

Understanding Gravestone Symbols

Cathy Wallace, BillionGraves Special Projects Coordinator

Email: cwallace@billiongraves.com

Website: billiongraves.com

Blog: blog.billiongraves.com



Learning to “Read” a Cemetery

Do you remember when you learned to read? As a child, it was fun to look at pictures in books as someone older read the words. But, oh, that magical moment when you realized you could read the words yourself! It opened a whole new world!

On many older gravestones, there are pictures and symbols that tell stories about your ancestors. If you can’t read “gravestone-language” you are missing part of the story.

Understanding gravestone symbols will help you learn to “read” a cemetery.

Definition of Symbols

The Webster Dictionary definition of symbols is “something that suggests something else by reason of association”.

The key word in that definition is “suggests.” In the end, a symbol is still a symbol. It represents whatever the person who designed it meant it to be, even though someone else may interpret it differently.

Since we cannot speak to the people who commissioned the symbol or those who carved it, interpretations should always be considered possibilities, not certainties.

That said, there are particular symbols that have commonly accepted meanings through their repeated use.

Basic Gravestone Symbols

- Book - book of life; Bible; gravesite of author, scholar, or teacher
- Open book - life story not yet fully written
- Anchor – gravesite of a sailor; hope
- Broken Obelisk – a life cut short
- Quill – a story not yet fully written; gravesite of a writer or teacher
- Shovel – death; life is short
- Urn – grief
- Sphere or Ball – unending circle of life; eternity

Gravestone Symbols from Nature

- Weeping willow tree – sadness; grief; drooping spirits
- Rose – love
- Rose with broken stem or unopened bud – a life cut short
- Calla Lili – marriage
- Ivy – eternity
- Wheat – a long life; harvested at the proper time
- Dove – Holy Spirit
- Dove with Olive Branch – peace
- Birds in pairs – love birds; marriage
- Butterfly – resurrection
- Caterpillar and Butterfly – miraculous change; resurrection

Hand Gravestone Symbols

- Finger pointing up – gone to heaven
- Handshake – farewell
- Finger pointing to stars – heaven
- Finger pointing down – hand of God
- Spirals – clouds; heaven
- Finger fixing broken chain – family is being linked together again
- Finger in open book – the Word of God is the pathway to heaven
- Finger pointing to bird – the soul has taken flight
- Finger pointing through a crown – gone to heaven through Christ's power
- Handshake beneath a veil – welcoming the deceased into God's presence
- Hand lifting banner beyond a veil – taking the deceased to heaven
- Hand on a stage – the play must go on; life is eternal
- Hand with a clock – turning back the hands of time
- Praying hands – faith; prayer
- Holding hands - love

Gravestone Symbols for Infants

- Lambs – little one died; quick to follow
- Empty cradle – baby is gone
- Sleeping baby – the little one will wake again
- Double headstones with lambs – twins or siblings died
- Morning Glory – innocence and purity
- Plant bud – life not yet in full bloom
- Grieving mother – love and sadness
- Sleeping little angel – baby will wake in the resurrection
- Flying angel with baby – baby has gone to heaven and is being cared for
- Bird – a little soul has left its body
- Pine trees – immortality and eternal life
- Sleeping in a seashell – baby is precious as a pearl; treasured baby on display

Cross Gravestone Symbols

- Calvary Cross – climbing the hill to Golgotha
- Alpha and Omega – Greek for first and last
- Agony cross with pointed tips – crucifixion
- Anchor cross – secret symbol for 1st century persecuted Christians
- Celtic cross – circle for pagan sun gods topped with Christian cross
- Crucifix – the death of Christ; sacrifice; love
- Eastern Cross – slanted footbar for spirit paradise and spirit prison
- Glory Cross – light of Christ
- IHS Cross – 3 Greek letters meaning Jesus
- Latin Cross – faith in Christ
- Cross Pattee – French footed cross; royalty
- Military Cross – the price of freedom and faith

Other Christian Gravestone Symbols

- Temple – families are forever
- St. Francis of Assisi – love of nature and animals
- Sacred Heart – love of God
- Mary – mother of God
- Holy Family – Joseph (with square for truth), Mary, and Jesus
- Rosary – prayer; Catholic
- Gates – entry into heaven
- Palm Leaves – worship of Messiah with shouts of hosanna

Israelite Gravestone Symbols

- Deer – tribe of Nephtali
- Griffin – tribe of Dan
- Water Pitcher – Levites washing hands of temple priests
- Lion – tribe of Judah
- Crown – royal heritage in tribe of Judah
- Star of David – King David's shield of protection; used for Jewish men
- Hands with finger separated – Cohen family; priestly heritage
- Hand putting money in box – charitable and generous
- Candles – kindling of Sabbath lights; used for Jewish women
- Broken candles – the life of a woman cut short; died young
- Menorah – a light to the nations
- Rocks – a visitor has come to the grave

Military Gravestone Symbols

- Penny – someone visited the grave
- Nickel – trained together in boot camp
- Dime – served together in the military
- Quarter – present when the soldier died

Fraternity Gravestone Symbols

- Freemason square – live a righteous life on earth
- Freemason compass – prepare to meet God in heaven
- Eastern Star – star of Bethlehem
- Eastern Star altar – sacrifice
- Moon, Star, Machete – Arabic or Shriner
- Fleur-de-Lis – Boy Scouts
- Trefoil – Girl Scouts
- All-Seeing Eye – Masonic or Odd Fellows; God sees our actions
- FLT Chain – Odd Fellows; friendship, love, and trust never to be broken
- Hand and heart – Odd Fellows; life of service
- Helmet, Skull & Crossbones, Swords – Knight of Pythias; lay down their life for a friend
- KOTM Tent – Knights of the Maccabees; protection
- Moose – Loyal Order of the Moose; service
- Shield – Salvation Army; service; helping the poor and needy
- Treestone – Woodmen of the World; industry and progress
- Double Treestone – Woodmen of the World; married couple
- Stack of logs - Woodmen of the World; number of children in the family
- Log Cabin – Woodmen of the World; home and security

Winged Skull Gravestone Symbols

- Skull & Crossbones – death is inevitable; live a good life
- Hourglass – life is short
- Winged skulls – death is coming; prepare to go to heaven

Angel Gravestone Symbols

- Translucent angels – light and truth
- Angel with bouquet – roses for love; forget-me-nots for remembrance
- Angel with cross – faith in Christ
- Angel with cupped hands – ready to receive a blessing or revelation
- Gabriel with lilies – archangel; purity and innocence of Mary
- Angel writing on scroll – keeping a record of the deceased's life
- Angel with tablet – presenting a record of good deeds to God
- Angel with upside down torch – a life extinguished
- Angel with crossed arms – begging for mercy
- Crying angel – grief
- Angel with chain – binding Satan for the Millennium
- Angel with sword – vengeance; justice
- Angel with trumpet – announcing resurrection and judgement day
- Angel in motion – “Let's go! Our work here is done but there is more to do in another sphere!”

More Gravestones Symbols on BillionGraves Blog:

- [Understanding Cemetery Gravestone Symbols, Part I](#)
- [Understanding Cemetery Gravestone Symbols, Part II](#)
- [Understanding Cemetery Crosses](#)
- [Australian Gravestone Symbols](#)
- [Irish Gravestone Symbols](#)
- [Egyptian Gravestone Symbols](#)
- [Cemetery Angels](#)
- [Fraternity Gravestone Symbols, Part I](#)
- [Fraternity Gravestone Symbols, Part II](#)
- [Fraternity Gravestone Symbols, Part III](#)
- [10 Catholic Gravestone Symbols](#)
- [Catholic Cemetery Symbols](#)
- [Occupational Gravestones are Family History Clues](#)
- [Military Flag Holders at the Cemetery](#)
- [Understanding Jewish Gravestones](#)
- [Winged Skull Gravestone Symbols](#)

Take Photos of Gravestones with Your Smartphone!

Whenever you take a photo of the precious data that is found on gravestones, you are preserving family history! If you or your group would like to help take photos of gravestones with the easy-to-use BillionGraves app, click [HERE](#) to get started.

As you take photos with the BillionGraves app, **each gravestone is automatically tagged with GPS coordinates**. The data is then made readily available on BillionGraves website for millions of families around the globe for generations to come.

Getting Started

- Download the BillionGraves app to your smartphone from your app store.
- Create a free account on the app or at BillionGraves.com.
- From the main screen of the app, click on "take pictures" to begin taking photos in your local cemetery. The GPS coordinates will be recorded automatically.
- Go up and down the rows, taking pictures of each gravestone until you have completed an entire section or the entire cemetery. Keep moving at a quick pace. If you take 1 photo every 15 seconds you will have taken almost 250 photos in an hour!
- If you are working with another person, leap-frog over each other's rows until you have completed a section.
- When you are finished, connect to Wi-Fi and plug in your phone.
- From the main screen of the BillionGraves app, tap on "photos".
- When the orange button that says "upload" appears, tap on it to submit your gravestone photos.

Photo-taking Tips

- Stand to the side to avoid casting a shadow.
- Remove weeds, grass, or other debris that may block gravestone information.
- Be sure the names and dates are inside the photo frame.

Transcribing

You can help transcribe names and dates from your own gravestone photos or from photos taken by others.

- To start transcribing, log in or set up an account on billiongraves.com.
- Go to billiongraves.com/transcribe
- An image of a gravestone will appear.
- Type the names, dates, and other information onto the form.
- Click [HERE](#) for more information.

Contact Us

If you have explored these resources and still have questions or would like help finding a cemetery that still needs to have photos taken, contact us by email at Volunteer@BillionGraves.com. **Thanks a Billion!**