

**The Silent Language of the Stones:
Reading Gravestones Through Symbols and Carvings©
with Joy Neighbors**

<http://www.AGraveInterest.blogspot.com>

You'll be amazed at just what fascinating facts are awaiting discovery in the cemetery. The type of gravestone used can help us determine when an ancestor died. Hard-to-read inscriptions may be puzzled out and solved. Tombstone inscriptions provide us with interesting and thought-provoking details about our ancestor's life, relationships and interests.

Uncovering Family Secrets on Your Ancestor's Gravestone

- Always take a digital camera to the cemetery. (Your cell phone camera may be fine.) In today's world, there's no excuse not to get an accurate record of your loved one's headstone.
- Enhance the writing on tombstones without damaging them. No charcoal rubbings or soap, please. Use water or a mirror for better clarity for reading.
- Pay attention to dates, which give clues to epidemics that swept through a region.

Types of Headstones

1) Fieldstone (1600s – Present) Fieldstones were the earliest types of marker used. Besides being plentiful, they could be carved or chiseled with a name.

2) Slate (1600s – 1900s) Found mainly in the eastern U.S., slate can withstand freezing and thawing fairly well, and acid rain appears to have minimal effect. But due to the stone's porousness, it is subject to delamination (separating into sheets.)

3) Sandstone (1650s – late 1800s) Sandstone was popular because it was easy to carve and available around the country. Colors range from red to light tan to brown. Problems include spalling or flaking where piece chip off making the surface uneven and encouraging the growth of lichen.

4) Limestone (mid-1700s – 1930s) Limestone was favored in the Midwest because of availability and ease of carving. Unfortunately the soft stone is severely affected by weathering, which causes pitting. This makes the letters slowly “fade away.”

5) Marble (1780s – 1930s) Marble has been used for centuries due to its strength and beautiful appearance. The stone is usually white with blue or grey veins running through it. Acid rain is the main enemy causing the surface to become grainy, and slowly fading the lettering into the stone.

6) Granite (mid-1800s – present) Granite is the most durable of gravestones, and currently, the most popular. Granite lettering is resistant to deterioration, and the stone does not erode. Modern techniques make it easy to carve, and lasers allow the etching of personal images to tell the deceased’s life’s story.

Hard to Distinguish Older Scripts

Inscriptions written in Old English, Gothic and Blackmore Lettering fonts can present a challenge to read. Take photos of the stone’s lettering – close up with a few letters at a time, with a sentence, and the entire epitaph.

Once you’re home, take an image of the confusing letters and place into Google’s image search. (Check out wikihow for ways to do this.

[https://www.wikihow.com/Search-by-Image-on-Google.](https://www.wikihow.com/Search-by-Image-on-Google))

You can also contact a local university for someone who teaches transcription, or has experience transcribing letters and books. Museums and historical societies will have people experienced with this type of transcription.

Transcription Internet Sources

- Brigham Young University Script Tutorial – <http://www.script.byu.edu/Pages/home.aspx>
- English Handwriting (1500 – 1700's) – <http://english.com.ac.uk/ceres/ehoc/lessons.html>
- Gothic script – <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/gothic/htm>
- Jewish Records Indexing – Polish Transliteration Standards - <http://www.jri-poland.org/translit.html>
- National Archives Paleography: reading old handwriting – <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography>

What the Stones Can Tell Us

Gravestones can offer clues about an ancestor's life. Besides surnames, birth and death dates, and age at death, you can discover other family relationships, religious affiliations, military service, club and fraternal memberships, occupations, economic status, and epitaphs.

Deciphering Symbols

Early and Colonial Americans placed death's heads, skulls, crossbones, hourglasses and scythes on their tombstones to indicate mortality and the passage of time. (These symbols were also used to instill a fear of God so those left behind would lead more chaste lives.)

By the 18th century, the Grim Reaper, an hourglass with wings, and a crossed spade and shovel were also included on gravestones. But more life-affirming symbols were being used such as willow trees, winged cherubs, and doves, which depicted the flight of the soul.

During the 1800s, iconography came into vogue. The Victorians loved a good secret so headstones were heavily decorated with images and symbols. Carved flora, animals, birds, broken chains and wheels, farming implements and guns, even self-images began to appear on gravestones. Ornate sculptures and

architecture appeared in rural and landscaped cemeteries, which became the place to spend a quiet Sunday afternoon.

The Great Depression brought about the end of ostentatiousness, and stones were again simple and to the point.

Abbreviations, Associations and Organizations

- AASR – Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (Masonic)
- BLE – Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers
- CSA – Confederate States of America
- DAR – Daughters of the American Revolution
- FOF – Fraternal Order of Firefighters
- GAR – Grand Army of the Republic (Union)
- IOF – Independent Order of Foresters
- MWA – Modern Woodmen of America
- OGC – Order of the Golden Cross
- SOT – Sons of Temperance
- WOW – Woodmen of the World

Learn More with Joy Neighbors

The Family Tree Cemetery Field Guide: How to Find, Record and Preserve Your Ancestors' Graves by Joy Neighbors. (ShopFamilyTree.com to order, or see Joy for a signed copy of her book.)