

DEAD MEN DO TELL TALES

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Terminology

Æ – Ætatis Suae (or “AS”) means “at his/her age” – usually followed by deceased’s age

Cemetery - comes from Greek “koimeterium” meaning “a place to sleep.” Became popular in the 19th century when ideas of burial places changed. Expansive rural vistas enhanced by carefully chosen flowers, trees and artful monuments. A place where the dead could find peace and mourners enjoy nature. First English settlers in American did not commonly use “cemetery.” During 17th and 18th centuries, English-speaking people used Burying Ground, Burial Ground, Graveyard, and Churchyard.

Cenotaph – An empty tomb or monument erected in the memory of a person buried elsewhere.

The widespread use of burial receptacles was rather new in Western culture dating back about 200-300 years. During the 1600s in Virginia and New England the dead were buried at night in an attempt to conceal losses from Indians. The deceased were placed in the ground without coffins and usually wrapped in shrouds. Until the 18th century few people, except the very rich, were buried in coffins. People used coffins for a variety of reasons: to protect the corpse, to confine dead spirits, to honor the dead.

Coffin - typically resembles the shape of a body and has six or eight sides; it is wider at the top for the shoulders and gradually decreases in width toward the opposite end where the feet are placed.

Casket - typically a four-sided rectangular box and, when used for burying people, often contains a split-lid for viewing purposes.

Pall – cloth laid over the coffin usually black; white for a child or women who died in childbirth.

Pallbearer – someone who bears the coffin which the pall covers.

Receiving vault or tomb - structures designed to temporarily store coffins and were a standard feature in the 1800s. Used during the winter months when the ground was frozen, normally away from front of cemetery. May have been a subterranean structure built in the side of a hill or sunken in the ground. Coffins placed on shelving or stacked. If above ground, it looked like a family mausoleum; thus may have had words “receiving vault” carved in stone above the door. Often called “public vault.”

Undertaker - person who “under took” the responsibility for funeral arrangements. The earliest “undertaker” was the coffin maker; usually the furniture maker or carpenter

The thorn symbol “y” pronounced as “th” followed by superscript letter
Y^e – means “the” Y^t – means “that” &c – means etc.

Why do we study cemeteries and tombstones?

Burial grounds are focal points of local history and help formulate pictures of life long ago. Know about earlier customs, can better understand what we see in cemeteries now. Tombstones tell us about the person buried there; act as vital records when none are available; give family relationships; information on children; military service; tell about interests of the deceased; organizations they belonged to; religion; affluence; and more.

Burial = Status in Community; Gravestone = Status in Burial

Where one is buried showed importance in the community, *i.e.* inside the church. Social standing in death and burial were as rigid as in life. Size and complexity of stone showed social position. Types of grave markers used: headstone, sometimes with footstone, resembled a bed; ledger; chest-tomb; obelisk; table-tomb. Last three rose above ground and therefore associated with upper strata of society.

Importance of social rank and ancestry become apparent on gravestones. Imagery and inscriptions reiterate importance of status in community. Use of titles and honorifics were prevalent.

Coat-of-arms – Used in the south and New England. Many stones with coat-of-arms designated the deceased as “gentleman” in inscription. Coat-of-Arms relate directly to individual’s status during life.

Gentleman – A man of gentle or noble birth or superior social position; entitled to a coat-of-arms.

Titles given to gentlemen included:

Honorable - Used in reference to an individual who held a high office, such as governor, treasurer, auditor, or secretary. Positions never held by more than one person at a time.

Esquire - Reserved for members of Governor’s council, who, as members of the Upper House of the General Assembly, were equal to England’s House of Lords. Men appointed to the Council belonged to Virginia’s most prominent families and is comparable to that of an English nobleman.

Mister - Associated with people who were not entitled to a Coat-of-Arms, but enjoyed a social status well above that of a yeoman; respected members of the community. Established the clergy, military, or profession, honored academicians, or had means and substance warranting public recognition. Had much influence in the community's affairs

Yeoman – A man holding and cultivating a small landed estate; a freeholder.

Status of women depended on her birth and marriage. If a person of inherited status, she was listed as daughter of a gentleman. Woman married to a gentleman, but not of gentility herself, would only be listed as wife of a gentleman. Lengthy inscriptions were rare, reserved for those with status.

Gravestones on harder stone with more ornate carvings were likely to have been imported. Colony with no local stone had to import from England or other colonies; was expensive to cut and transporting was a sign of family wealth or love of deceased. Stone carvers often became well-known. Check for name of carver on tombstone. Carvers charged by the letter so a lengthy epitaph would be an investment. Knowing about the stone carver or the monument company may provide some insight about the individual or company servicing an area. Gravestones rare throughout colonial times; few settlers had carving skills and used fieldstone or wooden slabs.

Grave markers were shrines to the ghosts of the deceased and were intended to placate evil spirits. They reflected beliefs of society of the times. In the 17th century and early 18th century pre-occupied with mortality; symbols and inscriptions reflected imminence of death and tenuous nature of life itself. Symbols were meant to remind the living of their impending end. Symbols included skulls, crossbones, skeletons, etc. Rarely did they contain symbols of life or indication of a highly-valued professional status. Earliest stones in New England devoid of religious emblems like Christian cross. Common warnings on New England grave markers “memento Mori” = remember, you must die; O Relentless Death; Fugit Hora – The hour flies or time flies.

By mid-1800s mortality symbols started to give way to more gentle images of mourning with draped urns, weeping willows, cherubs, etc. Cherubs found more on graves of high-status individuals. Visual images suggested resurrection and everlasting life; depicted occupations, social and professional associations. Children's markers began making an appearance. Some religions, such as Quakers, did not believe in markers. They also did not believe in large funeral processions or funeral gifts, but did serve cakes and wine before a burial and a full meal afterwards, but never to excess.

Mourning in Style

Well-to-do households would drape a black panel, possibly with coat-of-arms over door to home. A more modest home may hang a flower wreath tied with a black ribbon if deceased married or of advanced years; white ribbon if young or unmarried. *The Workman's Guide*, published in 1840, set mourning times. Women, during mourning of a husband, had to wear the deepest

matte black material for two years. Did not go out in public; if she did, had to have a thick black veil over her all-black outfit. Clothing could then go to grey, mauve and white, but still with a veil. At the end of two years she could resume wearing normal clothing. In various places there was a time period for how long one would mourn for: a parent or child, wore black for one year, sibling or grandparents six months, aunt, uncle, niece or nephew three months. All of this ended around World War I. Widowers wore dark clothing with black ties or armbands and did not have to adhere as strictly to mourning rules. Widowers wore black for one year then gray. After 18 months they could wear colors. Men did not have to wait a certain period to remarry. Would have been scandalous for a woman to come out of mourning early, let alone marry. Less is known about the mourning habits of the poor.

Mourning jewelry was an indication of a person's sense of loss. In the 17th century throughout most of the 18th century, funeral gifts were given to those who were invited to a funeral. Mourners expected to receive gifts when they attended funerals – rings, scarves, gloves. Quality of gloves varied according to status of the recipient or relationship to the deceased. Once gloves received, recipient obliged to attend funeral. Spending on funeral gifts in Colonial America so lavish, in 1700s some colonies passed laws banning the process.

Funeral etiquette - Breach of good manners not to attend a funeral when invitation sent; no calls of condolences made upon bereaved family while deceased in the home; all differences and quarrels must be forgotten in a house of mourning; and, personal enemies who meet at a funeral must treat each other with respect.

The Funeral

People went from house to house, farm to farm, plantation to plantation telling of the death and inviting friends and family to the funeral. By the 19th century handwritten notices replaced a “crier.” Before undertakers, family or neighbors would “lay out” the deceased in the parlor of the home. Often the custom was to stop clocks or cover mirrors. When photography became available, pictures often taken with family posed around the deceased in the coffin. Called “post-mortem” photography.

In warm weather, corpse packed in ice and face frequently sponged with wet rag. No way to preserve a body so funerals held within 24 to 48 hours. Mourners often carried strong-scented flowers to overcome odor. Wake may have been held to protect body from animals or body snatchers.

Body was then placed in the coffin, and either carried or put in a wagon and transported for burial. Well-to-do families would hire a hearse with jet-black horses decorated with plumes from a livery stable or undertaker. Family members would precede the coffin and others would walk or ride behind. Men were buried in their best suits; women often saved a gown or dress from bridal trousseau; and small children were buried in christening gowns and may have been buried with a doll or homemade toy.

People often came a long way on foot or in wagon to attend funeral. Food was supplied and drink available. After burial, mourners returned to the home of deceased where they were offered food and drink – often to excess. Colonial funerals in New England and Virginia were quite different from each other. In New England Puritan funerals were solemn affairs, unless for high-standing official. In Virginia, funerals were solemn, but also social occasions.

Type of Cemetery

Type of cemetery buried in may tell a little about the family.

Churchyard: usually for congregants. Colonial New England, graveyards often located near center of town, typically adjacent to the meetinghouse.

Family cemetery:

Small farms - with room for cemetery; placed on a high point or at edge of the property, or closer to the house in the front or rear yard, but usually far from the family's water source, usually fenced-in or surrounded with small rock wall.

Plantation cemeteries in southern colonies: parish churches were so far away often the dead could not be conveyed to the church for burial. Thus, deceased interred in orchards or gardens where whole families lie. If one could travel or lived close to a churchyard, would have a choice of where to be buried. Others families established churches near their family burial grounds.

Community cemetery: May be nondenominational. Some towns had two cemeteries; one for town folk, other for criminals, gunfighters, suicides not allowed in certain cemeteries, and ladies of "dubious" occupations.

Potter's field: destitute or people who died in epidemics; resided in hospitals, almshouses, jails, female workhouses, and smallpox hospital. Find ancestor buried in a Potters field, find out what connections it had with the community.

Some cemeteries were for Blacks only, Jews only, Catholics only, etc. Other cemeteries allowed burials of both Blacks and whites, but were segregated by race. Look for separate areas in cemeteries for the poor, Blacks, Jews, veterans, etc. Cemeteries for Jews, following religious tradition, not located adjacent to respective synagogue, but situated outside densely settled areas.

Slave burial grounds - Traditionally buried adjacent to the owning family's burial ground or separate slave graveyard elsewhere on the property in a spot considered to be of little agricultural value. Burials generally held at night to accommodate desire to have friends and relatives of neighboring plantations attend. Master's relationship to the slave influenced the funeral and burial; didn't want funeral to interfere with work. Normally no markers.

Mutual Aid or Benevolent Societies - Founded to care for needs of specific ethnic groups, religions, or professions. Many free Blacks and immigrants belonged to such societies. Ex: Italian Mutual Benevolent Society and Columbian Harmony Society of Washington DC connected to Harmony Cemetery. Provided necessary services by pooling resources, members were able to help defray health and burial expenses. Organization collected minimal dues from members to cover their funeral expenses. Sometimes the society offered additional financial support for their spouses and children; some had own burial grounds. These societies may have additional information about the deceased and/or his family.

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For tombstone symbols:

Grave addiction - <http://www.graveaddiction.com/symbol.html>

United States Genealogy & History Network - <http://msghn.org/usghn/symbols.html>

Do a Google search: Tombstone symbols and their meanings