



## What Can You Learn from a Cemetery?

Remember that cemeteries are historic sites and very important and reverent places to the people who have families and friends buried there. Cemeteries are to be treated with respect, even if closed. If visitors are in the cemetery, you should not disturb them but go about your work quietly.

### ➤ Rubbing the Past the Right Way.

You may enjoy collecting rubbings of gravestones. You'll need large, thin sheets of paper, masking tape, a fat wax crayon with the paper removed (or colored chalk), and a paintbrush (for cleaning off any dirt obscuring the words on the gravestone). To make a rubbing, tape the paper tightly over the chosen gravestone and rub the surface with the edge of the crayon until the stone's details show up sharp and clear. Be sure no tape is left behind when you remove the paper. Note the date and the name of the cemetery where the rubbing was taken.

### ➤ Looking for Names and Dates.

Sometimes the cemetery can seem like a giant puzzle that must be unscrambled. Understanding certain common gravestone abbreviations is important: "b" for "born"; "yrs" for "years", and "dau" for "daughter". You might notice that some people's names evolved from occupations, places of origin, and parents' names. For instance, the family name of Miller refers to the occupation of milling flour. The family name of Paris, suggests French origins.

- Compare the last names on the older stones with those on the more recent graves. Do the names suggest some changes over the years in residents' countries of origin? Focus on the first names. What used to be the most common ones for men? For women? Are those names still used much? Can you find any particularly unusual names?

- Are there any famous people buried in the cemetery?
- Try to locate the stones at the opposite ends of time; the one with the oldest dates and the one with most recent date.
- Compare gravestones of males and females to determine who tends to live longer. Did more husbands outlive wives, or vice versa? Does it appear that adult life expectancy has changed over the years? Is there a preponderance of headstones from one particular year? If so, why might that have happened? Could there have been an epidemic? A war? A natural disaster?

### ➤ Learning About Relationships and Beliefs

- Looking at the gravestones of previous generations, what seems to have been the average number of children in a typical family? Do gravestones tell you anything about whether this number has increased or decreased?
- What can you deduce about changing family relationships by observing the gravestones of individual families? How large did extended families used to be? What about today? Is it easy to find grandparents, great-grandparents and grandchildren buried near one another?
- Take note of the wide variety of symbols engraved on headstones. These may include angels, lambs, hearts, flowers, heraldic designs or specific religious symbols. Common themes include the passing of time, shortness of life, resurrection of the soul, and occupations of the deceased. For instance, birds stand for the soul, trees for paradise or eternal life, angels for heaven, willow trees for mourning, trumpets for victory, and anchors for hope. Also, look for hourglasses (life passing), candles (life snuffed out by death), bells (tolling for the dead), and fruits (fertility and abundance).

### ➤ Digging Deeper

- Like everything else, monument designs go in and out of fashion. Notice, for example, the massive designs that were popular at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or Egyptian motifs that were stylish in the 1920s. After the 1960s, a new freedom allowed quite a range of monument styles, and

these days you're likely to discover very personal remembrances, from a surfboard to a color photo of the departed, encased in Lucite and embedded in the granite.

- Compare the styles of graves and headstones. Think about how a headstone or marker can reflect a person's social status. What can you infer about a person or family from the kind of headstone chosen? For instance, more elaborate headstones - the ones with statues or ornate carvings - might suggest wealth and high status. However, wealthy or prominent people sometimes choose simpler headstones because they have simple tastes or dislike ostentation.
- Find the grave of a veteran for each of the wars listed below. Note the name and birth date and any other information or symbols on the marker.
  - Civil War
  - Spanish-American War
  - World War I
  - World War II
  - Korean War
  - Vietnam War

➤ Observe at least three different materials from which tombstones are made. What are they? Do some show more weathering and wear than others of the same age? What effect does pollution and acid rain have on different types of stones?

