Cemetery/Graveyard Records
Farmington Township

Farmington, Illinois

Version 2

Farmington Historical Society and Museum
Farmington, Illinois

Is it a Cemetery or is it a Graveyard?

You have heard burial places referred to as cemeteries and/or graveyards, so what is the difference between a graveyard and a cemetery? According to Merriam-Webster dictionary a graveyard is a burial ground, often associated with smaller rural churches, as distinct from a larger urban or public cemetery. A cemetery is an area set apart for or containing graves, tombs, or funeral urns, especially one that is not a churchyard; burial ground; graveyard.

Gravestone Symbols

Have you ever wandered through a cemetery/graveyard and wondered about the meanings of the designs carved on old gravestones? Thousands of different religious and secular symbols and emblems have adorned tombstones through the ages, indicating attitudes towards death and the hereafter, membership in a fraternal or social organization, or an individual's trade, occupation or even ethnic identity. While many of these tombstone symbols have simple interpretations, it is not always easy to determine their meaning and significance. We were not present when these symbols were carved into the stone and cannot claim to know our ancestors' intentions. They may have included a particular symbol for no other reason than because they thought it was pretty.

While we can only speculate what our ancestors were trying to tell us through their choice of tombstone art, these symbols and their interpretations are commonly agreed upon by gravestone scholars.

Gravestone Symbols and Their Meanings

Symbol	Meaning
Arches and gates	Passage into the next life
Acorn	Prosperity; power; triumph; strength; independence
Anchor	Hope, Navy
Angles	God's messengers and guardians; dropping flowers may signify grief, mourning. Pointing to heaven may signify rejoicing
Anvil and/or hammer	Blacksmith
Basket	Fertility; maternal bond
Bat wings	Death; misfortune
Beehive	Possible membership with the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
Benches	Mourning; contemplation
Bird	Flight of the soul
Book	Often the Bible, book of life
Bone	Death
Broken Chain	A broken chain signifies the death of a family member, and that the family has been broken.
Candle	Life
Church	Ministry; Possible pastor or minister
Clock	Mach of time, usually stopped at hour of death
Clover (three or four leafed)	Christian trinity; possible Irish ancestry or affiliation with 4H clubs
Column and or pillar - broken	Life cut short; sudden death
Column and or pillar – unbroken	A complete and full life
Corn	Farming (also often symbolized by wheat)
Cradle	Empty furniture like a cradle or bed is a symbol of the loss of a child.

Draped Urn	After the cross, the urn is one of the most used cemetery monuments. The design represents a funeral urn and is thought to symbolize immortality.
Dog	Dogs signify loyalty and vigilance. On modern gravestones, a dog may be an homage to a pet.
Doves	Peace; the Holy Sprit
Elk	Possible membership with the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks
Evergreen	Faithfulness; remembrance
Feathered Headdress	Possible membership with the Improved Order of Red Men or Degree of Pocahontas
Fern	Sincerity; humility; solitude
Forefinger pointing down	God reaching down for the soul
Forefinger pointing up	Soul's passage to heaven
Fruit	Eternal plenty
Half-carved tombstone	Transition from life to death
Handshake	Welcoming of a soul into Heaven; bond between spouses (if hands are feminine and masculine)
Harp	Worship; music to God
Heart	A blissful soul (Colonial Era); romantic love (Victorian era to today)
Horses	Courage or generosity; possible membership with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (especially if two-headed)
Hourglass or clock	The passe of time
Key	Knowledge; entrance to heaven
Lambs	Purity, gentleness, innocence (popular on children's graves)
Lamp	Knowledge; spiritual immortality
Lily	Innocence and purity; resurrection; marriage and fidelity (Calla); innocence and humility (Lily of the Valley)
Mainer	Anchor; sextant
Mortar and pestle	Medical profession (pharmacist or doctor)
Oak leaf	Strength; stability; endurance
Olive tree	Peace; reconciliation between God and man
Palm	Life conquering death; resurrection
Phoenix	Resurrection
Pineapple	Prosperity; hospitality; perfection
Rose	Love; beauty; virtue; motherhood; strong bond (intertwined); youthful death (rosebud)
Scales	Justice; law
Shield	Protection, faith, defense of the spirit
Shoes	Loss of a child (empty, one overturned)
Skull	Death: mortal remains
Soul effigy	Immortality of the soul; passage to the afterlife (especially if winged)
Sphinx	Courage; honor; power
Thistle	Sorrow and remembrance; potential Scottish ancestry
Tree-shaped or tree stump	Life cut short; sudden death; possible membership with the Modern Woodmen of America or Woodmen of the World
Urn	Death of the flesh
Wheat	Farming; harvest; prosperity; full life
Winged Death's head	Mortal remains of the deceased

Willow	Mouring and earthly sorrow

Gravestone Initials and Acronyms

Initials	Meaning
AAONMS	Ancient Arabic Order or Nobles and the Mystic Shrine (Masonic)
AASR	Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (Masonic)
BPOE	Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks
FOE	Fraternal Order of Eagles
IHC/HIS	Christian; the first three letters of Jesus' name in Greek
IOOF	Independent Order of Odd Fellows
K of C	Knights of Columbus (Catholic)

Military Gravestone Symbols

Symbols on government-issued gravestones are often religious symbols. There are other gravestones, though, that depict someone who was in the military, as listed below.

Symbol	Meaning
American flag	Military career; pride in country
Bugles	Military career
Canon	Military service
Eagle	Courage military career
Oak leaves	On military tombs stand for victory or power
Sword	Military career
Swords crossed	Military death in battle
Wreath of laurel	Distinction in military; can be a garland

Coins on Headstones

Why are there coins left on a headstone? Nowadays, when we talk about leaving coins on graves, we are most likely referring to the graves of soldiers. This practice is not exclusive to military but could be nonmilitary as well. While this is an ancient tradition, it adapted to new needs and practices. So, what do they mean?

Different meanings behind this military practice floated around social media platforms for years. However, they are all connected by a similar practice of respecting those who served in the armed forces.

When you see a coin on the grave of a servicemember, this is a sign that another member of the military paid their respects. According to tradition, there is a meaning behind each type of coin. Here is a simple breakdown:

- **Penny** - A penny at the gravesite means you visited. You have no formal relationship with the deceased, but you honor their service and their family.
- **Nickel** - A nickel signifies if you and the deceased person trained at boot camp together.
- **Dime** - In the case of a dime, you served with the deceased person in some capacity.
- **Quarter** - Finally, a quarter indicates you were with the deceased when he or she died.

Stones on Headstones

Why are there stones on Jewish graves and who put them there?

A common belief is that leaving stones is a way to pay homage to the deceased. In the past, Jewish people were nomadic. Because they lived in arid conditions, visitors didn't have flowers or other ways to leave a sign that they visited the gravesite. Rocks and stones were left because this was all they had at the time.

Today stones found on Jewish grave markers signify that someone came to visit the grave and is intended as a sign of respect and honor for the deceased. When a visitor comes to pay respects to their loved one or friend, the visitor simply puts a stone on the applicable headstone or grave.

Stones have special meaning in Judaism and are considered the appropriate memorial for those who have died.

Stones are thought to be simple, but strong and enduring. They last hundreds or thousands of years. Many Jews regard stones as a symbol of potency, perseverance, religious and family ties.

Over the centuries, the practice of leaving stones on Jewish graves has been enshrined as a tradition that Jews uniformly follow.

Even though the leaving of stones is a Jewish tradition, it is not exclusive to the Jewish faith and can be applied to any grave.

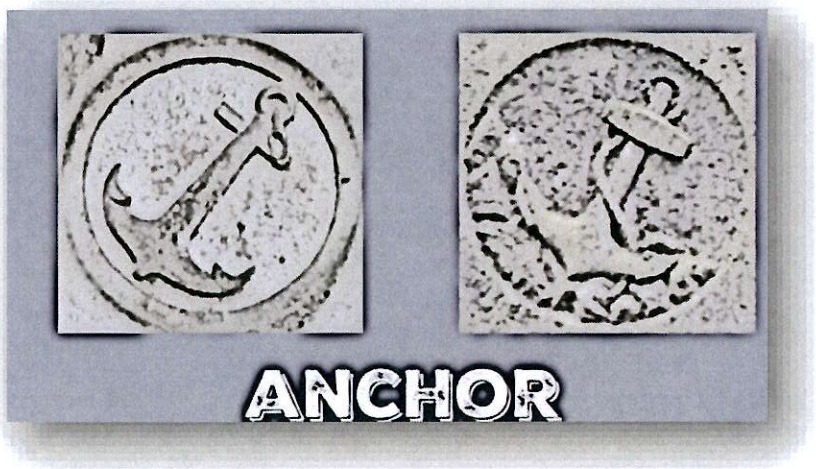
Summary

As you can see, there are more to headstones than first meets the eye. If you look closely at the headstones, you can learn a lot about the person buried below. You can tell if the person was married, was a child, had a specific religion, died in battle, or was a member of a fraternal order.

The next time you visit an old cemetery or graveyard, make sure you pay close attention to the symbols you see. You can learn a lot.

Symbols

Anchor



Sometimes an anchor was carved on the gravestones of sailors since it was their last resort in a storm. But more often, the anchor on a gravestone was a symbol of hope. The Bible references an anchor in connection with hope in Hebrews 6: 18-19, ". . . lay hold upon the hope set before us: which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast . . ." Those without hope may be like a ship tossed on the sea, their emotions being carried in every direction. The anchor would remind family members visiting the grave to hold on to the hope of seeing their loved one again.

To members of Freemasonry, the anchor represented well-grounded hope, a life well-spent, and eternal tranquility.

Angel



Angels are some of the most common symbols found in cemeteries. They are carved on gravestones and perch on top as statues. Angels signify that the departed has taken flight into heaven. Some angels are weeping with wings that droop in sadness, denoting sorrow, and lamentation. Others are in flight with a trumpet to proclaim the gospel to all the world. Some are walking upright, ready to escort the deceased into heaven.

Sometimes specific angels can be seen in cemeteries, such as St. George from an 11th-century legend, who rescued a princess from a dragon that required human sacrifices. Another is St. Michael with his drawn sword, engaged in the war in heaven against Lucifer.

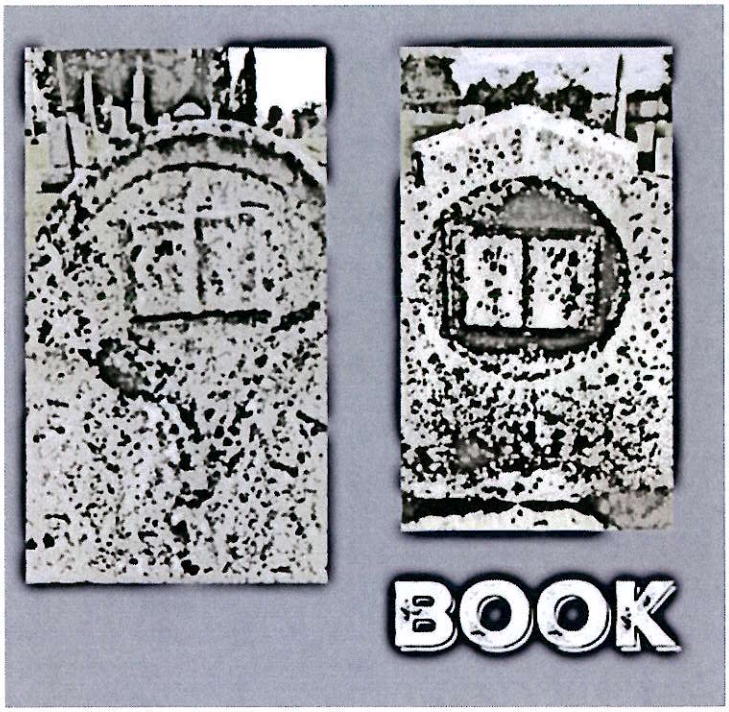
In older Jewish cemeteries angels were forbidden, as were depictions of human faces. This was in conformity with one of the ten Commandments, to thwart anyone from worshipping graven images. In later years, angels were allowed on gravestones if their faces were covered by their hands or arms.

Arches



The Biblical prophet Ezekiel, escorted by a heavenly messenger, was shown a vision of a city that contained a temple with magnificent architecture. The temple included many arches. In fact, there are fifteen references to the arches in this temple in the book of Ezekiel, chapter 40. Arches on a headstone can signify a triumph over death and entry into heaven.

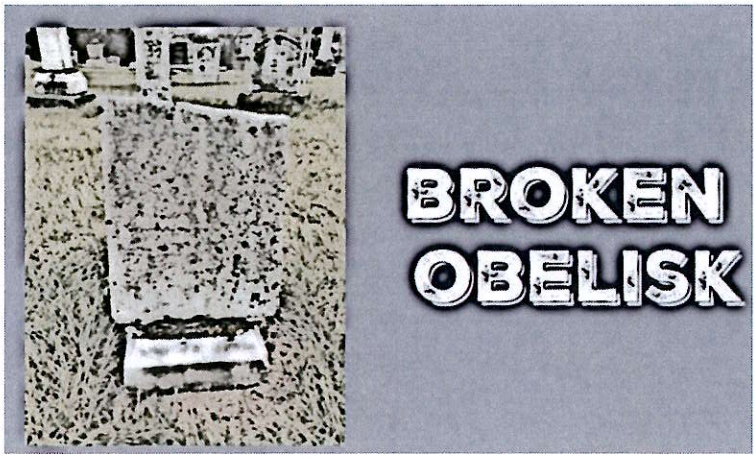
Book



A book on a gravestone can symbolize the charitable deeds of the departed, as recorded in the book of life. It can also represent the scriptures, as a sign of faith.

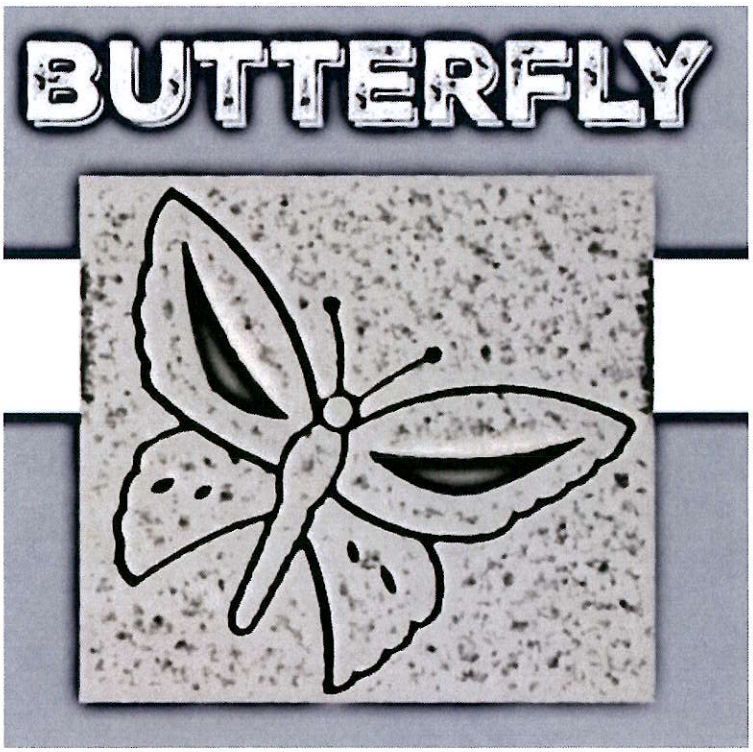
Books may also indicate that a scholar or teacher is buried at the gravesite. An open book can signify an early death for someone whose life story was not yet fully written.

Broken Obelisk



At first, it may appear that a gravestone that is missing the upper half has deteriorated, which is entirely possible since every year more gravestones are lost to decay. But many broken obelisks were formed that way from the time they were made to signify the cutting short of someone's life, particularly the head of a family.

Butterfly



Butterflies are the symbol of resurrection. Just as caterpillars change into winged creatures that launch into flight, the deceased will rise from the grave, changing into a new being.

Celic Cross

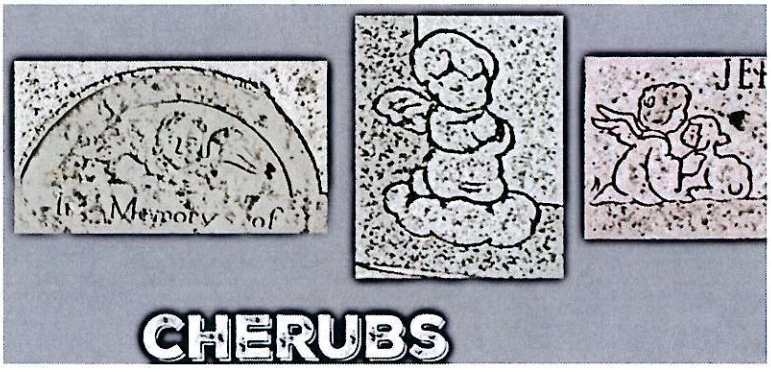


The Celtic cross can be a religious or a secular symbol. Its arms are of equal length, and it is surrounded by a circle. Sometimes it is referred to as a "sun cross" because of the outer circle. The interlacing bands on Celtic crosses are known as Hiberno-Saxon art which originated in medieval times.

Irish legends indicate that St. Patrick designed the cross to link Pagan symbolism with Christian symbols. Pagans at the time were worshipping the sun, represented by the circle on the Celtic cross. St. Patrick overlayed the circle with a cross, a symbol of Christ's sacrifice. Others claim that the circle represented a moon goddess, and the cross signified the greater power of Christianity over the pagan goddess.

Nevertheless, if you see a Celtic Cross on your ancestor's gravestone it may indicate an Irish or British Isles heritage.

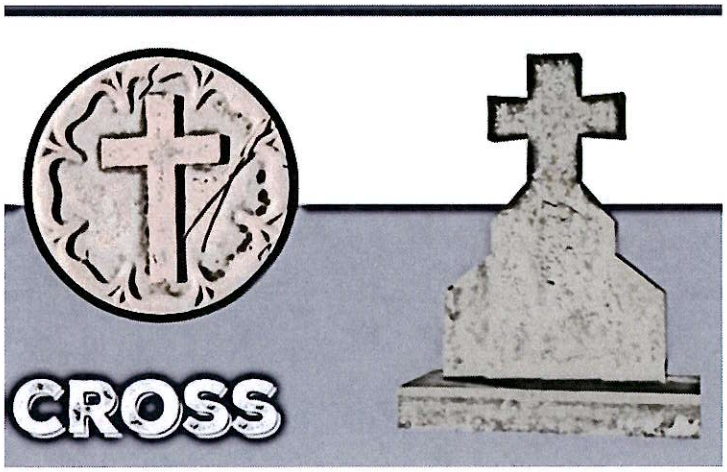
Cherubs



Cherubs became popular in the mid-1700s in New England's burying grounds. They usually depicted a human-like face with a serious expression, surrounded by wings. Cherubs signify a soul that has gone to heaven.

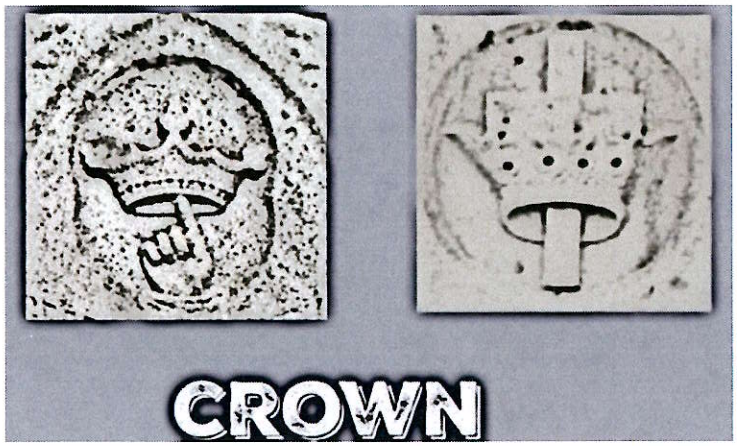
More modern cherubs usually indicate a child has died, particularly when featured with a lamb.

Christian Cross



The cross or crucifix is a significant symbol to Christians. In early times the Latin cross was referred to as God's mark. It is a symbol or eternal life and resurrection. The three ends may represent the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost of the Trinity or faith, hope, and charity.

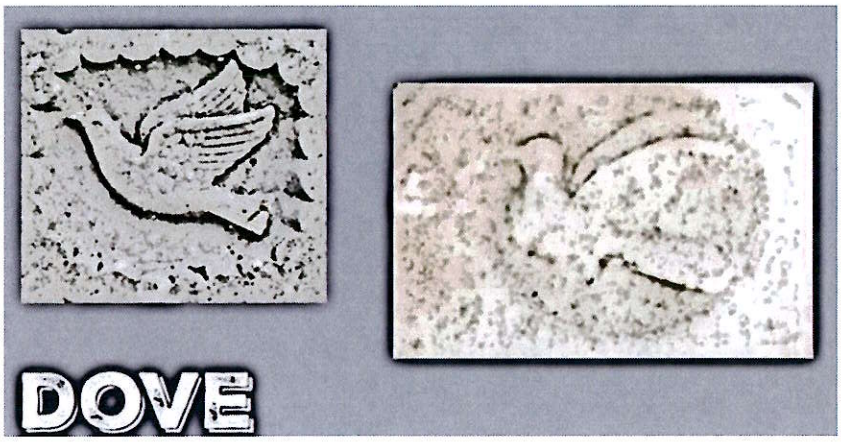
Crown



The crown typically symbolizes Christ, also known as the King of Kings. A finger pointing up through a crown indicates the deceased has gone to heaven through the power of Christ's resurrection.

A crown with a cross in the center is symbolic of the departed soul gaining victory over death through Christ the King.

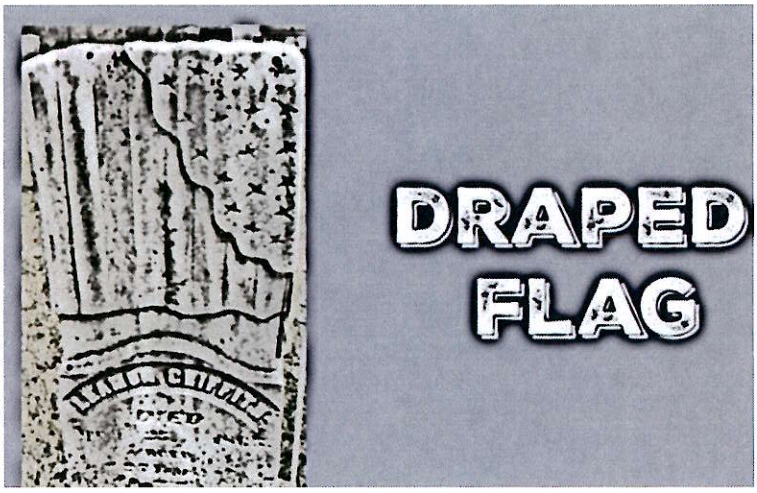
Dove



The dove in flight is a cemetery symbol of the Holy Spirit. This comes from the New Testament references to Jesus Christ's baptism by John the Baptist, "And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him." (Mark 1:10)

If the dove has an olive branch in its mouth it is a symbol of peace. This symbol comes from the story of Noah in the Old Testament who sent a dove out from the ark following the flood. The dove returned with an olive branch in its beak, from which Noah could know that the floodwaters were receding. Genesis 8:8- "He sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground."

Draped Flag



Drapery of any type symbolizes grief and mourning. When the drapery is a flag, it may signify that the deceased was in the military or died in battle.

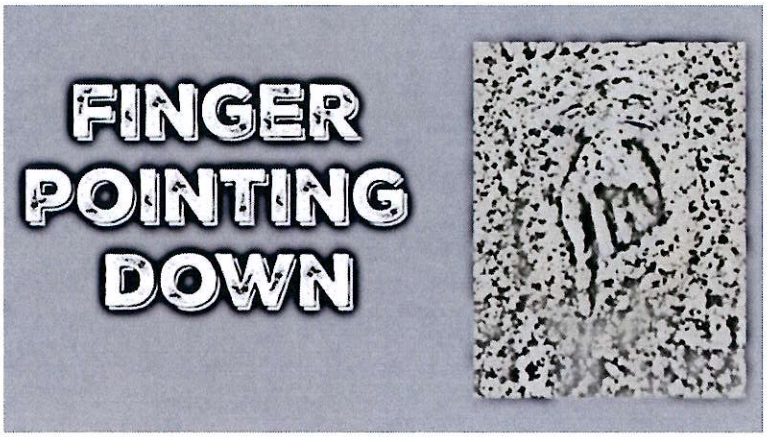
Eastern Stars



The symbol for the Eastern Star is a five-pointed star. The bottom ray of the star points downward, symbolic of the star that shone over the manger of baby Jesus.

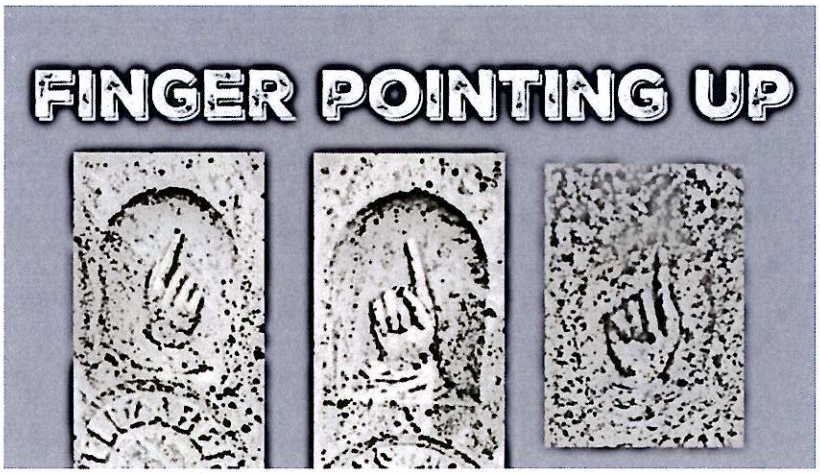
The letters FATAL on the rays of the star stand for "Fairest Among Thousands, Altogether Lovely," a biblical quote from the Song of Solomon.

Finger Pointing Down



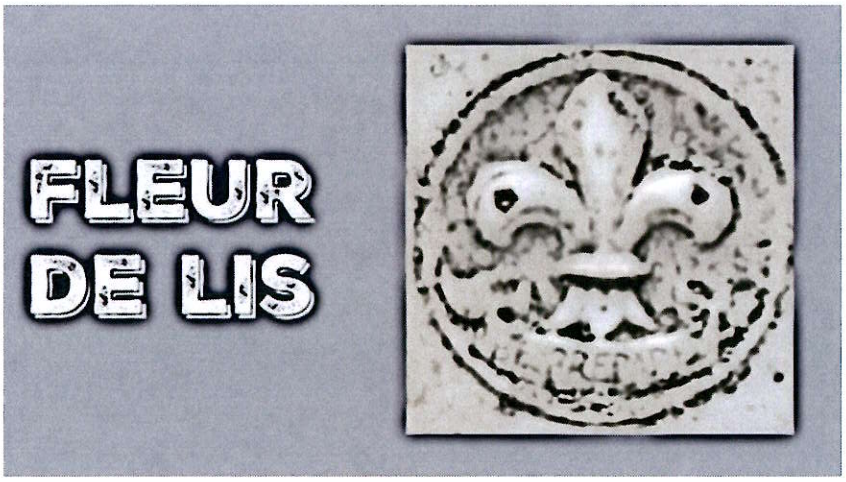
A finger pointing downward on a gravestone indicates that God is reaching down for the soul of the deceased.

Finger Pointing Up



Fingers pointing upward are a quite common cemetery symbol. They indicate that the departed has gone to heaven and beckons grieving loved ones to look up.

Fleur-de-Lis



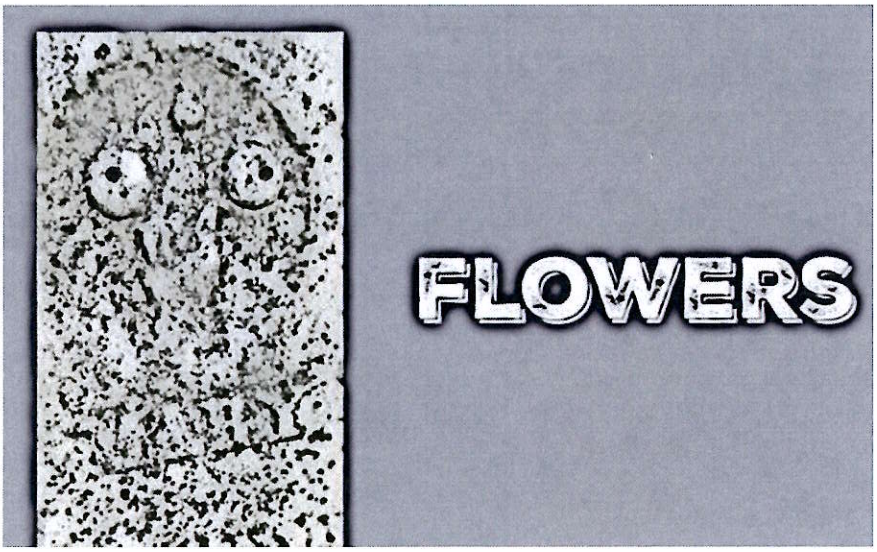
The fleur-de-lis or Lily of France is a design that appears on many family crests, coats of arms, and in King Arthur's legends. It is a stylized version of a wild lily and was popularized by French royalty. To the kings of France, the symbol meant perfection, life, and light and it became the royal emblem.

Joan of Arc bore a banner depicting God blessing the fleur-de-lis as she led French troops in a victorious battle against the English in support of Dauphin Charles VII.

In recent times, the fleur-de-lis has been used as an emblem of the Boy Scouts. The photo above has the words "Be Prepared" on a banner beneath the fleur-de-lis, which is the Boy Scout motto. When the founder of Scouting, Baden-Powell, was asked, "Be prepared for what?" he replied, "Why, for any old thing."

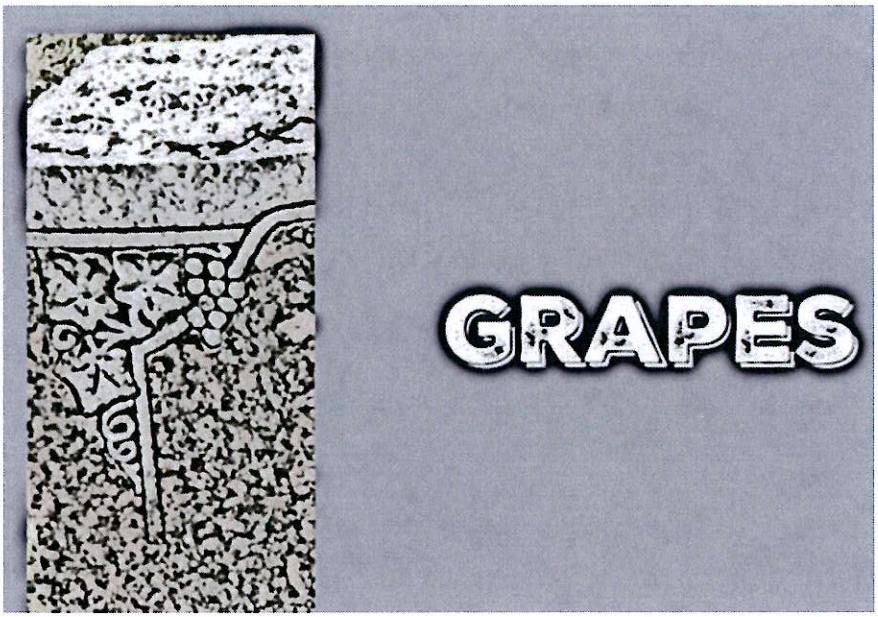
If your ancestor's grave has a fleur-de-lis on it there is a good chance that either they were of French lineage or they were a member of the Boy Scouts.

Flowers on Cross



Flowers on a cross can indicate growth in Christ or immortality.

Grapes



Grapes on a gravestone symbolize the blood of Christ, God's care, or Jesus' Last Supper.

Handshake



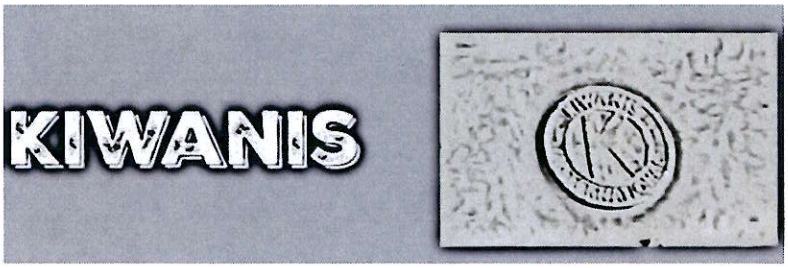
The origin of the handshake dates to the 4th or 5th century in Greece. It signified a token of peace, as the hand was extended without weapons. The shaking up and down may even have been a means of verifying that there was not a dagger or knife up the other person's sleeve.

In ancient Rome, handshakes were a symbol of loyalty and friendship. Clasped hands were even stamped on Roman coins.

Handshakes also denote that a person's word is their bond, a giving of a sacred trust.

In the case of gravestone symbolism, handshakes can mean a final farewell or eternal bond between the living and the dead. Clasped hands were sometimes meant to portray the link between a married couple. Other times a handshake indicated God reaching out for the deceased to bring them into his presence.

Kiwanis

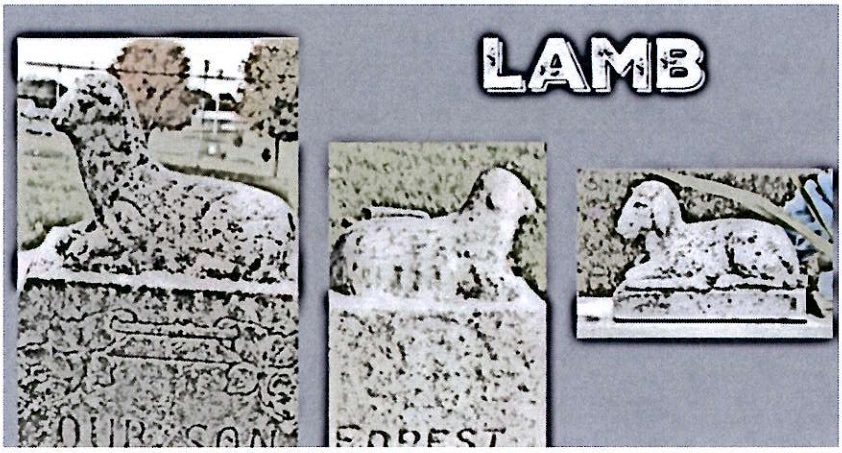


Many headstones show the deceased's membership in service organizations. In this case, the departed person was a member of the Kiwanis Club. The organization was founded in August of 1914 in Detroit, Michigan.

The Kiwanis Club has accepted female members since 1987. So, if the stone is older and has a Kiwanis emblem you may be assured that the deceased was male. Though the Kiwanis Club has undergone many changes over the years – including its mission – its current motto is "Serving the Children of the World."

If your ancestor were a member of the Kiwanis Club or other service organization, you could try contacting them to obtain further information that may help expand your family tree.

Lamb



Lambs are the most common animal symbol on children's gravestones, representing innocence and purity.

Sheep are instinctive followers too. They tend to follow the sheep in front of them no matter they are going. I once attended a sheep-parade, where cowboys on horses guided thousands of sheep down the street. When one sheep took a wrong turn up a side street, hundreds of sheep followed. Cowboys and their dogs chased them in hot pursuit, trying to get the parade back on the scheduled route. Likewise, small children are naturally submissive and loyal to those who lead them.

To Christians, lambs are also a symbol of Christ, "Behold the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (Holy Bible, John 1:29).

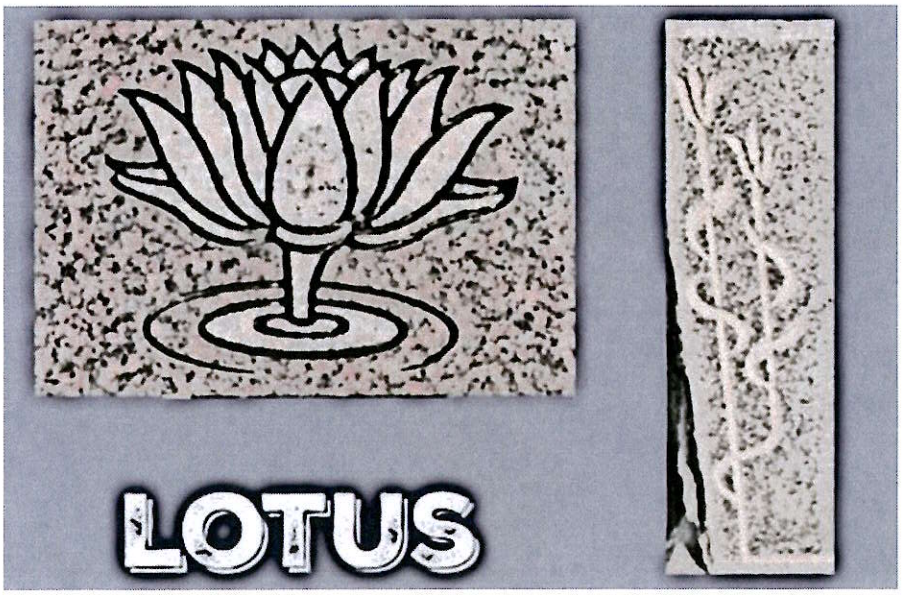
Lily



Lilies are a symbol of innocence, chastity, and purity. They are often associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and are used on women's gravestones.

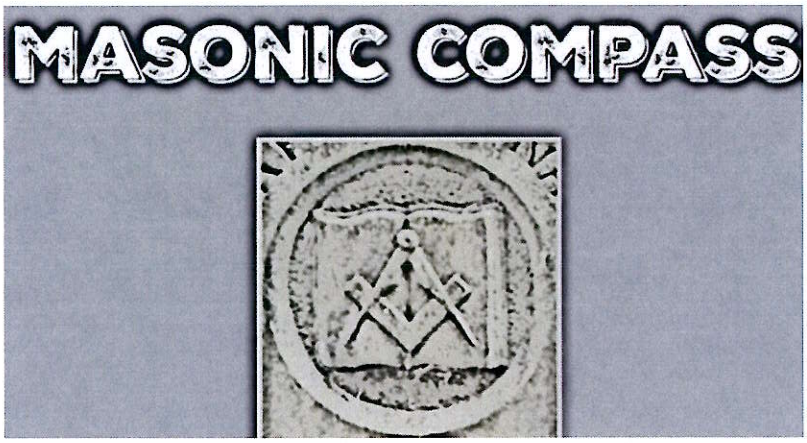
Lilies can also represent innocence being restored to a soul at death.

Lotus



Lotus are water-plants that close at night and reopen again with the morning sunlight. They symbolize a spiritual rebirth, reawakening, and resurrection.

Masonic Compass



Members of the Masonic Organization believe in God and in serving their communities. While Masonry is not a religion, adherents act in accordance with high moral standards. In the photo above there are three symbols, the open book, the compass, and the square. The specific position of these objects makes them a recognizable Masonic symbol. The book represents the Word of God, while the square and compass are tools used by architects. The compass reminds Masons to circumscribe their desires and passions within specific limits. The exactness of the straight edges of the square reminds Masons to behave with exact and precise virtue.

If your ancestor has this symbol on their gravestone, you may be able to find records of Masonic meetings at the local Freemason organization. This may allow you to place your ancestor in an exact place during specific years.

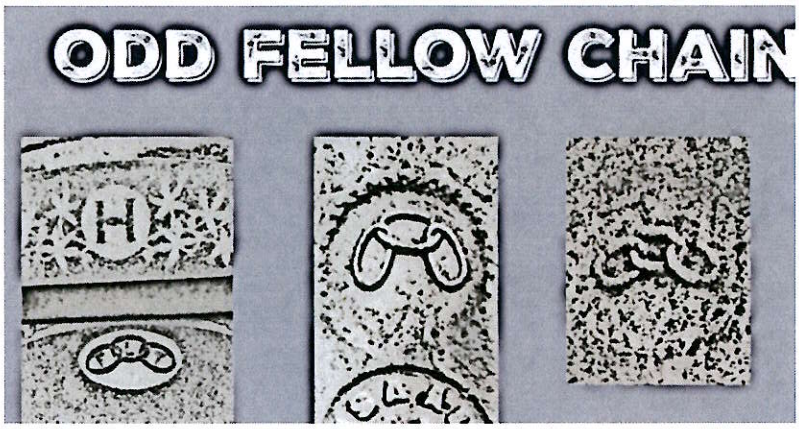
Oak Leaves and Acorns



Oaks are slow growing trees. It can take 40-50 years for an oak tree to go from acorn to full-height and a century before it fills in with thick leaves and branches. Oak trees can live to be two hundred years old. An oak tree at a family homestead may have provided shade for several generations.

Thus, oak trees are gravestone symbols of strength and endurance. Oak branches or acorns on your ancestor's headstone may mean they lived a long life or endured a lengthy illness.

Odd Fellows Chain



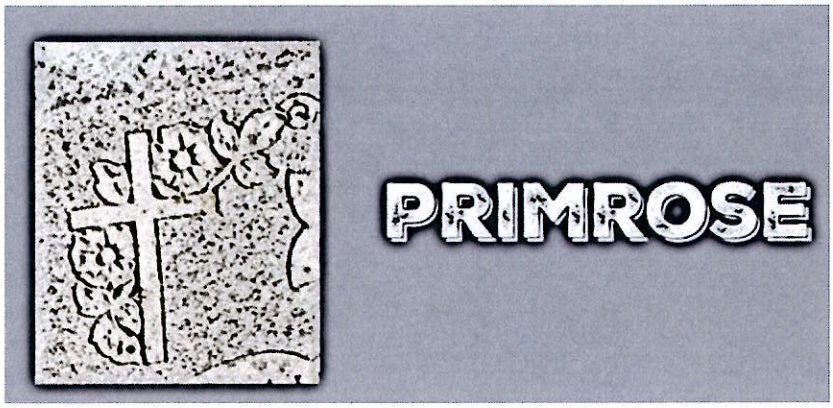
If you notice a chain with three links on your ancestor's gravestone you will know that they were a member of The Independent Order of Odd Fellows. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows is a fraternal organization, founded in 1819 in Baltimore, Maryland. It evolved from the Order of Odd Fellows, founded in England during the 1700s.

Odd Fellows recognize the inevitability of death, so they ask themselves, "How will I spend my life?" With this self-awareness, an Old Fellow then seeks to master their thoughts and actions. They focus on serving others.

The three links of an Odd Fellow chain may sometimes have the letters, "F," "L," and "T" on them. These letters stand for friendship, love, and truth. Odd Fellows seek to know and accept their own strengths in humility, without boasting. They strive to overcome their weaknesses without being critical of the weaknesses of others. They seek to be a friend to all and try to think carefully before acting or speaking.

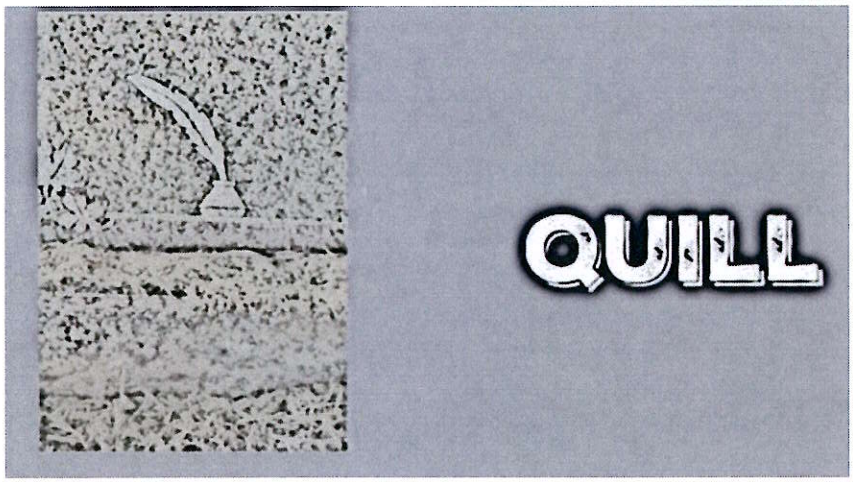
The Independent Order of Odd Fellows may now be found in more than thirty nations.

Primrose



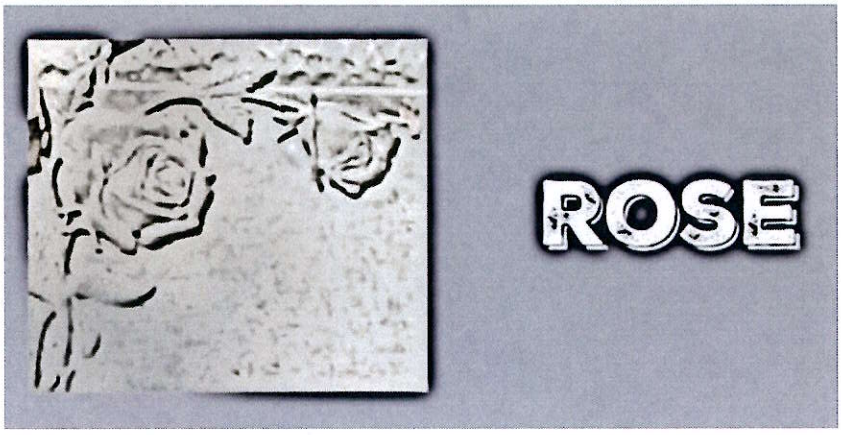
The primrose was a Victorian symbol for a silent love or bashfulness. This flower can also symbolize eternal love, hope, sadness, or youthfulness. Primroses had medicinal uses, so it could have indicated healing or the medical occupation of the deceased. Primroses have evenly spaced petals, making them easy to carve so they may have simply been aesthetic.

Quill



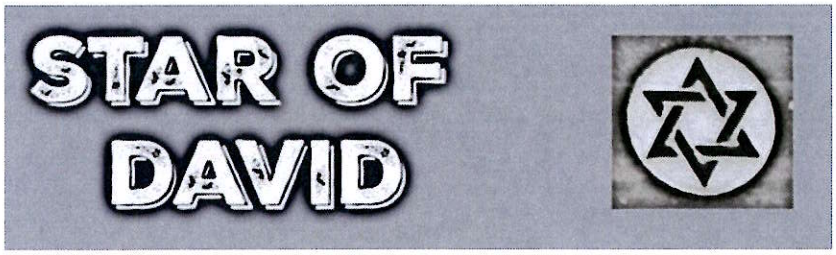
A quill on a gravestone symbolizes a life cut short for someone whose life story was not yet fully written. Quill may also denote that the deceased was a writer or teacher.

Rose



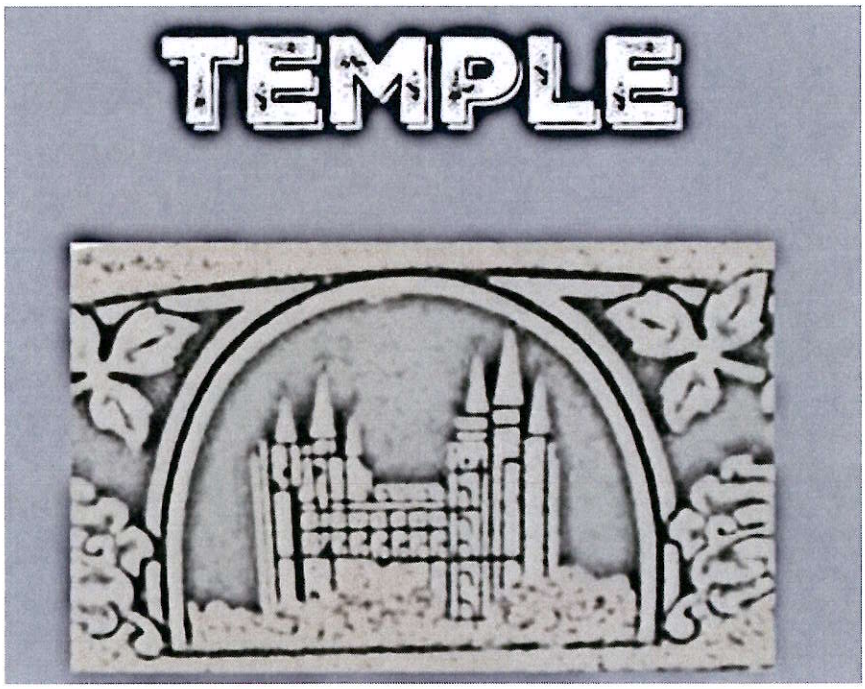
A rose symbolizes love, perfection, and truthfulness.

Star of David



The Star of David is a symbol used by Jewish people. The star is six-sided and is made up of two intertwined equilateral triangles. In Hebrew, it is called Magen David or David's shield, representing the protection of the ancient king. The symbol is the center of Israel's flag. When seen on a gravestone, you may be assured that the deceased was Jewish.

Temple



This photo depicts the temple of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah. Those buried beneath this symbol believe in the eternal nature of the family and everlasting relationships.

Tree

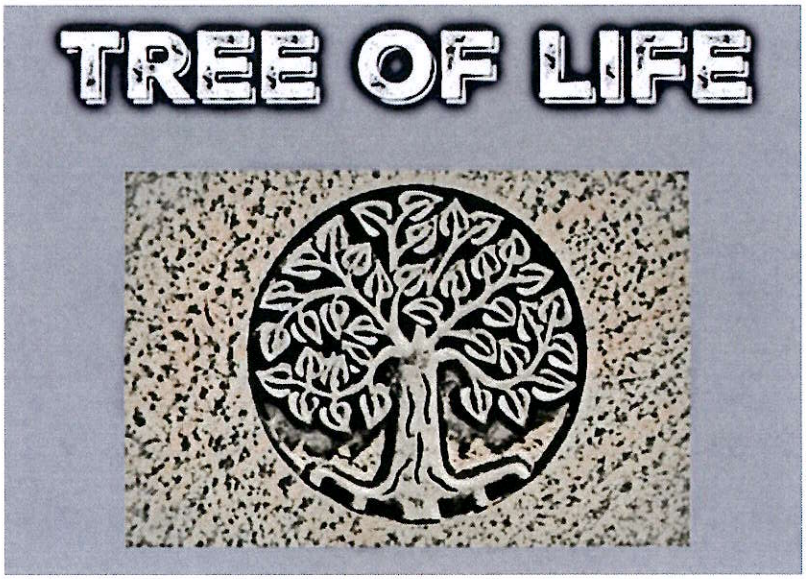


Tree trunk gravestones may be mistaken for living trees. These lifelike gravestones are called tree trunk stones, tree stump stones, or tree stones.

Tree stones, popular between the 1880's and 1920's, were used by members of the Modern Woodmen of America and the Woodmen of the World. Both organizations are fraternal societies that focus on financial services. They offer insurance, savings, retirement, and estate planning.

Joseph Cullen Root, the founder of Modern Woodmen of America and the Woodmen of the World, selected the name of woodmen after hearing a sermon about God's children being trees in His forest.

Tree of Life

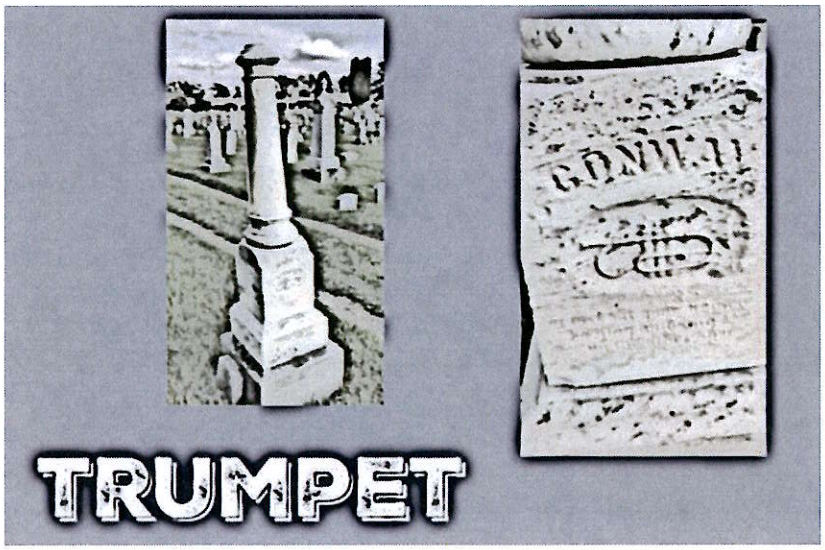


The tree of life is a cemetery symbol for immortality. The tree ages and moves closer to death, but it also bears the seeds that allow the tree to be reborn, so in a sense it becomes immortal.

It can also be a symbol of strength and growth. Branches lengthen as they reach for the light of the sun. Young tree's roots are shallow but eventually deepen as they age. Like the tree, the deceased may have become stronger by facing the wind, heat, and adversities of life.

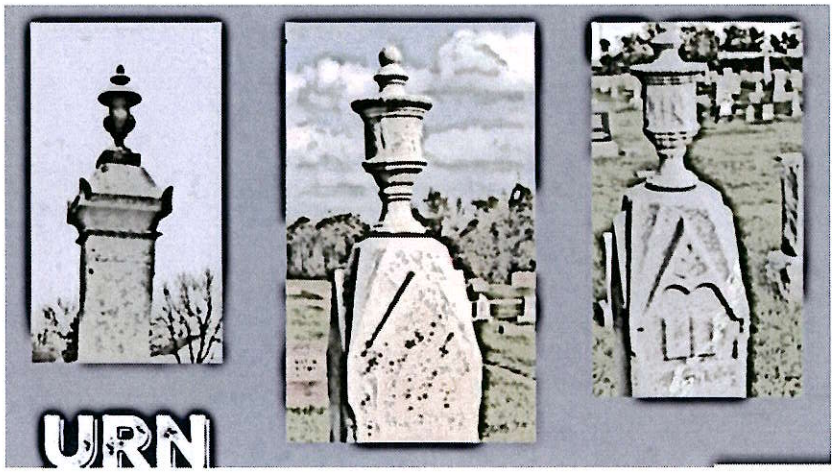
Genealogists may identify with the tree of life being a symbol of family. Our leaves and branches may go in many different directions, but we all come from the same roots.

Trumpet



Trumpets are symbols of victory and resurrection. Sometimes the trumpeters are angels announcing resurrection morning.

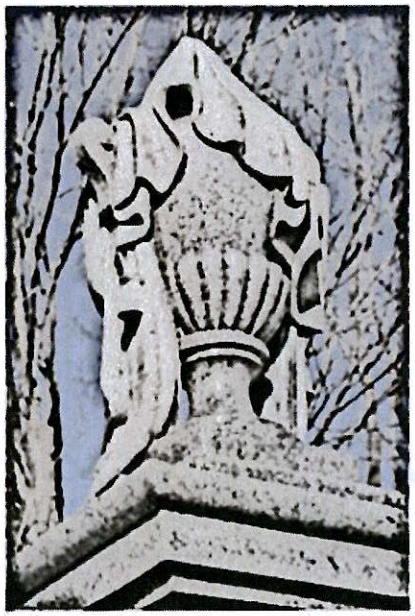
Urn



The urn symbolizes death itself. The Greeks used the urn as a symbol of mourning since it was often used as a repository for ashes of the dead.

From the 1770's to 1820's urns with willow branches carved around them were popular on gravestones in New England's burial grounds. The urns symbolized death and the willows symbolized grief.

Draped Urn



After the cross, the urn is one of the most used cemetery monuments. The design represents a funeral urn and is thought to symbolize immortality.

Cremation was an early form of preparing the dead for burial. In some periods, especially classical times, it was more common than burial. The shape of the container in which the ashes were placed may have taken the form of a simple box or a marble vase, but no matter what it looked like it was called an "urn," derived from the Latin aduro, meaning "to burn."

As burial became a more widespread practice, the urn continued to be closely associated with death. The urn is commonly believed to testify to the death of the body and the dust into which the dead body will change, while the spirit of the departed eternally rests with God.

The cloth draping the urn symbolically guarded the ashes. The shroud-draped urn is believed by some to mean that the soul has departed the shrouded body for its trip to heaven. Others say that the drape signifies the last partition between life and death.

Veil



In past generations, the deceased was laid out in their own living room or parlor for days prior to burial. Family and friends were invited into the home to pay their respects and comfort the living. The entrance to the room was often draped with a black veil, signifying the passage from life to death.

Anciently, temples also had veiled passages.

A gravestone draped with a veil can also be thought of like a curtain pulled back on a stage. All eyes would be drawn to the deceased as they passed through the veil, just as all eyes fall on the main actor or actor at the start of a play. It symbolizes the importance of everyone to God and to their family.

Weeping Willow



The drooping branches of weeping willow trees symbolize the drooping spirits and hearts of those who have lost their beloved family member or friend. The weeping willow tree was extremely popular carving on gravestones at the end of the 1700's and early 1800's in Massachusetts among early settlers.

Service Flag Medallions

American Legion



The American Legion was founded in Paris, France in March of 1919 by one thousand members of the American Expeditionary Forces. By September of the same year, the American Legion was sanctioned by the US government.

American Legion Auxiliary

The American Legion Auxiliary is made up of the male and female spouses, grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and direct and adopted female descendants of members of The American Legion.



Military Flag Holder

We have discussed the American Legion flag marker, but if a veteran buried in one of the five cemeteries/graveyards in Farmington Township did not belong to an organization that provides flag markers the Farmington Historical Society and Museum will provide one that denotes a veteran.



Military Bronze Plaque

The bronze plaque, supplied by the U.S. Government, is a symbol of the veterans that have served in the military. It is usually placed at the foot of the grave, it could be placed on the back of the headstone, and has their service information, name, rank, branch of service and when they served.



Military Grave Marker

The marble marker, supplied by the U.S. Government, is a symbol for the veterans that have served in the military. The grave marker can contain their birth and death dates as well as their service information, name, rank, branch of service and when they served.



Military Grave Marker

As you explore the cemeteries/graveyards you may notice some military grave markers are not standing erect but flat with the grave. These markers are also provided by the U.S. Government with the veteran's name, birth, and death dates, when they served, as well as some additional information.

