

# A STORY IN STONE

There is a lot more to be found in cemeteries than just stone monuments. Graveyards contain a wealth of information easily available to any historian. They serve as a record of life in a community. A walk through to read the marker **inscriptions** can provide a **glimpse** into the past. One can discover what an average life span was, what diseases swept through a community, at what age people usually married, what people did for work and play, and what religious beliefs they held.

When we search for information about a family or town, we often overlook the cemetery altogether and turn instead to librarians, teachers, and town clerks for facts. But the graveyard is a valuable **primary resource**. There you can make your own conclusions from knowledge you gather firsthand.

Part of the fun of being a graveyard detective is working outside in the fresh air, reading the odd names and inscriptions, and making gravestone rubbings. But certainly just as much fun is the excitement of learning how to **decipher** information about our forefathers and mothers. By piecing together the clues you can learn a great deal about what life at another time was like.

For centuries, people have erected markers to **memorialize** their dead. These markers vary greatly in material, size and style. Some are **ornately** carved, polished granite. Others are simple fieldstones without so much as a name or date chiseled on them. Still others are within huge monuments called **mausoleums**. Graves are found in churchyards,

isolated family plots, or town cemeteries. No matter where you live, there is probably a graveyard nearby.

But how does one find out how to gather information from these old stones? The answer is easy, but first you will have to get used to the odd spellings, strange **epitaphs**, and weird punctuation on so many tombstones. Also beware of a letter that looks

like an “f” but is actually an “s.”

This symbol was usually used to replace the first “s” of a double “s.” So, if you were to look at an old stone where the word “bliss” was written, it might look like “blifs.” Once you have become comfortable with some of these oddities, you can begin work as a cemetery detective.

The most **obvious** information on a gravestone is the person’s name and his or her dates of birth and death. But sometimes even these are absent. For example, a **peculiar** epitaph on a Stowe grave marker tells little about the person buried there:

*I was somebody.*

*Who, is no business  
of yours.*

However, epitaphs like this are unusual. Most stones tell who was buried there and often mention the **spouse** and children as well.

On the average people in the 1700’s and 1800’s did not live as long as we do today. Common colds, which cause us little concern now, were often fatal. You may find a family whose young children all died within weeks or months of each other. They were probably victims of some **epidemic**. In Grafton a stone documents the loss of a large family.



*Youth behold and shed a tear.  
See fourteen children slumber here.  
See their image how they shine  
Like flowers of a fruitful vine.*

Causes of death were sometimes related to the person's occupation. One can get an idea of what businesses operated in a town and the hazards they presented. In Pownal the following appears on the **deceased's** stone:

*Solomon Towslee Jr  
Who was kill'd in Pownal  
Vt. July 15, 1846, while  
repairing to Grind a sithe  
on a stone atach'd to the  
Gearing in the Woolen  
Factory, he was entangled.  
his death was sudden and awful*

Just as often **leisure** time took its share of human life. Abial Perkins, aged 13 and 14 days, died in Plainfield in 1826. His epitaph tells the rest.

*This blooming Youth in Health most fair  
To his Uncle's Mill-pond did reparaire,  
Undressed Himself and so plunged in  
But never did come out again.*

However not everything we learn from gravestones is written in words. The designs carved into the stone tell us a great deal, particularly about the religious beliefs of the time. Carvings on stones erected from the 1600's and 1700's emphasized the shortness of life.



Hourglasses, and skulls and bones were commonly used. In the late 1700's the emphasis shifted from death to life in heaven. Winged cherubs were carved

on many of these stones. By the 1800's the weeping willow design became the most popular, symbolizing **mourning**. Of course, there are many other **motifs** to see on gravestones. The cross, pointing hands, and flowers are all quite common. It is interesting to try to figure out what the carver was trying to say with the symbols he chose.



## VOCABULARY

**inscription** - a message that is carved into something

**glimpse** - a short look

**primary resource** - firsthand account of an event

**decipher** - to read or interpret

**memorialize** - to honor the memory of

**ornate** - fancy

**mausoleum** - stone building containing tombs

**epitaph** - inscription

**obvious** - easily understood

**peculiar** - strange

**spouse** - a husband or wife

**epidemic** - the outbreak and spreading of a disease

**deceased** - dead

**leisure** - free time

**mourning** - to show grief for the dead

**motifs** - designs