

CHAPTER 3 ~ DECIPHERING THE GRAVESTONE

Graves have been decorated, some lavishly, since the beginning of civilization. Mysterious structures from the iron age are believed to be monuments to the dead. Massive Egyptian pyramids are obvious examples of extravagance.

Yet even the common people mourn their losses in similar, if not more humble ways. The family of Eva L. enjoyed her for only one month and five days and felt she deserved a monument of style and class. They remembered her with the inscription: *Budded on earth, to bloom in heaven.*



Eva, Only One Month Old

Today, monuments span small stones with traditional engraving to beautiful laser cut life-like images.

Each of these may give the current viewer a glimpse of the deceased's life. The decorations may identify religious followings, social affiliation if not a specific occupation, and one's patriotic service. Study the artwork, and try to imagine the reasoning for specific artwork. Then include your observations in genealogy and family history writings you might produce.

Grave Stones - What Is It Made Of?

From habit, we call grave markers gravestones, headstones, tombstones—almost always with *stone* in the word. Stone does dominate, though iron, bronze, wood, and other materials were substituted sometimes. Current monuments may be of synthetic stone, but we still refer to most markers as gravestones, except where the word *marker* is a better fit.

It is not crucial that genealogists or family historians know the exact type of stone used in an ancestors grave, and for most people it is hard to distinguish different stones. However, the type of stone used in a monument probably impacted the inscription's longevity as many gravestones have become nearly if not completely unreadable due to deterioration. The most common types of stone used in the U.S. over last few centuries are:

- Fieldstone
- Slate
- Sandstone
- Iron
- Limestone
- Marble
- Granite

The materials are listed in general chronological order of usage; with a geological review of the material.

Short Lived Zinc Monuments

These were sold in the late 1800s as *White Bronze*, though they were a composite of copper, tin, and mostly zinc. They are quite attractive, very durable, and easily identified with their bright blueish-gray appearance.



"White Bronze", Actually a Zinc alloy.

Fieldstone

Fieldstone is the formal name for a simple rock. Frequently used to mark graves in the 1800s when a carved stone was not affordable. This fieldstone, void of any carving now, was found in the *potters field* of a city cemetery. Potters fields were sections of cemeteries reserved for indigent or unknown people. Few fieldstones remain as they were simply placed on a grave and were easily moved. Engravings were typically minimal.

Characteristics:

- Local rock
- Variety of engraving quality, mostly crude
- Shoebox size to several feet across

Slate

Slate is a compressed *metamorphic* rock that was formed from clay or volcanic ash. Slate gravestones are mostly found along the eastern seaboard from the 1700s, and especially concentrated in the Boston area, and Newport, Rhode Island. Both areas possessed excellent supplies from local quarries, though it is seldom used today for new gravestones. While it retains carving well, by nature it is brittle and prone to breaking if abused.

Characteristics

- Usually medium/dark gray in color
- Smooth to touch
- Usually thinner than stone markers
- Can see the (natural) laminated layers

Sandstone

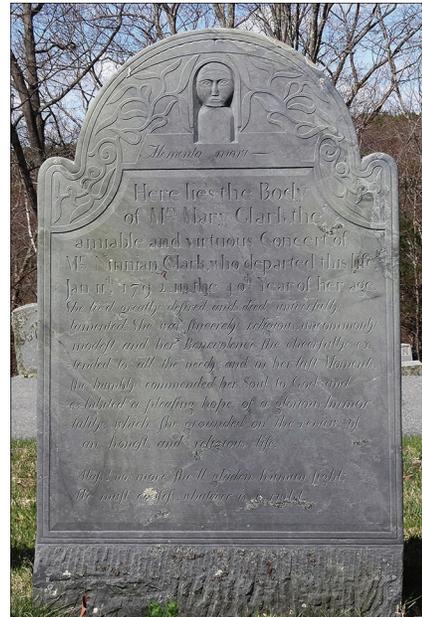
Sandstone is a *sedimentary* rock, composed of layers of rock sediments that have accumulated over millions of years. They can have various colors, some are called brownstone. It was popular in the 1700s and late 1800s as it was easy to carve. But this trait was also its disadvantage as they deteriorated easily over time, some crumbling to a point that any carving is now unreadable. Sandstone was also a popular base to support a larger marble gravestone.

Characteristics

- Wide range of gray, light tan to brown
- Rough to touch, layers evident.
- Sand grains can be identified under magnification.



Fieldstone in Potters Field



(Courtesy of Dan Rathman)

Slate tombstone in New Boston, NH, 1792



Weathered 1877 Sandstone Monument

Limestone

Limestone is also *sedimentary* rock, but its composition is different than sandstone, it is primarily composed of shells, coral, and bone; concentration of calcium resulting in its white color. If examined closely, shell structures may be seen. Popular in the 1700s and early 1800s limestone was largely due to availability in the area. Limestone deteriorates easy, and is seldom found except in areas where it is predominately found.

Characteristics

- White or gray, textured or rough.
- Tiny shells, coral, etc may be evident.
- May exhibit severe deterioration.

Marble

Marble is a *metamorphic* rock formed from limestone-like material that was recrystallized by extreme pressure and heat. Recrystallization is more than just compression, it actually changes the physical and chemical properties of the rock, making it more durable than limestone. Inspection with a magnifying glass clearly shows the crystals. White marble became the stone of choice throughout the 1800s, and into the 1900s. The easily recognized Civil War veteran gravestones (and current veteran gravestones) are white marble.

Characteristics

- Usually white (when clean), gray, blue, or even pink.
- Sometimes with gray or blue streaks.
- Marble crystals easily seen under magnification.
- Slightly rough to very rough for weathered stones.

Iron

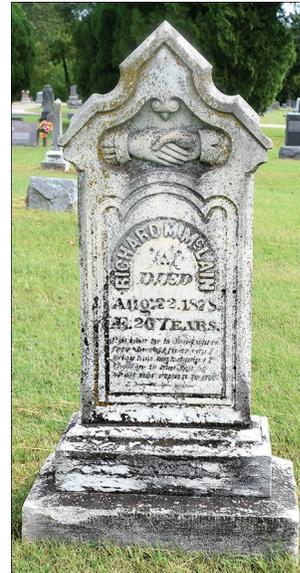
Iron grave markers are typically found in areas with Volga-German ancestry. These iron markers can be elaborate and quite large. They were used when engraved stones may have been expensive or not available in the area. Blacksmiths fashioned these from scrap iron, usually in the winter. Check local cemeteries in German communities for iron crosses.

Characteristics

- Usually scrap iron welded together.
- Large, several feet tall.
- Gothic designs.



Weathered 1933 Limestone Monument



Marble Gravestone - 1878



Volga-German Marker, c. 1900

Granite

Granite is *igneous* rock, a result of magma or volcanic activity. It is very hard. Granite came into use around 1900 as it was sturdy, did not deteriorate, and powered cutting machines made carving easier. To this day, it is still the most commonly used natural material for gravestones, from simple to the elaborate monuments. The stones can be rough, even boulder-like looking, or highly polished smooth monuments—sometimes a combination of both.

Sandblasting (actually using steel pellets) is a common method of engraving granite. Portable engraving machines units can even add a name, or death date, to pre-placed gravestones without removing the stone. Granite comes in a variety of colors, with most monument-quality stone imported from Brazil, India, and China.

Characteristics

- Usually gray in early usage.
- Variety of colors later, especially reddish-brown.
- Can have highly polished/smooth areas.
- Hard and durable.

Wood Markers

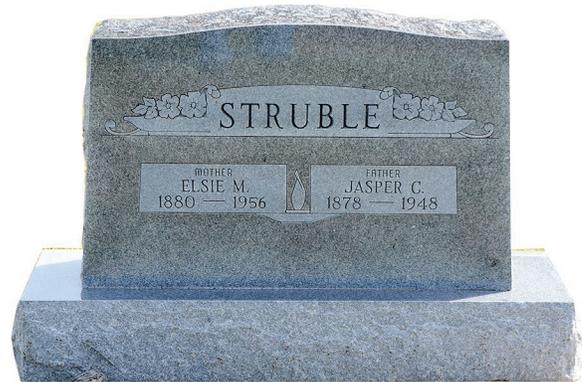
Not surprising, very few wood markers remain today, virtually none with legible carving. They were probably used for the poor, maybe a pauper buried at the expense of the local authorities. The Women’s Relief Corp (WRC) placed a Civil War veteran emblem on this grave.



Granite has been the stone of choice for over 100 years and is found in countless shapes, styles and finishes, including many colors. Gray is the most common, especially in early usage.



Small gray granite stone – 1916.



Polished gray granite – 1948.



Polished brown granite – 1949.



Polished red granite with frosted inset – 1936

Gravestone Symbology

Connecting life and death with higher beliefs and the afterlife, religious symbols may represent the deceased's dedication and fidelity to a specific deity. There are scores of symbols that have been used over the years, some with specific representations, others more esoteric, some referencing familiar Bible meanings.

Some symbols are simple acknowledgement of a tragic event. For example, many children gravestones include a carved lamb, signifying the child was taken too soon.

Fraternal symbols have been historically very prominent, connecting the deceased to the fellowship they had with others with similar beliefs and likes.

Deciphering symbols can actually give you a historical reference to beliefs. This can lead you to a search for records that reveal details of a person's life. Fraternal symbols are especially useful for this line of research.

Religious Denomination or Symbols

- Cross (variations)- Christian
- Cross with Flames - Methodist
- IHS (Catholic)- Ancient letters representing Jesus name
- Star of David (variations) – Hebrew
- Angle of Moroni – Mormon
- Crescent and Star – Muslim
- Wheel of Righteousness - Buddhist
- Hindu
- Medicine Wheel - Native American

General Symbols - Traditional Meaning

- Acorn – Strength, spiritual growth, power
- Alpha & Omega – The beginning and the end
- Anchor – Christian symbol of safety, hope
- Angel – Spiritual, messenger of god, guardian
- Bear – Berlin Bear (upright walking)
- Beehive – Mormon symbol, Masonic symbol
- Boat – Beginning Journey
- Book – Often representing the Bible
- Broken Column – A short life
- Butterfly – Shortened life
- Celtic Cross, Irish Cross – Eternity
- Dove – Peace and love, Resurrection
- Fish – Faith, Plenty
- Grapevine – Fertility and prosperity
- Hands, Clasped– Parting and unity
- Hands Praying – Praying to God

- Heart – Love
- Lily - Purity
- Oak Leaves – Strength, honor
- Olive Branch – Peace
- Owl – Wisdom
- Thistle – Of Scottish Descent
- Tools – Trade Tools
- Trees – Eternal life
- Palm Branch – Victory, peace

Fraternal Symbols

- Square and Compass – Masonic Lodge
- Two-Headed Eagle – Scottish Rite
- Star in Circle – Eastern Order of Star (Masonic women)
- Various Logs – Woodmen of the World
- Elk – Member of Order of the Elks
- Three Chain Links – Order of Odd Fellows
- Stylized Dove & RB – Daughters of Rebekah (Odd Fellow)

Fraternal, sorority, and affiliation emblems are frequently found on gravestones or as markers. Identifying the insignia may help you find additional information through that organization.

In-Ground Veteran & Fraternal Markers

After the Civil War, numerous patriotic organizations honored deceased veterans of the War. The most recognized is the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) Membership in the G.A.R. was restricted to veterans, though allied or auxiliary units such as the Women's Relieve Corp (WRC) followed. Fraternal organizations also created markers from their logo to recognize their members,



Ladies of the GAR marker.

Religious Affiliation

These sample images have been found in various cemeteries and represent a cross-section of denominations or beliefs. It is not a definitive gallery of all followings. Appendix A shows more than 50 silhouettes that are currently offered for application onto U.S. veteran gravestones supplied by the Veterans Administration.



Christian

Cross represents the crucifixion



Hebrew
Star of David



United Methodist
Cross and Flame



Buddhist *
Wheel of Righteousness



Catholic *
Celtic Cross



Hebrew
Menorah Candelabrum



Lutheran Cross *



Mormon *
Angel Moroni



Four Directions *



Catholic
IHS: Ancient letters,
representing Jesus' name



Muslim *
Star and Crescent



Christian Church *



Episcopal Cross *

* Images photographed at National Cemeteries from gravestones or markers of U.S. Veterans. Descriptions from VA Form 45-1330.

Six More Pages In This Chapter