Gravestone Symbols

98 carvings found on old gravestones, and what they meant

All-seeing eye
An all-seeing eye on a gravestone stands for God watching over all; it is also a common emblem of Masons and Odd Fellows.

Alpha and Omega
Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, stand on gravestones for God, the beginning and the end of all things.

American Legion emblem
The American Legion emblem, a star in a wreath on a sunburst, on a grave or grave marker shows the person was a Legion member and a veteran.

Anchor
An anchor on a gravestone usually stands for hope, the soul held fast in God; only sometimes does it mark a sailor or Navy man.

Angel
An angel on a gravestone is God's messenger and guardian of the dead, often pointing upward or carrying the soul to heaven.

AOUW shield
An AOUW shield, lettered A.O.U.W., on a gravestone marks a member of the Ancient Order of United Workmen, an early fraternal insurance society.

Beehive
A beehive on a gravestone stands for faith and hard work; it is also an emblem of the Rebekahs, the women's branch of the Odd Fellows.

Bible
A Bible on a gravestone shows the person's Christian faith and trust in the Word of God; on a minister's stone it may mark his calling.

Bird in flight
A bird in flight on a gravestone stands for the soul flying to heaven; a bird at rest is read as eternal life.

Broken chain
A broken chain or broken link on a gravestone stands for a death that broke the family circle, a life ended and a family parted.

Broken column
A broken column on a gravestone marks a life cut short, often a young person or the head of a family who died early.

Broken rosebud
A rosebud with a broken stem on a gravestone usually marks a child or young person whose life was cut short.

Butterfly
A butterfly on a gravestone stands for the soul and the resurrection; on a child's grave it can also mean a life cut short.

Calla lily
A calla lily on a gravestone is usually read as marriage, resurrection or majestic beauty, and it appears on both men's and women's stones.

Celtic cross
A Celtic cross, a cross with a ring around the crossing, stands for eternal life and often for Irish or Scottish heritage on American graves.

Cherub
A cherub, a chubby child angel, on a Victorian or later gravestone usually marks a child's grave and stands for innocence.

Chi-rho
The chi-rho, an X and P laid over each other, is an ancient monogram for Christ from the first two Greek letters of his name.

Clasped hands
Clasped hands on a gravestone mean farewell or a lasting bond; a man's cuff and a woman's frilled cuff together mark a married couple.

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Closed book
A closed book on a gravestone means a life story that is finished; the book of that life has been shut.

Coffin
A coffin carved on a colonial gravestone is a mortality symbol, a blunt reminder that the body ends in the grave.

Cross
A cross on a gravestone shows Christian faith; a cross standing on three steps (a Calvary cross) stands for faith, hope and charity.

Cross and crown
A cross and crown on a gravestone stands for suffering on earth followed by reward in heaven; it is also an emblem of Knights Templar Masons.

Crossed bones
Crossed bones on an old gravestone, often under a skull, are a plain reminder of mortality, common on colonial stones of the 1600s and 1700s.

Crown
A crown on a gravestone stands for the reward of the righteous, the glory of life after death; on Jewish stones it means honor and piety.

Daisy flower
A daisy flower on a gravestone stands for the innocence of a child; in Christian symbolism it can also mean the Christ Child.

Death's head
A death's head is a carved skull, usually with wings, on early New England gravestones; it reminded the living of death and the soul's flight from the body.

Dogwood
A dogwood blossom on a gravestone stands for hope and the resurrection; Christian legend links its four petals to the cross.

Dove
A dove on a gravestone stands for peace, purity and the Holy Spirit; a dove carrying a broken rosebud marks a child's death.

Draped urn
A draped urn on a gravestone is a 19th century mourning symbol; the cloth over the urn is read as the veil between life and death.

Drapery
Carved drapery on a Victorian gravestone stands for mourning, recalling the black cloth that covered a home's parlor while the body lay there.

Eastern Star emblem
The Eastern Star emblem, a five-pointed star with one point down, on a gravestone marks a member of the Order of the Eastern Star.

Elk's head (Elks)
An elk's head on a gravestone, often with B.P.O.E., marks a member of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks.

Empty chair
An empty chair or cradle on a gravestone stands for a loved one missing from the family, most often a child.

Fern
A fern on a gravestone stands for sincerity and humility; some guides add eternal youth.

Flame
A flame on a gravestone stands for life, and often for eternal life or an undying memory; a lit torch carries the same meaning.

G.A.R. star marker
A G.A.R. star marker is a cast-iron star by a grave, from the Grand Army of the Republic; it marks a Union Civil War veteran and holds a flag.

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Grapes
Grapes on a gravestone stand for Holy Communion and Christ's blood, or for a person of mature years, ripe for God's harvest.

Hand holding a chain
A hand holding a broken chain on a gravestone shows God taking a soul from the family, the hand of heaven breaking the chain of life.

Hand pointing down
A hand pointing down on a gravestone is God's hand reaching for the soul; it does not mean the person went to hell.

Hand pointing up
A hand pointing up on a gravestone means the soul has gone to heaven, and it asks the living to look upward too.

Hands of the Kohanim
Hands of the Kohanim, two hands raised in the priestly blessing, on a gravestone mark a kohen, a descendant of the Temple priests.

Harp
A harp on a gravestone stands for worship and music in heaven; on some stones it signals Irish roots, and on Jewish stones a Levite.

Heart
A heart on a gravestone stands for love, the love of God, or the soul; two joined hearts usually mark a married couple.

Hourglass
An hourglass on a gravestone stands for time running out; on its side, it means time has stopped for the person buried there.

Inverted torch
An inverted torch on a gravestone stands for death, a life put out; if the flame still burns, it can mean the soul living on.

Ivy
Ivy on a gravestone stands for friendship, faithfulness and immortality; it stays green and clings, like lasting love.

Knights of Pythias emblem
An inverted triangle with F, C and B on a gravestone is the Knights of Pythias emblem: Friendship, Charity and Benevolence.

Lamb
A lamb on a gravestone stands for innocence and usually marks a child's grave; it also recalls Christ as the Lamb of God.

Laurel
Laurel on a gravestone, usually as a wreath, stands for distinction, achievement or victory; it is evergreen, so it can also mean eternity.

Levite pitcher
A pitcher on a Jewish gravestone, sometimes with a basin, marks a Levite, whose ancestors washed the priests' hands in the Temple.

Lily
A lily on a gravestone stands for purity and innocence; Victorians used it mostly for girls and young unmarried women.

Lily of the valley
Lily of the valley on a gravestone stands for humility, purity and the return of happiness, often on stones of young women.

Lyre
A lyre on a gravestone is a classical symbol of harmony, wisdom and heavenly peace; on Jewish stones it can mark a Levite.

Memento mori
Memento mori is Latin for remember that you must die, a motto carved on colonial gravestones, often in a banner under a skull.

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Menorah
A menorah, the seven-branched candlestick of the ancient Temple, on a gravestone is a Jewish symbol of God's presence and of faith.

Moon and seven stars (Rebekahs)
A moon and seven stars on a gravestone often mark a Rebekah, a member of the women's branch of the Odd Fellows.

Morning glory
A morning glory on a gravestone stands for the brevity of life, since the flower opens and fades in a day; some read it as resurrection.

Oak leaves and acorns
Oak leaves and acorns on a gravestone stand for strength, endurance and steadfast faith; they were common on men's stones.

Obelisk
An obelisk is a tall, tapering four-sided monument from Egyptian Revival style; in American cemeteries it suggested permanence and pointed toward heaven.

Open book
An open book on a gravestone is usually the Book of Life, where a person's deeds are written; blank pages mean the last acts are recorded.

Open gates
Open gates, or gates ajar, on a gravestone stand for the entrance to heaven: the dead have passed from earth into the afterlife.

Palm frond
A palm frond on a gravestone stands for the soul's victory over death and salvation, recalling the palms of Easter week.

Pick and spade
A pick and spade on an old gravestone are the gravedigger's tools, a mortality symbol meaning everyone will be buried in the end.

Pointed-top headstone
A pointed-top headstone of white marble with no shield is the government stone for a Confederate soldier; Congress first provided them in 1906.

Poppy
A poppy on a gravestone stands for eternal sleep, peace and rest, drawing on the flower's old link with sleep.

Portrait stone
A portrait stone is an 18th century gravestone carved with a human bust; it stands for the dead person but is not a real likeness.

Praying hands
Praying hands on a gravestone show religious devotion; many 20th century versions copy Albrecht Durer's famous drawing.

Rising sun
A rising or shining sun on an old gravestone stands for renewed life, the dawn of the resurrection after the night of death.

Rose
A rose on a gravestone stands for love and beauty of soul; a full bloom often marks an adult, frequently a woman.

S.A.R. marker
An S.A.R. marker, an iron or bronze cross with a Minuteman in the center, marks the grave of a soldier, sailor or patriot of the American Revolution.

Scallop shell
A scallop shell on a gravestone stands for pilgrimage, the journey of life, and the resurrection to life everlasting.

Scythe
A scythe on a gravestone stands for death as the reaper, cutting down life like grain at the last harvest.

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Shabbat candlesticks
Shabbat candlesticks on a Jewish gravestone usually mark a woman, honoring her role in lighting the Sabbath and holiday candles.

Sheaf of wheat
A sheaf of wheat on a gravestone usually marks a person who lived a long, full life, harvested when ripe like grain.

Shield headstone
A marble government headstone with a carved sunken shield is the Civil War type stone, first used in 1873 for Union soldiers.

Shoes
A pair of shoes on a gravestone usually marks the death of a very young child, often under one year old.

Shroud
A carved shroud or pall on a gravestone stands for the separation of the living from the dead and for mourning.

Sickle
A sickle on a gravestone, often with wheat, marks a person who lived to a ripe old age and was harvested by God.

Skeleton
A skeleton on a colonial gravestone is death personified, often holding a scythe, dart or hourglass to show that death comes for everyone.

Sleeping child
A carved sleeping child on a gravestone shows death as peaceful sleep and marks the grave of a young child.

Snuffed candle
A snuffed or broken candle on a gravestone means a life put out; a lit candle stands for life and the soul.

Soul effigy
A soul effigy is a carved face with wings on an 18th century gravestone; it is usually read as the soul of the dead person flying to heaven.

Square and compasses
A square and compasses on a gravestone, often with a G in the middle, shows the person was a Freemason, a member of a Masonic lodge.

Star
A star on a gravestone usually stands for divine guidance, hope and eternal life; a five-pointed star with its point down marks the Eastern Star.

Star of David
A Star of David, the six-pointed star, on a gravestone marks a Jewish burial; it is the most common symbol on modern Jewish graves.

Thistle
A thistle on a gravestone often signals Scottish ancestry; in Christian symbolism it can also mean earthly sorrow or Christ's crown of thorns.

Three links (Odd Fellows)
Three links of chain on a gravestone, often with the letters F, L and T, mark a member of the Odd Fellows: Friendship, Love and Truth.

Tree stump
A tree stump or trunk on a gravestone stands for a life cut short; many, but not all, mark members of the Woodmen of the World.

Triangle
A triangle on a gravestone usually stands for the Holy Trinity; the three-lobed trefoil and interlaced triquetra carry the same meaning.

Trumpeting angel
A trumpeting angel on a gravestone is the call to the Resurrection, the trumpet that wakes the dead on the last day.

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Urn
An urn on a gravestone is a classical mourning symbol for the dead person's remains or soul; it was decorative, since cremation was rare.

Urn and willow
An urn and willow on a gravestone is a mourning symbol in classical style, the most popular carving on American stones from the late 1700s to the mid-1800s.

War of 1812 marker
A War of 1812 marker on a grave was placed later, often by the U.S. Daughters of 1812, to show the person served in that war.

Weeping angel
A weeping angel on a gravestone stands for deep grief, usually over an untimely death; many copy the 1894 Angel of Grief sculpture.

Weeping willow
A weeping willow on a gravestone stands for grief and mourning; it was a favorite carving on American stones from about 1800 through the Victorian era.

Winged hourglass
A winged hourglass on a gravestone means time flies: life passes swiftly, and the wings can also suggest the soul flying to heaven.

Woodmen of the World tree stump
A tree stump with an axe and the motto Dum Tacet Clamat (though silent, he speaks) marks a member of the Woodmen of the World.

Wreath
A wreath on a gravestone stands for victory over death and for memory; wreaths go back to the leaf crowns of ancient victors.

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