

Early American Gravestones

Introduction to the Farber Gravestone Collection

by Jessie Lie Farber

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- Who is interested in America's early gravestones?**
- How did this collection of gravestone photographs develop?**
- How were the photographs made?**
- Where are the colonial burying grounds?**
- Have early American graveyards changed over time?**
- Why do the early stones face west?**
- How many early American gravestones are there?**
- What are common sizes and shapes of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century gravestones?**
- What materials were used?**
- What is the current condition of the early stones?**
- What can be done to lengthen the life of these artifacts?**
- Who carved the stones?**
- How is a carver identified?**
- What motifs decorate the stones?**
- What do the motifs on the stones mean?**
- Who wrote the inscriptions?**
- What was the general form of the inscription?**
- What kinds of verses were used?**
- What is the source of the verses?**
- What quotations were used?**
- What was the lettering style, wording, and layout of the inscriptions?**
- What is the relationship between the motifs and the inscriptions?**
- Are there many variations on the basic gravestone styles here described?**
- What conclusions can be drawn from the study of the country's early gravestones?**

RECOMMENDED READING

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Creating this photograph collection was a fascinating labor of love that dominated and enhanced our lives for more than twenty years. In each of its two phases we have enjoyed a great deal of assistance from friends, colleagues, and institutions.

We thank those who aided us in our search for interesting old burial grounds. Without their help, the photograph collection would be bereft of many of noteworthy subjects (and we would have missed the thrills of some extraordinary treasure hunts). Friends and colleagues who gave us directions or guided us to special stones are Peter Benes, Nancy Crockett, Robert Drinkwater, Francis Duval, Robert Emlen, William Hosley, Vincent Luti, Patricia Miller, Avon Neal, Ann Parker, Ivan Rigby, James A. Slater, Lynette Strangstad, Deborah Trask, Ralph Tucker, and Betty Willsher. Anne Williams and Sue Kelly directed us to stones with carver signatures and allowed us to photograph and include in the collection examples of their rubbings. Authors whose published and unpublished work guided us to yards and stones are too numerous to list here, but we are grateful to each of them and especially to Harriette Merrifield Forbes, Ernest Caulfield, and Allan Ludwig, whose early research, writing, and photography led the way in gravestone studies.

The American Antiquarian Society made it possible for us to add the photographs of Harriette Merrifield Forbes to the collection. Adding the photographs of Ernest Caulfield was made possible by the Connecticut Historical Society. These two pioneer collections are valuable additions to the strength of the overall collection.

Vital to the development of the collection was the help we received in organizing and documenting the photographs and data. Laurel Gabel, the recognized authority on gravestone carver attributions, organized the carver section of the database and made the final decisions on attributions in this ever-evolving area of research. Her attributions are based on eight years of work with our collection and on findings from her own extensive research in the field. Laurel was assisted by James Blachowicz, Robert Drinkwater, Vincent Luti, Steve Petke, James Slater, Ralph Tucker and Gray Williams, who provided carver information for her research clearinghouse, to which other researchers report their findings. Our debt to her is enormous.

The other data from the photographs in the collection was recorded by Bradford Dunbar, whose time was made available by the American Antiquarian Society, in Worcester, Massachusetts. We appreciate the careful attention given to the project by him and by Larry Buckland whose company, Inforonics, Inc., entered the data into its computer in Littleton, Massachusetts. Thanks for making this essay and the database more user-friendly are due to Laurel Gabel, Miranda Levin, James A. Slater, and Dwight Swanson. Naomi Miller saw that the accumulating records, negatives, and photographs found their way to their proper destinations, including the American Antiquarian Society and Yale University—each of which has prints of the complete collection—and twenty-seven other institutions that house parts of the collection.

This website follows the second phase of our project, putting the photographs on CD-ROMs, which was initiated and organized by Henry Lie, Director of the Straus Center for Conservation at the Harvard University Art Museums. The thousands of photographs were delivered, box by box, from the American Antiquarian Society to him in Lincoln, Massachusetts, where he supervised the digitizing of each photograph in two

resolutions. The photographs were then returned to the Society, where the final step in the project was taken—finding the right company to combine the digitized photographs with the computerized data and produce the CD-ROMs. This was accomplished by Ellen Dunlap, President, and Georgia Barnhill, the Andrew W. Mellon Curator of Graphic Arts, of the American Antiquarian Society. It has been a pleasure to see the skill with which they and Joseph Burke, President of Visual Information, Inc., moved the project through the intricacies of the strange (to us) and wonderful world of computer science and brought the project to its fruition.

Daniel and Jessie Lie Farber, 1997

INTRODUCTION

Daniel and Jessie Lie Farber met each other through their interest in early American gravestones. For over twenty years they worked, separately and together, making photographs and rubbings of these artifacts. The gravestone images on this website are mostly from the New England states, with the largest percentage from Massachusetts, the richest treasure-trove. There are also samplings from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Nova Scotia, Canada, England, and Ireland.

The collection of Farber photographs in this collection numbers more than 13,500 images of more than 9,000 different stones. To this body of work the Farbers have added the collections of two early scholars in the field: Harriette Merrifield Forbes, who worked mostly in the 1920s in Massachusetts, and Dr. Ernest Caulfield, who studied Connecticut gravestones in the 1950s. The Forbes collection numbers more than 1,370 photographs of more than 1,260 different stones; the Caulfield collection numbers approximately 600 photographs. The three combined collections total 14,834 photographs of more than 9,300 gravestones.

These early stones are precious records. They stand in their often-isolated burying grounds suffering destruction by erosion, power mowers, and vandals. Their fragility and vulnerability has in recent years inspired efforts to save them. Saving the stones, albeit with photographs, was a factor in the Farbers' decision to combine these three major collections and make them available, first as original photographs and now as digitized images. The collection is unique in that many of the subjects have already disappeared, and the condition of extant stones will not be as good when photographed in the future.

The data accompanying the photographs include the name and death date of the deceased, the location of the stone, and information concerning the stone material, the iconography, the inscription, and (when known) the carver. Some carvers whose work is known but who have not been identified by name are entered by stylistic groupings, rather than by name. When using this data one should recognize that carver attribution is relatively young and in a state of constant flux, with frequent new discoveries resulting in corrections and additions.

Note also that the data in the text comparing the incidence of several characteristics of early gravestones were derived from an analysis of the stones in the Forbes collection, and that this collection, while extensive, is not a random sampling of early gravemarkers. Because gravemarkers cannot be moved about and compared, and because even the photographs are difficult to access, sort, and compare, this on-line exhibit fills a need felt by all who are seriously interested in the artifacts. With it, carver attribution can be studied more thoroughly and conveniently than was previously possible. By using the random access searching that digital imagery allows, one can easily compare images from different geographic areas and time-frames without having to manually file through thousands of individual photographs. The website also makes it possible to study the stones in an enhanced detail previously unavailable, even in the burying ground. Finally, the database, instead of being static like a book, can be continuously refined and revised to reflect new findings.

In summary, this digitized photographic record has two functions: to preserve the images of early gravestones and to serve as a superior research tool.

Who is interested in America's early gravestones?

Not long ago, a person with a serious interest in early gravestones was surprised to discover that anyone else had the same esoteric interest. This misconception prevailed in the field of gravestone study. Historians, anthropologists, and students of American social culture were using the stones as a primary, hands-on resource in their research. Art historians and amateur sleuths were identifying carvers. Geologists were studying the stone materials (and the effect of pollution and acid rain on their stability). Organizations and individuals were documenting the stones. Conservators were being engaged to restore early burial grounds. Old books about the stones were being read and new ones written. School children were making trips to local graveyards. Boy Scouts and other youth organizations were organizing burial ground clean-ups. Printmakers and photographers were discovering the stones and making collections of rubbings and photographs that were finding their way into exhibitions and museum collections. Genealogists were studying family markers. Churches and historical societies were checking the stones in local yards against their records. Old cemetery associations were being organized. Associations of modern monument builders and of cemetarians, appreciating the early stones as part of their industries' historical past, were publishing articles about them in their trade magazines.

In view of all this activity, why did so many scholars and amateur enthusiasts, by their own accounts, feel that no one shared or really understood their interests in gravestone studies? Perhaps this misconception existed because interest in gravestones was and is scattered among so many fields. In most areas of academic or artistic interest, one finds colleagues. One attends meetings. One shares. But gravestone study, until relatively recently, tended to be a transitory part of a scholar's work in another field, the scholar's *real* field. For example, two anthropologists, James Deetz and Edwin Dethlefsen, published several epoch-making articles about the motifs on early New England gravestones in scholarly journals between 1965 and 1968; then they moved to other areas of anthropological research. Allan Ludwig's landmark book *Graven Images*, published in 1966, opened new vistas for interpreting gravestone iconography. Then Ludwig's interest, like Deetz's and Dethlefsen's, shifted to other areas.

The need for an interchange of ideas was recognized by Peter Benes, the author of *The Masks of Orthodoxy*, a 1977 study of Plymouth County, Massachusetts, gravestones. In the course of his research and writing, Benes observed that students of early gravestones tended to work more in isolation than in concert, largely unaware of one other's problems, contributions, and often of one other's existence. As a result, in the fall of 1975, just before America's bicentennial celebration, he began to make arrangements for a gathering of scholars and laymen who had a serious interest in gravemarkers. He hoped his seminar would attract 40 participants; over 80 attended. From this beginning, the Association for Gravestone Study (AGS) developed.

The mission of AGS, incorporated in 1977, is "to foster appreciation of the cultural significance of gravestones and burial grounds through their study and preservation." The association, with headquarters at 278 Main Street, Greenfield, Massachusetts, has an international membership of 1,100. It publishes a quarterly bulletin and an annual journal, *Markers*; maintains an archive, a research clearinghouse, and a

lending library; and holds an annual conference. Through its contacts with professional and business organizations and academic disciplines interested in gravestone scholarship, it assists professionals and laymen in their conservation projects and their gravestone-related research and writing. Membership provides a network for exchanging ideas and information.

The American Culture Association (ACA) makes a similar contribution. Founded in 1979, ACA is an interdisciplinary organization open to individuals and organizations interested in the study of American cultural phenomena. In 1989, a Cemeteries and Gravemarkers Section, chaired by Richard E. Meyer, was added to the ACA conference program; under Meyer's leadership this section has become one of the association's largest. A subscription to the *Journal of American Culture* is included with ACA membership.

A number of museums and libraries have made contributions to the field. The Yale University Art Gallery, the Rhode Island Historical Society, the Boston Public Library, the Museum of American Folk Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Wadsworth Atheneum have mounted major exhibitions that either featured or were devoted entirely to gravestone art. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has twenty gravestone photographs and two Boston gravestones on permanent exhibition in its American Decorative Arts Department. Institutions that house large collections of gravestone photographs include Yale University and the American Antiquarian Society (each of which owns the collection of Farber, Forbes and Caulfield photographs included on this site), the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Museum of American Folk Art. The American Antiquarian Society owns the Farber negatives and film copies of the Forbes glass negatives, and the Museum of American Folk Art owns a large collection of glass negatives and transparencies made by Francis Duval and Ivan Rigby. The collection of gravestone materials at the Museum of American Folk Art includes, also, an extensive collection of gravestone rubbings by Sue Kelly and Anne Williams and molds by Francis Duval and Ivan Rigby. Many smaller collections of gravestone art are housed in other museums and galleries.

How did this collection of gravestone photographs develop?

The basis for selection of the particular stones in this collection depended on many factors, but largely on the personal interests of the photographers: Harriette Forbes, Ernest Caulfield, and Dan and Jessie Lie Farber. Each was interested primarily in gravestones carved before 1800.

Harriette Merrifield Forbes (1856-1951) made most of her gravestone photographs in the 1920s. The stones she photographed are predominantly Massachusetts markers, radiating from Worcester, where she lived, to other Massachusetts towns, and from Massachusetts to other New England states and Long Island, New York. Mrs. Forbes was the first to publish, in 1927, an evaluation of the artistic, symbolic, and historical significance of early gravemarkers and to identify many of their carvers. There have been four printings of her book, *Gravestones of Early New England and the Men Who Made Them, 1653-1800*.

Ernest Caulfield (1893-1972) made his gravestone photographs in the 1950s. Dr. Caulfield was a physician whose interest in the history of medicine led him to study the

epidemics of “throat distemper” (diphtheria and scarlet fever) that took many lives in parts of New England in the mid-1700s. His research introduced him to the gravestones of that period, and subsequently, like Harriette Forbes, he began to study the artistic styles of the ornamental carving and to conduct research into the identities and the lives of the carvers. Dr. Caulfield lived in Connecticut, and made most of his photographs in that state. His complete collection is housed with his publications at the Connecticut Historical Society, in Hartford.

The balance of the photographs in this collection is the work of Dan and Jessie Lie Farber. Dan Farber is a Worcester, Massachusetts, businessman whose serious avocation is photography. After making photographs of nature subjects for many years, he discovered gravestones as a photographic subject in 1970 and began in 1973 to photograph them almost exclusively. Jessie Lie’s interest in photography began in college and continued for ten years during which she fitted professional photography around her career as a teacher. She was a professor at Mount Holyoke College when, in 1974, she saw gravestone rubbings exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art and was motivated by the exhibition to document with rubbings and photographs the stones in the old graveyard in South Hadley, Massachusetts, where she lived. Dan Farber and Jessie Lie met through their mutual interest in the folk art on the early stones, and after their marriage, in 1978, they worked as a team. Since that time they have made photographs and rubbings of gravemarkers along North America’s eastern seacoast and in England, Ireland, Spain, Turkey, and the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. (Of the Farbers’ photographs of foreign stones, only those made in Canada, England, and Ireland were digitized and included in this collection; the others are housed in the Yale University Art Gallery.)

Because Forbes, Caulfield, and the Farbers were all primarily interested in the gravestones’ decorative carving, their choices of photographic subjects often coincided. A few stones are represented in all three collections. Differences in the photographers’ various interests, however, such as carver identification and historical research, plus chance factors, such as weather, travel conditions, and access to a particular graveyard, often determined whether or not a particular stone was successfully photographed. Family, professional, and business obligations limited the amount of time each could devote to this work. Mrs. Forbes was much constrained by travel conditions. Travel by car on country roads in the 1920s was relatively slow and, as she did not drive, she had to find someone to do this for her. Moreover, her camera was less versatile, often requiring long waits for suitable lighting as well as long exposures. Both Forbes and Caulfield were handicapped by the time limitations of natural lighting; also by the fact that some important stones are so positioned that they are never well lighted by the sun. Dan Farber extended the number of his working hours by devising a technique for using a mirror to reflect controlled sunlight on shaded stones.

How were the photographs made?

We have little information about the photographic equipment and technique used by Forbes and Caulfield.

During her fifty-five years of making photographs, Harriette Forbes used three lenses, the last a Betax #3 Wollensak. When photographing gravestones she always used

a tripod. She made a record of each exposure in a small notebook she took to the site. Her negatives are glass, size 5 x 7 inches. She did her own processing. To block out the backgrounds of those photographs she selected to illustrate her writing, she used a combination of opaque paint and a cutout of black construction paper affixed to the negatives. Her work with gravestone photography was motivated by her interest in the ornamental carving, in carver attribution, and in publishing her findings. She also had in mind the development of a collection that would preserve the images of the artifacts. (She made a similar collection of photographs of old houses, also owned by the American Antiquarian Society.)

Ernest Caulfield's negatives are 2¼ x 3¼ inches. His photographic interest was focused primarily on documenting the stones for his research rather than on developing a collection or producing works of photographic art.

The Farber photographs on this site were made with four cameras: a Hasselblad, a Minolta, and two Deardorffs (negative sizes 2¼ inches square, 2¼ x 3¼ inches, 5 x 7 inches, and 8 x 10 inches). They are black-and-white. A Nikon was used to make color transparencies for slide-show presentations.

Dan Farber first saw the gravestone carvings only as unusual photographic subjects, the way he saw flowers, leaves, the silhouettes of trees, reflections, and other subjects in nature. He enjoyed studying them in the camera's ground glass and experimenting with angles and lighting to bring out the stone's details and texture. In the summer of 1973 he photographed as many gravestones as his available time allowed, concentrating almost exclusively on the tympanum and other details of the ornamental carving. When he had a collection he felt good about, he showed it to Charles F. Montgomery, a curator and professor of art history at Yale University. Professor Montgomery advised him to put his work into context by making a photographic record of the whole stone whenever he photographed a detail. As a result of that conversation, Farber returned to the yards he had worked in the summer before and rephotographed each stone, this time in its entirety. From that time, photographing both the detail and the whole stone became routine procedure, whenever conditions permitted. Photographing details, however, always gave him the most creative pleasure.

Following Mrs. Forbes' lead, the Farbers also blocked out the backgrounds, accomplishing this during the photographing by placing a large plywood backboard laminated with blue Formica immediately behind the subject. In time they discontinued using the backboard in photographs of the whole stone, deciding that the background environment was an important element to record. When the setting was either unusual or artistically appealing, they photographed a view of the burying ground. Occasionally they photographed seriously deteriorated and damaged stones, just to record the loss.

The major contribution that Dan Farber made to the *technique* of gravestone photography is the use of a mirror to control lighting. Prior to his developing this technique, he, like every other photographer of the stones, was severely limited by the number of hours of sunlight suitable for making good photographs. The amount of time that natural lighting is optimal—that is, raking across the inscribed face of the stone—is usually brief, and some stones are never lighted by the sun. By using a mirror to reflect sunlight onto the unlighted stone, Farber extended his working hours. Equally important, the mirror gave him precise control of the angle at which the light struck each stone to produce the contrasting shadows and highlights that best define the carving. Variations

on this technique involve shading a stone that is poorly lighted by the sun and substituting reflected light from the mirror for the natural lighting; also, in unusually difficult situations, using two mirrors, reflecting sunlight from one to the other and then onto the stone. Dan Farber described his use of mirror lighting at a conference of the Association for Gravestone Studies in 1977 and he and Jessie Lie demonstrated it at the 1978 conference. A full-length mirror is now standard equipment for photographers of gravestones.

To make the photographs, Dan Farber always used a tripod and took a light meter reading. Unless a sense of the artistic dictated otherwise, tall grass and weeds in front of the stone were clipped, and the stones were sprayed with water and wiped clean of sand and other extraneous matter. Lichen was not usually removed. The photographs were processed by several commercial studios.

The major contribution that Jessie Lie Farber made to the collection relates to its breadth and organization. While Dan photographed, she selected the subjects. She encouraged enlarging the geographical scope of the collection and the amount of data that was collected and, subsequently, entered into a computer. She motivated the development of what was an accumulation of fine photographs of mostly Massachusetts gravestones into a broader-based and better organized and more useful and available collection.

EARLY AMERICAN GRAVESTONES

Gravestones are America's earliest sculpture. Among early American artifacts they are unique in that each is dated, and most are found in their original settings, surrounded by similar objects from the same period. The majority of artifacts that have survived two or three hundred years—paintings, furniture, silver, quilts, books, pottery, decoys, tools, and nearly everything we now have from the colonial period—have been relocated to museum settings and other collections. An American colonist, reincarnated and walking through the streets of his hometown today would be hard put to find anything he recognized except the town's old burying ground. There he would see stones he knew, still grouped by family and bearing familiar names and verses.

Stranger, stop and cast an eye
As you are now, so once was I
As I am now, so you will be
Remember Death and follow me

Death is a debt
To Nature due
That I have paid
And so must you

Where are the colonial burying grounds?

North America's seventeenth- and eighteenth-century burying grounds are scattered along the continent's eastern seaboard from Nova Scotia to Georgia wherever there were settlements, with the largest and oldest yards in the oldest cities.

Today the old stones can be found in both urban and rural settings. Yards are frequently located adjacent to a church or meetinghouse (or where one used to be), or on a town common. They are also tucked between tall buildings, scattered through open fields and remote wooded areas, and huddled near busy airports and throughways—or

anywhere the early settlers once lived. Often the stones stand on hills, possibly symbolic of a nearness to God, but more likely a reflection of the settlers' thrifty use of arable land.

Have early American graveyards changed over time?

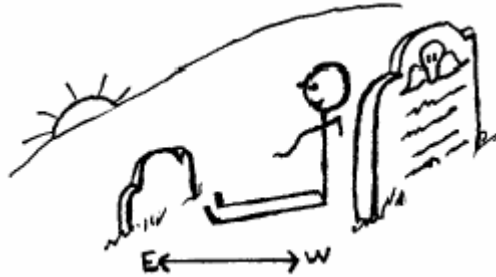
The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century graveyards one visits today look remarkably similar to the yards seen in old paintings and drawings of the period. Even then, many of the stones were tilted, sunken, or broken. Then as now, mature trees sheltered the yard, and (without the help of the power mower) tall grass and brush and brambles grew between the stones. The headstones usually faced west; that is, the headstones' inscriptions faced west, the footstones' east, with mounded graves between the pairs. We see far fewer footstones now; many have been discarded or reset back-to-back with their headstones to facilitate mowing. Also, in many instances, the headstones have been moved from their original crowded and random grouping and reset in rows or some other formal arrangement. The terrain has often been leveled, again to facilitate upkeep. The features that distinguish an old yard whose stones are in their original positions from one whose layout has been "improved" are the facing and arrangement of the stones and the presence of footstones to go with the headstones.

One can identify the oldest section of a cemetery that spans many years and see how it grew by noting the appearance of the stones—their color, shape, size, and placement. The oldest stones, made of fieldstone, slate, sandstone, schist, or whatever kind of stone was quarried nearby, tend to face west, and (unless they have been moved) they stand grouped together closely and rather haphazardly, like a family, with the taller stones for the most important citizens and tiny stones for children. As it became easier to transport stone, the color and texture of the markers often changed from that of the earliest stones, and with the change of material, the stones' shape, size, and decorative carving were altered. In burial grounds whose use continued into the nineteenth century, one can see that white marble became the stone material of choice. The middle years of the nineteenth century saw the introduction of the rural garden cemetery, with spacious, park-like landscaping designed around gentle hills and tranquil lakes. Winding carriage drives led the visitor to fenced family plots filled with ornate, unrestrained, and visibly sentimental three-dimensional sculpture, obelisks, and mausoleums.

Thus, in our burying grounds and cemeteries, we see the sternness of the Puritan seventeenth century replaced by the "Age of Reason" of the eighteenth century, and that in turn replaced by the nineteenth century's extravagance, love of nature, and free expression of sentiment. The twentieth century, punctuated by two world wars and a depression, is by comparison secular, straight-forward, and businesslike. Death has become more distant. Advances in medicine have lengthened our lives and moved death out of sight, to an unfamiliar, impersonal hospital setting. Our arts embrace abstraction, and in our cemeteries, functional simplicity and anonymity reign. Most contemporary cemeteries are filled with rows of sensible, durable monuments of polished granite. Some modern cemeteries permit only lawn-level bronze markers. At the same time, there is a developing recognition of a need for more individuality and distinctiveness in our lives, and this is beginning to be seen in our art as well—and in our cemeteries. It is possible that cemetery memorials of the twenty-first century will involve changes as significant as those of the past.

Why do the early stones face west?

The story goes that bodies were laid head to the west, feet to the east so that, at the sound of the cock's crow on the day of judgment, the resurrected dead would arise to face the dawn. To facilitate a visitor's reading the gravestone inscriptions without walking on the grave, the head and foot stones were set with their carved surfaces facing away from the grave. Thus the inscribed faces of old headstones tend to face west and those on footstones, east.



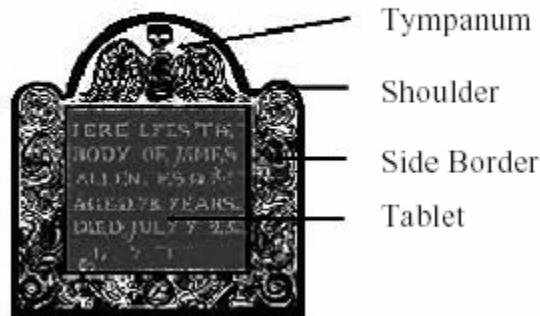
How many early American gravestones are there?

No one knows how many there are or how many there were. The number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century headstones and footstones standing today is surely in the hundreds of thousands, a large number when one considers their age and the harsh conditions they have withstood. There is abundant recorded evidence, however, that many have *not* survived. When considering the numbers, one should realize that most gravemarkers were erected for those who were relatively well-known and secure economically so that segments of the population never had a gravestone. While there are a tremendous number of extant early American gravestones, they memorialize a select proportion of those who died in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

What are common sizes and shapes of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century gravestones?

Size. There is no standard height or width, although there is a solid relationship between the importance of the deceased and the size of the head and foot stones. The above-ground height of the markers tends to vary from graveyard to graveyard, with markers in more prosperous communities somewhat larger in size and more complex in shape. The butt, or unfinished, supporting portion of a gravestone, may reach to a surprising underground depth, sometimes three-fourths the above-ground height. Over the centuries, many an old stone has sunk below its intended ground line, diminishing its original above-ground height (and hiding lines of inscriptions). In other instances, stones have broken off at their ground lines and been reset, again with the loss of above-ground height (and readable lines of inscription). The oldest New England headstones tended to stand about 30 inches high, and the average height increased somewhat during the latter half of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Shape. The shape of the stones standing at the head and foot of colonial graves suggests the headboard and footboard of a bed. Their shape also suggests the arches and portals that, through death, the Puritans believed the soul must pass to enter eternity. The headstone's rounded tympanum is flanked on each side by rounded shoulders, or finials. The inscribed tablet under the tympanum is usually bordered with decorative carving on two, three, and sometimes all four sides. The tympanum and shoulders are nearly always decorated. Footstones are smaller than headstones. Some footstones are cut to match the shape of their headstones, but footstone shapes are usually simple, often just a small slab with rounded corners. (Their ornamental carving is also simple or nonexistent and the inscription is often limited to the initials of the deceased.)



This basic tripartite or three-lobed shape was by far the most popular of those used in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The older the yard, the more this style dominated.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, variations on the old shape and many new, innovative shapes began to outnumber the basic, three-lobed gravestone pattern. There were tympanums without the flanking round shoulders; tympanums and shoulders elaborately embellished with bulges and curves and points; and any shape that was a particular carver's personal, artistic variation on the basic shape. The transition in shape was accompanied by an increase in height.

Then came a significant style change, the result of a great neoclassical revival imported from Europe. By 1800, almost every burial ground reflected a move from the Puritan religious spirit to an enthusiasm for classical antiquity. Compared to the squat, thick, three-lobed markers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and the more elaborate later-eighteenth-century markers, the gravestones produced in the early nineteenth century are simpler in design, more finished and sleek in appearance, taller and more uniform in shape. Gone are the rounded shoulders and the innovative embellishments. A clean-cut, rounded tympanum now surmounts a simple rectangular tablet. The width of the tablet extends beyond the base of the tympanum on either side, giving the marker the appearance of having squared-off shoulders. (In eastern New England, these neoclassic markers were usually made of slate.)



Today, anyone traveling along a busy thoroughway and spotting a roadside graveyard can at a glance make surprisingly accurate guesses concerning the age of the stones. And at the same time, the traveler can rather accurately predict the iconography that will be found carved into the stones of each shape—skulls or faces, usually winged, on the round-shouldered stones; urns and/or willows on the stones with square shoulders.

What materials were used?

The earliest graves were marked with local fieldstones or with wood markers. So few of the latter have survived that it is hard to know how prevalent their use may have been. Gravemarkers have been made from slate, sandstone, marble, granite, limestone, schist, soapstone, and any other stone that was available. Until transportation by rail became an option, most communities used whatever stone was brought by wagon from the nearest quarry, although communities on the Atlantic seaboard and near navigable rivers were able to get stone from farther away. Today, researchers studying the country's transportation networks can trace these routes by determining the origin of the stones found in the old graveyards.

So many different kinds of stone were used in the colonies during the different time periods that one hesitates to make any sweeping generalizations about what stone was used during a given period without specifying the location. Nevertheless, when one thinks of colonial stones, one thinks first of slate, the dominant gravestone material of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. As the century progressed, there was an increased use of other stone, primarily sandstone and schist. In the nineteenth century, as transportation improved, white marble from Vermont became popular. Granite, the hardest and most durable material, is the stone of choice in the twentieth century.

The slate of the colonial markers is subdued in color and at the same time beautifully varied, ranging from almost black to shades and tints of gray—reddish, greenish, and bluish—sometimes streaked and striated. Like slate, sandstone is found in a myriad of shades and colors, from dark brown and reddish brown to light tan. The quality of both slate and sandstone varies from quarry to quarry so that some of the early stones have eroded and exfoliated while others look as though they were cut yesterday. Slate, in general, is a harder, more dense stone than sandstone and usually withstands the freeze-thaw cycles better. It is also more suitable than softer stone for carving clean, sharp detail. Sandstone, though, lends itself better than slate to dynamic designs carved in deep relief. Schist is any of several metamorphic rocks. The predominant mineral is aligned in parallel layers and is easily broken along a lamination. The individual mineral grains in a

schist, discernible with the naked eye, add to its beauty. For example, an identifying feature of mica schist is the glint of the mica. Schist is even more varied in its durability and appearance than are slate and sandstone.

Of all the stone used in America's graveyards and cemeteries, the ethereal white marble is the softest, the easiest to carve, and the shortest lived. No doubt beautiful in the nineteenth century when it became easily available and very popular, many of the once-pristine white marble stones are now covered with an unsightly black lichen, and most are so badly deteriorated that they are difficult, if not impossible, to read.

The twentieth century's hard, polished granite is by far the most durable gravestone material. Limited use was made of this dense stone by the early carvers, but with modern power tools and technology it is both workable and beautiful. Granite's color range is extensive, and the color is enhanced by machine polishing.

What is the current condition of the early stones?

There are two entirely different views of the status of America's early gravemarkers, both of which are reasonable. Both can be held by the same individual. On the plus side is the view inspired by the remarkable fact that so many of the old yards and stones have survived. Anyone on the eastern seaboard can, with a few questions, get directions to an old burial ground, and, once there, walk through an outdoor museum filled with history, drama, and art. Chances are, some of the stones will be in excellent condition, and the yard itself will appear to be rather well maintained, due to the revival of interest in early Americana in the last twenty years. In all probability, a few additional questions from a visitor will lead to a local person or institution eager to share information about the old burial ground and its history. Prior to 1976, many of these old yards were neglected eyesores, but today they are more often objects of civic pride, recognized in their communities as unique historic and artistic treasures and studied by scholars in a variety of fields.

A less optimistic view is also accurate. The stones are disappearing, and in their outdoor setting, unless preventive action is taken, they will all, eventually, disappear. The first serious threat to their survival occurred in the Victorian years with the development of the rural garden cemetery, a movement that originated in France and became popular in the United States. By the middle of the nineteenth century, colonial burial grounds were old, overcrowded, "unsightly," and, many felt, the source of "bad air" and disease. The solution was to landscape spacious burial grounds called cemeteries (from *coemeteri*, the Latin word for sleeping place) outside the city, where the dead could rest in peace in handsomely arranged family plots, and where they could be visited in an aesthetic, park-like setting. The problem of what to do about the old yards, often prominently located in the town center, was solved in a number of ways. Some yards were simply ignored and left to be taken over by nature—weeds and brambles, overgrown vines, fallen tree limbs, erosion—and vandals. More creative, and more drastic, solutions included moving the whole graveyard from mid-town to a less obtrusive site, or laying the old stones flat and burying them, or resetting the stones in what was seen as a more artistic or simply a neater and more easily maintained configuration. Discarded stones were put to other uses, such as stepping stones and basement floor paving.

No one has yet thoroughly investigated the extent of the loss of old yards and stones during the period of the development of the attractive new cemeteries. To do so would require determining from records how many colonial yards there once were, how many stones were in them and what happened to them, then comparing these findings with the yards and stones that have survived—a formidable research project!

Today the greatest threat to the survival of the stones is the elements. Acid rain and polluted air deteriorate the stones' surfaces. Porous and cracked stones absorb water, which freezes and expands, causing the stones to break. Vandals and thieves are responsible for considerable loss. Fenced and locked yards challenge vandals to devise a way to get in and provide a protected site for destructive action. Armed with spray paint, rocks, bottles, and even firearms, they turn delicate stones into targets, firebacks, or simply objects to push over and break. Another threat to the stones is, paradoxically, the result of their becoming better understood and more prized. The theft and illegal sale of gravestones as antiques is now a problem.

Misguided efforts to save these artifacts have led to inappropriate treatments that result in further damage. Stones have been sprayed with substances intended to protect them but which, in time, caused discoloration and exfoliation. To keep them from tilting and to prevent theft, the butts of stones have been sunk into cement with the result that, without any "give" at ground level, thin markers tend to snap neatly off.

Misguided cleaning techniques involving the use of chemicals, abrasives, wire brushes, and even sandblasting have done incalculable damage. Even a decorative shrub or young tree planted too close to a stone can in time become a hazard. But the most damage from man comes from a source one tends to suspect least. Cemetery maintenance men who have been given power equipment and little guidance or direction other than to keep the grounds neat have been and are every day responsible for damage and loss. In order to mow close to the stones, these caretakers abrade, gouge, and topple them, then remove downed stones and fragments, which find their way into walls, paths, and dumps. The visitor sees a neat yard, but there are fewer and fewer stones in it.

What can be done to lengthen the life of these artifacts?

Most communities have one or more persons with a historical knowledge of and interest in their old burial grounds. Leadership by these people can result in group efforts that are effective. Following are projects they can initiate and lead.

The first step in revitalizing and protecting an old yard is to encourage frequent visitation. Indeed, the interested and concerned visitor is the backbone of all other protective action and can contribute significantly to the preservation of these cultural sites. Locked yards, as we have noted, often benefit only the vandals. If a yard must be locked, a sign stating its opening and closing hours, naming the person in charge, and giving the telephone number to call if there are problems not only encourages safe and appropriate behavior but tells the visitor that the site is not abandoned. Signs noting a yard's historical background and guiding visitors to its points of interest help the visitor recognize and appreciate its special features. Incorporating friends groups to serve as eyes and ears in the neighborhood of the burying ground encourages local pride while discouraging misuse and vandalism.

School projects involving one or more trips to the local burying ground contribute to the yard's continued existence. In the graveyard children can study their town's history on the stones. There they can read the inscriptions and consider the drama, wisdom, tragedy, and philosophy they express, and they can learn to understand and appreciate the ornamental carving on these early artifacts. Grade-schoolers can (for example) practice their arithmetic by figuring the years of birth from the inscribed death dates and ages. Children who have had such experiences are probably not the young people who will later use the cemetery to deal drugs or spray-paint the stones.

Probably the most basic graveyard preservation project is documenting the yard. This fascinating work begins with research into the yard's past using data found in libraries, historical societies, and in church, cemetery, and probate records. The second phase is to record information about the yard as it is today. Placement and condition of each stone should be recorded on a plan, and inscriptions should be recorded in their entirety. A photographic record of every stone should accompany the written document. Black-and white photographs have a longer life than color and are therefore preferable. Carefully transcribed rubbings are useful as actual-size documents and are art objects in their own right.

When documenting a burial ground, archival materials should be used, and the final records should be given archival storage in an accessible location. Well-documented information about an old burying ground can be useful in developing projects that related to the community's history. The documenting process itself creates positive interest in the yard among the participants and other members of the community. A good graveyard document can also provide the data required to identify, claim, and reset any recovered markers that have been (or may in the future be) moved, covered over, lost, or stolen.

Every state has laws protecting—or at least relating to—its burial grounds. In some areas, police are alert and knowledgeable. A stone for sale in a gallery or antique shop or on the auction block is confiscated, and anyone who has reported a loss is notified. In other areas, farmers plough over small yards in their fields, and developers demolish gravestones that are unearthed on their construction sites. Penalties for violations vary from state to state. Anyone interested in the preservation of an early burying ground should become acquainted with the relevant laws and, when they are inadequate or unenforced, take steps to improve the situation.

Application should be made for landmark status if the graveyard has unusual historic or artistic significance. This status can be a helpful promotional aid in raising funds for preservation projects.

Many revitalization efforts begin with a clean-up project. To be successful, such a project requires careful, knowledgeable planning. Volunteers left to their own well-meaning activity can destroy irreplaceable evidence from the yard's past. Further, amateur clean-up projects cannot take the place of a program of regular, professional care that must be provided for the yard's continued maintenance. But when well planned, organized, and supervised, a clean-up project can be an effective early step in initiating community interest.

For similar reasons, repairing and resetting stones are not jobs for unsupervised amateurs. Harm can be done, not only to the stones, but to those working on the stones. This work requires knowledge and experience. The ideal place to begin is with a professional conservator trained to evaluate problems, make recommendations, and guide

the project to its completion. The service of a conservator trained to treat museum-quality objects is expensive, though, and may not be a viable, immediate option. In such a situation, it is better to extend the project over a period of years—repairing and resetting the number of stones each year’s budget allows—than try to begin and finish the job in a single operation.

Funding is the vital link in the success of almost every aspect of a graveyard preservation project, and successful fundraising depends on good promotion. Here again, a professional, who knows how to write grant proposals and organize and publicize events, is invaluable. Guided tours and dramatic presentations of the town’s historic past, television and radio interviews, newspaper and magazine articles, slide shows, brochures and bulletins informing the public about the yard and the individuals and organizations that are involved in efforts to preserve it—these are all effective ways to promote public interest. The importance of developing a groundswell of public interest cannot be overemphasized. It greases the wheels that raise the money that makes the project succeed.

But such projects, as important as they are, do have their limits. The simple fact is that the old stones are constantly weathering and deteriorating. Good conservation and preservation will lengthen their lives, but in their original settings, they cannot survive indefinitely. Markers that are particularly important historically or artistically, especially those that are in fragile condition or located in frequently vandalized areas, should be removed from the graveyard to indoor safekeeping.

Moving a gravestone can be a complex or a simple process depending on state laws, the cooperation of the descendants of the deceased, the interest of civic authorities, the availability of proper storage, and funding. Funding is needed to move and repair the stone, to have a replica made, and to set the replica in place. On the replica should be a notation identifying the new marker as a replacement and stating the year the original was removed and its new location.

Finding proper housing for the original requires thoughtful planning in advance of its removal from the yard. An arrangement should be made to place the marker “on permanent loan” in the collection of an institution equipped to catalogue it and give it the kind of treatment other important, irreplaceable artifacts enjoy. This procedure will save the marker and make it available for viewing and study by future generations. The following history of the Sarah Tefft stone illustrates both the need for and the success of this kind of action.

Although recent genealogical research has established the date on the Sara Tefft gravestone as 1672 rather than 1642, the stone has been preserved for this reinterpretation because it was once considered the oldest gravestone in New England dating from the year of the settlement of the town of Warwick. This highly regarded memorial was, in about 1868, removed for safekeeping to the Rhode Island Historical Society, in Providence, and a Victorian-style replacement was erected on the site of the original. Today the replacement lies on the ground broken into five fragments, and the original rests intact and available for viewing at the Society’s museum.

Who carved the stones?

Before research proved otherwise, it was thought that many of New England's early gravestones were brought to the colonies as ballast on ships from England. A few were, their origin noted in their inscriptions, but most were quarried and carved not far from their present location by local stonecutters. Gravestone carving was usually a second, part-time occupation of stonemasons and other craftsmen, although some carvers supported themselves entirely with this work. Occasionally an amateur, probably a friend or family member of the deceased, cut a stone, and some of these display interesting folk carving.

The sophistication and skill of the early carvers varied tremendously, and these artisans often developed colorful, individual styles. Their work is found in pockets that included their home town and surrounding communities and can be identified by the kind of stone used, the size and shape of the stone, the ornamental carving, the lettering style, and the language, spacing, and spelling used in the inscription. When shown photographs of a colonial gravestone, a student of colonial gravestone carving can often identify the carver or carving school and the general area of the stone's location.

Gravestone carving is not a lost art. Modern technology for quarrying, designing, engraving, and polishing stone includes the use of computers, stencils, and laser and power equipment that enlarge the creative possibilities far beyond those enjoyed by the early stonecutters. And at the same time, one can still find men and women who carve stone by hand. The country's oldest and best-known stonecutting business of this kind is the John Stevens Shop, in Newport, Rhode Island, thought to be the continent's oldest business operating continuously at its original site. This shop opened its doors shortly after John Stevens arrived from England in 1700. It continued through generations of stonecutting Stevenses until the family died out in 1929 and the shop was bought by another carver, John Howard Benson. Today it is owned by Benson's son, John Everett Benson, who carved the John F. Kennedy Memorial in Arlington National Cemetery and whose work is found across the nation. There are other modern carvers of distinction whose handcrafted work is found in our cemeteries, and occasionally in early yards as replicas for lost seventeenth- and eighteenth-century stones.

How is a carver identified?

Identifying a carver is like solving any mystery; the procedure varies with every case. There are, however, three basic avenues of approach. The researcher can search for a *signature*. Although only a small percentage of the stones are signed, a careful search may reveal a name or initials. A stonecutter was more likely to sign an important stone or one erected outside his area than one of his routine carvings in his home yard. Sometimes the signatures themselves are colorful—the following pair, for example. In bold letters across the base of the tympanum of the 1762 sandstone marker for Daniel House in East Glastonbury, Connecticut, the stonecutter announced that the stone was “MAD:BY:PETER: BUCKLAID”; and the reverse side of the 1802 soapstone marker for Josiah Spurgin in Wallburg, North Carolina, reads, “MAID BY THE HAND OF JOSEPH CLODFELTER.” But most carvers' signatures are simple and discretely located, often underground. For example, “G.Allen,Sc” in which the abbreviation “Sc” stands for *sculpsit* or “he carved it” in Latin.

Another approach to carver identification is to record names of deceased, death dates, and other data from stones whose carver is being sought. This collection of data is followed by a search of *probate records* of those names for any reference to payment made for the deceased's gravestone. This may yield the name of a gravestone carver. A stone's carver can also be identified by his carving *style*. Just as a trained eye can identify a painting as a Picasso or a Miró or a Warhol, an experienced researcher can analyze the characteristics of a gravestone or group of gravestones and conclude that the work in question is or is not by the same hand; that the carver is a known carver or one who has not been identified. Identification by style is fraught with the possibility of error. Some carvers in urban areas were full-time professionals working in shops whose members produced almost indistinguishable work. They sometimes specialized, one carving the ornamental motif, another inscribing the lettering. Apprentices copied the work of their masters. Carvers in an area sometime influenced one other enough to be called a carving school, and an individual carver often produced work in more than one style. Moreover, stonecutters moved, and in their new locations they might use a different kind of stone or change their style to suit their new customers. Finally, the trained eye of the researcher is fallible. Nevertheless, combinations of the procedures outlined here, plus other techniques that are developed as the plot thickens and the search narrows, do often result in the identification of a known carver's work or the discovery of a "new" carver. The final step is to employ the tools and skills of the genealogist to discover the life of the man behind the name.

As noted in our introduction, interest in identifying the men who made the stones has grown enormously since research in this field was initiated by Harriette Forbes in the 1920s and enlarged by Ernest Caulfield in the 1950s. Study of carver attribution benefited from the 1976 bicentennial celebration, which focused attention on the country's historic graveyards, and it was strengthened by the formation, in 1977, of the Association of Gravestone Studies (AGS). Outstanding among contributors to the field of carver research are Peter Benes, Theodore Chase, Michael Cornish, Robert Drinkwater, Laurel Gabel, Allan Ludwig, Vincent Luti, Stephen Petke, James Slater, Ralph Tucker, Richard Welch, and Gray Williams. Laurel Gabel, in her capacity as director of the AGS Research Clearinghouse, assists researchers and integrates their findings.

What motifs decorate the stones?

Mortality symbols. All art reflects its social culture, and gravestone art is a particularly good example of this truth. The imagery on America's earliest gravemarkers is derived from the strong and stern religious beliefs of the Puritans. Mortality and preparedness for death were dominant themes. Among the primary motifs cut into the tympanums of the earliest (round-shouldered) stones are skulls (usually winged "death's heads"), skeletons, hour glasses, bones, scythes, and coffins. These powerful examples of the Puritan culture are found wherever there were colonists with the sophistication and economic means to have their graves marked with ornamented stones.

Winged faces. Toward the middle of the eighteenth century the iconography on the stones began to change from the Puritans' awesome images to motifs that showed an

increasing concentration on the Resurrection and life-everlasting. Winged faces (or effigies), many of them crowned, gradually replaced the winged skulls. The tree-of-life, birds with fruit, celestial bodies, angels, and hearts became more popular than the earlier mortality symbols. This change in focus was not sudden, nor did it follow a consistent progression. Its development also varied from area to area. Nevertheless, one sees a profound difference in the imagery on the stones as their dates advance from the late seventeenth to late eighteenth century.

In some areas the development in iconography from the winged skull to the winged face evolved in interesting steps. An example is the “mouthmark” occasionally carved above a skull’s teeth, giving the death’s head a living (sometime smiling) feature. Another is the placement of the skull’s teeth so low that they have been transformed into neck decoration. One finds skulls that have almond-shaped eyes with pupils and eyebrows; skulls whose empty, triangular nose space has been filled with a real nose; and winged faces retaining vestiges of the skull’s contours. Intended or not, adding to and subtracting from the established motifs rendered the skull-to-face change more subtle, less abrupt.



An analysis of the motifs on the stones in the Forbes collection shows that in the period from 1675 to 1800, the prevalence of the skull/skeleton motif diminished from being almost exclusive to being present on about one in every thirty stones. During the same period, the frequency of the winged-face motif increased from about one in ten stones to nearly one in two; that is, at the turn of the century, almost half of the stones were decorated with the winged face. This said, it should be noted that there is scholarly controversy concerning the timing and significance of the evolution from winged skull to winged face. This is an area in which more research is needed.

Portraits. Another primary motif is the so-called portrait. Most of the “portraits” are busts, although some depict the deceased in full figure. There are full-face portraits and portraits in profile; there are busts on pedestals and in oval frames, coiffed and dressed in the clothing of the period; and there are figures holding a Bible or another object denoting a profession. Probably the most common portrait is that of the minister wearing his collar. Calling these carvings portraits is not to say that they are likenesses of the deceased. They are not, nor were they intended to be. We know this because portraits by the same carver, when compared, prove to be so similar to one other that one must rule out any attempt by the carver to create a likeness to the deceased. Not only the face but also the body position, hair style, dress, and even jewelry may be routinely repeated. Some carvers cut identical faces for men, women and children. Even facial characteristics such as a double chin have been found to be ubiquitous in a carver’s portraits. These portraits do, however, *represent* the deceased, if only in an abstract way.

Even when a carver's portraits are almost identical, he may indicate the sex of the deceased person by consistently carving buttons on men's clothing only, or by carving bonnets on women and wigs on men. And, as previously mentioned, an occasional item of dress or a hand-held object is clearly representative of the person memorialized by the stone.

Urns and willows and other motifs. Although the focus of this collection is pre-1800, mention should be made of motifs that were introduced around 1800 and ornamented the tympanums of gravestones for the first half of the nineteenth century. At this time an interest in neoclassic art was evident in architecture, painting, and other decorative arts, such as samplers. In cemetery art the change in motifs was striking. On the large, smooth, square-shouldered slate stones that became stylish at the turn of the century, the most popular of these motifs were the neoclassic urn and willow carved in every conceivable variation with columns, tassels, banners, and drapery. Occasional mourning figures, weeping over the urns and under the willows, provide some relief from the ubiquity, as do stones decorated with the emblems of fraternal organizations. By mid-century, interest in the repetitive urn-and-willow motifs faded, and they were replaced by allegorical subjects.

First introduced in the mid-eighteenth-century, allegorical themes grew in popularity through the nineteenth century, and many have endured into the twentieth century. Fingers point upward to celestial bodies or to banners reading, "Rest in Heaven"; lambs decorate the graves of children; there are clasped hands and praying hands, doves, crowns, books, shells, and more—all carved into absorbent white marble (which is now being dissolved by acid rain).

Also interesting are the less impressive, secondary motifs that fill the spaces in the shoulders and borders, decorate the edge of the tympanum, or share space with the inscription on a stone's tablet. The secondary motifs are not as strong visually as the primary motifs, and most are probably more ornamental than symbolic. That may be the reason that, for the most part, they did not undergo the transformation that altered the primary (tympanum) motifs. Much of the secondary carving was abstract—diapering, crosshatching, spirals, and stylus designs of pinwheels and intersecting circles—or semi-abstract, suggesting plant life. Rosettes and pinwheels are the dominate shoulder designs; vines, fruit, and flowers the dominate border designs. An innovative carver occasionally added interest to an important stone by carving into the shoulders or borders a motif usually reserved for tympanums.

What do the motifs on the stones mean?

This is a question asked by both the first-time viewer and the serious student of gravestone art. A great deal of casual speculation and considerable scholarly research have been devoted to finding answers.

Speculative interpretation of some of the more obvious designs can safely be made by the insightful observer. The winged hourglass clearly tells us that time flies; the hourglass on its side, that time has stopped for the deceased; the broken flower, absent branch, or felled tree, that life has been cut short. Numerous designs invite this kind of

easy, simplistic interpretation, and lists have been prepared that suggest the probable symbolic significance of the motifs.

Not all designs can be interpreted in such an uncomplicated way, and attempts to do so render results that may be more in the eye of the beholder than of the carver. What is the meaning of an upside-down heart? Of a smile or frown on the face of a skull or an effigy? Does a particular flower or a pinwheel have symbolic significance, or is it simply a decorative space-filler? Scholars disagree sharply about the meaning of specific motifs; they even debate the extent to which it is possible to determine their meaning and significance. This healthy diversity of opinion stimulates interest and further study.

This said, we offer the following short list of some of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century motifs with their probable symbolic meanings.

ANGEL

Flying angel: Rebirth

Trumpeting angel: Call to the Resurrection

Weeping angel: Grief

ARROW: Mortality

BIRD: Eternal life

In flight: Flight of the soul

Dove: Purity, devotion

BREASTS/GOURDS/POMEGRANATES: The church, the ministry; the nourishment of the soul

CANDLE FLAME: Life

Being snuffed: Death

COFFIN, PICK, SPADE, PALL: Mortality

CROWN: Glory of life after death

FIG, PINEAPPLE, OTHER FRUIT: Prosperity, eternal life

FLOWER: Frailty of life

Severed blossom: Mortality

Garland: Victory

HEART: Love, love of God, abode of the soul

HOUR GLASS: Inevitable passing of time (and life)

Winged: Swift passage.

ROOSTER: Awakening, call to the Resurrection

SCYTHE: Death, divine harvest

SHELL: The Resurrection, life everlasting, life's pilgrimage

SKULL, BONES, SKELETON: Mortality

SUN SHINING, SUN RISING: Renewed life

TREE: Life.

Cut down: Mortality

Sprouting: Life everlasting

With severed branch: Life cut short

Willow tree: Life, mourning

VINE with GRAPES: The sacraments

WINGED FACE: Effigy or soul of the deceased, soul in flight

WINGED SKULL: Flight of the soul from mortal man

WREATH: Victory.

Worn by skull: Victory of death over life

Who wrote the inscriptions?

The primitive lettering on the earliest stones and on later stones found in areas isolated from the sophistication of the larger cultural centers was the work of unskilled amateurs, probably family members or friends of the deceased. On simple, roughly-crafted markers and on undressed field stones they carved the basic facts: name or initials of the deceased, death date, and age. Attempts were occasionally made to embellish the inscriptions with naïve carvings of mortality symbols.

Responsibility for the organization and wording of the inscriptions on professionally-carved markers was probably shared, as it is today, by the family and the designer of the stone. In most instances, the carver must have been the stronger influence, as the inscriptions used by each carver generally share similarities in their length and overall style. But the fashion of the day, then as now, was perhaps the strongest influence in determining what was said, and how it was said.

What was the general form of the inscription?

The first line of a typical inscription from any given time period opens with similar, often identical, lines. In the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, inscriptions opened with "Here Lyeth ye Body of" or variations such as "Here Lyes Buried [or interred] ye Remains of," which evolved to the even more straightforward "Here Lies the Body of." As the Puritan influence diminished, "In Memory of" and such variations as "Sacred to the Memory of" and "Erected in Memory of" were used

increasingly. By 1750, the two types of opening lines shared equal popularity, and after 1800 the old “Here Lies” had all but disappeared in favor of the “In-Memory”-type opening.

The opening line is followed by the name of the deceased, often with a title (e.g., the Rev., Capt., Esq.) and the relationship (e.g., wife of, infant son of), the date of death, and the age. Then, on the larger, more expensive stones for important people, follows an account, sometimes lengthy, of the deceased’s work and contributions and perhaps, if it was unusual, the cause of death.

...His Death was sudden premature awfull & violent;
providentially Occaſion'd by the Fall of a Tree...
John Stockbridge, 1768, Hanover, Massachusetts

Finally, on the tablet there may be added a verse, a poetic statement, a biblical quotation, or a biblical reference—or more than one of these.

In addition to the inscription on the tablet of the stone, a short philosophical statement, verse, or quotation may be carved on the tympanum, usually as a border around the curved edge of the tympanum. Here are examples of inscriptions used in this way:

Arise ye Dead
As runs the Glass Our lives do Paſs
Life how ſhort! Eternity how long!
Tempes Fugit
Memento Mori

Prior to 1700, few gravestones were inscribed with verses. Possibly because the stones of this early period tend to be somewhat smaller than eighteenth-century stones, their inscriptions are typically limited to the basic facts: name, death date, and age. During the eighteenth century the percentage of inscriptions that included a verse gradually increased until, in the last half of that century, nearly one in three included a verse. The verses are most often comprised of four lines, though they range from two lines to (but rarely) more than eight.

What kinds of verses were used?

Most of the thousands of verses are conventional, traditional and repetitive. They are worth reading, however, for even the most banal speaks to us about the beliefs and tenor of the times. From them we learn of the prevailing religious beliefs, of the levels of education and health, of politics and war, of daily life and occupations, of the relative status of the sexes, and much more. Sprinkled among the commonplace and the conventional, one finds sparkling treasures conveying both profound philosophy and poignant expressions of love and grief. Here, for example, on a schist marker ornamented with the carving of a rose torn from its bush, is the verse memorializing a twenty-seven-year-old wife:

The Rose Bloſſoms—it diffuseth
sweetneſs in the morning; plucked

from the Stock, it is still lovely
To thee, the morning of Eternity
is come! Mary! thy Soul is an immortal Rose
Mary Leroy, 1792, Brooklyn, Connecticut

And this verse for Caesar, a slave, reveals the poet's love and respect—and also his racial bias.

Here lies the best of slaves
Now turning into dust;
Caesar the Ethiopian craves
A place among the just.

His faithful soul has fled
To realms of heavenly light
And by the blood that Jesus shed
Is changed from Black to White
Caesar, 1780, North Attleboro, Massachusetts

A parent's grief for the loss of a three-year-old daughter (named Wealthy Buck!) is tempered by religious faith.

This babe that lays so near my heart
It was gods will that we must part
My Judge knows all things day & night
He cant do wrong it must be right
Wealthy Buck, 1777, Shaftsbury, Vermont

Epidemics raged, accounting for verses like the one for four brothers, ages five, nine and twelve (twins), all of whom died between December and February. Their stone is ornamented with a handsome, high-relief carving of four faces in profile and a tree of life with four broken branches. The first four lines read:

Ye living mortals see in earthly Bloom
Four lovely of springs lie beneath this tomb.
The Afflicted mother weeps from day to day,
To see those lovely branches torn away...
Holmes children, 1794-95, East Glastonbury, Connecticut

Other verses remind us that the state of medical knowledge was primitive by our standards. A striking example is the verse on a family stone that records the deaths of fourteen children, thirteen of whom died in infancy. Information about the infant deaths indicates that the cause was RH incompatibility, a condition that is now treatable. On the stone is carved a tree-of-life with vine-like branches, ending with tiny, blooming faces. The verse reads:

Youth behold and ſhed a tear.
Se fourteen children ſlumber here.
Se their image how they ſhine.
Like flowers of a fruitful vine.
Rebecca Park, 1803, and children, Grafton, Vermont

Existing with a high incidence of infant mortality was a high death rate for women in childbirth. The eight-line verse for a nineteen-year-old mother “who died in child-bed” begins:

Remember friends the ſolumn Hour.
I was a Mother and a Tomb:
In Dreadful pains a Corps I bore;
And ſoon a Corps my ſelf became...
Salla Barns and infant, 1780, Somers, Connecticut

Some verses leave the reader to ponder their meaning. On the stone for a young child who was “instantly kill’d by a ſtock of boards,” the tympanum carving shows two boards crossed like an X, the effigy of a child behind them, and the verse reads:

Parents dear your idols
all take down
leſt God ſhould ſtill
upon you frown.
Aaron Bowers, 1701, Pepperell, Massachusetts

Each verse speaks to the living with one of three voices: the voice of the deceased person, the voice of a friend or family member, or the voice of a philosopher. The distribution of these voices is about equal. The two classic verses quoted in the opening paragraph of this text (page 12) are the best known examples of verses that speak with the voice of the deceased. These two, and innumerable variations on them, were the most frequently used verses on the eighteenth-century stones. Following are additional examples in which the deceased is speaking:

By me Mortality you’r taught.
Your days will paſs like mine.
Eternity Amazing thought,
Hangs on this thread of time.
Jane Webster, 1797, Shaftsbury, Vermont

What you are reading o’er my bones
I’ve often read on others tombs.
And others soon will read of thee
What you are reading now of me.
Isaiah Bodenhamer, 1827, Wallburg, North Carolina

Verses speaking with the voice of a friend or a family member may mention qualities of the deceased or the circumstances of the death:

How charming all, how much she was ador'd
alive; now dead, how much's her loss deplor'd
Martha Green and infant, 1770, Harvard, Massachusetts

An amiable Mother a loving wife,
Who of the small-pox departed this life...
Lucy Maynard, 1793, Mendon, Massachusetts

THIS GOOD SCHOOL DAME
NO LONGER SCHOOL MUST KEEP
WHICH GIVES US CAUSE
FOR CHILDRENS SAKE TO WEEP
Joanna Winship, 1707, Cambridge, Massachusetts

My trembling Heart with Grief overflows,
While I Record the death of Thine;
Who died by Thunder sent from Heaven,
In seventeen hundred and seventy seven...
*Abraham Rice, struck by lightning, 1777, Framingham,
Massachusetts*

The philosopher's voice speaks of eternal truths:

Ye young ye fair your rosy cheek
May promise you old age
But yet a few more setting suns
& death may you engage
Anna & Amasa Hitchcock, 1795, Cheshire, Connecticut

Death like an overflowing stream
Sweeps us away our life's stream
An empty tale a morning flower,
Cut down and withered in an hour.
Rufus Munson, 1797, Manchester, Vermont

Our life is ever on the wing
And death is ever nigh
The moment when our life begins
We all begin to die.
Timothy Paige, 1791, Hardwick, Massachusetts

What is the source of the verses?

This is a subject that invites research. Some are lines from familiar hymns. Isaac Watts has been credited with this verse, often used on gravestones:

Princes this clay muſt be your bed
In ſpite of all your towers
The tall, the wiſe, the reverned hed
Muſt be as low as our's
Noah Goodman, 1797, South Hadley, Massachusetts
Source, A Voice From the Tombs, by Isaac Watts

Some of the verses are probably the original work of the carver. But the source of many of the often-repeated verses is not known. Most so-called “funny epitaphs,” humorous verses that are collected and frequently quoted, cannot be verified and probably do not exist on authentic gravemarkers.

Here lies the body of our Anna
Done to death by a banana
It wasn't the fruit that laid her low
But the skin of the thing that made her go.

The locations given for verses like this are usually vague (e.g., east Texas), or, when the location is more specific, a search for the stone is usually fruitless. In at least one instance the markers themselves are questionable. Boothill Grave Yard in Tombstone, Arizona, is filled with wood slabs freshly painted with graveyard humor.

Here lies Lester Moore,
Four slugs from a .44,
No Les, no more.

The language, punctuation, and spelling (“Gone to be an Angle”) used by an uneducated seventeenth- or eighteenth-century stonecutter/poet, together with changes in the meanings of words, do, however, sometimes combine to give some of the verses a curious twist when read today.

Molly tho pleaſant in her day
Was ſudd'nly ſeiz'd and ſent away
How ſoon ſhes ripe how ſoon ſhes rott'n
Sent to her grave & ſoon for gott'n
Mary Fowler, 1792, Milford, Connecticut

If that verse were written today, it might read somewhat like this:

Molly, pleasant in her day,
Was suddenly seized and passed away.
How soon her mortal remains decay,
And her remembrance fades away.

And the last line of the following verse, on a pockmarked and lichen-covered stone, is amusing and confusing to those who do not see the deteriorated apostrophe in the last word, di'd.

Her laſt diſtreſs with patience bore
Severely was She try'd.
The Saint ſuſtain'd her grief & pain.
But ſtill the woman did.
Polly Andrus, 1802, Shaftsbury, Vermont

Today's reader may smile at the language and spelling when reading these touching lines:

NOW BETWEEN
THESE CARVED STONS
RICH TRESUER LIES
DEER SMITH HIS BONES
Obadiah Smith, 1727, Norwichtown, Connecticut

What quotations were used?

Like verses, quotations, usually from the Bible, were used with increasing frequency during the eighteenth century. By the last half of that century, about one out of ten stones included a quotation or a biblical reference, or both. Typically, the quotation is the last entry of the inscription, following the verse (when there is a verse). Occasionally, a short quotation is inscribed on the tympanum, bordering its curved edge. Following are among the most frequently used quotations:

The Memory of the just is blessed.
Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.
Time cuts down all, both great and small.
From Death's arrest no age is free.
The Sweet remembrance of the just shall flourish when they
sleep in dust.

When the quotation is obscure or infrequently used on a gravestone, the source may be inscribed with it.

Then they are quiet, becau ſe
they are at Reſt P]l [Psalms] 107 30.
*Mary Robinson, 1722, Duxbury, Massachusetts, for a
teenager drowned with her mother.*

The inscription on a signed stone for a forty-three-year-old mother and her almost-four-month-old infant ends with a quotation in Latin.

Deus eos qui ob dormierint in Jesu, adducet anni eo. 1 The J
4 14.

[Those who fall asleep in Jesus will be brought with him.]

Mary Rous, 1714/15, Charlestown, Massachusetts

Space around a tympanum carving of the tree-of-life, Adam, Eve, and the serpent is filled with this quotation:

Corin:s Chap XV/Vears 22:

For as in Adam all die, even Jo

in Chriſt ſhall all be made alive

Sarah Swan, Bristol, Rhode Island

Stones for ministers are usually among the largest and most elaborate in a graveyard, and ministers' eulogies (like their sermons?) are usually long and wordy and quote from the Bible. The twenty-one-line epitaph for the Reverend Thomas Jones contains four cited biblical quotations, one of which reads:

Being dead he yet speaketh Heb. XI 4.

Rev. Thomas Jones, 1774, Burlington, Massachusetts

What was the lettering style, wording, and layout of the inscriptions?

Because the stones were carved by hand and represent the work of hundreds of carvers of varied skill and educational background, the layout and lettering on early gravemarkers had nearly as many variations as there were carvers. There were also common characteristics.

Upper-case lettering. Most of the seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century stones were carved with bold upper-case letters that give vigor to the brief, factual statements.

HE RE LYES Ye
BODY OF
SIMON BEAMON
AGED 54 YEARS
DECt Ye 19th OF
FEBRUARY
1711/2
Deerfield, Massachusetts

SAMVEL W (Samuel Wellsted,
ELLSTED AG aged 15 months,
ED 15 MON died the 13 of August,
TH S DED 1684.)
THE 13 OF AV

GVST 1684
Charlestown, Massachusetts

Although brevity was characteristic of the early inscriptions lettered in upper-case, sometime there was a need to say more. Ethnic tensions may have played a part in the tone of this epitaph.

HERE LIES BURIED Ye
BODY OF MR DANIEL
CAMPBELL BORN JN
SCOTLAND CAME INTO
NEW ENGLAND ANNO 1716
WAS MURDERD ON HIS
OWN FARM JN RUTLAND
BY ED. FITZPATRICK AN
JRISHMAN ON MARCH
Ye 8th ANNO DM 1744
JN Ye 48 YEARS
OF HIS AGE
~~~MAN KNOWETH  
NOT HIS TIME  
*Rutland, Massachusetts*

*Ligatures.* Another characteristic of the upper-case lettering of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century gravestones is the use of ligatures, that is, joined letters. A few combinations such as Æ and Œ are in use today, but in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, carvers tended to combine any letters that lent themselves to being united. Ligatures had a practical function in that they minimized both space and carving required. They were also elegant in appearance.

MEMENT O MORI FUGIT HORA  
HERE LYETH BURIED  
e  
Y BODY OF ELIZABETH  
BELCHER WHO WAS  
FORMERLY THE WIFE OF  
ANDREW BELCHER L ATE  
OF CAMBRIDG DECEASED  
WHO DEPARTE D THIIIS LIFE  
e  
JUNE Y 26D 1680  
ETATIS SUÆ 62  
*Elizabeth Belcher, 1680, Cambridge, Massachusetts*

The incidence of ligatures on gravemarkers rather closely parallels that of all-upper-case lettering. During the mid-seventeenth century, ligatures were used in almost



every inscription. The number per inscription averaged about three, with some containing more than ten. Then, for a period of about fifty years—twenty-five years before 1700 and twenty-five years after the turn of the century—their use gradually diminished. After 1730 they occur infrequently, with about one in twenty-five inscriptions containing one or two ligatures, and by 1760 this interesting lettering style had died out.

*The letters I-J and U-V.* Inscriptions in upper-case letters often show the letter *I* used instead of the letter *J*, and the letter *V* instead of *U*. This lettering, curious to the modern eye, was the result of developments in the English alphabet. The letter *J* is a late variant of the Latin *I*, which gradually differentiated from *I* in function as well as form until, in the seventeenth century, the distinction between *J* as a consonant and *I* as a vowel was fully established. Similarly, the letters *V* and *U* are varieties of the same character—the *U* being simply a cursive form of the letter *V*, with which it was formerly used interchangeably. *U* and *V* were not given separate alphabetical positions until about 1800. The letter *W*, or double *U*, sometimes seen as a double *V* is a survival of this use.

|                                 |                        |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| SARAH                           | (Sarah Prescott        |
| PRESCOTT                        | Her blessed soul       |
| HVR BLAS                        | ascended up to heaven, |
| ED SOVL                         | July 17 day, 1709.)    |
| ASSANDED                        |                        |
| UP TO HEA                       |                        |
| VEN IULY                        |                        |
| 17 DAY                          |                        |
| 1709                            |                        |
| <i>Lancaster, Massachusetts</i> |                        |

*Lower-case lettering.* As the eighteenth century progressed, an increasing number of stones were carved with lower-case letters. By 1790 only one in ten markers used the Roman upper-case letters exclusively, and by the turn of the nineteenth century, the powerful, all-upper-case lettering on gravestones had disappeared. In its place are lower-case letters in many different styles, sprinkled with capitol letters and important words carved in upper-case for punctuation and emphasis. A variety of lettering styles, such as Old English, Roman, Script, and Italic, were used to enhance the inscription.

The inscriptions from two stones in the same yard illustrate typical lettering found on late eighteenth-century gravemarkers. The first is an ordinary stone for an ordinary citizen of the community; the second is a large, elaborately-carved stone for a leader, a minister, and his two wives.

In Memory of  
M,r JONATHAN WHITE  
who died Aug, 2, 1789  
In ye 72, Year of his Age.

---

Life is Uncertain  
Death is fure

ƒin is the wound  
& Chriſt the cure.  
*South Hadley, Massachusetts*

Profiles of the minister and his two wives stand out in high relief above this epitaph.

In Memory of the  
Rev,d JOHN WOODBRIDGE  
late Miniſter of the Goſpel  
of Chriſt in this Town:  
Who was born at Springfield Dec, br  
25,th 1702. & died Sept,br 10,th 1783.  
in the 81,ſt Year of his Age.  
(He was Son of ye Venerable &  
Rev,d, JOHN WOODBRIDGE  
of Springfield 2,d Pariſh)  
M,rs TRYPHENA His firſt Wife died  
Jan,ry 10,th 1749 In her 42,d Year.  
Mrs, MARTHA His 2,d Wife died  
Aug,ſt 20,th 1783. In her 58,th Year.

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This ſtone ſtands But to tell  
Where their duſt lies and who they was  
When Saints ſhall Riſe that day will ſhow  
the Parts they acted here Below.  
*South Hadley, Massachusetts*

*The long s.* The long s (ſ) is another letter with a history that can be traced on early gravestones. The long form of the letter s came into popular use as the incidence of upper-case lettering and ligatures diminished, first appearing on gravemarkers dated as early as the 1680s. Its use increased gradually for a century until most inscriptions included three or four. In long inscriptions there are sometimes fifteen or more instances of the use of the long s.

In memory of  
Capt. ELISHA ALLEN,  
who was inhumanly murdered  
by Samuel Froſt.  
July 16th 1793:  
aged 48 Years.

---

Paſſengers behold ! my friends and view;  
Breathleſs I lie; no more with you;  
Hurri'd from life, ſent to the grave;  
Jeſus my only hope — to ſave;

No warning had I of my fad fate  
Till dire the stroke alas! to late.  
*Princeton, Massachusetts*

*Double dates.* A calendar change accounts for the double dates seen on some stones. In 1582, on the advice of astronomers, Pope Gregory XIII ordered calendar changes to correct errors in the Julian calendar, changes that included dropping eleven days and fixing the start of the year at January 1 instead of March 25, the beginning of spring. (Thus, **S**eptember, **O**ctober, **N**ovember, and **D**ecember, logical names for the seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth months, became our ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth months.) European countries adopted the new, improved calendar at different times; it was not adopted by Great Britain and the colonies until 1752. After this date, the colonists consistently recorded the year of death in the “new style,” but for nearly 75 years preceding the formal adoption of the Gregorian calendar, the colonists were living with two overlapping calendars. To adapt, they frequently used double dates (such as 1701/2 and 1709/10) when recording a year of a death that occurred between January 1 and March 24. From the late 1600s until 1752, about half the January/February/March gravestones (approximately one out of ten of the total stones of that period) were engraved with double dates.

*Language.* Language is ever changing, and on gravemarkers the outmoded and discarded words are preserved, carved in stone. We read of a man’s being “casually shot” or “casually killed by the fall of a tree.” Today we would say *accidentally*, although the earlier use of casual survives in the name of casualty insurance companies. We use the word *exhume* but not its opposite, *inhume*, although the latter is still in the dictionary. Wives are no longer referred to as *consorts*, or widows as *relicts*.

*Spelling.* Spellings change, too. On gravestones, spelling that we find unusual, antiquated, or humorous may be the result of a simple change in style. Examples are seen in *dyed* for *died* and *lyes* for *lies*. Other spellings, such as *bleow* for *below*, are simply errors. Many misspellings are phonetic. We see *Unas* for *Eunice*, *cends* and *sens* for *sends*, *phisitian* for *physician*, and innumerable other examples—“Har lies the body,” “My Rase is Run,” “God the Farther,” “Hur body only resting here/Hur soul is fled to a hier spear.” Phonetic spelling was not confined to primitive, crudely-lettered stones or to areas where the population was uneducated. “In Ther Death They Ware Not Divided,” reads the elegantly carved 1709 Cambridge, Massachusetts, gravemarker for Capt. Pyam Blower and his wife Elizabeth.

Some phonetic spellings are interesting keys to the pronunciation of the period. An example is seen in the abbreviation *daftr* for *daughter*. Could *daughter* have been pronounced *dafter*? Probably. We pronounce the word *laughter* as *lafter*.

Not only is there misspelling on the gravestones, there is also considerable inconsistency, such as words, even surnames, spelled different ways on the same stone.

*Opening lines.* The words and spelling in the first line of an inscription place it in a time frame and cultural context. The typical opening line of the earliest stones, “Here lyeth ye body of,” was gradually altered, first by substituting *lyes* for *lyeth*, then *lies* for

*lyes* and *the* for *ye*. By the middle of the eighteenth century the introductory line used today's English—"Here Lies the Body of" or a variation, such as, "Here Lies Interred the Remains of." In the latter quarter of the century, as attitudes toward death and afterlife were changing, reference to death in the opening line was abandoned. "In Memory of," "Erected to the Memory of," and "Sacred to the Memory of" introduced most inscriptions.

All of these examples are indications of the culture of the period and of the colonists' perspective toward spelling itself. If it could be read, it was acceptable. Spelling and pronunciation changed in favor of consistency as dictionaries became available, but not until 1788 was a dictionary published in the United States, and a dictionary written by an American—Noah Webster—was not published until 1806.

*Abbreviations.* Abbreviations were much used in both handwriting and stone carving. When read on gravestones today, the abbreviations tend to lend the inscriptions an unintended informality; the carver's (and writer's) purpose was simply to reduce the amount of lettering. No rules applied. Omitted letters were indicated by apostrophes or by raised letters in titles (Mrs, Capt, Lieut, Esqr), months (Aprl, Janry), names (Danl, Willm, Benjn), and other words (interd, educatd). Contemporary lettering has retained abbreviations with raised letters only for numerals, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.

*Thorns.* The thorn, a symbol for the *th* sound, was used extensively on gravemarkers. This symbol, which resembles the letter Y, is seen most often as *Ye* for *the* and, less often, as *Yt* for *that*. (The word *you* probably developed from using the thorn to write the word *thou*.) The thorn appears on gravemarkers with dates throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although its popularity diminished after 1750.

*Layout.* Finally, the overall layout and general appearance of the carved inscription is characterized by a number of common practices that would not be acceptable today. Guidelines to help the carver with his lettering were cut into the face of the stone, but even with this help, the lines of lettering were not always as straight and parallel as a modern customer would demand. Careful planning and meticulous spacing was not an unconditional priority. The right hand margin was occasionally a jumble of letters and words raised above or lowered below the line in order to force the fit. Carets were used to add inadvertent omissions; other errors were simply cut out of the stone and re-carved in the depressed area. Punctuation was equally relaxed, with periods, commas, semicolons, and dashes used, or not used, as the carver fancied. The carver may have worked very hard indeed, but the effect is frequently one of unstudied, informal improvisation.

In Memory of Mrs.  
SARAH. wife of  
Mr. David  
EN  
DNISON  
^ ch  
who was Born Mar

13th. 1755 & Died  
August 20th. 1787  
*Brooklyn, Connecticut*

### **What is the relationship between the motifs and the inscriptions?**

Usually there is no specific relationship. Each carver developed his individual style for carving whatever motifs were popular at the time. He ornamented the majority of his stones with similar carvings, changing his basic designs as dictated by changes in public taste. Thus we find stone after stone with much the same ornamentation and with no obvious relationship between the ornamental carving and the inscription. Exceptions to this pattern usually involved prestige and money. The congregation of a beloved minister or the wealthy family of a pillar of the community might order from the local stonecutter what we would call a custom design, and such stones often did coordinate the ornamental carving with the inscription. These special stones show the wigged minister in his pulpit, the mother with her stillborn infant, the father under a fallen tree, a ship or anchor on the stone for a naval officer lost at sea, or a symbol of distinction such as a coat-of-arms or the emblem of a fraternal, social, or military organization. The memorialized person was not invariably rich or powerful. In Attleborough, Massachusetts, there is a slate stone designed especially for Marcy New, who died at age 72 in 1788. The tympanum carving is of the head and shoulders of a woman, her brow furrowed and her sad eyes focused on the viewer. Her hands, palms forward, fingers spread, are raised to shoulder height, as if in amazement (“Land sakes!”). Carved in an arch above her head are the words, “Lay Jick one Day & Died the next Day.” Marcy New was probably not rich or powerful, but she was important to the carver. The stone is signed by James New, a prominent carver of gravestones—and Marcy New’s son.

### **Are there many variations on the basic gravestone styles here described?**

In shape, material, carving style, motif, inscription, and every other characteristic mentioned, there are innumerable variations. There are, for example, “discoid” stones shaped like a person’s trunk supporting a big head. There are horizontal “table stones” supported by four legs, and grave slabs called “body stones” or “wolf stones” lying flat on the grave. There are tombs with handsomely decorated stone tablets at their entrances. There are stones whose ornamental carving covers the entire face and whose inscription is cut into the reverse face, and there are stones with elaborate decoration and no lettering at all, not even names. There are markers made of wrought iron and markers made of wood, and cement markers decorated with ceramics, shells, and glass fragments. There are soapstone markers cut completely through with designs of birds, flowers, and fylfots. We have not discussed the use of languages other than English and Latin found on stones in regions where the early settlers were not English. Nor have we mentioned “backdated” stones carved years after the death date, or re-used stones whose original inscriptions were excised—practices that complicate carver attribution. Except for signatures, we have not called attention to the interesting personal information sometime left by the carver, usually underground, such as the price of the gravestone or his practice carving.

Nor have we commented on whole areas of the cultural significance of the stones. One example will illustrate: gravestones give us insight into the roles of women in early America.

A man's stone typically reads:

Here lies the body of  
Mr. John Doe  
Who Died July 4, 1776  
In the 76 Year of his Age

A woman's stone reads:

Here Lies the body of  
Mrs. Mary Doe  
Wife of Mr. John Doe  
Who Died July 4, 1776  
In the 76 Year of her Age

The wife is sometimes referred to as the *relict* (widow) or *consort* of her husband. Often her stone is smaller than his. The eulogies and verses and even names of women—Silence, Thankful, Comfort, Hopestill, Mercy, and Submit—often suggest the supportive and submissive role they played. A woman's name is typically attached to that of a man, if not her husband, then her father. Inscriptions for males, however, mention their parents only when the stone is for a child or, occasionally, the young adult son of a prominent father.

There are numerous stones for men that mention the names of more than one wife, but for a woman who married more than once, this history was not usually recorded on her stone. Nor was her maiden name. Typically, the only name recorded in the inscription for a married woman was her married name at the time of death. While perhaps not typical, it is far from unusual to find a stone that memorializes a widower and the wife who predeceased him (in this case by eight years) that reads more or less like this:

In Memory of  
Doc,t SAMUEL VINTON  
who died May 30th  
1801, in the 65 year of  
his age.  
50  
Also Mrs. ABIGAIL wife  
of Doc,t SAMUEL VINTON  
who died Aug. 13 1793  
in the 56 year of her age.  
*South Hadley, Massachusetts*

**What conclusions can be drawn from the study of the country's early gravestones?**

As we have seen, America's early gravemarkers offer us primary, hands-on evidence of our country's past. On them we read of events, both major and minor, that were documented at the time the incidents occurred, inscribed by carvers who were close to or even participants in these events. Names of the famous, the infamous, and of the ordinary man, woman, and child were carved into stone by their contemporaries, often by stonecutters who knew them personally. We read of deaths that give us insight into the daily life of early Americans—falling from a horse, felling a tree, raising a barn, fording a river, being “cast away in a storm,” falling into a tanning vat, fighting Indians—

CAPT  
THOMAS LAKE  
AGED 61 YEERES  
AN EMINENTLY FAITHFUL  
SERVANT OF GOD & ONE  
OF A PUBLIC SPIRIT WAS  
PERFIDIOUSLY SLAIN BY  
Ye INDIANS AT KENNIBECK  
AUGUST Ye 14 1676  
HERE INTERRED THE [?]  
OF MARCH FOLLO[OWING]  
*Boston, Massachusetts*

On a slate stone with a carving of a man, a woman, and three huge tulips rising from the ground, all surmounted by a seated angel, is this story:

Erected in the Memory of  
Lieut. Moses Willard and Mrs  
Sufannah his Wife Who  
Were first Settlers of this  
Town; Whose boddys are  
inter'd here. He was Killd  
by the Indians June 16th, 1756  
In the 54th year of his age  
And she departed this Life  
May 5th 1797 In the 88th year  
of her age.  
What render'd their lives remarkable  
was their being bereft of two of their elder  
daughters by the Indians one of whom had  
her family with her and continued in  
captivity till after his death.  
*Charlestown, New Hampshire*

And the stones tell us of war. Here is an inscription for three sons, two of whom died in the same month at early ages. Their gravestone was erected twenty-four years later, when the surviving son died in the service of his country.

In Memory of three Sons  
of Mr Thomas & Mrs Sa  
rah Miles. Hartshorn died  
Ocr 18th 1754. in the 5th  
year of his age. Parker  
died Ocr 8th 1754. in the  
3d year of his age.  
Also  
Mr. Reuben Miles died at  
Valley forge in Pennsylvania  
in the service of the United  
States June 18th 1778. in the  
30th year of his age.  
*Brooklyn, Connecticut*

We say our world is shrinking. The early gravestones tell us that the world of the people these stones memorialize was very large indeed.

In Memory of  
MR GEORGE ROBBINS, of  
*Wethersfield, in Connecticut,*  
who died Augt 8th 1798. Æ. 29.  
In the morn of life, he felt the  
extremes of fortune.  
*Tutored in the School of adversity,*  
he knew how to compa[s]ionate  
the afflicted.  
*Far from the condolence of friends,*  
he fell an early victim to the  
*Boston Epidemic.*  
One friend mourn'd his exit,  
while the tears of Strangers watered  
his GRAVE.  
*Boston, Massachusetts*

In 1798 George Robbins' friends and family could not travel the hundred miles from Wethersfield to Boston in time to attend his burial. Today, just six generations later, some of us have traveled from Halifax to Savannah just for the adventure of finding and making photographs of gravestones such as his.



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