

CONFUSED BY **CEMETERY SYMBOLS?**

WANT TO EXTRACT NEW EVIDENCE FROM YOUR ANCESTORS' GRAVE MARKERS? FOLLOW THESE **EIGHT STEPS TO UNCOVER HIDDEN CLUES** DURING YOUR NEXT TRIP TO THE BONEYARD.



CRACKING THE TOMBSTONE CODE



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The jury's still out: Did Leonardo da Vinci really incorporate secret codes into his artwork? Scholars likely will debate that mystery for decades to come. Meanwhile, your own cryptographic riddles await you in your ancestors' burial grounds.

You've probably noticed the symbols carved on gravestones. But have you ever stopped to think what that skull and crossbones really means? Was your ancestor a pirate? Did he die from poisoning?

Fortunately, you don't have to be a Harvard symbologist like *The Da Vinci Code's* Robert Langdon to crack your ancestors' cryptic codes. Just study our eight-step gravestone guide, and you'll become an expert at interpreting headstone art. You'll also learn more about your deceased relatives than you ever thought possible.

STEP 1: HEADSTONE HUNTING

Stop by your local cemetery and look at the artwork carved on the headstones. Don't worry if you don't know the inhabitants

there. Your initial goal is to familiarize yourself with the types of symbols on tombstones, not the people buried beneath them.

Take notes (and pictures if you have a digital camera). If you're good at drawing, copy some of the artwork you see. Also record death dates, as you'll later notice correlations between certain symbols and eras in history. The variety of cryptic emblems and insignia might surprise you. Try to find at least a dozen examples.

When you get home, pull out any pictures of your ancestors' grave sites. Repeat the exercise described above: Note the art and the death dates, as well as the states or regions where the graves are located. Do you see any similarities between your ancestors' headstones and those in the cemetery you just visited?

Unravel the meanings of your ancestors' tombstone art with this quick guide to the significance of common marks.

- **angels:** God's messengers and guardians
- **archways, pillars and gates:** passage into the next life
- **book:** the Bible, the book of life
- **broken tree stump or pillar:** a life cut short
- **completed pillar or column:** a complete and full life
- **doves:** the Holy Spirit
- **forefinger pointing down:** God reaching down for the soul
- **forefinger pointing up:** passage of the soul to heaven
- **half-carved tombstone:** transition from life to death
- **handshake:** God welcoming the soul into heaven
- **heart:** a blissful soul (Colonial era), romantic love (Victorian era to today)
- **hourglass:** flight of time
- **lambs:** purity, gentleness, innocence
- **palm leaves and lilies:** resurrection
- **rose:** motherhood, beauty
- **skeleton:** death
- **skull and crossbones:** mortal remains of the deceased
- **soul effigy:** the immortal soul
- **tree stumps:** usually Woodmen of the World member
- **urn:** death of the flesh
- **willow:** mourning and earthly sorrow
- **winged death head (below):** mortal remains of the deceased

STEP 2: TRANSLATING TOMBSTONE ART

Symbology, the practice of expressing oneself through symbols, is as old as humankind. Before developing written languages, people drew figures on cave walls to communicate with one another and to record things they didn't want to forget. Today, we use symbols on our roadways, in daily correspondence (think of the ubiquitous smiley face), throughout restaurant and lodging guides, and lots of other places. Just as you've come to know and understand these marks, now it's time to learn what your ancestors were trying to communicate through their funerary figures.

A word of caution before we get started, though: Tombstone scholars still debate the meanings of certain symbols, so you could find varying interpretations. Our cheat sheet at left will get you started learning the significance of some common symbols. See the resources on page 50 for additional marks and their meanings.

STEP 3: UNDERSTANDING VISIONS OF DEATH

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* (see page 50), 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.

Around the 1970s, our collective outlook on death changed again. Today, we typically

MAKING LASTING IMPRESSIONS

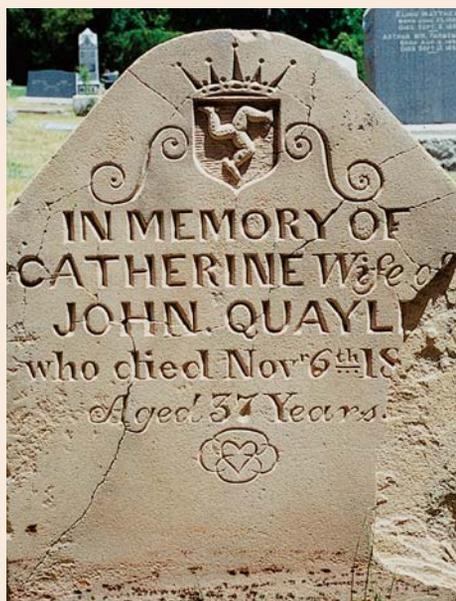
With your newfound knowledge of tombstones, you can put together the perfect gift for family members: a scrapbook of your ancestors' grave markers. You probably won't want to include actual tombstone rubbings, which run on the large side, but you can incorporate photos of rubbings and markers, as well as descriptions of the stones' composition and artwork, attitudes toward death at that time, the epitaphs' origins and any discrepancies you found in your research. If you have pictures of the deceased, include those, too.

Decorate the pages with cemetery symbols and funeral wreaths. You can download cemetery clip art from <www.alsirat.com/cemart>, <dir.coolclips.com/Celebrations/Solemn_Occasions/Death/Cemetery> and <webclipart.miningco.com/od/msubgrav>. To find more art, type "cemetery clip art" or "cemetery clipart" into a general search engine, such as Google <www.google.com>. Some Web sites let you download the art for free; others require a small fee.



TEST YOUR TOMBSTONE IQ

Below, you'll see two headstones made for the same person, Catherine (Killip) Quayle, whose remains lie in Utah's Salt Lake City Cemetery. Put your cemetery-sleuthing skills to the test by answering these 10 questions. Give yourself one point for each correct response.



QUESTIONS:

- The top stone is the original marker.
 - true
 - false
- Catherine was 37 when she died.
 - true
 - false
 - can't tell for sure
- Catherine probably was 57 when she died because the person(s) who erected the new stone also knew her maiden name.
 - true
 - false
- To resolve the age discrepancy, I'll
 - check cemetery and funeral home records
 - look in the 1850 census
 - check online sources, such as the International Genealogical Index (IGI) at <www.familysearch.org>
 - check all of the above, plus additional sources if these don't help me resolve the discrepancy
- The three-legged symbol on Catherine's headstone tells me
 - that Catherine was a marathon runner
 - that Catherine was born with three legs
 - where Catherine was born
- To learn what the three-legged symbol means, I'll
 - check online sources for cemetery symbols
 - consult *Your Guide To Cemetery Research* and other books on cemetery symbolism
 - ask friends if they can identify the mark
 - check with local monument makers
 - check all of the above
- The replacement marker consists of
 - sandstone
 - marble
 - granite
- The replacement marker likely was placed
 - after 1880
 - before 1880
 - shortly after Catherine died
- The original stone is made of
 - sandstone
 - marble
 - granite
- Catherine likely died
 - in Salt Lake City
 - while running in a three-legged race
 - from complications of surgery to amputate one of her legs

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SHARON DEBARTOLO CARMACK



ANSWERS:

- true**
- c.** We'll need information from other sources to know which stone is correct.
- false.** Whoever had this new stone placed did so several decades after Catherine died. Unless we can find out who purchased the new stone (one of Catherine's children?) and determine that the person knew Catherine's age at death, we'll need to confirm her age in other sources.
- d.**
- c.** Symbols such as this one can clue you in to a person's origin and the organizations he or she joined.

- e.** For some of the more esoteric symbols like this one, you might have to check a variety of sources. This particular symbol is the Three Legs of Man, adopted in the 13th century to represent the armorial bearings of the Isle of Man's native kings. The symbol still appears on the Isle of Man flag. According to the IGI and the Ancestral File databases on FamilySearch, Catherine was born in Peel, Kirk German, Isle of Man.
- c.** You don't have to be a geologist to learn the differences among marble, sandstone and granite. Marble is usually white with light gray or black streaks, sandstone is beige or pink, and granite is usually black or gray with flecks in the stone.

- a.** Granite grave markers weren't used until the 1880s.
- a.**
- a.** We can assume Catherine died in Salt Lake City, since she's buried there and the tombstone doesn't indicate otherwise. To know for sure, we'd need to look at an obituary or death certificate.

SCORING

Correct Answers:

- | | |
|---------|-------------------|
| 8 to 10 | Grave Maven |
| 5 to 7 | Cemetery Sleuth |
| 3 to 4 | Boneyard Beginner |
| 0 to 2 | Dead Loss |

TOOLKIT

WEB SITES

- **The Association for Gravestone Studies**
<www.gravestonestudies.org>
- **Cemetery Symbolism: A Wary Glossary**
<www.alsirat.com/symbols/symbols1.html>
- **Cemetery Symbols**
<castlescribe.hispeed.com/fam/cemeterysymbols.html>
- **Cemetery Symbols Found in Forest Lawn Cemetery, Buffalo, NY**
<ah.bfn.org/a/forestl/symbols>
- **From Beyond the Grave: Cemetery Symbols**
<www.prairieghosts.com/grave_symbols.html>
- **Glossary of Symbols and Terms for Studying Cemeteries**
<www.history.org/history/teaching/glossary2.cfm>
- **Glossary of Victorian Cemetery Symbolism**
<www.vintageviews.org/vv-tl/pages/Cem_Symbolism.htm>
- **Saving Graves**
<www.savinggraves.com>
- **Tombstone Art and Symbols**
<www.tales.ndirect.co.uk/A_ZINDEX.HTML>

BOOKS

- *Early American Gravestone Art in Photographs* by Francis Y. Duval (Dover Publications, out of print)
- *Graven Images: New England Stonecarving and Its Symbols, 1650-1815* by Allan L. Ludwig (Wesleyan University Press, \$34.95)
- *Gravestones of Early New England, and the Men Who Made Them, 1653-1800* by Harriette Merrifield Forbes (Pyne Press, out of print)
- *Soul in the Stone: Cemetery Art from America's Heartland* by John Gary Brown (University Press of Kansas, \$39.95)
- *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography* by Douglas Keister (Gibbs Smith, Publisher, \$24.95)

commemorate the deceased's life, rather than the afterlife. Modern tombstones depict the deceased's occupation, hobbies, pets or whatever else he or she held special in life.

STEP 4: CHECKING VITAL STATS

Of course, grave markers have a more practical function than memorializing the deceased: They tell you who's buried where. Some markers offer nothing more than the person's name and death date. More-elaborate stones may give the date of birth, places of birth and death, age at death, parents' and spouse's names, and a verse (known as the epitaph). Some even provide a mini biography of sorts, telling you when and where the person migrated and what he or she did for a living.

After the death date, you'll often see a person's age written this way: "Died March 25, 1846, aged 37 years, 3 months and 15 days." To determine the birth date, use an online calculator: You'll find two such tools at <www.longislandgenealogy.com/birth.html> and <www.olivetreegenealogy.com/misc/birthcalc.shtml>.

STEP 5: READING EPITAPHS

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.*

Just as tombstone art has evolved from death's heads to willows and urns, epitaphs have changed from messages of doom and gloom to those of grief, happiness and hope.

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.

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.

STEP 6: IDENTIFYING THE STONE

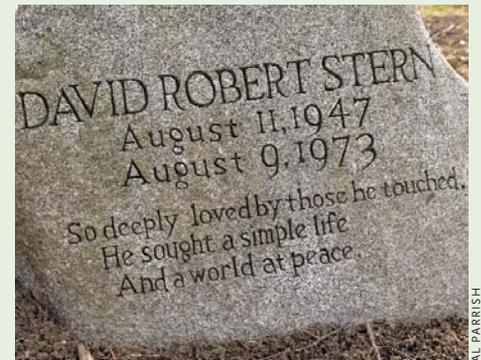
By determining the headstone's composition, you can tell if the marker at your ancestor's grave is the original or a replacement. Before the 1650s, people used mostly fieldstones or rough-cut rocks to mark graves. A stone from this time might have the deceased's initials and death year carved on it. From about the

DEAD GIVEAWAYS

Want to know a cheap and easy way to make family history headway? Just visit a relative's final resting place. Keep an eye out for these cryptic clues.



■ **Art:** Do you see a symbol such as an hourglass, urn or tree stump? Turn to page 48 or check the resources at left to find out what these marks mean. The hourglass on Sarah Haris' tombstone represents the flight of time.



■ **Epitaph:** What verse did your relatives choose to memorialize their loved one? Or did your ancestor write his own epitaph? If that's the case, what can you infer about his personality? Be sure to consider the verse in its historical context.

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.

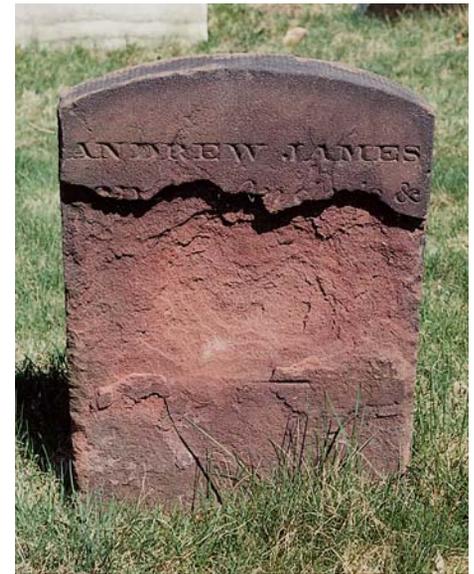
STEP 7: CLEANING SLATE (AND OTHER ROCK)

To safely remove debris such as bird droppings, lichen and moss, use a soft nylon-bristle brush and plain water. Gently loosen and rub away as much debris as you can. If you find yourself applying pressure, it's not wise to continue. Don't use abrasives or chemicals to clean the stone, unless directed by a grave-stone conservator or the monument maker.

If the stone is so worn you can barely make out the words or art, you have a problem. Years ago, genealogists rubbed chalk or shaving cream on headstones to bring out the images. Today, gravestone preservationists warn that these materials can harm the stones. Sidewalk chalk can scratch the surface, colored chalk can stain it, and acidic shaving cream will eat away at the stone. Remember: Headstones are artifacts; many have been around for centuries. You wouldn't want to do anything to deprive future generations from appreciating their ancestors' markers.



Creating a tombstone rubbing (left) can help you decipher and preserve an inscription. But you should never attempt a rubbing on a damaged, crumbling or unstable stone (right).



LEFT: COURTESY OF SUSAN RUST; RIGHT: COURTESY OF SHARON DEBARTOLO CARMACK

Here's one safe way to enhance the stone: Illuminate the image by using a mirror or a piece of cardboard wrapped in tin foil, shiny side out. Step a few feet away from the stone, and capture the sunlight in the mirror or foil, then reflect it onto the stone. You'll be amazed at how well the image appears.

Also try making a rubbing of the stone (if the cemetery allows it). Use butcher paper or nonfusible interfacing fabric, wrapping it around the stone and securing it to the back with masking tape (or have a partner hold it). Then rub a peeled jumbo crayon over the paper or fabric to bring forth the image.

For additional safe gravestone-reading methods, go to www.savinggraves.com/education/bookshelf/alternative.htm.

STEP 8: GOING BEYOND THE GRAVE

Just because ancestral details are carved in stone, that doesn't mean you can trust them. It's common to find mistakes on grave markers, since errors often cost too much to fix. Plus, most tombstones didn't appear on the graves until several months, if not years, after the funerals. Families who could barely afford funeral costs put off buying a marker—sometimes until the other parent died, so they could memorialize both on the same headstone. For these reasons, you'll need to verify the names, dates, places and any other details on a headstone using other sources, such as obituaries, death certificates, censuses and birth records.

So after all the hype about *The Da Vinci Code* and the cryptic clues in the artist's works, does his tombstone hold any surprises? Was any elaborate art carved on da Vinci's grave marker? Disappointingly, no. Visit www.thecemeteryproject.com/graves/da-vinci-leonardo.htm, or go to www.findagrave.com and type in *da Vinci* to see the inscriptions. Guess you'll have to follow the clues on your own ancestors' stones if you want real mysteries to solve. 🐾



■ **Inscription:** This could tell you where and when your ancestor was born and died, his parents' and spouse's names and his occupation. Just remember that even information carved in stone can contain errors.



■ **Stone composition:** Does the headstone consist of granite, marble, slate or some other stone? Based on the material and your ancestor's death date, can you tell if the stone's the original grave marker or a replacement one?

ART, INSCRIPTION AND STONE COMPOSITION PHOTOS: COURTESY OF SHARON DEBARTOLO CARMACK

Family Tree Magazine contributing editor SHARON DEBARTOLO CARMACK is the author of *Your Guide to Cemetery Research* (Betterway Books, \$19.99).