

Learning from the Grave

General Overview

The landscape of most cities and towns includes land set aside for burials. Burial practices and cemeteries have changed throughout history and give us a visual interpretation of society's beliefs and precepts. Any unit on cemeteries and/or gravestones will likely involve either an actual site visit or a virtual one. Luckily the latter is relatively simple to do. An actual trip to a cemetery will need to be well planned, but the trip itself could be very educational. Cemeteries contain a wealth of information that can be used in many subject areas. While language arts and social studies may be obvious subject areas, lessons on science and mathematics can be developed as well. Gravestones also offer a look at an under-explored art form.

Preparation

- Students should be given ample opportunity to discuss cemeteries at the beginning of the unit. People often have profound feelings about cemeteries, ranging from fear or morbid fascination to peace or depression, and students need to express these feelings freely. For some, the feelings might be better expressed in writing.
- Check out books about cemeteries and gravestones for students to use. The teacher can also have some chosen websites for students to explore for a general overview of the types of cemeteries and markers that can be found.
- Discussion should include the fact that gravestones can be primary sources. While not written on paper, they, nonetheless, contain contemporary written information. Discuss the types of information found in a cemetery. Why is this information important?

Activities

- The teacher might want to create a slide show or PowerPoint presentation of local cemeteries and examples of gravestones.
- Choose a deceased famous person that means something to you. Find out where the person is buried and using some of the sources given here, look at the gravestone (or lack thereof). Write an essay about the final resting place of this person. Do you feel that it is appropriate? Is it unexpected? Do they have an epitaph? Is it appropriate? Could you create a better one?
- Visit a local cemetery. Use the attached Cemetery Scavenger Hunt to seriously study the cemetery and its gravestones.
- Do an in-depth inventory of at least ten markers. Use the attached inventory sheet.
- Use the attached poster, copied from records at the North Carolina State Archives, to discuss the changes in grave markers over time. Early in America, markers often looked like those on the poster but gradually became more varied. What are they like now?

Enrichment and Extension

- Create a poem about a graveyard or one of the gravestones.
- Create your own epitaph and/or design your own tombstone.
- Survey and record the information in a small cemetery and send the attached form to the address listed on it for inclusion in the cemetery records maintained by the State Archives.
- Choose one stone in a cemetery that interests you. Do some research on the person buried there and write a short biography of that person.
- Write an essay about the media's treatment of cemeteries and how that might affect people's perception of them.
- Using the worksheet on symbolism, draw or photograph five gravestones and describe the symbolism of the artwork.

Sources

Cemetery Websites

<http://www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/tombstones.html> "Reading Hebrew Tombstones"

www.findagrave.com

www.gravestoneconservation.com (commercial site)

www.gravestonestudies.org

www.gencem.org

www.africanamericancemeteries.com/

www.thecemeteryclub.com

www.primaryresearch.org/Gravestones/index.php

www.msp.umb.edu/LocHistoryTemplates/MSPCemeteries.html

www.interment.net

www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/84mountauburn/84mountauburn.htm

www.oakdalecemetery.org

www.gravematter.com

www.arlingtoncemetery.net

Cemetery Books

Arbeiter, Jean and Linda D. Cirino. *Permanent Addresses: A Guide to the Resting Places of Famous Americans*. NY: M. Evans and Co., Inc., 1983.

Helsley, Alexia Jones. *Silent Cities: Cemeteries and Classrooms*. Columbia, SC: South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1997.

Keister, Douglas. *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*. NY: MJF Books, 2004.

King, Henry. *Tar Heel Tombstones and the Tales They Tell*. Asheboro, NC: Down Home Press, 1990.

Little, Ruth M. *Sticks and Stones: Three Centuries of North Carolina Gravemarkers*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Meyer, Richard E., ed. *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989.

Purser, Charles E., compiler. *A Story Behind Every Stone: The Confederate Section of Oakwood Cemetery, Raleigh, North Carolina*. Wake Forest, NC: 2005.

Reed, J. D. and Maddy Miller. *Stairway to Heaven: The Final Resting Places of Rock's Legends*. NY: Wenner Books, 2005.

Sloane, David Charles. *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

Solomon, Jack and Olivia. *Gone Home: Southern Folk Gravestone Art*. Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2004.

Strangstad, Lynette. *A Gravestone Preservation Primer*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1998.

Skills Learned from the Grave

Computer skills:

- Data entry, sorting, etc.

Art:

- Drawing, photography

Media studies:

- Media portrayal of cemeteries

Science:

- Id of plants and trees
- How plants can harm gravestones
- Weathering of stones
- What kinds of stone deteriorate faster

Math:

- Calculation
- Percentages
- Adding/subtraction
- Mean/average
- Ratio
- Making tables and graphs

Social studies:

- Combine with a study of the Day of the Dead for a look at Hispanic cultures
- Recognize that cemeteries are cultural symbols & important to human identity
- Develop/enhance critical analysis skills
- Cause & effect
- Inductive & deductive reasoning
- Recognize how different groups meet the human need for burial & memorial

History:

- Recognize how US or state events affect the death rate in each community
- Explore how the built cemetery environment interacts with culture

Language Arts:

- Formulate research questions and apply steps to obtain & evaluate information

Geography:

- Drawing & reading maps
- Observation of the overall design of the cemetery

Cemetery Definitions

Consort: a living spouse

Relic: a widow or sometimes a widower

Wife: can be living or dead

Tomb: a chamber for the burial of the dead

Table tomb: tomb that looks like a stone table

Chest tomb: tomb shaped like a trunk

Hip tomb: tomb shaped like a small, low house with a hip roof

Mausoleum: a large, stately tomb

Epitaph: inscription on a tombstone or monument in memory of the person buried there

Obelisk: a tall, four-sided shaft of stone, usually tapered, monolithic and rising to a point

Headstone: a stone set at the head of a grave, often larger & more ornate than the footstone

Footstone: a stone set at the foot of a grave

Gravestone: a stone that marks a grave

Cemetery: a place for burying the dead

Plot: a small piece of ground

Inter: to bury a dead body in the grave

Urn: a vase usually with a footed base or pedestal

Garden pieces: furniture such as benches, tables, bird baths, fountains, and urns

Sarcophagus: a stone coffin, often inscribed or decorated, modern ones usually do not hold a body; the body is usually in a vault beneath it

Potter's field: a place where unknown people are buried

Symbolism on Old Gravestones

Anchor: Hope, mariner's symbol

Angel, flying: Rebirth

Angel, trumpeting: call to the Resurrection

Angel, weeping: grief

Arch: Victory of life or victory in death

Arrow: Mortality

Bird: Eternal life

Birds in flight: Flight of the soul

Breasts (also gourds, pomegranates): The church, ministry, nourishment of the soul

Candle flame: Life

Column, broken: Death

Columns, doors: Heavenly entrance

Crown: Glory of life after death

Dove: Purity, devotion

Figs, pineapples, other fruits: Prosperity, eternal life

Flower: Frailty of life

Flower, severed blossom: Mortality

Garland: Victory

Hand, pointing: Heavenly reward

Heart: Love, mortality, love of God, abode of the soul

Hourglass: Time's inevitable passing

Lamb: Innocence

Lily: White, Madonna

Pall (cloth covering coffin), pick, spade: Mortality

Palm: Victory over death

Rooster: Awakening, the Resurrection

Rose: Beauty, perfection

Scythe: Death, the divine harvest

Shell: The Resurrection and life everlasting

Skull, death head: Mortality

Sun setting: Death

Sun shining or rising: Renewed life

Thistle: Of Scottish descent

Tree: Life

Tree, severed branch: Mortality

Tree, sprouting: Life everlasting

Vine: The sacraments, general symbol of Christian faith

Weeping willow tree: Nature's lament

Winged face: Effigy of the soul of the deceased, soul in flight

Wreath: Victory

Wreath worn by a skull: Victory of death over life

Wheat sheaves: The divine harvest
Courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina

Cemetery Field Trip Guide

Skills to be gained during this field trip are:

- Reading maps
- Following directions
- Drawing maps
- Learning the etiquette of visiting a cemetery
- Identifying symbols on tombstones
- Learning local history

Visit the cemetery before the field trip and know exactly where you and the students will go. Speak with the authorities before the visit about any rules and regulations that should be followed while in the cemetery.

Provide maps of the cemetery or the area of the cemetery that you will be visiting.

Have adequate adult supervision, preferably one adult for each 6 to 8 students.

Know the students you are taking: Have any students recently suffered a death in their family? Are any especially sensitive about cemeteries? It may be a good idea to send out a letter or survey to parents and guardians before the trip in case they have an objection to their child going on the trip.

Prepare the class by discussing rules and regulations, any fears the students may have, and what they should wear.

Make sure there is an opportunity for a bathroom break and adequate water for the students. Be aware of any health concerns among the students such as allergies to bees or plants, inability to walk long distances or over uneven terrain.

Be cognizant of the possibility of snakes, ticks and/or chiggers being present. Leave the cemetery as, or better than, you found it.

Do not do rubbings of stones or allow students to sit or lean on the stones as many of them may be unstable.

Call just before going to make sure that a burial will not be taking place while you are there. Allow at least two hours for the activities in the cemetery.

Make sure that students have supplies that they need to do their work, i.e. worksheets, clipboards, pencils, erasers, camera, etc.

Gravestone Inventory Sheet

Name of deceased:

Birth & death dates:

Epitaph:

Gravestone appearance:

Drawing:

Lettering condition:

- Clear
- Faded
- Hard to read
- Very hard to read

Design, symbols or decoration:

Material made of:

Wood Granite Limestone Marble Slate Other:

Information about the deceased (copy any information from the gravestone):

Family relationship:

Veteran:

Occupation:

Member of fraternal or religious organization:

Cemetery Scavenger Hunt

Students should look first at the cemetery as a whole.

They should give a description of the cemetery.

Questions to be considered are:

- Is it orderly or do the tombstones seem to be randomly placed?
- Are there plots for families or are people placed in rows of unrelated stones?
- Is vegetation interfering in any way with the cemetery or the individual tombstones?
- Are there obvious signs of vandalism?
- Do you feel that this cemetery is valued by a family or community?
- Does the cemetery appear to be a wildlife refuge?
- Why might this location have been chosen for the cemetery?
- Where is the cemetery in relation to town? How do you “feel” here (scary, creepy, peaceful, intrigued)?
- What month or season has more births?
- What month or season has more deaths?
- Do you see evidence of an epidemic or widespread tragedy in the cemetery?
- Do you see more stones for people dying before or after the age of 20?
- For how many different wars are there veterans represented in the cemetery?
- Are there any famous people buried in the cemetery?
- Are there obvious signs of wealth in some of the markers?
- What metaphors for death do you see on the stones?
- Are there geometric shapes in the cemetery? Name at least 5.
- Are there any interesting epitaphs? What makes them interesting?
- Do you see certain types of plants in the cemetery?

Using a group of ten gravestones, determine the ratio of males to females and children to adults.

Make a graph of the ages of death of individuals on at least ten gravestones.

Tombstone Tour

Look very carefully at the section of the cemetery that has been assigned to you. Draw a map of the area that shows where each stone is positioned, compared to each other stone:

- Does their position suggest a relationship?
- Where is the sun in relation to each stone?

Does one type of stone appeal to you such as the ones with animals or angels on them, children’s stones?

Draw or photograph one or several of these stones and explain why you like that particular stone or that type of stone.

Observe the time frame represented by the markers:

- Can you see differences in the markers over time?
- What changes have occurred?
- Is there a motif or epitaph that was used on early stones but not on later ones?
- Are there plants or types of that are threatening the gravestones?
- Do you see particular signs of weathering on the gravestones?