



What Can You Learn from a Tombstone?

A Genealogist's Guide to Gravestone Evidence

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Why do tombstones matter in genealogical research? They are physical artifacts left behind to remind us of our ancestors and their lives. At times, the records may have been destroyed, but the tombstone remains, preserving a partial record of their life. We can gain a multitude of clues from tombstone and death record research. So, dig in and see what clues you might uncover about your ancestor!

Tombstones as Genealogical Evidence

Tombstones are original sources of information about our ancestors. We must treat them as though they are clues, rather than the absolute truth! Think about all of the people involved in collecting the data and getting it to the final product on the tombstone. The details may have been shared three or four times before the carving is completed. There is plenty of room for error. You must analyze what you find along side other independent records to determine the accuracy of the information.

What can we learn from a tombstone?

Names – Formal names, nicknames, middle names or initials, married or maiden names

Dates – Complete birth and death dates, partial dates, implied dates based on years of life

⚠ Dates may be incorrect — always verify.

Family Relationships – son of, wife of, loving brother – occasionally a whole family tree!

Economic Status – Monument size and materials – Is it a family plot? Family mausoleum?

History in Stone – Migration patterns, settlement, epidemics, service

Personal Information – Photos, hobbies, occupations, organizations, personality of the deceased

Military Service – Wars and units, rank, gov't issued markers, veteran organization symbols

Ethnic Background – Language on the markers, ethnic fraternal organization insignia

Symbolism – Any special symbols on the stone? Their meaning may provide insight into the life of the individual.



What tombstones don't tell you!

- Exact place of birth or death
- Parentage often missing unless a small child
- Cause of death
- Accurate dates
- Who provided the information

How do we evaluate accuracy?

- Who likely supplied the information?
- Is the stone original or placed long after the event?
- Correlate information on the stone with other information gathered. How does it compare with Vital Records? Census Records? Church Registers? Probate Files? Obituaries? Are there discrepancies? Can they be explained?

Preservation & Ethics

- Follow Cemetery Rules
- Do no harm!
- Report endangered stones
- Respect burial grounds

Documentation Best Practices

Photo Tips

- Take a shot of the main gate and a wide shot around the tombstone, as well as close ups of the stone you're interested in.
- Stand to the side to avoid casting a shadow.
- Remove grass, weeds and other debris that may block information.
- Consider the angle. Kneel down and take a straight on shot for upright stones.
- Use a mirror to direct light onto the face of the stone.
- Take photos of the stones surrounding your family stone. They may be extended family members.

Transcription Tips

- Transcribe exactly as written
- Photograph entire stone + close-ups
- Record cemetery name and location
- Note plot, section, or GPS
- Create a full source citation

Records Behind the Stones – Where to look?

- Sexton's Records – Cemetery Office, City or Church Office – burial information, plot deeds
- Funeral Home Records
- Church Burial Records
- State Vital Records
- Court Probate Records



Use plot analysis to:

- Identify family clusters
- Discover in-law relationships
- Reconstruct FAN (Friends, Associates & Neighbors) networks

A Final Thought . . . *A tombstone rarely gives answers — but it almost always gives direction.*

Resources

Blogs

Billion Graves Blog - <https://blog.billiongraves.com/winged-skull-gravestone-symbols/>

Family History Daily – The Hidden Meaning of Grave Marker Symbols Explained

<https://familyhistorydaily.com/genealogy-resources/grave-marker-symbols/>

Family Tree Magazine - <https://familytreemagazine.com/cemeteries/hidden-meanings-gravestone-symbols/>

Gravely Speaking - <https://gravelyspeaking.com/>

Gravestone Databases

- Find a Grave – <https://www.findagrave.com>
- BillionGraves – <https://billiongraves.com>
- Interment.net – <https://www.interment.net>
- USGenWeb Cemetery Project – <https://usgenweb.org>

Books

Your Guide to Cemetery Research. Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo.

A Graveyard Preservation Primer. Baxter, Lynnette Strangstad.

Cemetery Research in the United States. Meyer, Marvin & Vivian Tholen.

Inscriptions and Iconography of Early American Gravestones. Sexton, James.

To Die For: A Cookbook of Gravestone Recipes. Grant, Rosie.

Web Resources

Association for Gravestone Studies – gravestonestudies.org

Forms

Tombstone Transcription Form – PursuingYourPast.com

On-line Education

FamilySearch.org Learning Center – Cemetery Research

Legacy Family Tree Webinars – Cemetery & Gravestone Methodology

Planning a Service Project

Looking for a Service Project?? - <https://billiongraves.com/service>

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