



Symbols and Interpretations Investigation

Inscriptions and markings on headstones tell a large story about the societal norms and implications that came along with it. Using a key and vocabulary worksheet from Colonial Williamsburg, you analyze headstones and try to interpret what the symbols mean and what they could have meant to those survived of the deceased and of the people of that time period.

When investigating, ask yourself these questions:

- What was decedent's birthdate?
- How old was the decedent at the time of death?
- Was the decedent a member of a fraternal organization, or some other organization?
- Is there an underlying common theme or pattern with the deceased of certain years?
- How could historical happenings (current events at that time) have influenced the inscription?
- Were there popular literature or cultural occurrences that could have influenced the inscription as well?

Remember to think critically. Remember, people back then lived extremely different lives than we do now (No cell phones or rapid communication), and every aspect of society was different than the 21st century. You can find those characteristics if you look hard enough at the engraved history of the headstones of the people in this cemetery.

Symbols	Possible Interpretation	Terms	Definitions
Angel, flying	Rebirth; Trumpeting—call to the Resurrection; Weeping—grief	AE	An abbreviation for Aetatis, or years of life
Arch	Victory of life over death, or victory in death	B.P.O.E.	Benevolent Protective Order of Elks
Bird	Eternal life. Birds in flight—flight of the soul	Catacomb	An underground network of chambers with recesses in which to place the dead
Candle, flame	Life	Cemetery	A place for burying the dead

Vocabulary worksheet provided by: Colonial Williamsburg

"History.org: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's Official History and Citizenship Website." Glossary of Symbols and Terms for Studying Cemeteries: The Colonial Williamsburg Official History & Citizenship Site. Web. 6 Aug. 2015. <<http://www.history.org/history/teaching/glossary2.cfm>>.



Columns,	Doors Heavenly entrance	Columbarium	A vault with niches for urns containing ashes of the dead
Crown	Glory of life after death	Consort	A husband alive at the time of his wife's death
Dove	Purity, devotion	C.S.A.	Confederate States Army
Figs, Pineapples	Prosperity, eternal life	D.S.P. (Latin)	Died without children
Flower	Frailty of life. Severed blossom–mortality	D.V.P. (Latin)	Died in father's lifetime
Garland	Victory	D.Y.	Died young
Hand pointing	Heavenly reward	Epitaph	An inscription on a tombstone or monument in memory of the person buried
Heart	Love, mortality, love of God	Footstone	A stone marking the foot of a grave
Hourglass	Time's inevitable passing	G.A.R.	Grand Army of the Republic
Lamb	Innocence	Gravestone	A stone that marks a grave
Pall, Pick, Spade	Mortality	Headstone	A memorial stone set at the head of a grave
Rooster	Awakening, the Resurrection	H.S. (Latin)	Here is buried

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Scythe	Death; the divine harvest	I.H.S.	Greek spelling of Christ
Shell	The Resurrection, life everlasting	Inter	To bury or put a dead body into a grave
Skull, skeleton	Mortality	I.O.O.F.	Independent Order of Odd Fellows
Sun setting	Death	Mausoleum	A large stately tomb
Sun shining/rising	Renewed life	O.E.S.	Order of Eastern Star
Thistle	Of Scottish descent	Obit	Died
Tree	Life. Tree sprouting–Life everlasting. Severed Branch–Mortality	Obit Sine Prole	Died without children
Vine	The sacraments	Plat/plot	A small piece of ground
Weeping Willow	Nature's lament	Potter's Field	A place where unknown persons are buried
Winged Face	Effigy of the soul of the deceased	Relict	A widow
Winged Skull	Flight of the soul from mortal man	Sarcophagus	A stone coffin, often ornamental
Wreath	Victory	Sepulcher	A place of burial
Wheat Sheaves	The divine harvest	V.F.W.	Veterans of Foreign Wars

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