

TEACHER'S CORNER: EXPLORING HISTORIC CEMETERIES

by Ann Palkovich



In the Washington metropolitan area during the 16th, 17th, and early 18th centuries, as in most towns in the United States, "graveyards" were located in churchyards and usually near the center of town. However, overcrowding of graves and new sanitation laws mandated the closing of most of these early "graveyards" by the 1850s. 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 Cambridge, MA 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 that 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.

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. 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 historic archaeologists 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, archaeologists 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 archaeological 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?

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 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 gravestones, 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 figurative 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 grave markers 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—superseded differences within society. Only when individual grave data are 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.

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 archaeologist would find useful in understanding how artifacts reflect

or holiday decorations of graves. Comparisons of different parts of the same cemetery or of different cemeteries are also interesting. Students can then 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 summarize their findings in a concluding essay, or share their insights in a roundtable class discussion.

Readings:

Aries, Philippe. 1981 *The Hour Of Our Death*. Alfred Knopf.

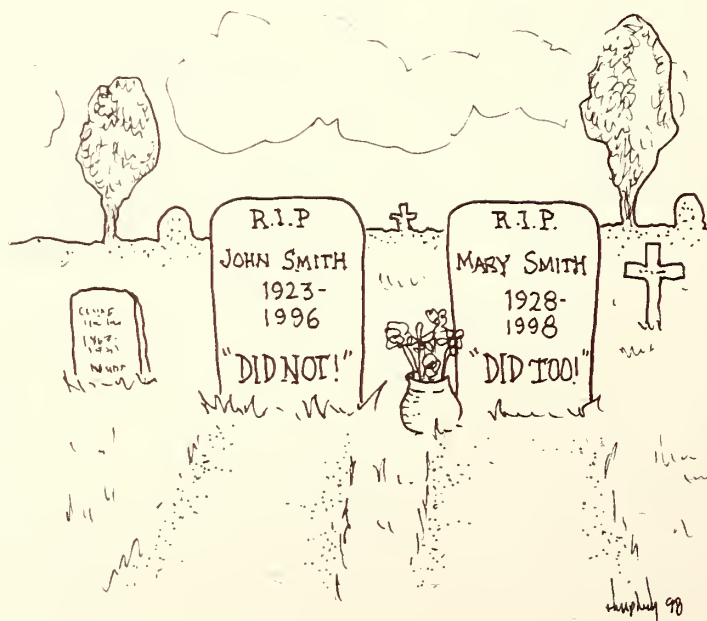
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Stannard, David. 1977. *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture and Social Change*. Oxford Univ. Press.

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

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[Editors' Note: Also of interest is the journal *Markers* published by The Association for Gravestone Studies. Check out their web site at www.berkshire.net/ags/.

An earlier version of this teaching activity appeared in *AnthroNotes*, vol. 8 (2), spring 1986. This and other *AnthroNotes* teaching activities are available free-of-charge by writing: Teacher's Packet in Anthropology, Anthropology Outreach Office, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560-0112. This packet serves as a companion to the book *Anthropology Explored: The Best of Smithsonian AnthroNotes*, available from the Smithsonian Institution Press (1-800-782-4612). Book royalties support the printing costs of *AnthroNotes*.]

INDIVIDUAL GRAVE DATA

Recorder's Name _____

Date _____ Observation _____

Cemetery _____

Photo: B/W _____ Color _____ Sex _____ Age _____

Map/Location _____ Born _____ Died _____

Foot Stone Description

Plot Marker (Single/Multiple) Description

Grave Marker (Permanent/Temporary)

| Shape | Material | Construction |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tablet | <input type="checkbox"/> Wood | <input type="checkbox"/> Unfinished |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tablet-like | <input type="checkbox"/> Cement | <input type="checkbox"/> Hand-made |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Vertical Slab | <input type="checkbox"/> Metal | <input type="checkbox"/> Formally constructed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Obelisk | <input type="checkbox"/> Stone | <input type="checkbox"/> Carved |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Block | <input type="checkbox"/> Granite | <input type="checkbox"/> Molded |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Triangular Block | <input type="checkbox"/> Marble | <input type="checkbox"/> Soldered |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Horizontal Slab | <input type="checkbox"/> Slate | <input type="checkbox"/> Cast |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pulpit | <input type="checkbox"/> Limestone | <input type="checkbox"/> Cut |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Figural | <input type="checkbox"/> Other | <input type="checkbox"/> Polished |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sarcophagus | <input type="checkbox"/> Unidentified | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cenotaph | <input type="checkbox"/> Field Stone | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other | | |

Grave Adornment

| Permanent | Temporary | Individual | Ritual/Seasonal |
|---|----------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Potted Plant | <input type="checkbox"/> Flowers | <input type="checkbox"/> Fresh Flowers | <input type="checkbox"/> Easter |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Plantings | <input type="checkbox"/> Wreath | <input type="checkbox"/> Plastic Flowers | <input type="checkbox"/> Christmas |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Religious Marker | <input type="checkbox"/> Other | <input type="checkbox"/> Wreath | <input type="checkbox"/> July 4th |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Military Marker | | <input type="checkbox"/> Child's Toy | <input type="checkbox"/> Memorial Day |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other | | <input type="checkbox"/> Other | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

Marker Dimensions: Height: _____ Width: _____ Thickness: _____

Inscription (Front/Back):

Design/Decoration: