

ALPHA and OMEGA

Alpha (A), the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and Omega (Ω), the last letter, are often found combined into a single symbol representing Christ.

Revelation 22:13 in the King James version of the Bible says "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last." For this reason, the juxtaposed symbols often represent God's eternity, or the "beginning" and the "end." The two symbols are sometimes found used with the Chi Rho (PX) symbol. Individually, Alpha and Omega are also symbols of eternity that pre-exist Christianity.

AMERICAN FLAG

The American flag, a symbol of courage and pride, is generally found marking the grave of a military veteran in American cemeteries.

Anchor

The anchor was regarded in ancient times as a symbol of safety and was adopted by Christians as a symbol of hope and steadfastness.

The anchor also represents the anchoring influence of Christ. Some say it was used as a sort of disguised cross. The anchor also serves as a symbol for seamanship and may mark the grave of a seaman, or be used as a tribute to St. Nicholas, patron saint of seamen. An anchor with a broken chain symbolizes the cessation of life.

Angel

Angels found in the cemetery are a symbol of spirituality. They guard the tomb and are thought to be messengers between God and man.

The angel, or "messenger of God," may appear in many different poses, each with its own individual meaning. An angel with open wings is thought to represent the flight of the soul to heaven. Angels may also be shown carrying the deceased in their arms, as if taking or escorting them to heaven. A weeping angel symbolizes grief, especially mourning an untimely death. An angel blowing a trumpet may depict the day of judgment. Two specific angels can often be identified by the instruments they carry - Michael by his sword and Gabriel with her horn.

Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks

This symbol, generally represented by an elk head and the letters BPOE, represents membership in the Benevolent Protective Order of the Elks.

The Elks are one of the largest and most active fraternal organizations in the United States, with over one million members. Their emblem often incorporates a clock tolling the eleventh hour, directly behind the representation of the elk head to represent the "Eleven O'Clock Toast" ceremony conducted at every BPOE meeting and social function.

Book

A book found on a cemetery tombstone can represent many different things, including the book of life, often represented as the Bible.

A book on a gravestone may also depict learning, a scholar, a prayer, memory, or someone who worked as a writer, book seller, or publisher. Books and scrolls can also represent the Evangelists.

Calla Lily

A symbol reminiscent of the Victorian era, the calla lily represents majestic beauty and is often used to represent marriage or resurrection.

Celtic Cross or Irish Cross

The Celtic or Irish cross, taking the form of a cross within a circle, generally represents eternity.

Column, Broken

A broken column indicates a life cut short, a memorial to the death of someone who died young or in the prime of life, before reaching old age.

Some columns you encounter in the cemetery may be broken due to damage or vandalism, but many columns are intentionally carved in the broken form.

Daughters of Rebekah

The entwined letters D and R, the crescent moon, the dove and the three-link chain are all common symbols of the Daughters of Rebekah.

The Daughters of Rebekah is the female auxiliary or ladies branch of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. The Rebekah Branch was established in America in 1851 after much controversy regarding the inclusion of women as Odd Fellow members in the Order. The branch was named after the Rebekah from the bible whose unselfishness at the well represents the virtues of the society.

Other symbols commonly associated with the Daughters of Rebekah include: the beehive, the moon (sometimes embellished with seven stars), the dove and the white lily. Collectively, these symbols represent the feminine virtues of industriousness at home, order and the laws of nature, and innocence, gentleness, and purity.

Dove

Seen in both Christian and Jewish cemeteries, the dove is a symbol of resurrection, innocence and peace.

An ascending dove, as pictured here, represents the transport of the departed's soul to heaven. A dove descending represents a descent from heaven, assurance of a safe passage. A dove lying dead symbolizes a life cut prematurely short. If the dove is holding an olive branch, it symbolizes that the soul has reached divine peace in heaven.

Draped Urn

After the cross, the urn is one of the most commonly used cemetery monuments. The design represents a funeral urn, and is thought to symbolize immortality. Cremation was an early form of preparing the dead for burial. In some periods, especially classical times, it was more common than burial. The shape of the container in which the ashes were placed may have taken the form of a simple box or a marble vase, but no matter what it looked like it was called an "urn," derived from the Latin *uro*, meaning "to burn."

As burial became a more common-practice, the urn continued to be closely associated with death. The urn is commonly believed to testify to the death of the body and the dust into which the dead body will change, while the spirit of the departed eternally rests with God.

The cloth draping the urn symbolically guarded the ashes. The shroud-draped urn is believed by some to mean that the soul has departed the shrouded body for its trip to heaven. Others say that the drape signifies the last partition between life and death.

Eastern Orthodox Cross

The Eastern Orthodox Cross is distinctively different from other Christian crosses, with the addition of two extra cross beams.

The Eastern Orthodox Cross is also referred to as the Russian, Ukraine, Slavic and Byzantine Cross. The top beam of the cross represents the plaque bearing Pontius Pilate's inscription INRI (Jesus the Nazorean, King of the Jews). The slanted beam on the bottom, generally sloping down from left to right, is a bit more subjective in meaning. One popular theory (circa the eleventh century) is that it represents a footrest and the slant symbolizes a balance scale showing the good thief, St. Dismas, having accepted Christ would ascend to heaven, while the bad thief who rejected Jesus would descend to hell.

Hands - Pointing Finger

A hand with index finger pointing upward symbolizes the hope of heaven, while a hand with forefinger pointing down represents God reaching down for the soul.

Seen as an important symbol of life, hands carved into gravestones represent the deceased's relationships with other human beings and with God. Cemetery hands tend to be shown doing one of four things: blessing, clasping, pointing, and praying.

Horseshoe

The horseshoe can symbolize protection from evil, but may also symbolize an individual whose profession or passion involved horses.

Ivy & Vines

Ivy carved into a tombstone is said to represent friendship, fidelity and immortality.

The hardy, evergreen leaf of the ivy denotes immortality and rebirth or regeneration. Just try and dig out the ivy in your garden to see how tough it is!

Knights of Pythias

Heraldic shields and coats of armor on a tombstone are often a sign that it marks the spot of a fallen Knight of Pythias.

The Order of Knights of Pythias is an international fraternal organization which was founded in Washington D.C. on February 19, 1864 by Justus H. Rathbone. It began as a secret society for government clerks. At its peak, the Knights of Pythias had close to one million members.

Symbols of the organization often include the letters F B C - which stand for friendship, benevolence and charity the ideals and principles which the order promotes. You may also see the skull and crossbones within a heraldic shield, a knight's helmet or the letters KP or K of P (Knights of Pythias) or IOKP (Independent Order of Knights of Pythias).

Laurel Wreath

Laurel, especially fashioned in the shape of a wreath, is a common symbol found in the cemetery. It can represent victory, distinction, eternity or immortality.

Lion

The lion is often found guarding a tomb in the cemetery

This massive lion, known as the "Lion of Atlanta," guards the tomb of more than 3,000 unknown Confederate soldiers in Atlanta's historic Oakland Cemetery. The dying lion rests on the flag they followed and "guards their dust."

The lion serves as a guardian in the cemetery, protecting a tomb from unwanted visitors and evil spirits. It symbolizes the courage and bravery of the departed.

Lions in the cemetery can usually be found sitting on top of vaults and tombs, watching over the final resting-place of the departed. They also represent the courage, power and strength of the deceased individual.

Oak Leaves & Acorns

Oak trees, oak leaves and acorns are commonly seen cemetery icons

Oak leaves and acorns are often used to represent the strength of the mighty oak, as in this beautiful tombstone example.

The mighty oak tree, often represented as oak leaves and acorns, signifies strength, honor, longevity and steadfastness.

Olive Branch

The olive branch, often depicted in the mouth of a dove, symbolizes peace - that the soul has departed in the peace of God.

The association of the olive branch with wisdom and peace originates in Greek mythology where the goddess Athena gave an olive tree to the city that was to become Athens. Greek ambassadors carried on the tradition, offering an olive branch of peace to indicate their good intentions. An olive leaf also makes an appearance in the story of Noah.

The olive tree is also known to represent longevity, fertility, maturity, fruitfulness and prosperity.

Sleeping Child

The sleeping child is one of the most common decorations on Victorian-era children's graves

Beautiful Magnolia Cemetery, in Charleston, SC, is filled with Victorian statues and carvings. This small sleeping child is just one of many such examples.

A sleeping child was often used to signify death during the Victorian era. As expected, it generally decorates the grave of a baby or young child.

Figures of sleeping babies or children often appear with very few clothes, symbolizing that young innocent children had nothing to cover up or hide.

Sphinx

The Sphinx, featuring the head and torso of a human grafted to the body of a lion, guards the tomb.

This popular neo-Egyptian design is sometimes found in modern cemeteries. The male Egyptian sphinx is modeled after the Great Sphinx at Giza. The female, often appearing barebreasted, is the Greek Sphinx.

Square & Compass

The compass and square is the most common Masonic symbol found on cemetery headstones

This cemetery marker incorporates several Masonic symbols, including the Masonic compass and square, the three unbroken links of the International Order of Odd Fellows, and the emblem of the Knights Templar.

The most common of the Masonic symbols is the compass and square standing for faith and reason.

The square in the Masonic square and compass is a builder's square, used by carpenters and stonemasons to measure perfect right angles. In Masonry, this is a symbol of the ability to use the teachings of conscience and morality to measure and verify the rightness of one's actions.

The compass is used by builders to draw circles and lay off measurements along a line. It is used by the Masons as a symbol of self-control, the intention to draw a proper boundary around personal desires and to remain within that boundary line.

The letter G usually found in the center of the square and compass is said to represent "geometry" or "God."

Torch, Inverted

Photo of inverted torches on a tombstone in Allegheny Cemetery near Pittsburgh, PA.

The inverted torch is a true cemetery symbol, symbolizing life in the next realm or a life extinguished.

A lit torch represents life, immortality and the everlasting life. Conversely, an inverted torch represents death, or the passing of the soul into the next life. Generally the inverted torch will still bear a flame, but even without the flame it still represents a life extinguished.

Tree Trunk Tombstone

Tree trunk tombstones are an interesting sight in the cemetery

A tombstone in the shape of a tree trunk is symbolic of the brevity of life.

The number of broken branches appearing on the tree trunk may indicate deceased family members buried at that site, as in this interesting example from Allegheny Cemetery in Pittsburgh.

Wheel

In its generic form, as pictured here, the wheel represents the cycle of life, enlightenment and divine power. A wheel might also represent a wheelright.

Specific types of wheel symbols that might be found in the cemetery include the eight-spoked Buddhist wheel of righteousness, and the circular eight-spoked wheel of the Church of World Messianity, with alternating fat and thin spokes.

Or, as with all cemetery symbols, it could just be a pretty decoration.

Woodmen of the World

This symbol signifies membership in the Woodmen of the World fraternal organization.

The Woodmen of the World fraternal organization was formed from the Modern Woodmen of the World in 1890 for the purpose of providing life insurance death benefits to its members.

A stump or log, axe, wedge, maul, and other woodworking motifs are commonly seen on Woodmen of the World symbols. Sometimes you'll also see a dove carrying an olive branch, as in the symbol shown here. The phrase "Dum Tacet Clamat," meaning though silent he speaks is also often found on WOW grave markers.