

# HERITAGE BULLETIN

Tips, Ideas & More to Help Preserve Oregon's Heritage

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## A SAMPLING OF OREGON GRAVESTONE SYMBOLS

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*“American gravestone art inherits its symbolism from many sources: the Bible, Greek and Egyptian civilizations, and European cultural history that pre-dates Christianity. Popular fraternal organizations, such as Free and Accepted Masons, the Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, and their many imitators, likewise drew from these same ancient sources. The symbolism essential to the mystery and pageantry of these secret societies became familiar to most nineteenth-century Americans and greatly influenced our country's history and art.”*

- AGS Field Guide No. 8 Symbolism in the Carving on Gravestones.

As you wander through a cemetery you will see many motifs on gravestones. A symbol on a marker can offer an interesting insight into the person's life or the family's feeling about the death. In addition to asking the question, “What does this symbol mean?” it is important to remember that a particular motif may appear just because someone liked it. For example, an anchor can be a symbol for the Christian cross, which may explain why this symbol is found on a gravestone in Oregon's High Desert. In spite of the grave's location, perhaps the person buried there loved the sea.

The workmanship and beauty of the gravestones and the sculptures found in cemeteries are art. In fact, in many places it was the first art available to the public. Ultimately, what a particular symbol means depends as much on what the patron, who ordered the gravestone, or the stonecutter wanted to convey. Whether or not the symbols can be accurately interpreted, it is still possible to enjoy the inherent beauty found in a cemetery.

The following is a sampling of motifs typically found in Oregon's historic cemeteries. Not surprisingly, the majority are based in Christian iconography, as the majority of the population was Christian.





**Anchor**

Symbol of hope, can also represent the Christian cross. Sometimes represents a trade or field of military service.



**Asphodel** (see also Lily)

Refers to plants in the lily family having white, pink, or yellow flowers. It includes the narcissus and daffodil. It means the deceased is, in fact, dead and it reminds viewers of their own mortality.



**Angel**

Guardian or messenger between God and man. Symbol of resurrection.



**Book**

Typically represents the holy book or the Holy Bible.  
 Open - Represents "the book of life." If a member of the clergy, sometimes the final sermon is written on the open pages.  
 Closed - Represents the end of earthly life, a completed life.  
 Stack of Books - Scholarly, educated.



**Buds**

Renewal of life. With broken branch often used for children as life cut short.



**Candle**  
Life

**Chain with Missing Link**

Removed by death. Indicates the family circle has been broken.



**Column, Broken**

The end of life or life cut short.



**Cross**

Emblem of faith for Christians. Means resurrection for some. There are many different types of crosses with many different meanings.



**Crown**

“Crown of righteousness,” may be a reward of the faithful Christian. Also signifies victory, or victory over death. With a cross it means the sovereignty of the Lord. Cross and crown together also indicates a member of the York Rite Masons and symbolizes authority.

**Door or Doors**  
Heavenly entrance.



**Dove**

The soul, purity, peace. In Christian symbolism it typically represents the Holy Ghost. With an olive branch it refers to the dove Noah sent out to find land.





### Drape

The closing off of life, sometimes early.  
 May also refer to the veil between heaven and earth.  
 Sometimes associated with an urn.

### Festoon or Garland

May be a garland of leaves, fruit, flowers, ribbon or fabric draped between two points. Symbolizes victory in death. Originated from Greek and Roman motifs.

### Gate of Heaven

Passageway to heaven; usually gates are open. There are many different variations, usually with many symbolic motifs such as: the sun, hand of God, dove and olive branch, diving dove, and others.



### Hands

Hands are common marker motifs, and can be found in various positions:  
 Clasped - Farewell or bond of marriage  
 Praying - Asking God for eternal life  
 Pointing Up - Pathway to heaven  
 Pointing Down - The hand of God, or represents the presence of God





**Hourglass**

Swiftness of time. Represents the impermanence of life; time has run out.



**IHS**

First three letters of the Greek word for Jesus; also *in hoc signo vinces* (Latin for “in this sign you will conquer”). Sometimes stacked and looking like a dollar sign. Means immortality.



**Ivy**

Immortality



**Lamb**

Innocence. A common symbol on children’s gravemarkers.





**Lily** (see also Asphodel)  
Represents purity. On a gravemarker this purity can reflect the transition of the earthly to the spiritual. May also be a symbol of chastity.



**Lyre**  
A bridge between heaven and earth. My also reflect musical abilities.

**Pine Cone**

Immortality from the evergreen tree.  
Incorruptability from the sap.



**Oak**

A sacred tree for many cultures, it symbolizes strength, honor, virtue. In Christain symbolism it represents enduring faith. Also an important symbol in pre-Christian pagan religions.



**Rose**

A reminder that the soul achieves its most perfect state after physical death. A symbol of the blood of Christ.



**Sphere**

Represents the soul waiting for resurrection.



**Torch**

Eternal life.



**Tree** (see also WOW)  
Represents life. With a broken branch, represents mortality.



**Star of David**

Represents the Jewish faith.

**Urn**

Classical symbol of death, particularly popular in the nineteenth century.

Draped - Death, mourning,

Flame - Soul departing; eternal vigilance, remembrance



**Weeping Willow Tree**

Nature's lament, mourning and remembrance.



**Wheat**

Time, the divine harvest at the end of life or life fulfilled.



**Wreath**

Victory or victory in death.





**Military Markers**

Many grave markers display military related symbols. They reflect the period of service, branch or duty, experience and religion.



**Grand Army of the Republic**

An organization of honorably discharged veterans of the Union Army, Navy, Marine Corps, or Revenue Cutter Service who had served between April 12, 1861 and April 9, 1865.



Symbols of faith accepted by the military for official markers.

[http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/hm\\_hm.asp](http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/hm_hm.asp)



**Other Military Symbols**

Just two of a wide variety of military related symbols found throughout the state.



**Membership Organizations**

Symbols for fraternal or auxiliary organizations appear in historic cemeteries throughout Oregon. The most common are Masons and Eastern Star, International Order of Odd Fellows and Daughters of Rebekah and Woodmen of the World and its many offshoots.



**Freemasons/Masons**

The main symbol for the Masons is the letter G placed within the compass and square. The G may refer to God or geometry. The square and compass represent the transition from the material to the intellectual to the spiritual. Another common Masonic symbol is the All-Seeing eye with rays of light, an ancient symbol for God,



**The Order of the Eastern Star**

This organization is considered the female counterpart to Masons. The five pointed star is the primary symbol for Eastern Star. Each point represents a heroine and a tenet for the organization and may include additional symbols. The letters FATAL are also common and refer to a portion of the Eastern Star oath.



**International Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF)**

The key symbol for the IOOF is the three-link chain. It typically stands alone, but can be seen with other symbols, including the letters FTL for Friendship, Love and Truth.



**Daughters of Rebekah**

The typical symbol for this female auxiliary of the IOOF includes a half moon for “the value of regularity in work,” a dove for peace, a lily for purity, and the intertwined letters D and R.

## Woodmen of the World (WOW) (see also Tree)

WOW is an insurance based organization. It is highly represented in cemeteries because until the 1920s one of the benefits of membership was a tombstone. Symbols for WOW include: the tree stump for equality and commonwealth; *Dum Tacet Clamet* for Gone But Not Forgotten; a dove with an olive branch for peace; and an ax, beetle and wedge for workmanship. Several organizations broke off from WOW including: Women for Woodcraft, Neighbors of Woodcraft, Modern Woodmen of America, Woodmen Circle and others.



## References:

Keister, Douglas. *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*. Gibbs Smith, Publisher, 2004.

## Websites:

### Angels in Cemetery Symbolism

<https://cemeterysymbolism.wordpress.com/2012/12/10/angels/>

### Cemetery and Grave Symbolism

A list of websites about symbolism.

<http://www.the-symbols.net/cemetery/>

### Cemetery and Cemetery Symbols

<http://cemeteries.wordpress.com/2006/08/page/2/>

### City of the Silent – Glossary of Symbols

[www.alsirat.com/symbols/symbols1.html](http://www.alsirat.com/symbols/symbols1.html)

### Cemetery Symbols

Found in Forest Lawn Cemetery, Buffalo, NY

<http://buffaloah.com/a/forestL/symbols/index.html>

### From Beyond the Grave: Cemetery Symbols

[www.prairieghosts.com/grave\\_symbols.html](http://www.prairieghosts.com/grave_symbols.html)

### Glossary of Symbols and Terms for Studying Cemeteries

[www.history.org/history/teaching/glossary2.cfm](http://www.history.org/history/teaching/glossary2.cfm)

### Gravestone Symbolism

[www.graveaddiction.com/symbol.html](http://www.graveaddiction.com/symbol.html)

### Saving Graves

[www.savinggraves.net](http://www.savinggraves.net)

### The Association for Gravestone Studies

[www.gravestonestudies.org](http://www.gravestonestudies.org)

### Information on Jewish Gravestones

[www.bloodandfrogs.com/2011/04/jewish-gravestone-symbols.html](http://www.bloodandfrogs.com/2011/04/jewish-gravestone-symbols.html)

