

TEXAS GRAVEYARDS - A CULTURAL LEGACY

Cemeteries are among the most valuable of historical resources. The names on the tombstones serve as a directory of early residents, and they reflect the ethnic diversity or uniqueness of an area. Tombstone designs and cemetery decorations represent a variety of cultural influences that helped shape the history of Texas. Cemeteries also can reveal information about historical events, religious, lifestyles, epidemics, and genealogy.

Cemeteries are established for the benefit of the living, and they perpetuate the memory of those who have lived before us and who have bequeathed to us all the things that give a place character and definition. People come to commune with the dead, to associate with friends and neighbors, to manicure and beautify the grounds, to record biographical data concerning their ancestors, to make rubbings of fine old tombstones, to vandalize and destroy and even to study traditional material culture. Life, death, and afterlife merge in the folk culture of the burial ground.

The following is a list of traits of a Southern Folk Cemetery developed by Terry G. Jordan, professor of cultural geography at North Texas State University. The traits listed here in detail are those found in the Old Settler's Cemetery, Fearland.

SCRAPING

Southern folk typically refer in conversation to their cemeteries as grave "yards". Grass was an unwelcomed intruder. Respectable people kept it chopped out of yards, fields, and burial grounds. Some rural Anglos in Texas even refer to scraping as "plowing". Removal of grass reduced the danger posed by grassfires and the proverbial snake in the grass. Removal of grass also kept loose livestock from grazing in yards and cemeteries. Rarely does one encounter scraping outside the Gulf and South Atlantic coastal plains. In Texas, scraping and swept-earth yards are found among southern Anglos, blacks, and the Alabama-Coushatta Indians. The custom is rapidly dying out, and relatively few cemeteries are completely scraped today. Dora Long (Mrs. Ernest Long) can remember some bare-earth sections or plots at the Old Settler's Cemetery. Latter-day substitutes for scraping abound, including cement paving, graveling, and bricking of the plot. Ex. 1-5, 4-6

CRYPTS

Stone crypts appear to have been popular in the United States during the late 19th century. They are especially distinctive in Southern Louisiana.

The distinctive use of above-surface vaults has been ascribed to sanitary precautions and to a humanistic reaction to a high water table. Ex. Hatfield 11-5, McCormack 1-9

MOUNDS AND FALSE CRYPTS

Traditionally, the scraped earth was heaped up in elongated mounds at each grave. Mounding of graves was known to pre-Columbian Africans, Europeans, and Indians alike. A more likely origin of the southern mounding custom is Britain.

Less commonly, the traditional mound is replaced by a low false crypt of brick, stone, or concrete. Though these structures somewhat resemble the above-ground burials of the Louisiana French, they actually cover normal in-ground interments and are, in effect, permanent mounds. They occur through much of the South from the colonial period. Many false crypt style covers are remembered to have been in the Old Settler's Cemetery by Dave Ferri. Ex. 11-1

GRAVE DECORATION

Of the diverse objects on southern grave mounds, none is more intriguing than the shell. Shell decoration seems to be confined largely to the Coastal Plain south. Some believe the shell decoration custom likely originated in Europe. The Virgin Mary has many symbols and one is the shell. To place a shell on a grave suggests "Let them be reborn". It is a feminine symbol of eternal life. Shells are found in ancient Greek and Roman Cemeteries as well as stamped or sculpted on the exterior tombs. English and Welsh immigrants perhaps introduced the practice to the southern Atlantic seaboard of the United States in Colonial times. However, the British who colonized New England and the Middle Colonies do not seem to have been bearers of the shell custom. Clyde H. Fendley Sr. remembers that Lola Beatrice Fendley 2-4 had a seashell vase headstone.

GRAVEYARD WORKING DAY

Community people set aside a day for graveyard working. They gathered to work the graves by hoeing and raking, and cleaning the cemetery. The work belonged to the men, women, and children alike. In Pearland, as many of the original families moved away and the difficult accessibility to the Old Settler's Cemetery, working days became infrequent. Dora Long remembers having to carry her hoe along the railroad track and then crawling through the barbed wire fence to reach the family plot. Today our cemetery is cared for by city workers.

TRADITIONAL PLANTS

The lily is a symbol of the Madonna. It is a common southern cemetery plant. The lily is also a resurrection symbol; an ugly brown bulb seemingly without life becomes a plant rising above the soil - new life.
Ex. 4-5

ORIENTATION AND SPATIAL ARRANGEMENT (1)

Nearly all southern folk cemeteries have graves aligned on an east-west axis, and burials are made with feet to the east. A Christian symbolism is attached to this practice by most rural folk. The east, they say, is the direction of Jerusalem, of the second coming, and archangel Gabriel's horn will sound from that quarter. In order to be facing Christ when they rise from their graves on Judgment Day, the dead must lie with their feet to the east.

Some rural Texans believe that the feet-to-east burial allows the dead to face the rising sun.

The origin of the traditional southern burial orientation is found in Europe especially in Great Britain.

Husband and wife also have traditional positions in the southern folk cemetery. The man is supposed to be buried to the right, or south, of the woman, in the Anglo British tradition. Texas folk cemetery offers exceptions to the rule, but generally most couples are interred in this arrangement. Other Texas ethnic groups - German, Czechs, Poles, and Mexicans, do not employ this custom. Husband-to-the-right burial apparently derives from a British Christian folk-belief that Eve was created from the left side of Adam. Woman's left-sided burial in the South duplicates her position at the taking of wedding vows.

Ex 11-1, 2-2 Paul and Lena Livesay, Alice and F.H. Livesay; 6-1, 6-3 Charles and Luella Davidson; 1-10 Harry and Annie Glazier

ORIENTATION (2)

A universal trait of the southern folk cemetery in Texas is the subdivision into family plots. The majority of traditional southern cemeteries began as private family graveyards. But even the multifamily cemeteries are clearly segregated by surname and blood kinship. Often fences, curbing, or rows of brick mark the confines of the family plots. Ex. 3-6 and 6-4; 1-4. Europe offers no satisfactory model for this practice. The strength of Anglo family and clan ties in the South, fostered by frontier isolation likely provides the explanation.

LACK OF SANCTITY

Southern cemeteries, in keeping with British dissenter Protestant tradition, do not occupy sanctified ground. John Wesley, for example, opposed the consecration of burial grounds as "a mere relic of Romish superstition". No preferential distinction is made between graveyards situated adjacent to chapels and those that are not.

Surviving as a relic of burial sanctity is the practice, almost universal, of setting southern cemeteries on high ground or slopes. The veneration of high places is far older than Christianity.

Burial in un sanctified ground is a clear departure from western European custom. Few churches existed in the early years of settlement, but even the devout could not transport their dead from isolated homesteads over poor roads in the heat of summer. The un sanctified private family cemetery was a practical frontier necessity.

The Old Settler's Cemetery is not located next to a church. It predates the settlement by earlier recorded burials.

Ex. 1892 Mary Thornton (recorded by Julia Hunter and Emma Wells); 1-1 dated 1894

Our cemetery site was chosen because it was the highest ground on that side of the RR tracks. The raised tracks diverted the drainage on one side and the cemetery sloped to the creek. Lester Liversay relates this description.

FENCES

The large majority of southern folk cemeteries are enclosed by a fence, in contrast to midwestern New England or even Kentucky graveyards, which are usually unfenced. Even individual graves or family plots within the typical southern cemetery in Texas are sometimes fenced. Ex. 3-3 had a wrought iron plot fence.

This compulsion to enclose the burial ground apparently derives from British tradition, for enclosing walls are ancient in Britain possible dating to early Celtic Christianity. The church lent its support to the custom in 1229, when an English bishop required all cemeteries to be walled and forbade the grazing of livestock in the church yard. It has been observed this same revulsion toward animals in the cemetery among rural Anglo-Texans. Ex. Lester Liversay and Cliff Kliesing description of Old Settler's Cemetery was barb wire along the track and smooth looped church wire on the other three sides to keep the open range cattle out.

TRADITIONAL SOUTHERN GRAVE MARKERS

Traditional grave markers in the American South are humble home-made wooden boards or crudely shaped slabs of native stone. They may have scrawled a few cryptic symbols or some may be beautifully crafted stones. These, in time, were largely succeeded by a variety of commercially made tombstones. Regardless of the level of craftsmanship or the long-obsolete symbolism, the southern folk grave marker remains simple, unpretentious, and largely unadorned. John Calvin dictated long ago that it be so.

Some gravestones were made to set into socketed plinths which held them securely upright in the ground. Ex. 2-4, 5-3

WOODEN GRAVE MARKERS

Some of the oldest folk markers in Texas and the American South are wooden. Relatively few wooden grave markers survive in rural and small-town Texas. Rot, insects, and fire removed the markers. Mary Boyce Kliesing remembers seeing wooden crosses in the Old Settler's Cemetery which are a long-standing tradition across the South.

STONE MARKERS

Another early, traditional southern grave marker is the fieldstone. Completely unworked and often bearing no inscription, these rude stones offer greater permanence and durability than do wooden markers. If the bereaved family is literate, the fieldstone will bear a terse inscription, crudely but lovingly scratched in the soft native rock. Often this amounts to nothing more than the initials of the deceased.

One step above the fieldstone is the slab of native rock hewn by hand into any one of several artificial shapes, particularly squaretopped blocks, rounded tablets and Gothic points. The professional or semi-professional stone carver was uncommon in the South; emotion, poverty, and tradition directed that the markers should, instead, be made and erected by the bereaved.

(The ancients, awed by the seeming permanence of rocks and stones, understandably associated them with immortality) Ex. 1-1 and 3-2

CEMENT MARKERS

Many folk markers erected in the twentieth century consist of unadorned slabs of molded cement. Poured into a mold of the desired shape, the cement is allowed to begin hardening before an inscription is written with stylus or stick. Ex. 1-5

The advent of commercial, precut markers of exotic stone signaled the gradual decline of folk types.

Homemade cement markers represent the last significant survival of the southern folk tombstone tradition in Texas today.

TOMBSTONE DECORATIONS (1)

A variety of decorations, both abstract and symbolic, appear on southern grave stones though markers in the pure folk tradition are less likely to display such ornamentations. Ex.3-2; 4-1; 4-4. Some forms of symbolic decoration are clearly taboo in the Protestant South, in particular the Christian cross, which most of the common folk regard as "popish", an attitude derived from the Old World British Protestants. Often, close inspection of wooden crosses in traditional southern graveyards reveals that they mark the burial places of a small local Hispanic minority.

The most common tombstone decorations in the southern folk tradition are geometric designs and simple scribed lines. A crosshatching often covers the edges of burial stones, and borders are sometimes adorned with zig-zag or ruled lines, or perhaps a stylistic wreath.

Ex. 2-2; 2-6; 4-5.

Marble smooth pillar resting on square base design lends dignity. The Romans favored columns designed to serve as memorials to special persons.

Ex: 2-6 George A. Perkins

TOMBSTONE DECORATIONS (2)

Whatever the decade or the location, the stone carvers sought visible symbols that would represent both the inevitability of death and the hope of heaven to follow.

It is becoming a popular pastime to photograph the old slates, to make rubbings of their remarkable carvings and to copy the quaint epitaphs. Such a visit means far more to the person who knows a bit about history and symbolism than it does to the casual visitor. Taken together, the stones can tell a complete story about how the people conceived of death and how our ancestors lived as well. Because our ancestors often could not read the carved words they had to rely entirely on images for the message.

Far from being depressing, an hour or more spent in an old graveyard (only more recent burial grounds are called cemeteries) can be satisfying in many ways. For some its values will be historical, for others artistic. But whatever the reasons, what other kind of museum offers breezes that blow through towering old trees over grassy paths that lead back across the centuries? And the admission is free!

"The Last Word" by Melvin G. Williams

TOMBSTONE DECORATIONS (3)

Death: Winged cherubs Ex. 1-5. The puritan emphasis on sin and death first symbolized by the death's head (a hollow-eyed skull) evolved into artistically graceful design of winged cherubs:

"I am the resurrection and the life."

Poet William Cowper mocks in one of his sermon satires,

"What, always dreaming over hea'nly things
Like angel heads in stone with pigeon wings?"

He too describes the designs chiseled on many gravestones.

Life: Life is most often portrayed in the form of wings that will carry the soul to heaven. Usually wings are attached to a figure's shoulders. Ex. 1-5. And on a very few stones the wing motif is developed imaginatively in the form of birds. Ex. 2-4.

Heaven: Images of Heaven are revealed with symbols such as stars on gravestones. Ex. 5-2. Stars also symbolize the promised coming of Christ, God, the Holy Spirit, and the disciples.

Resurrection: Tree of Life (pattern of continuous lines over smooth background) is a prominent image of resurrection. Flower and vine patterns are also common, especially in side borders, but these are more than just an extension of the growing tree. They portray Jesus' New Testament metaphor that He is the vine. Ex. Flower from mouth of burial urn, 1-10; Ex. Flowers 1-4, 2-4, Ex. "Tree of life" design of zig-zag lines across three sides of the monument, a traditional British design. Ex. 2-2 Alice Livesay. Popularity of design appear on early glass patterns.

The open-book, or Bible, symbol is a popular tradition on Texas folk grave markers. It is also British in origin. Ex. 2-9

SIMPLE INSCRIPTIONS (1)

Southerners are not, and never have been great epitaph writers. Bereaved southerners have never been under moral or social obligation to place writing on the grave marker and it is probably fair to say that the majority of antebellum southern grave markers bore no inscriptions whatever.

The most primitive inscriptions found in southern cemeteries of Texas are simply the name, initials, or other minimal identification of the deceased. Ex. 3-2

A bit more informative and perhaps most typical among southern folk inscriptions, are stones bearing the initials or name of the deceased together with the dates of birth and/or death. Ex. 2-2; 2-4; 2-6; 4-4; 4-1.

At times the need to reckon the exact age seems obsessive, and it is counted in years, months, and days. Ex. 1-1

Occasionally a brief phrase or line is added to these terse inscriptions. Ex. At Rest; Asleep in Jesus 1-5; Come ye blessed 5-2; In Memeory B-9

1-4

INSCRIPTIONS (2)

While the typical southern inscription is both brief and rather uninformative, a minority is lengthier and provides more data. It is surprising, given the southern's obsession with genealogy, that the birthplaces of those who migrated to Texas are so rarely recorded on grave markers. Perhaps the customary silence concerning origins reflects the American backwoodsman's compulsive mobility, his lack of attachment to place. Ex. 1-1; 9 does give birth place.

A variety of verse eulogizing inscriptions tell something about the personality or character of the dead. Ex. 2-4. Marker 10-1 is an example of a German marker with its German work ethic revealed.

Kinship is important to the southerner. Ex. 2-9; 5-2; 10-1; 9; 15-6.

Rhymed verse epitaphs appear infrequently on folk tombstones in Texas, in spite of their antiquity in Britain and the popularity of ballads in the traditional southern music. Rhymed verse epitaphs increased greatly in frequency with the advent of commercially cut markers. Some rhymed verses permit the bereaved to speak to anyone who might be interested, expressing hope, bitterness, or despair. Ex. 2-9.

INSCRIPTIONS (3)

The heyday of epitaphs in the southern cemeteries of Texas occurred in the half century between about 1880 and 1930. Since then, corresponding to a trend in the American popular culture at large, inscriptions, particularly rhymed verses, have fallen out of fashion.

MEXICAN GRAVES IN TEXAS (1)

Mexican Americans in a minority status in Texas rather than purchase land for their own cemeteries, typically requested and received permission to bury their dead in unsanctified Anglo graveyards. To a quite remarkable degree, Hispano and Anglo share burial grounds.

Spanish-language tombstones are startling and unexpected reminders of the multiple peopling of Texas. But even when the cemeteries are shared, the Mexicans decorate and maintain their graves in distinctive ways. Sanctity may have been discarded; ethnicity has not.

A haphazard spatial arrangement of the dead is typical and emphasis is on the individual grave rather than clan groupings.

The preferred and almost universal shape of Mexican and Old World Spanish grave markers, regardless of material composition, is the Latin Cross. Ex. 15-6

A minority of traditional Mexican American grave markers take some form other than the Latin Cross. An image of Christ or Madonna markers appear on the side facing the burial, lending the grave the appearance of a small shrine. Ex. 9.

MEXICAN GRAVES (2)

The true epitaph has no place in Mexican folk tradition. When inscriptions appear their purpose is to convey the most basic biographical information, to affirm the strong family ties that characterize Mexican society, or to request rest and salvation for the deceased. Ex. 15-6; 9.

The frontier times, most graves had no markers at all in the Spanish settlements. The priest made an entry in the "Book of Burials" kept at each church. The first use of markers coincides with early Anglo penetrations of the Southwest.

BURIAL CUSTOMS

It is not known when coffins first came into use in Texas. They were not used in Spanish times. By the early 19th century, however, hexagonal wooden coffins were in vogue in San Antonio.

Early coffins were made of lumber. Traditionally in most small communities a coffin was made to fit the individual when one was needed. A craftsman by the name of L. B. Carlton made the coffin for Andrew Fletcher (1903 - \$25.00) Making a coffin was not a simple job and required some knowledge of wood working. Earl Peters remembers the rectangle wooden coffins.

Interviews with the senior citizens of the area, Josie Heflin and Earl Peters, reveals burial customs consistent with descriptions of other early burials reported in Texas. When a person died, relatives were notified, one of the neighbors immediately began construction of a coffin and the body was washed and dressed for burial, usually by members of the family. By the time the coffin was ready, family and friends had gathered at the home of the deceased. It was customary for a member of them to sit up all night with the body, as a mark of respect.

Burial was usually the next day, if there was no embalming. Often the preacher did not live in the local town but rode through on a regular circuit. In this case friends and family would bury the deceased, and a memorial service would be held the next time the preacher came. Digging and filling of the grave was done by friends and neighbors. The filling-in of the grave was done with the mourners present.

The coffin was made to the size of the individual, often of wood specially put aside for the purpose. It was lined with white cloth padded with cotton or woodshavings and held down with carpet tacks. Black cloth was sometimes used for adults. For tiny infants, a small rectangular box was lined and padded with cotton.

The use of pine for the coffins was probably not so much a matter of preference as what was available and inexpensive at the time. There may be a deeper significance here, however. In the early Christian Church, pine cones were a symbol of life everlasting, likely because the trees were evergreen. Pine for coffins may be a survival of the tradition. Metal coffins came later with funeral homes.

CONCLUSIONS

It appears that the people of Fearland area brought with them customs evolved over many generations throughout the United States. They clung to their time-honored customs and attitudes toward death and burial altering them little, if at all, during the late 19th century.

With the opening (1936) of a new modern cemetery customs gradually changed and burial in the old cemetery ceased except for an occasional, more conservative family or individual who consciously chose the old

Texas Graveyards- A Cultural Legacy

by Terry G. Jordan

(Guidelines for study of the Old Settler's Cemetery)

The Southern Folk Cemetery in Texas 17

Table 2-1. Origins of Southern Folk Cemetery Traits

	Pagan Mediterranean European	Pagan Northwestern European	Christian British European	Pagan African	Pagan Amerindian	American Frontier Innovations
Scraping of cemetery				x		
Mounding of graves		x		o	o	
Broken crockery on mound	o			x		
Lamps or light bulbs on mound	x					
Shells as decoration	o			x	o	
Rose bushes	x					
Cedar/juniper	o	x				
Flowers	x					
Burial with feet to east	o	o	x	o		
Burial of wrongdoers on north-south axis			x	o		
Wife buried to left of husband			x			
Family plots				o		x
Unsanctified ground			o	o		x
Tabernacle			o			x
Gravehouses				o	x	
Surrounding fence			x	o		
Lichgate			x			

x = likely origin o = similar custom

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