



THE ASSOCIATION FOR GRAVESTONE STUDIES

SYMBOLISM IN THE CARVINGS ON OLD GRAVESTONES

What is the meaning of the designs carved on old gravestones? This question is often asked by both the interested layman and the serious student of gravestone art. A great deal of casual speculation and considerable scholarly research have been devoted to finding answers.

Speculative interpretations of some of the more obvious designs can safely be made by the insightful observer. The winged hourglass, for example, tells us that time flies; the hourglass on its side, that time has stopped for the deceased; the broken flower or tree, that life has been cut short. Hundreds of other designs invite this kind of easy, simplistic interpretation, and a number of lists have been prepared which suggest to the reader what the symbol probably means. The best of these is included in a handsome book of gravestone photographs by Francis Duval and Ivan Rigby, *Early American Gravestone Art in Photographs*.

Unfortunately, not all designs on gravestones can be interpreted in such a neat, uncomplicated way, and attempts to do so are fraught with the likelihood of error. Professional scholars disagree sharply about the meaning of particular designs; they even debate the extent to which it is possible to determine their meaning and significance. This healthy diversity of opinion stimulates interest and further study.

Because there are few simple answers, you should, if you are interested in the symbolism on old gravestones, approach the subject with an open, inquiring attitude laced with a healthy skepticism. Familiarize yourself with varying scholarly opinions. Read literature about the work of individual carvers and about the life of the period. Of most importance, study the stones themselves. With patience and perseverance you will develop a good background and understanding of this fascinating subject.

The following bibliography will help you get started.

BOOKS

Benes, Peter, *The Masks of Orthodoxy: Folk Gravestone Carving in Plymouth County, Massachusetts, 1689-1805*. The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Massachusetts, 1977. \$20, hardcover.

Duval, Francis Y., and Ivan B. Rigby, *Early American Gravestone Art in Photographs*. Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1979. \$6, softcover. (See the "Alphabetical List of Gravestone Motifs," p. 132.)

Forbes, Harriette Merrifield, *Gravestones of Early New England and the Men Who Made Them 1653-1800*. The Pyne Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1927 reprint, softcover. This book, currently out of print, is available in libraries. (See Chapter 11, "Symbolism," pp. 113-124.)

Here are a few of the many motifs seen on early American gravestones, with some of the commonly held interpretations of their symbolic significance.

ANGEL, FLYING: Rebirth; Trumpeting: Call to The Resurrection; 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, the ministry; the nourishment of the soul.

CANDLE FLAME: Life.

COLUMNS, DOORS: Heavenly entrance.

CROWN: Glory of life after death.

DOVE: Purity, devotion.

FIGS, PINEAPPLES, OTHER FRUITS: Prosperity, eternal life.

FLOWER: Frailty of life. Severed blossom: Mortality.

GARLAND: Victory.

HAND POINTING: Heavenly reward.

HEART: Love, mortality, love of God, abode of the soul.

HOURLASS: Time's inevitable passing.

LAMB: Innocence.

PALL (cloth covering coffin), PICK, SPADE: Mortality.

ROOSTER: Awakening, The Resurrection.

SCYTHE: Death, the divine harvest.

SHELL: The Resurrection and life everlasting. Life's pilgrimage.

SKULL, CROSSBONES, SKELETON: Mortality.

SUN SETTING: Death. Sun shining and sun rising: renewed life.

THISTLE: Of Scottish descent.

TREE: Life. Severed branch: Mortality. Tree sprouting: Life everlasting.

VINE: The sacraments.

WEEPING WILLOW TREE: Nature's lament.

WINGED FACE: Effigy of the soul of the deceased; the soul in flight.

WINGED SKULL: Flight of the soul from mortal man.

WREATH: Victory. Wreath worn by skull: Victory of death over life.

WHEAT SHEAVES: The divine harvest.