

# Beyond the Grave: Uncovering Life Stories from Death Records

## *Class 4: Burial, Cemetery, and Gravestone Records*

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## Burial Records

### Locations of Burial Records

- Cemetery Offices or Ground Keeper's residence
- Office of a church or a synagogue
- Town and City Halls: Cemetery or Parks Department
- National Soldier's Homes
- Local or State historical societies
- Formats range from unique manuscripts to online searchable databases

### Burial Permits

- Issued from a city or town clerk to have a body buried in a community a death did not occur.
- Often used to travel with the coffin if it is being shipped over state lines.
- Generally, these records are not microfilmed, and are occasionally bound with death records

### Burial Registers

- Details may include the following:
  - Name of deceased or family
  - Date of death
  - Date of burial
  - Ages



- Cause of death
- Burial plot details. Including costs and size of lot.

Year of Burial	Name	lot	age	Cause of Death	Date of Death
1899	Eggertson Mrs. E. A.	571	56	Perforation of bowels	Apr. 30
1899	Becker Mary M.	724	75	Septicemia	" 30
1899	Shaffer Geo. W.	311	42	Necrosis base of skull	May 1 <sup>st</sup>
1899	Welsh Mrs. Grace	195	31	Tuberculosis of lungs	Apr 30
1899	Wintrob Anna G. P.	548	33	Adenoma of the Pelvis	May 20
1899	Spencer Gladys	203	4 mos	Scarlatina	" 28
1899	Tooley William	203		Removed from (Conjunctiva) Jackson's Plot of lungs	Jan 23-1898
1899	Pittman L. S.	895	58-10-1	Violent death	June 9, 99
1899	Geo. A. Burns	body removed from lot 8 to Rochester N.Y.			
1899	Dunton Mrs. H. K.	159	66	Hodgkins Disease (Cancer)	July 11

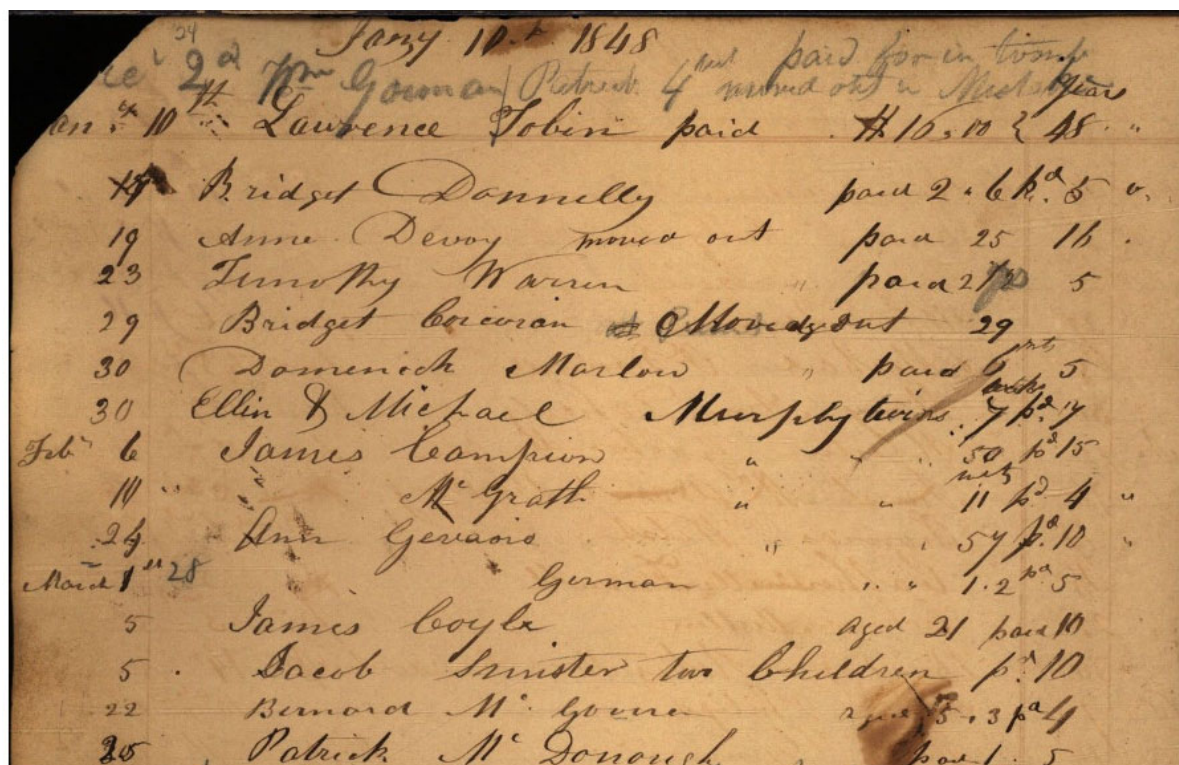
Source: Oak Grove Cemetery, Hillsdale, Michigan, 1899 ([www.FamilySearch.org](http://www.FamilySearch.org))

## Cemetery Records

### Church Cemeteries and Graveyards

- The church may oversee their own private graveyard or private cemetery.
- Burial records can include:
  - Internment records
  - Lot sales/transfers
  - Maps of the burying ground





Source: St. Augustine's Cemetery, South Boston, Mass., 1848 ([www.AmericanAncestors.org](http://www.AmericanAncestors.org))

## Cemetery Rules and Regulations

- ✓ When are the Cemetery gates open?
- ✓ Is photography allowed?
- ✓ Grave Rubbings?

## Check List before your visit

- ✓ Location of Cemetery in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century
- ✓ Have the gravestones or cemetery records been transcribed?
- ✓ Cemetery Office hours
- ✓ Existence of plot card(s) or location of grave(s)
- ✓ Request a cemetery map or find an online version showing sections for larger cemeteries



# Gravestones

## Colonial Markers – 17<sup>th</sup> Century

### Location

- Puritan Burying Ground
  - Away from the meeting house
  - Body did not need to rest in sacred ground
- Church graveyards
  - Next to church building
  - Sacred ground
- Family property

### Early Gravestone Markers

- Simple wooden cross or boards
- Field stone
- Local slate, sandstone, limestone, soapstone
  - Easy to quarry and carve
  - Durability varied by type of stone
- Headstone at the head of the deceased







Source: Earliest dated 17<sup>th</sup> century stone from New England for Barnard Capen (d. 1638) of Dorchester, Mass. And 20<sup>th</sup> century replacement stone at the gravesite (NEHGS Archives)

## 18<sup>th</sup> Century Gravestone Markers

### Description

- Gravestone markers became taller in size
- Typically made from slate or sandstone locally quarried
- New shapes appeared
  - Plain rectangle
  - Three part with shoulders modified
- Embellished Death head
- Hourglass
- Bones
- Urns
- Willow Trees



## 19<sup>th</sup> Century Gravestone Markers

### Location

- Burying grounds replaced by cemeteries, a planned burial ground
- Rural cemetery movement, e.g. Mt. Auburn, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1831 and Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, N.Y., 1840.

### Description

- Markers began to be more varied: taller, different materials
- Marble and granite becomes very popular
- Late 19<sup>th</sup> century began see to stouter stones, layered stones
- Egyptian archeological influence including obelisks
- Less full dates more names and years on the stone.
- Central family monuments



## 19<sup>th</sup> Century Symbols

- Sleeping Child – an infant or child death
- Broken Columns – a life cut short
- Clasped hands – fidelity
- Anchor – for seamen
- Dove – resurrection, innocence, peace
- Ivy – fidelity and immortality
- Oak leaves – strength, honor, steadfastness
- Lillies and Drapery – honoring mourning



# 20<sup>th</sup> Century Gravestone Markers

## Description

- Granite becomes predominant stone
- Markers stocky and solid
- Can include photographs attached or engravings in color
- Religious Symbols

## Summary

- 17<sup>th</sup> century grave markers used locally available stone and usually bore a Death Head carving at the top
- 18<sup>th</sup> century markers began to use marble and branched out to other symbols such as the urn and willow tree
- 19<sup>th</sup> century markers were elaborate and multi-layered
- 20<sup>th</sup> century markers often use granite and tend to be stockier
- The symbols that appear on markers tell a story about the deceased's beliefs and community

**Tip: Remember not everyone had a gravestone**

## In Search of a Tomb Burial

- Burial records on the local level may reveal the tomb number.
- The names engraved on a tomb does not always reflect all those buried within the tomb.
- Sometimes tombs will have multiple names engraved on it, and also when the tomb was constructed or purchased above the door
- Tombs were bought and sold like real estate



## Gravestone Transcriptions



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## Examples from the NEHGS Manuscript Collection

- Typed abstract of gravestone information arranged alphabetical
- Typed abstracts arranged in order of burial
- Handwritten abstracts arranged by cemetery rows
- Abstract with additional genealogical research on each individual
- Typed abstracts in cemetery row order.
- Verbatim transcription with loss of order of the original transcription on the stone
- Inscription abstract arranged alphabetically, and each gravestone is assigned a number
- Newspaper column transcriptions
- Verbatim transcription with line breaks

## Suggestion for transcribing a Gravestone in original order

### Original Transcription Order



**HENRY H. / ARNOLD / PENNSYLVANIA / GENERAL  
OF / THE AIR FORCE / WORLD WAR II / JUNE 25, 1886  
/ JANUARY 15, 1950 / DSM & 2 OLC LM**

## Published Cemetery Proprietor Lists

- Alphabetical list of cemetery plot owners



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- Plot name and or #
- Location of Plot
- Date of Plot purchase
- Burials in each plot

## Common Gravestone Abbreviations

- **Æ, AE, æ, æt, Æt, æt, or A:** Latin aetatis, “age of,” referring to age at death. Usually followed by the age in years, months, and days. When subtracted from the date of death, offers an approximate date of birth.
- **Y:** Common substitute for the “thorn” symbol, which signifies the sound “th.” Example: 5Y = 5th, Ye = The, Yt = That, Yis = This
- **OB:** Latin obit, “she/he dies.”

## Archaic terms that provide clues to marital status on gravestones

- **Spinster:** unmarried adult female
- **Consort:** wife; husband alive at her death
- **Relict:** widow; husband predeceased her

**Tip: Given names and surnames may be abbreviated on a gravestone**

## Online Cemetery Research Websites

- [www.Billiongraves.com](http://www.Billiongraves.com)
- [www.FindAGrave.com](http://www.FindAGrave.com)
- [www.Interment.net](http://www.Interment.net)
- [www.AmericanAncestors.org](http://www.AmericanAncestors.org)

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