

The Art of the Tombstone: Cemetery Art and Symbols

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Iconography

- 1: pictorial material relating to or illustrating a subject
- 2: the traditional or conventional images or symbols associated with a subject and especially a religious or legendary subject**
- 3: the imagery or symbolism of a work of art, an artist, or a body of art

(Source: Merriam-Webster.com)

Symbols are typically chosen by the family of the deceased to represent the deceased in some way (life, vocation, hobby, interest, religious beliefs, etc.) and the symbols and meanings may vary widely around the world or even across parts of the United States. The meanings of symbols have even changed across time as society's attitudes toward death changed. Having a general idea of what you're looking at may give you hints on where to look for records; plus, some of the symbols are beautiful to look at. New technologies are providing additional ways for loved ones to have the deceased represented on their tombstone with stone etching instead of or in addition to carving(s) and color can even be added in some cases. A list of many common symbols can be found on my website at <https://talkingboxgenealogy.com/resources-and-reading/>.

Epitaphs

Epitaphs are inscriptions included on a tombstone as a remembrance of the deceased. It may represent an organization they were a member of, a religious belief, or the grief of loved ones and may appear in Latin or the native language of the deceased. Epitaphs also changed across time as society's attitudes toward death changed; once meant to provide instruction to the living, epitaphs have become more comfort- and mercy-based.

Types and Styles of Stones

- **Above-Ground Tomb:** A structure for the entombment of human remains, which is entirely above ground, and which is designed in such a way that space is available for one or more coffins. In Alabama, true above ground tombs generally are located in colonial period cemeteries established or heavily influenced by the Spanish and French populations who originally settled in the area.
- **Box Tomb:** Rectangular shaped grave marker which can be seen above ground with four sides and a slab top.
- **Cenotaph:** A monument, usually (but not always) of imposing scale, erected to commemorate one whose remains are elsewhere; literally "empty tomb."
- **Cinerary Urn:** A receptacle for cremation remains, or ashes, in the shape of a vase.
- **Closure Tablet:** An inscribed stone tablet placed over the sealed opening of an above-ground tomb to commemorate the deceased.
- **Columbarium:** A vault or structure for storage of cinerary urns.
- **Comb Grave:** A stone structure built over an in-ground grave that is triangular in shape. It most often consists of two rectangular sandstone slabs placed together to form a gabled roof over the grave.

- **Coping:** The use of brick, marble, cement, granite or other materials to outline a single grave plot or group of graves. Sometimes used interchangeably with “curbing”.
- **Cradle Grave:** A grave consisting of a gravestone, a footstone, and two low stone walls connecting them, creating a rectangle designed to hold plantings to memorialize the person buried below. It resembles a bed, with a headboard and footboard, and plantings resemble a blanket.
- **Curbing:** A very low masonry or stone wall or edging surrounding a grave or plot of graves, and is sometimes decorative. Often used interchangeably with “coping”.
- **Emerging Stone:** A type of gravestone where one portion of the stone has been fully carved, while another portion remains undressed or only partially dressed, giving the impression of a stone that has been incompletely carved. The emerging stone was most common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and symbolized a life partially completed but cut short.
- **Flush Marker:** A flat, rectangular grave marker set flush with the lawn or surface of the ground.
- **Foot Stone:** A small stone placed to mark the foot of a grave. It is usually made of the same type of stone, and in the same style, as the marker at the head of the grave. It is usually not inscribed or inscribed with only the initials of the deceased’s name.
- **Grave Shelter:** A wood structure placed over an in-ground burial, usually with a gable roof and sides made of vertical pickets or boards. Some have boards with decorative “jig” work and a few are constructed with doors and windows to resemble small houses. Grave Shelters were common in some areas of the South and are generally associated with Native Americans and groups of Scots-Irish ancestry.
- **Headstone:** An upright stone marker with a base; usually inscribed with demographic information, epitaphs, or both; sometimes decorated with a carved motif.
- **Ledger Stone:** Placed over the grave, ledger stones are usually flat on the ground and may contain inscriptions.
- **Mausoleum:** A large building or structure housing a tomb or several tombs.
- **Obelisk:** Four-sided column that forms a pyramid at the top of the monument.
- **Pulpit Stone:** Resembles a lectern from a church pulpit. They may also look like an open book. The book may be a Bible or it may be The Book of Life.
- **Sarcophagus:** A stone coffin or monumental chamber for a casket, often inscribed or decorated with sculpture.
- **Sepulcher:** A burial vault or crypt.
- **Slant marker:** A rectangular grave marker having straight sides and inscribed surface set at an acute angle.
- **Table Tomb (or Table Stone):** A type of grave monument in which a stone slab, usually at least two inches thick by about three feet wide by six feet long, is supported by six (or more) pillars or columns. The columns, or legs, are usually two to three feet high, in turn rest on a stone set on the ground. In most cases, an inscription is written on the slab top (ledger); the stone columns are generally carved, sometimes ornately.

- **Tablet (or Tablet Stone):** A marker made of a single piece of stone approximately two to three inches thick, that is set vertically into the ground. It does not have a base. Markers of this type usually date from the 18th through the early-19th centuries.
- **Tympanum:** Semicircular or triangular decorated face at the top of a tablet stone.

Resources

- **Association of Gravestone Studies** (<https://www.gravestonestudies.org/>)
- **Gravestone Symbolism by The Cemetery Club.com** (<http://www.thecemeteryclub.com/symbols.html>)
- **Cyndi's List: Cemeteries & Funeral Homes: Monuments, Memorials & Tombstones: Iconography & Symbolism** (<https://www.cyndislist.com/cemeteries/monuments/iconography/>)
- **Common Latin Inscriptions by Saving Graves** (<https://www.savinggraves.net/component/k2/item/1066-common-latin-inscriptions>)

Additional Information

- Don't forget to look at the entire tombstone, not just the front! Sometimes the back and even the sides of the tombstones have symbols on them.
- Never make a tombstone rubbing. While it may still be legal in some places, in others it is not and there's a potential of damaging the stone during the rubbing process.
- Photography Tips
 - DON'T use crayons, markers, pens, etc. on a tombstone to make it more readable
 - DON'T put flour or any other type of powder on the stone to make it more readable
 - DON'T use aluminum foil on the tombstone to make it more readable
 - DO use water to rinse off the stone but DON'T scrub the tombstone
 - DO utilize a reflective source or external light on a tombstone to make it more readable (consider keeping a reflective car sunshade, mirror, emergency blanket, or piece of aluminum foil in your cemetery kit or car)
- Tombstone cleaning: DO research how to properly clean a stone before undertaking that process; there are materials available for use that will be safe for the tombstone and make the job easier for you. **The primary thing to remember is DO NO HARM to the stone.** The Cemetery Conservators for United Standards (CCUS) has a great website which provides lots of information on cleaning, preservation, resources, and education (<https://cemeteryconservatorsunitedstandards.org/>).

Additional iconography resources can be found on my website at
<https://talkingboxgenealogy.com/resources-and-reading/>

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