Heritage Bulletin

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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 mortalilty.

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.

Star of David
Represents the Jewish faith.

Torch
Eternal life.

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

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 fullfilled.

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

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 tenent 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.

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