.” Analyzing all the information may shed light on relationships the deceased had.

Finding the Right Cemetery

Know where they had lived
The time frame that they died
Their religious and fraternal associations
Their ethnicity, military service, and economic background
How long they were married to the surviving spouse

Types of Cemeteries

Commercial: usually have an office
Church: contact church or archives
Family or abandoned: Head for the trees!

Types of Stones

Symbols on the gravestone may have significance, i.e. a thistle may indicate Scottish heritage.

Getting the Most from Reading a Tombstone

Note exactly what you see on the stone (abbreviations, “wrong” information) in its entirety
Check back of stone and sides for inscriptions and stone carver’s name
Techniques: digital camera and regular, videotape, mirror, rubbing (paper or foil), chalk, water, mud, shaving cream?

Problems in Reading Tombstones

Broken, moved, or misplaced stones, or missing altogether
Worn stones give no contrast to reading; leaning or toppled stones; material that doesn’t last
“Cleaned-up” cemetery where all the markers have been removed
Numbers easily confused: 4 vs. 1 or 7, 8 vs. 3 or 2, 5 vs. 6, 6 vs. 8, 8 vs. 9

Analyzing the information

Is the age of the stone contemporary with the death date? Or is this a replacement stone?
Assuming relationships based on the proximity of stones; Spelling changes
Not noticing relationships in the proximity
Stones in a foreign language indicate ethnicity as do symbols and burial customs
Reasons that what was cast in stone is false

Information on the Internet

Web page for your county, or genealogical or historical society may have a cemetery list

The USGenWeb project at <http://usgw-tombstones.org/> and a site of abbreviations and symbols found on tombstones is at http://olivetreegenealogy.com/misc/grave_symbols.shtml

A site showing emblems of belief is: <http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/hm/hmemb.asp>

The US Geological Survey database of map features (feature class = cemetery):
<http://geonames.usgs.gov/pls/gnispublic>

Association for Gravestone Studies has much how-to information: www.gravestonestudies.org

Cemetery Junction Directory has cemetery listings, a directory of over 50,000 cemeteries, articles & helpful hints for researching. <http://www.CemeteryJunction.com>

Links to over 2,000 web sites concerning cemeteries (and counting):
<http://www.cyndislist.com/cemetery.htm>

Links to on-line cemetery burial records, and tombstone inscriptions, including Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, France, Germany, India, Norway, Philippines, Serbia, Thailand, the U. K.
<http://www.interment.net>

Searchable database of millions of user-contributed world-wide readings and photographs:
<http://www.findagrave.com>

Billion Graves project to collect photographs, transcribe, and search gravestone images
<http://billiongraves.com/>

Links to worldwide cemeteries including Africa, Asia, Australia, Canada, England, as well as Catholic cemeteries in various U.S. cities:
<http://homepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~maggieoh/Links/cem.html>

Symbols and wording on tombstones with their meanings:
<http://homepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~maggieoh/tomb.html>

Directory of US Funeral Homes, Obituary Search & Cemetery (including VA) Index
<http://www.funeralnet.com>

International Jewish Cemetery Project has gathered information on more than 21,000 cemeteries around the world including Slovakia, Czech Republic, Ukraine and Poland, and almost 500,000 names of individuals from all around the world from over 1,100 cemeteries that have already been indexed. Also help on how to interpret tombstones.
<http://www.iajgs-jewishcemeteryproject.org/> and <http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/cemetery/>

SAMPLE FORM USED IN THE FIELD
as developed by The North Hills Genealogists [of Pittsburgh, PA]

CEMETERY Wallace Cemetery READER 1 Expowell READER 2 _____ DATE 26 Feb 1998
Pine Twp. Hazy Day

SURNAME	ROW #	STONE #	STONE: (S)SINGLE (C)COMBO (M)MONOLITH	TYPE: (F)FLAT, (O)OBELISK (U)UPRIGHT, (M)MONUMENT (T)TABLE TOP	COLOR MATERIAL SHAPE	CONDITION: (E)EXCELLENT (G)GOOD, (P)POOR (B)ROKEN, (I)ILLEGIBLE	PLACEMENT: (S)SUNKEN, (L)LEANING (F)FALLEN, IN (P)PILE (M)MISSING (D)DISPLACED	SYMBOLS
example: STALEY	1	5	S	U	Rounded Top White Marble	P/B - part missing, part repaired	F	Dove
Inscription: "BARBARY / Wife of / William Staley / Died / May 26, 1864. / Aged 87 years. / _____ d who die / _____" On Base: Alex Beggs (Stone Carver)								
LOGAN	3	1	S	U	white	poor		
Inscription: JOHN LOGAN / Died / OCT. 30, 1859, / Aged 82 ys. 11 m. / 4 15 ds. / ONE LINE EPITAPH / (STONECARVER) W. H. Mc _____ Only one facing West, metal rods behind for support.								
THOMPSON	3	2	S	U	white	poor		Finger pointing up
Inscription: SAMUEL P. THOMPSON / DIED / JUNE 28, 1870. / in the _5 year of his age / 4 lines illegible epitaph 1987 Reading says 45 years								
?	3	3	S	U	ROUNDED FIELD STONE			
Inscription:								
McCord	3	4	S	U	white	Good	leaning	
Inscription: JOHN McCORD. / Died / J_n. 5, 1850 / IN the 91 year of his Age 1987 Reading says JAN. 5, 1850								
McCord	3	5	S	U	white	Good	leaning	
Inscription: ELEANOR, / wife of / JOHN McCORD. / Died / JULY 22, 1856. / IN the 91 year / of her AGE. / (STONECARVER) J. W. LOGAN. / JOHNSTOWN.								

FINAL BOOK FORMAT from *Pioneer Cemeteries of Pine and Richland Townships, Allegheny County, PA*

Row 3

LOGAN (3,1,s) upright, white marble, poor condition
On top curve: "Our Father" "John Logan / Died / Oct. 30, 1859, / Aged 82 ys. 11 m. / & 15 ds. / He is not dead but sleeping" Stone carver: "W. H. Marshall" This stone is facing west. It has metal rods behind it for support.

THOMPSON (3,2,s) upright, white marble, poor condition, carved finger pointing up
"Samuel P. Thompson / Died / June 28, 1870. / in the _5 year of his age. / [4 lines of epitaph]" Note: 1987 reading shows 45 years of his age

NO SURNAME (3,3,?) upright, rounded fieldstone, illegible

McCORD (3,4,s) upright, white marble, good condition, leaning
"John McCord. / Died / J_n. 5, 1850 / in the 91 year of his age"
Note: 1987 reading says Jan. 5, 1850.

McCORD (3,5,s) upright, white marble, good condition, leaning
"Eleanor, / wife of / John McCord. / Died / July 22, 1856. / In the 91 year / of her age." Stone carver: "J. W. Logan. / Johnstown."

BIBLIOGRAPHY and RESOURCES

Mailing lists at Rootsweb.com. There are specific cemetery lists by state.

<http://bigfile.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/listsearch>

Jacobs, G. Walker. *Stranger Stop and Cast an Eye: A Guide to Gravestones and Grave Rubbing*, 3rd edition. Brattleboro, VT: S. Greene Press, 1973.

Keister, Douglas. *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*. Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2004.

North Hills Genealogists. *Pioneer Cemeteries of Franklin Park Borough and Marshall Township, Allegheny County, PA*. Pittsburgh, PA: North Hills Genealogists, 2007. (Free index at www.NorthHillsGenealogists.org)

_____. *Pioneer Cemeteries of Pine and Richland Townships, Allegheny County, PA*. Pittsburgh, PA: North Hills Genealogists, 2003. (Free index at www.NorthHillsGenealogists.org)

Powell, Elissa Scalise, "Messages From the Grave: Listening to your ancestor's tombstone" Part I and Part II, *NGS NewsMagazine*, vol. 30, no. 2 (June/July 2004) and vol. 30, no. 4 (December 2004). (From the National Genealogical Society, 3108 Columbia Pike, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22204. www.NGSgenealogy.org)

Schafer, Louis S. *Tombstones of Your Ancestors*. Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1991.

Strangstad, Lynette. *A Graveyard Preservation Primer*. Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1988.

Various resource leaflets available from the Association for Gravestone Studies:

"Analyzing Cemetery Data" by Rosalee Oakley, 1990, 2003. AGS #1

"Guide to Forming a 'Cemetery Friends' Organization" by Sybil F. Crawford, 1995, 2003. #3

"Cleaning Masonry Burial Monuments" by Tracy L. Coffing and Fred Oakley, 2003. #4

"Gravestone Rubbing for Beginners" by Jessie Lie Farber, 1986, 2003. #5

"Basic Guide to Carver Research" with Laurel Gabel as told to Jessie Lie Farber, 1986, 2003. #6.

"Making Photographic Records of Gravestones" by Daniel and Jessie Lie Farber, 1986, 2003. #7

"Symbolism in the Carvings on Old Gravestones" by Jessie Lie Farber, 1986, 2003. #8

"Reading Weathered Marble Gravestones" by John E. Sterling, 2003. #11

"The Care of Old Cemeteries and Gravestones" by Lance R. Mayer, 1980, 2003. #12

"Recommendations for the Care of Gravestones" by Jessie Lie Farber, 1986, 2003. #15

"What Do You Do When You Find A 'Lost' Gravestone?" by Laurel Gabel, Jo Goeselt, Marcia Melnyk, Barbara Rotundo, 2003. #16

"Recording Cemetery Data" by F. Joanne Baker & Daniel Farber, field testing by Anne G. Giesecke, 1986, 2003. #17

"Photographing Gravestones" by Michael Cornish, 1990.

"Primary Genealogical Resources Available on a Local Level" by Fred Fredette, 1986.

"What to Look for on Gravestones" by Michael Cornish, 1990.