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What's in a Tombstone?

by Dorothy Scott Johnson

When you enter a cemetery what do you see? Tombstones. And what is on those stones? Inscriptions? Anything else? Yes, often there is an epitaph and perhaps a lodge marker such as Eastern Star, DAR, Mason, Oddfellow, Links, etc., but what else? Have you ever wondered if the shape of the tombstone had any significance? Or if the ivy twining around a stone in bas-relief had a special meaning?

Fashions in tombstones change just like fashions in clothes, although not so rapidly. For instance, it is rare to find a box tomb, a rectangular stone box with the inscription on the lid, dated after the Civil War. A box tomb is believed to have discouraged predators from digging up the bodies when the country was still a frontier. As the country became more settled other less cumbersome markers came into favor such as table tombs. The table tomb, a slab mounted on four legs that looks like a table, "went out" about the same time as the box tomb. Many samples of these markers can be seen in Block 1 of Maple Hill.

Many of the most common tombstone shapes and decorations are found in one form or another in Maple Hill Cemetery. Their meanings may surprise you. Much of the following information has been adapted from *Memorial Symbols*, published by the Georgia Marble Company of Tate, Georgia. Our thanks to William L. "Billy" Sparkman of Sparkman Marble and Granite Works for allowing us to study his copy of this helpful booklet, and for providing other information.

Woodmen of the World Memorial Stones

Many of us have marveled at the beauty of the Woodmen of the World tombstones but few of us are aware of the story behind them or of the talent and hard work that went into their making. All are works of art and some are masterpieces.

These stones were made almost entirely by hand with a hammer and sharp chisel. These markers are no longer produced because of the high cost of labor and the lack of artisans capable of hand-shaping the stones. Making tombstones by hand is a lost art; if ever tombstones should be preserved, these should.

Woodmen of the World, an insurance company still in existence today, has changed with the times and no longer provides exquisite hand-wrought memorial markers. At one time it was not only an insurance company but a social organization to which many of our prominent citizens belonged, as can be attested by the number and variety of these stones in Maple Hill.

Woodmen of the World held picnics, meetings and parties. When a member died, the whole group came to the cemetery and participated in a formal ceremony much as the American Legion and Masons do today. In one symbolic part of the ceremony, a caged dove was released and rose to Heaven, representing the spirit of the deceased.

In Huntsville, doves were not easily available and pigeons were used. Mr. LaMont Sparkman of Sparkman Marble and Granite Works started raising pigeons for that very purpose. They were homing pigeons; the pigeon released at any given funeral would be home long before Mr. Sparkman.

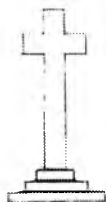
Beauty and Symbolism

“Beautiful memorials speak an everlasting and universal language, alleviating the pain and sadness of death and magnifying the powers of life.”¹

Certain words, chosen for their beauty of sound and meaning, are associated with certain shapes or styles of tombstone. There are many examples of each type in Maple Hill, but only a few are given on the following pages.

¹ Anonymous, *Memorial Symbols* (p.5, n.d.), Georgia Marble Company, Tate, Georgia.

VIRTUE. *Stele or vertical tablet.* The marker of Martha A. Halsey (1824–1867) in Block 5 is a classic example.



FAITH. *Cross.* Classic examples are the stones of Albert E. Matthews (1865–1907) and May Violet Matthews (1906–1907) in Block 21.

HEAVEN. (Eternal Life.) *Obelisk or shaft.* Examples in Block D are the stones of C. S. McCalley and Rev. John H. Bryson (1831–1897).



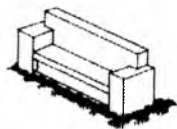
PURITY. *Urn or vase.* A draped urn tops the obelisk of James Bradley (1794–1845) in Block 6. An undraped urn tops the tall shaft marker of Dr. David Moore (1787–1845) in Block 5.

JOY. *Column or architectural type.* The Beasley marker in Block 15 is an example, as is the stone of Mary E. Wright and Margaret C. Moore in Block 4. Their stone is more ornate, topped with urns which in turn are topped with a dove.



MODESTY. *Horizontal tablet.* This type of marker is becoming more popular and is usually found in polished granite. A classic example is the Martison-Barnes plot marker in Block 15.

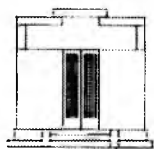
ELOQUENCE *Exedra or seat.* An elegant expanded version of this is the Thompson plot marker in Block 11 on which the name of Kathleen Dement Thompson (1842–1908) is engraved. It beckons one to rest in its serenity.



VALOR. *Grave ledger.* In Block 10 the markers of Henrietta Kuttner Alexander (1868–1943) and Charles Alexander (1868–1933) are classic examples. Two other modern examples are those of Margaret Sparkman (1908–1970) and Ward Fern Sparkman (1902–1971). They are next to David Thomas Caldwell who died in 1834, not yet a year old. These are in Block 2.

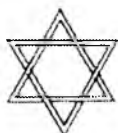


LOVE. *Tables with vases.* The exquisite stone of R. H. Leo (1932–1984) in Block 13 has tastefully carved roses draping over one edge of the stone in bas-relief.



HOPE. *Mausoleum or tomb.* A classic example of this type is the John Robinson mausoleum in Block 26. Two bales of cotton are carved at the peak of the tomb over the door of the Robinson tomb, reflecting Mr. Robinson's activity as a cotton broker.

MOSAID. *Decalogue.* This monument type represents a tablet on which Moses was given the ten commandments. There are countless stones in Maple Hill in this shape. It was quite popular around the turn of the century.



STAR OF DAVID. *Divine protection.* Two beautiful stones topped with the Star of David are on the graves of Jacob Bernstein (1884–1924) and Hilda Bernstein (1916–1934) in Block 10.

LATIN CROSS. This cross is generally and universally accepted as the Christian symbol. Three bases commonly used symbolize Faith, Hope, and Charity. The marker of Jane McDavid (1865–1866) in Block 7 is a good example. This marker has ivy wrapped around the stone in bas-relief.



CELTIC CROSS. This is sometimes referred to as the Cross of Iona since the style originated in Iona, Scotland, and symbolizes not only faith but atonement and regeneration. The nimbus (wheel) usually symbolizes divinity; on most Celtic crosses, divinity is also represented by a sacred monogram. The plot marker of LeRoy Pope Walker in Block 5 is the only true classic example of the Celtic Cross in Maple Hill Cemetery. (See photo page 37.)

CRUSADERS CROSS. This is the cross of the Episcopal Church. It is called the Crusaders Cross because it was the most common form of cross adorning the shields of the English soldiers in the Crusades. In fact, it was their means of identification. Examples of this cross mark the graves of Reuben Chapman (1858–1891. Son of Gov. Chapman) and his wife Rosalie Sheffey Chapman (1860–1917).



Sacred Monograms



CHI (X) RHO (P). The most ancient of the symbols is the abbreviation of the Greek word, *Xpictoc*, meaning Christ.

IHC. Not as ancient as the Chi Rho, but more commonly used, this is the abbreviation for the Greek work *Ihcoyo*, meaning Jesus.



IHS. Originally IHC, this monogram became IHS in the 15th century when an eccentric monk wandered about carrying a banner on which he had painted the words *Iesus hominum salvator*, which means “Jesus, Saviour of Mankind.” This so completely captured the imagination of the people that they accepted the symbols IHS, if not the translation. The small cross bar in the stem of the H denotes an abbreviation but is not commonly used. A beautiful example of the IHS monogram is on the Bradley cross plot marker in Block 15.



Symbols

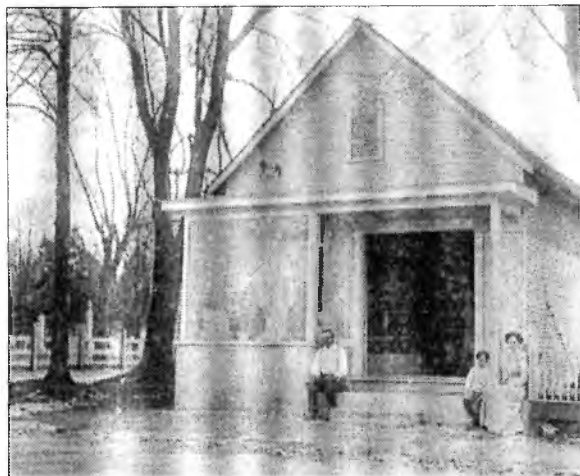
Memorial symbolism is expressed by ornament to a great extent. Flowers, trees, plants, inanimate items etc., are commonly used as memorial ornamentation.

- Anchor—Hope
- Angel—Messenger of God to man
- Banner—Triumph
- Bell—Invitation, exorcism
- Bible—Word of God—Divine Authority; closed Bible means concealed from man; open Bible means perfect knowledge.
- Birds—Human souls
- Calla Lily—Sympathy
- Cedar tree—Prosperity, long life
- Circle—Eternity, completeness
- Column (broken)—Symbol of death
- Crocus—Youthfulness
- Crown—Reward, honor
- Dolphin—Love
- Dove—Spirit of God, purity, peace
- Evergreen—Immortality of the Soul
- Eye—Omniscience of God
- Fleur-de-Lis—Purity, Holy Trinity
- Grape—Religious truths
- Hand—The hand of God
- Hands clasped—Fellowship
- Harp—Joy, music
- Heart—Piety, love

- Ivy—Immortality, light, knowledge
- Lily of the valley—Humility
- Morning Glory—Resurrection, dawn
- Oak—Strength, honor
- Rainbow—Promise of eternity
- Rising Sun—Dawn of new life
- Rose—Love, beauty, perfection
- Scroll—Fear of God, wisdom; scroll with pen means literature, knowledge; scroll with harp means music
- Shamrock—The Holy Trinity
- Sheep—Christians
- Shell—Holy baptism
- Shield—Protection, valor
- Sword—Power, Justice, Authority
- Thistle—Austerity, independence
- Torch—Zeal
- Urn, draped—Sorrow
- Violet—Modesty
- Wheat—The Bread of Life

*Celtic cross marker, LeRoy Pope Walker, Block 5, Maple Hill Cemetery.
Courtesy Ann Montes.*





R.L. Sparkman, his wife Lillie and their son LaMont before their home and shop, corner of California and Wells Avenue. Courtesy William L. "Billy" Sparkman.

In the window is the beautiful hand-carved maiden that was later purchased and placed above the grave of Louisa Richie (January 10, 1851-January 16, 1914), Block B. R.L. Sparkman was the son of J. Reed Sparkman, founder of Sparkman Marble and Granite Works, now operated by the fourth and fifth generations, William L. "Billy" Sparkman, and his son William L. "Monte" Sparkman, jr. Note the three-rail fence around Maple Hill Cemetery in the background. This fence replaced a six-rail wooden fence and was replaced by the present stone fence.

Maiden monument above grave of Louisa Richie, Block B, Maple Hill Cemetery. Courtesy Ann Montes.

