Dead men tell no tales, but...

TOMBSTONES TELL THE STORY

Cemeteries are traditionally thought of as being scary, spooky, dreary or peaceful, but the history, legends and customs found in cemeteries can be very interesting.

Tombstones are, in fact, forms of frozen history. An epitaph, engraving and even the shape of a tombstone can reveal much about a person’s hobby, occupation, hopes and dreams.

The engravings found on monuments are symbolic. Here are a few of the more common ones:

Ivy—Memory
Rose—Nativity or Messianic hope
Also Love of Our Lord
Cross—Faith
Rosary—Prayer
Bible—Divine Authorship
Olive—The Grace of Our Lord, Peace
Laurel Wreath—Glory
Grapevine—The Lord and His Followers
Celtic Cross—Cross of Iona
Poppy—Sleep or Consolation

Other symbols are more unique and sometimes reveal more about an individual. Customs surrounding burial have changed through the years. Placing shells on top of the grave was once a tradition, but has almost disappeared.

We found many interesting monuments in our investigation. One of the most unique was a stone in the shape of a chair with only the inscription “Baird.” Highland Park Cemetery records list only the person who bought the lot, not the person buried there, and this made our research more difficult. We think this tombstone belongs to Mr. and Mrs. David Baird.

David Baird, born in 1833, was a marble cutter and tombstone dealer. He handled Vermont and Italian marbles chiefly. Did he design and carve this beautiful monument?

In Forest-Llewellyn Cemetery, an elaborate Celtic Cross with an unusual sign in the center sparked our curiosity. This beautiful monument belongs to W. P. Nason, a prominent citizen of Kirksville who died in 1909. Nason, a schoolteacher, came from Kentucky to Kirksville with his friend W. T. Baird. Nason opened a private school at the corner of Florence and Buchanan streets, and later taught at the Normal School until 1887.

His good friend, W. T. Baird, saw to the erection of this beautiful monument.

Those elaborate tombstones are almost a thing of the past except for the very wealthy. We talked with Arlo Smith, manager of Carter Memorial in Kirksville. “Tombstones cost about $750 for the average size. The stones, which are made from granite, take only a day or two to put up and set, out making them could take up to six weeks. You have to order the stone from the quarries in Macon and if they don’t have it, the branch orders it from the northern quarries.”

Although Carter Memorial has many monument designs from which to choose, Mr. Smith told us that people can and do create their own designs. “Draw what you want and artists will carve it for you...bird dogs, elephants, or even your own picture can be baked in porcelain and placed on the stone.”

Vandalism in cemeteries has always been a problem, but during World War II many tombstones were turned over for the lead supports which could then be sold for recycling.

There are many interesting cemeteries in the area, large as well as small, simple, family plots. Each tombstone has a story to tell. By researching some of these stories, we can better understand the history and culture of a community.
Opposite Page: Left, the symbol on this tombstone seems to indicate that Mr. Clifton had no doubts about where he wished to spend eternity. Right, the Nason stone features an elaborate Celtic Cross with an unusual symbol in the center.

This Page:

Above left, very little information is available to explain the significance of these basket tombstones in the Greentop Cemetery. They were constructed by hand from hundreds and hundreds of sea shells. Above right, the hound and rifle which decorate this grave in Forest-Llewellyn Cemetery appear to indicate the deceased man's love for hunting. Left, this magnificent stone carved from marble in the shape of a thronelike chair may have been designed by a local tombstone dealer, David Baird.

By Jane Lintner and Renea Scott