Anthropological Approaches to Cemeteries

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- Anthropology: understanding behavior (actions) and culture (thoughts) of people from different times & places
- How do cemeteries offer insights into different ways of thinking about death, the afterlife, gravesites, personal identity and experiences, values, beliefs, the environment, communities, and relationships? How do cemeteries reflect cultural change and continuity?

Metaphors for Death: Examples

Death as sleeping, graves as beds
- Orientation of graves, often facing east (resting until resurrection)
- Gravestones shaped like headboards, sometimes also footboards and sides
- Epitaphs referencing waiting, resting, "Just Sleeping"

Death as departure, graves as portals
- Gravestones shaped like doors or archways
- Epitaphs referencing departure, crossing over, "Gone on Ahead"

Death as going home, graves as memorials to people now in Heaven

- Gravestones often include images of the deceased
- Epitaphs suggest that God brought them home: "God's garden had a need for little flowers"; "God loaned you to us Dec. 22, 1989. And called you home Nov. 26, 2007."
- Sometimes celebratory: "Look ye on high – We are not here!"
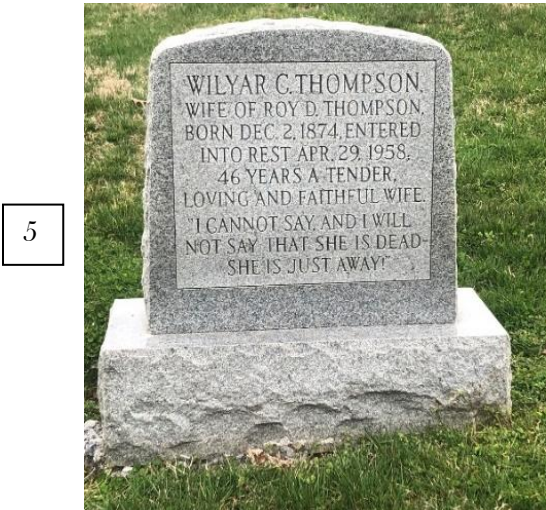
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6 (at ARP)

Glimpses of Stories

- Some individual grave markers, or sets of grave markers, provide narrative glimpses into people's experiences.
- Some can be read directly from the grave markers themselves.
- Other grave markers raise questions that documents can help answer (e.g. Ancestry.com.)
- Still others hint at stories that no one alive now can tell. (e.g. "She did what needed to be done," "He missed his brother's love.")

7 (group includes smaller stone not pictured)

Values: Connections and Privacy

Community: Memento Mori
- Most common in the colonial era
- Reminders that life is temporary, encouragement to make good choices
- Gravestones shaped as coffins
- Imagery including winged skulls (deaths head), skull and cross bones, hour glasses, etc.
- Epitaphs depicting the deceased as caring about and advising the living
- Sense that social and interpersonal ties, community transcend death
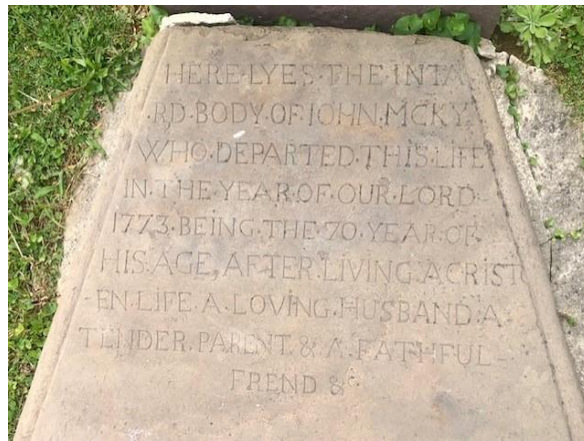
Privacy, restraint
- Most common c. 1800 – 1970s
- Epitaphs brief, often just a name and dates of birth and death
- Usually plain shapes (tablets, small obelisks)
- Sense that the grave and marker respect the privacy and separateness of the deceased

Community: Identity and Networks
- Most common 1980s – present
- Information about the deceased shared on their grave markers
  - Examples include listing parents, children, and grandchildren on the marker; representing identity through work (e.g. companies / businesses, vehicles, tools) or through hobbies (e.g., NASCAR, golf, the Baltimore Oriels). Informality, inclusion of nicknames.
  - Often use metonymy: one thing evokes another because of their close, regular association. A classic example is the term "the bench" used to represent a judge (who sits on the bench). In cemeteries, a Jeep or porch swing might metonymically represent the deceased.
- Gifts on graves
  - Figurines, books, coins, shells, candy, etc.
  - Inclusion of the deceased in holidays; graves decorated seasonally; cards and balloons left on birthdays and anniversaries.
  - News shared with the deceased by leaving photographs, trophies etc. on graves
- Graves as front porches
  - Welcome flags, flowers (potted, planted), lights, bird feeders, mats, wreaths, wind spinners
- Communication
  - Living speak to the dead through epitaphs (e.g. "Remember we love you, Granddaddy") and messages left on graves (e.g. cards, painted stones, flags with messages).
  - Dead speak to the living, modern expressions of *memento mori* (e.g. "Don't just stand there – Get ready!")

12

13

14
(rear)

15
(rear)