

Gravestone Symbols and Their Hidden Meanings



A gravestone decorated with carvings of flowers and plants. (Getty Images)

A walk through a cemetery when researching ancestors can be a haunting, yet beautiful and reflective experience. Aside from [names](#), [birthdates](#), and [death dates](#), gravestones are often decorated with symbols and icons.

These majestic, weather-worn stone carvings were popularized by those cipher-loving Victorians (from 1839 to 1920) and are more than pure decoration. They mean something; a virtue the person exemplified, a value they held dear, or a nod to how they earned their living.



In the table below, learn the meanings behind some common (and several uncommon) gravestone symbols. A revelation about your ancestor's life may just be right in front of you, hidden in plain sight.

A word of caution before we get started, though: tombstone scholars still debate the meanings of certain symbols, so you could find varying interpretations. Don't forget to grab your free download to common tombstone symbols before you head out on your next research trip!

Gravestone Symbols and Their Meanings

Symbol	Meaning
Arches and gates	passage into the next life
Acorn	prosperity; power; triumph; strength; independence
Anchor	hope; Navy
Angels	God's messengers and guardians; dropping flowers may signify grief, mourning; pointing to heaven may signify rejoicing
Anvil and/or hammer	blacksmith
Basket	fertility; maternal bond
Bat wings	death; misfortune
Beehive	possible membership with the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, or the

	Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Benches	mourning; contemplation
Bird	flight of the soul
Book	often the Bible, book of life
Bone	death
Candle	life
Church	ministry; possible pastor or minster
Clock	march of time, usually stopped at hour of death
Clover (three- or four-leafed)	Christian trinity; possible Irish ancestry or affiliation with 4H Club
Column and/or pillar (Broken)	life cut short; sudden death
Column and/or pillar (Unbroken)	a complete and full life
Corn	farming (also frequently symbolized by wheat)
Doves	peace; the Holy Spirit
Elk	possible membership with the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks
Evergreen	faithfulness; remembrance
Feathered headdress	possible membership with the Improved Order of Red Men or Degree of Pocahontas
Fern	sincerity; humility; solitude
Forefinger pointing down	God reaching down for the soul
Forefinger pointing up	soul's passage to Heaven
Fruit	eternal plenty

Half-carved tombstone	transition from life to death
Handshake	welcoming of a soul into Heaven; bond between spouses (if hands are feminine and masculine)
Harp	worship; music to God
Heart	a blissful soul (Colonial era); romantic love (Victorian era to today)
Horses	courage or generosity; possible membership with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (especially if two-headed)
Hourglass or clock	the passage of time
Key	knowledge; entrance to heaven
Lambs	purity, gentleness, innocence (popular on children's graves)
Lamp	knowledge; spiritual immortality
Lily	innocence and purity; resurrection; marriage and fidelity (Calla); innocence and humility (Lily of the Valley)
Mariner	anchor; sextant
Mortar and pestle	medical profession (pharmacist or doctor)
Oak leaf	strength; stability; endurance
Olive tree	peace; reconciliation between God and man
Palm	life conquering death; resurrection
Phoenix	resurrection
Pineapple	prosperity; hospitality; perfection
Rose	love; beauty; virtue; motherhood; strong bond (intertwined); youthful death (rosebud)
Scales	justice; law
Shield	protection, faith, defense of the spirit
Shoes	(empty, one overturned) loss of a child

Skull	death; mortal remains
Soul effigy	immortality of the soul; passage to the afterlife (especially if winged)
Sphinx	courage; honor; power
Thistle	sorrow and remembrance; potential Scottish ancestry
Tree-shaped or tree stump	life cut short; sudden death; possible membership with the Modern Woodmen of America or Woodmen of the World
Urn	death of the flesh
Wheat	farming; harvest; prosperity; full life
Winged death's head	mortal remains of the deceased
Willow	mourning and earthly sorrow

Headstone Initials and Acronyms

Initials	Meaning/Affiliation
AAONMS	Ancient Arabic Order or Nobles and the Mystic Shrine (Masonic)
AASR	Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (Masonic)
BPOE	Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks
FOE	Fraternal Order of Eagles
IHC/HIS	Christian; the first three letters of Jesus' name in Greek
IOOF	Independent Order of Odd Fellows
K of C	Knights of Columbus (Catholic)

Changing Meanings

If you have pictures of tombstones from different parts of the country, you'll notice regional symbols that evolved as attitudes toward death changed. For instance, the winged death head (a skull with wings), most commonly seen on the graves of New England colonists, is one of the earliest cemetery

art forms in America. The Puritans viewed death in its stark reality: It was part of their daily lives, and they believed their salvation was never certain. They had little regard for physical remains, and hastily buried loved ones with minimal ceremony. Although the Puritans grieved privately, they deemed public expressions of sadness inappropriate.

Harriette Merrifield Forbes, author of *Gravestones of Early New England, and the Men Who Made Them, 1653-1800*, has grouped Colonial and early American symbols from New England into five categories, according to their significance:

- recognition of the flight of time
- the certainty of death and warnings to the living
- the occupation of the deceased or his station in life
- the Christian life
- the resurrection of the body and the activities of the redeemed soul

Beginning in the early 1800s, Americans replaced the winged death head with symbols of mourning, hope and resurrection, as represented by the winged cherub, soul effigy, willows and urns. This transition no doubt stemmed from the Great Awakening revivals of the 1730s and 1740s. The old Calvinistic beliefs of predestination and damnation died, and notions of salvation through good deeds and divine grace took their place. Also during this period, people viewed the deceased as resting in a state of eternal sleep, so they adorned their loved ones' graves with carved drapery, pillows, chairs, beds, flowers and other objects that would comfort them.

Headstone Materials

By determining the headstone's composition, you can tell if the marker at your ancestor's grave is the original or a replacement. Before the 1650s, people used mostly fieldstones or rough-cut rocks to mark graves. A stone from this time might have the deceased's initials and death year carved on it. From about the 1660s to 1850s, headstones consisted of sedimentary rock, such as red or brown sandstone or limestone, and dark slate. You'll also see early 1800s gravestones made from a grayish-blue slate. Marble was the stone of choice between the 1830s and 1880s. Since the 1880s, we've stuck with granite headstones. That means a granite stone with a pre-1880 death date isn't the original marker.

A Note on Grave Epitaphs

Epitaphs are short verses or poems written to honor a deceased person, and they are frequently seen on gravestones.

Epitaphs typically reflect living relatives' feelings toward the deceased, as survivors would select verses from monument makers' and funeral directors' catalogs. Occasionally, people would specify what they wanted on their tombstones — such pre-selected epitaphs tend to reflect the decedents' personalities.

Like funerary art, epitaphs carved on gravestones reveal changing outlooks on death. Colonial verses were meant to provide instruction, not comfort. Here's a common warning to the living:

Stranger, stop and cast an eye,

As you are now, so once was I,

As I am now, so you shall be,

Prepare for death and follow me.

Generally, families have derived epitaphs from popular or favorite poems, other classic literary works such as Shakespeare's, and holy scriptures or prayers. As Americans came to favor more-comforting verses, scripture passages and prayers for mercy became the most common types of epitaphs.

Free Tombstone Iconography Download

Now that you're up to speed on common gravestone symbols, it's time to do some exploring! Grab your free download to the most common iconography for easy reference. Happy searching!

Cemetery Research Cheat Sheet

Discover your ancestors in cemeteries with this useful download, which will show you how to research your family in cemeteries. Inside, you'll find guides to popular tombstone symbols, step-by-steps for using tombstone databases and the top records you should be searching for in cemeteries.

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