

# Symbols in the Stones

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It's been said that "dead men tell no tales." If the deceased can't share stories, their headstones certainly can. These intricately carved stone mementos can provide clues into that person's life or religious beliefs. Here are some symbols you may find while exploring cemeteries and their meanings.

For more information, see "Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography" by Douglas Keister.



## *Flowers*

**Acanthus** – Represents the triumph of eternal life over a prickly life on earth or overcoming the curse in Genesis 3:17-18 in the Old Testament.

**Buds** – Either broken or whole, these are commonly found on children's graves. Two joined buds could represent the strong bond between two people who passed around the same time, such as a parent and child.

**Calla lily** – Symbolizes beauty, marriage.

**Clover** – A symbol of the Trinity.

**Daffodils** – The flower of the underworld and paradise.

**Daisy** – Commonly found on children's graves.

**Evening primrose** – A flower that opens in the evening and closes in the morning, symbolic of eternal love.

**Ferns** – A symbol of humility and sincerity.

**Lily of the Valley** – One of the first flowers to bloom in spring; a symbol of renewal, resurrection.

**Easter, or Madonna, Lily** – Symbol of purity or chastity.

**Morning glory** – A symbol of the resurrection as it opens in the morning with the sun.

**Rose** – Frequently appears on women's graves during the Victorian period. If in full bloom, it may represent someone who died in their prime.



## *Nature/plants*

**Grapes** – Represent the Eucharist.

**Ivy** – A symbol of immortality as the plant is eternally green. An ivy vine could also represent the relationship between God and humankind.

**Wheat** – A Masonic symbol or denotes someone who was older than 70 when they passed. Because it is a harvested grain that can be planted for another crop, it denotes immortality and resurrection.

**Cypress trees** – Considered to be a tree of life, evergreen. Common in cemeteries.

**Oak leaves/trees/acorns** – A symbol of honor, hospitality, strength, prosperity and fruitfulness.

**Olive branch** – Biblical reference; a dove with an olive branch signifies that the soul has departed to the peace of God.

**Treestones** – A product of the Victorian rustic movement (1880s-1905) or the person was a member of the Woodmen of the World.

**Weeping willow** – A symbol of the Gospel and of immortality. Very popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**Palm tree/branches** – A symbol of the triumph over death.



## *Animals*

**Dove** – The most frequently seen animal in a cemetery. It can symbolize peace, purity, the Holy Spirit and the soul in flight.

**Lambs** – A symbol of Christ, purity, innocence and gentleness. Most common on children’s graves.

**Fish** – A symbol of Christianity.

**Shells** – Represent a journey or pilgrimage, or baptism. The use of shells in connection with death is an old custom that predates Christianity and Egyptian burial practices. Headstones of shells with sleeping children nesting inside were popular from the 1870s to World War I and most commonly used for children younger than 6.



## *Humans*

**Hand, descending** – Symbolic of the hand of God. Sometimes the hand is holding an object such as a chain or flower, or has three fingers pointing down to represent the Trinity.

**Hand, finger pointing up** – The deceased’s soul has risen to the heavens. If two fingers are pointing up, that person may have been a member of the clergy.

**Clasped hands** – A symbol of marriage. Check the sleeves—one could be more feminine in style. The person who passed first may have the extended hand to represent that spouse leading the other into the afterlife. Neutral-appearing sleeves could mean a farewell to earth or a greeting in heaven.



## *Miscellaneous*

**Spheres** – Mostly decorative, but could represent cannonballs if around a veteran’s grave.

**Anchor** – Symbol of hope, a reference to Hebrews 6:19.

**Closed book** – The Bible or a symbol that a life has been completed.

**Open book** – It’s open like the heart with thoughts/feelings open to God.

**Curtain/veil** – A symbol of passing from one life to another.

**Vacant chair** – Death of a child or young person.

**Skull and crossbones, hourglass, death’s head or soul effigy** – Older “memento mori” symbols to remind the living they can’t escape death.

**Broken column** – Symbolic of a life cut short, possibly the head of a family.

**Urns** – Occasionally can be draped, but the most common 19<sup>th</sup> century funerary symbol.

**Angels** – Cherubs are most common on children’s graves. Could also be angels Gabriel or Michael.

**Fraternity organizations** – Masonic square and compass could be on stones. A three-link chain, sometimes with F-L-T (friendship, love, and truth) in the links, is a sign of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.