

## TEACHER'S CORNER: EXPLORING HISTORIC CEMETERIES

In the Washington metropolitan area during the 16th, 17th, and early 18th centuries most "graveyards" were located in churchyards (e.g. Pohick Cemetery in Fairfax) and usually near the center of town (e.g. Christ Church Cemetery in Alexandria). However, overcrowding of graves and new sanitation laws mandated the closing of most of these early "graveyards" by the 1850's. The new cemeteries were located on the periphery of towns--distinct and separate from the focus of activity among the living. By the mid-19th century, a new genre of formal cemeteries was being established in America. (The Mount Auburn Cemetery in Boston is one of the earliest examples of these new burial places.) Most existing cemeteries in the Washington metropolitan area were created during this time and are generally referred to as "rural cemeteries." What was this new genre?

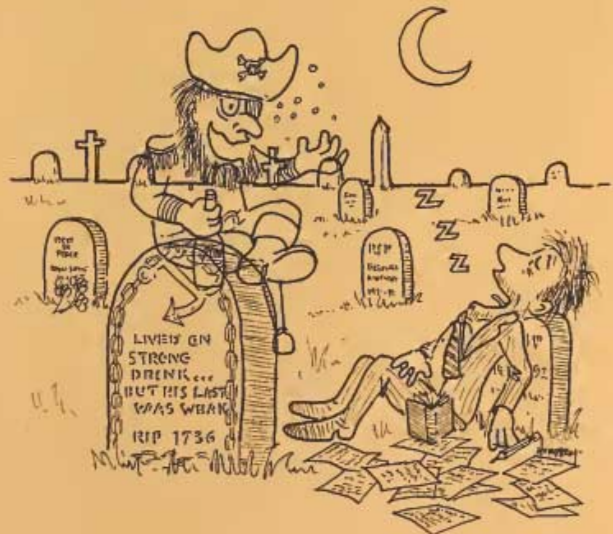
The newly established 19th century "cemeteries" (replacing earlier terms such as "graveyards") were not simply a place to inter the dead but represented a new type of cultural institution. Cemeteries were now formally designed to resemble gardens. The dead were not simply interred but memorialized. New rules defined such things as the proper care of the grounds and the appropriate attire and demeanor while visiting the cemetery.

The boundaries of most 19th century rural cemeteries are marked, for instance, by fences or shrubbery. Often a centrally located entrance leads to symmetrical paths or roadways which divide the cemetery into sections. These sections may be further divided into family plots or other areas (e.g. military graves). Planting may mark sections, plots or individual graves. Such features set off the individual graves as well as

the entire cemetery, both physically and visually, from the surrounding area.

In metropolitan Washington, the most common gravestone styles are tablets, obelisks, blocks, and slabs. Occurring in the late 18th century to the mid-19th century, tablets are single vertical stones that average two to four inches in thickness and are made of limestone, marble, or sandstone. These stones, often with a sculpted top, are placed directly in the ground with no bases used. All the surfaces of these stones have been cut (or finished) but are not polished.

Shaped like the Washington Monument, obelisks, usually made of marble, are tall and square in cross-section and dominate gravestones in the late 19th to early 20th century. The obelisk may be topped with an urn,





ball (known as an orb), or other figure and may have one or several bases of varying sizes. While most gravestones are lettered only on the front, obelisks may show lettering on all sides.

Blocks, which are square grave-stones, vary in size, may or may not have bases, and generally show cut but not polished surfaces. Made of a variety of different stones, these markers are characteristic of the 20th century. A variation of a block stone, the pulpit style marker has a slanted face on which is carved the individual's name, other information, and decoration. Made of marble or granite, pulpit stones rest on bases.

Slabs typify the 20th century and are still the most common gravestone used today. Slabs, often composed of granite, are usually placed vertically on a base and vary in thickness from six to eight inches. While the front of a slab is polished, the sides and sometimes the back are roughhewn.

Other gravestone styles may be noted as well--elaborate figural sculptures, crude stones, or simple wooden crosses. Often greater numbers of unusual gravestones are found during transition periods from one general style (e.g. tablets) to another style (e.g. obelisks).

Initial studies of local 19th century cemeteries have yielded some unexpected results. The striking similarity among contemporaneous cemeteries representing distinct socioeconomic and religious groups proved the most surprising observation. Formally marked boundaries, landscaping, symmetrical paths, and, in particular, the style of gravemarkers and the stone from which they are carved create a uniform visual impression. Economic class or religious affiliation are not immediately apparent. This suggests that the accepted "rules" for rural

cemeteries--that is, how the grave is to appear in the landscape and the elements which it must contain--superceded differences within society. Only when individual grave data is examined do differences in community and religious cemeteries become evident. Contrasts in epitaphs, religious symbols, decorations, and the spatial arrangement of graves seem to be the ways in which class structure and religious affiliations are expressed in these 19th century cemeteries.

Nineteenth century cemeteries distinctly differ from earlier American graveyards. The differences are not limited to changes in gravestone styles, epitaphs, and symbols. Earlier graveyards express mortuary ideology and attitudes of death through individual graves. Nineteenth century institutionalization of rural cemeteries suggests that variation in individual graves is subsumed under the proscribed or implied elements of the institution. Rural cemeteries cannot simply be analyzed or understood as clusters of graves. Individual graves are an integral part of the overall cemetery "design." Interpretation of these 19th century cemeteries must, therefore, not only account for the variety among individual graves but also for the overriding common elements expressed in all such cemeteries.

#### CLASS EXERCISE

The exercise below focuses on historic cemeteries. These cemeteries provide archeologists with an interesting opportunity to examine how artifacts (in this case gravestones) vary at different times and in different places. Such variations often reflect how a culture is changing, how cultures differ from one another, and how artifacts reflect these changes and differences. To understand differences in gravestones, archeologists observe both the



individual markers and the larger context or setting of these graves. In general, they ask how important are artifact patterns and the context of these patterns to archeological interpretations.

Select a cemetery to study and answer the questions for each part of the exercise.

1. What is the name of this cemetery? Spend about 15 minutes just walking around the cemetery. Pay particular attention to fences, paths, paved drives, chapels and other buildings, plantings, and other features of the landscape. Identify the boundaries of the cemetery. Is it marked by a fence, sidewalk, shrubs, or in some other way?

2. Make a rough sketch map showing the location of the fences, paths, and other features you have identified. Note the earliest and most recent gravestones and sketch in their locations. Does the cemetery seem planned or are the graves located haphazardly?

3. Using a standard form (see below), record 20 gravestones. Try to find different styles of gravestones to record. Do you find certain gravestone styles in only some areas of the cemetery and not others? Are these styles associated with only certain time periods? What does this tell you about the size of the cemetery at different times and how gravestone styles changed over time?

4. Locate at least five gravestones, from different time periods, which have epitaphs. What do these epitaphs say? What might they reflect about attitudes toward death? How does the use of epitaphs and what epitaphs say change over time? What might this mean?

5. Locate a family plot or several gravestones with the same surname. Do you think these individuals are related or are husband and wife? How can you

tell? Are other relatives buried in the same area? Are these family burial areas more common in earlier graves or more recent graves? What might this tell you about the changing use of family plots over time?

6. Select five gravestones with men's names and five gravestones with women's names from different time periods. How are men's and women's gravestones similar? How are they different? What might this tell you about the changing roles and statuses of men and women over time?

Questions 1 and 2 are designed to have you take a close look at the cemetery and to notice the importance of elements other than just the gravestones themselves. Question 3 treats each gravestone as an artifact and focuses on the same kind of details an archeologist would find useful in understanding how artifacts reflect change over time. Questions about particular aspects of the cemetery, similar to 4, 5, and 6, can be added or substituted. For example, you can examine the special features of military gravestones or children's gravestones or holiday decorations of graves. Comparisons of different parts of the same cemetery or of different cemeteries are also interesting.

Anyone interested in recording gravestones may request copies of standard gravestone and cemetery forms from Ann Kaupp or Dr. Ann M. Palkovich. Also, Dr. Palkovich will be conducting a special field course (Anth. 325, May 27-June 24, 10 a.m.-12 p.m. daily) on studying and recording cemeteries this summer at George Mason University. Anyone interested in registering for this course may contact the Summer Session Office, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia 22030; (703-323-2300).

(continued on p.10)



### Suggested Readings:

Aries, Philippe. The Hour Of Our Death. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1981.

Deetz, James. "Remember Me As You Pass By," In In Small Things Forgotten. New York: Doubleday, 1977.

Dethlefsen, Edwin. "The Cemetery and Culture Change: Archaeological Focus and Ethnographic Perspective," In Modern Material Culture edited by R. Gould and M. Schiffer. New York: Academic Press, 1981.

Dethlefsen, Edwin and James Deetz. "Death's Heads, Cherubs and Willow Trees: Experimental Archaeology in Colonial Cemeteries." American Antiquity 31 (1966):502-510.

Dethlefsen, Edwin and Kenneth Jensen. "Social Commentary in the Cemetery." Natural History (November 1977):32-39.

Mrozinski, Mary Anne. "Resources for the Classroom Teacher: An Annotated Bibliography (for Studying Cemeteries)." Markers 1 (1980):172-173.

Stannard, David. The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture and Social Change. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Stannard, David, editor. Death in America. Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975.

Weitzman, David. "Resting Places," In Underfoot: An Everyday Guide to Exploring the American Past. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1976.

Also of interest is the journal Markers published by the Association for Gravestone Studies.

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