

# Cemetery Secrets

by Paddy Bowman

*Gravestones stop time so that we can look back.—Mississippi teacher*

While cemeteries might seem unlikely places to take students on a fieldtrip, they offer rich possibilities for engaging students in primary research and for practicing research skills such as documenting with photographs, making sketches or stone rubbings, taking field notes, and drawing maps. Cemeteries hold important clues about the dead: economic class, social status, religion, ethnicity, and age, among others. The choice of stone, inscription, religious symbols, personal information and imagery, and location in relation to other family members also hold clues about the living and their relationship to the deceased. Students can find primary sources of history and folklore in local cemeteries, from family names that bear witness to settlement patterns to changing styles of gravestones, epitaphs, and symbols over time. They can compare regional and denominational graves, learn gravestone preservation and documentation skills, document local roadside memorials in rural areas or memorial murals in cities, and research burial traditions across historical eras and cultural groups as well as in literature.

During the 19th century in the United States, formal cemeteries began to replace local graveyards, typically found on the grounds of a church or synagogue or on a family farm. Cemeteries took the shape of a heavenly garden, bordered by hedges with orderly rows of plots paid for by families. Today, whether conducting research in a rural area with small family or community graveyards or a city with a large historic cemetery, students have

*Many cemeteries do not allow grave rubbings because of possible damage to headstones, but in Logan, Utah, folklorists and teachers were allowed to do rubbings during a 2001 Fife Folklore Conference fieldtrip. Folklorist Charlie Seeman of the Western Folklife Center chose a contemporary headstone style, which incorporates color etchings evoking the life of the deceased.*



Photo by Bonnie Sunstein

*Formal, garden-like design of cemeteries such as the Logan Cemetery began in the 19th century in the United States.*

much to learn from documenting cemeteries, by looking for clues to local history, social relations, and cultural traditions.

Students will find many facets of cemeteries revealing: cemetery names; physical arrangement of paths, plots, and graves; historical events; plants and trees; gravestone styles, symbols, and images; grave decorations; religious and ethnic group comparisons. Among the more important steps to take when planning cemetery fieldwork are the following:



Photo by Paddy Bowman

- Try to visit the cemetery beforehand to troubleshoot and seek areas of interest such as older gravestones, different religious and ethnic gravestone styles, intriguing sculpture.
- Get permission from the person in charge, the cemetery superintendent, town clerk, historical society.
- Discuss with students the importance of respecting the space in a cemetery as you discuss the clues to history and tradition their research will uncover. Ask them to dress comfortably for the weather and for walking.
- Don't count on doing grave rubbings since many cemeteries no longer allow it. Students can fully document gravestones by writing field notes, making sketches, taking photographs. If students are allowed to do grave rubbings, learn to rub responsibly (see Resources).
- Design or choose cemetery survey forms to print from online sources (see Resources), line up transportation, and gather supplies such as clipboards, notepads, pencils, digital or disposable cameras, tape measures, drinking water.
- Consider organizing a warm-up exercise by giving students 10 minutes to find five clues to cemetery secrets: a religious symbol, a veteran's grave, a child's grave, an epitaph, a Masonic symbol, for example. Or, ask them to find stones from different historical periods to compare.

Different types of surveys may be found in Resources, on next page. When designing one with students, consider the types of data they will need to produce

their projects. The *Louisiana Voices* form includes these and other categories: birth and death dates, names, gender, style and adornment, symbols, religious affiliation, epitaph.

Cemeteries provide interdisciplinary learning opportunities, so teachers as well as students might work in teams. Teams could be in charge of the subjects below or of documenting a certain number of graves or a section of the cemetery. Your curricular needs and students' interests will drive their research.

**Social Studies:** From finding names of local families to graves of war veterans, students will discover clues to local history, geography, settlement patterns, and social, religious, and ethnic groups. They can research cemeteries of other eras and other regions as well as memorials and monuments.

**Language Arts:** Use this opportunity to practice taking double-ledger field notes (see box below) which will deepen students' writing about the cemetery after the fieldtrip. They may collect epitaphs and compose their own back in the classroom.

**Art:** In addition to the aesthetics and design of gravestones and the cemetery, students may find sculpture, grave decorations, and unusual iconography that they can research further after the trip.

**Science:** Students can try to identify types of stone and the effects of weathering and nature on various gravestones as well as gauging cemetery topography and identifying plants and trees.

**Math:** Students can measure and compare the size of graves and compute the average age of those who died in different eras.

**Service Learning:** As students find broken or vandalized stones, ask them to think about how to help with preservation efforts and ways to discourage vandalism. After a fieldtrip, students should thank cemetery officials and organize their field notes, data, maps, sketches, and photos to produce a project such as a multimedia production, database, or report. They could also share their findings with a local historical society or cemetery restoration group and continue research through the resources offered here.

## RESOURCES

### Books

Carmack, Sharon Debartolo. *Your Guide to Cemetery Research*. Beltway Publishers, 2002.

Deetz, James. *In Small Things Forgotten*. Random House, 1996 (rev. ed.).

Vlach, John. *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*. University of Georgia Press, 1990 (rev. ed.).

## Web Sites

**AnthroNotes** [www.nmnh.si.edu/anthro/outreach/outrch1.html](http://www.nmnh.si.edu/anthro/outreach/outrch1.html) Winter 1998 newsletter covers cemeteries and provides a form to help students collect physical data about graves

**Association for Gravestone Studies** [www.gravestonestudies.org](http://www.gravestonestudies.org) includes Gravestone Rubbing Dos and Don'ts.

**Colonial Williamsburg History Comes Alive** [www.history.org/History/teaching/graveyard2.cfm](http://www.history.org/History/teaching/graveyard2.cfm) has student activities and worksheets.

**GraveNet** [http://edutel.musenet.org:8042/gravenet/gravenet\\_index.html](http://edutel.musenet.org:8042/gravenet/gravenet_index.html) provides excellent student activities and gravestone rubbing alternatives.

**History Written in Stone** [www.mtsu.edu/~then/Cemetery](http://www.mtsu.edu/~then/Cemetery) is useful for fieldtrips.

**Louisiana Voices** [www.louisianavoices.org](http://www.louisianavoices.org) Unit IX Part 2 Lesson 3 features student activities for studying cemeteries and a gravestone worksheet, The Stories They Tell.

**Masters of Ceremony** [www.ohs.org/exhibitions/moc](http://www.ohs.org/exhibitions/moc) Master folk artists provide a window into the way several ethnic groups mark the rites of passage: birth, coming of age, marriage, and death.

## Teaching with Field Notes

*Field notes are only one documentation method students use during fieldwork. Notes aid follow-up, analysis, and writing. Utah teachers made double-ledger field notes during the 2001 Fife Folklore Conference fieldtrip to the Logan Cemetery. Here one teacher reflects on facts she wrote, a strategy that helps students deepen their understanding and their writing.*

by Tamera Newman

The Logan Cemetery is a clean, well-groomed cemetery nestled amongst the construction and hubbub of Utah State University's campus. One would not expect to find much peace and solitude there, but it exists. Surprisingly, there isn't an old and a new section to the cemetery. New marble headstones and old limestone monuments proudly stand side by side. Giant trees flank the paved roads, indicating just how old the cemetery is. Standing headstones in all sections of the cemetery prove this isn't a modern cemetery where the convenience of an easily groomed flat headstone is the rule.

### Objective Facts . . . . . My Reflections

There is a monument on the west end of the cemetery for a three-year-old boy. A child is depicted sleeping on a bed one foot high with a stuffed animal. The head of the bed has the child's name, birth, and death dates. Engraved on the foot of the bed is a message from his parents.

The likeness of a child sleeping on a bed in the cemetery haunts me, and I was just a visitor. I can only imagine the heartbreak of the grieving parents. It was my most poignant memory of the cemetery. This monument is most likely a close replica in size to the deceased child.

### Objective Facts . . . . . My Reflections

Many monuments had likenesses of the deceased engraved, imprinted, or framed on them.

These headstones attracted me the most. It was interesting to see a likeness of the deceased. It made it seem like, yes, this really was a person. Though these were the most riveting markers, I don't want my picture on my headstone.

### Objective Facts . . . . . My Reflections

Religious symbols such as temples, scriptures, and crosses were easy to identify. Lambs and infants' toys were common engravings on children's headstones. Tractors, musical notes, and an RV were visual reminders of some of the adults' lives.

I believe the religious symbols can be comforting reminders of the deceased's life but I appreciate less the reminders of earthly passions. Somehow, I just can't relate these things to the heaven I've been taught about. However, I do believe our spirits can be as rebellious as our earthly bodies. Like a lot of old-time epitaphs, perhaps the deceased will have the last laugh. If these engravings bring comfort to the survivors, go for it!