

There's History in Those Sticks and Stones!

By M. Ruth Little *

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 48: 2 (spring 2009).

Images may differ from those in the original article.

An old cemetery is like a cultural encyclopedia that tells the “his-story” and “her-story” of a community. Genealogists, historians, and others eagerly copy the names and birth and death dates from gravemarkers in order to understand family relationships, or family trees. And each gravemarker itself is a primary source that tells us about a particular person. Sometimes we can combine what we see with research from other sources to learn even more.

One gravestone in a North Carolina cemetery contains this *inscription*—basic information such as name and death date—cut into the stone: “Here lies the remains of Morris Nichols, son of John Nichols Senr. who died Octr. 1st, 1796 in the 19th year of his age. He was a promising youth, and his death was much regretted by all his friends, and more particularly by his patron, Samuel Lowder, who does this in remembrance of him.” You also will read this *epitaph*, a short poem or sentences written as a tribute to the deceased: “Go home my Friends, dry up your tears, For I shall sleep, till CHRIST appears.”

Morris Nichols, d. 1796, Nixon-Foy Graveyard, New Hanover County.

These words tell us that a young man named Morris Nichols, who lived in the late 1700s, is buried here. By studying the design of his gravestone—including the skull with wings carved at the top—we can discover much more about Morris. He is buried in a cemetery near Wilmington, a port town on the coast. The eastern, sandy section of the state has no available stone, so Morris’s gravestone must have been made elsewhere. The style of carving of the skull, which symbolizes his dead body, and the wings, which symbolize his soul (the part of him that did not die) match gravestones from the late 1700s in Boston, Massachusetts. So we know that Morris’s stone probably was produced in Boston. We can guess that he grew up in that area and moved to Wilmington for a job. The “patron” listed on the gravestone may have been his employer. We know based on the epitaph that Morris was a Christian who believed that his soul would go to heaven when he died.

We can use gravemarkers as a primary source to learn about a person’s cultural roots, economic class, religious beliefs, and attachment to other people. And the design, material, and size of a gravemarker often indicate much about a family. Rural people, for example, usually made a gravestone themselves or bought it from a local craftsman. City dwellers often ordered stones through a funeral home or visited the stonecutter at the local marble yard. These gravestones reflect styles copied from books and catalogs that were similar throughout the United States. Some families spent extra money on a larger marker or on decoration that symbolized their love for their lost family member.

Early North Carolina settlers immigrated from a variety of places—especially England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, and Africa—and cultures. If they settled in eastern North Carolina, where there are no natural stone deposits, they created gravemarkers out of available materials—wood and bricks made of clay. If they lived in central or western North Carolina, they created gravestones out of the abundant deposits of stone. The variety of cultures and materials led to many different types of gravemarkers, including flat stones that cover the grave, called *ledgers*; flat stones raised on a foundation, called *box tombs*; rectangular vertical head and foot markers made of wood, stone, or other materials; wood, stone, or brick structures that enclose the entire grave, known as *gravehouses*, *vaults*, or *tombs*; and tall, decorative sculptures known as *obelisks* or *pedestals*. The following five gravemarkers represent a cross-section of Tar Heels—white and black, rich and poor, rural and urban.

Head- and footboard, Coston Cemetery, Onslow County, 1800s.

Families who lived in rural areas often crafted gravemarkers out of everyday materials such as wood. The Coston family in eastern North Carolina marked graves in their cemetery with wooden headboards and footboards. Each headboard has the shape of a human body, with a torso, neck, and round head that is an ancient European form known as a *discoïd*. Wooden gravemarkers were made of long-lasting wood such as cypress, cedar, or longleaf pine. Most have no carved information to indicate exactly who is buried beneath them. When the Coston family died out, their graveyard became abandoned. Today, all we know is the family name, not who lies in each grave.

Headstone of Ann Jenkins, d. 1846, Cross Creek Cemetery, Fayetteville.

Ann Jenkins's marble headstone is signed "Lauder" at the lower right. There are hundreds of beautiful gravestones signed by this craftsman in North Carolina. (Only the very best stonecutters signed their gravestones.) If you can find a signature on a gravestone, it is possible to research its maker by using written records. You can combine what you see in cemeteries with other sources to piece together history. By searching written records like the federal census, land deeds, city directories, newspaper advertisements, and estate records in the North Carolina State Archives, we learn that this stonecutter was George Lauder, born in Edinburgh, Scotland. Lauder—who lived in Raleigh and Fayetteville—owned the largest gravestone factory in North Carolina in the 1800s. He carved a weeping willow tree at the top of Ann Jenkins's stone to symbolize her family's sadness over her death. During the 1800s, the drooping branches of that tree reminded people of sorrow and tears.

Henry Grimes, d. 1844, Beulah Church of Christ, Davidson County.

In central North Carolina's Davidson County, a group of German immigrants known as the Swisegood School of craftsmen made wooden furniture with decorative, carved ornaments. These men also used the local stone to create remarkably intricate headstones. Because the soapstone was soft when first cut from the ground, the craftsmen shaped it with their molding planes and carving knives as if it were wood. Later it aged into hard stone. The ancient symbol at the top of Henry Grimes's gravemarker is a *fylfot cross* (also known as a swastika) that symbolizes eternity. The carvers cut away the stone between the petals of the *fylfot* as if they were carving a piece of wood. These soapstone monuments with cutaway Germanic symbols of everlasting life are found nowhere else in the United States.

Gravestone of Margaret Johnson, d. 1905, Oakdale Cemetery, Hendersonville.

North Carolina author Thomas Wolfe named his best-known novel *Look Homeward, Angel* in honor of his father, William O. Wolfe, one of North Carolina’s best stonecutters in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The elder Wolfe worked mainly in Asheville. He carved the marble base of this gravestone and ordered the three-dimensional statue of the angel—who symbolizes the immortal soul of Margaret Johnson—from a New York City distributor of Italian statues. Wolfe is known largely because of his son but was highly skilled and important in his own right.

Ernest Barkin, d. 1970, Flea Hill Church, Cumberland County.

Concrete—a mixture of portland cement, water, and sand—can be poured into a wooden mold and impressed with letters, numbers, and decorations before it dries into a permanent, hard form. Many craftsmen have created in-expensive and decorative gravemarkers out of concrete. Issiah McEachin, an African American brick-mason who lived near Fayetteville, produced this marker and many others. Before the concrete dried, he pressed children’s playing marbles into the marker’s edges to cause it to sparkle in the sunlight. Such use of ordinary materials in unusual ways is typical of African American craftsmen.

These examples should get you interested in sharpening your gravemarker detective skills. As you explore Tar Heel cemeteries, see how much you can discover about people by looking carefully at their gravemarkers. The marker may be signed by an artist. It might represent the person’s religious beliefs. And it may even tell you a story about love.

*M. Ruth Little is the author of *Sticks and Stones: Three Centuries of North Carolina Gravemarkers* (published by the University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Much of the material in this article came from that book. A former staff member of the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, at the time of this article’s publication Little owned Longleaf Historic Resources, a historic preservation consulting firm in Raleigh.

What about Cemeteries?

Plans and designs of cemeteries created from the 1700s to the 1900s reveal much about Tar Heel people and their community traditions. Some communities arrange graves in family clusters, often enclosed by fences. In other cemeteries, people are buried in straight rows; in Moravian cemeteries in Forsyth County, people are buried in different sections based on their age and gender. Early North Carolina families often buried their dead in small graveyards on their own farms. Other families used church cemeteries. Larger towns and cities opened municipal cemeteries. Raleigh officials created City Cemetery on East Street in 1798, for example. By the 1860s, it was crowded with graves, so Oakwood Cemetery was laid out in what was then the countryside. In the Mountain region, cemeteries often occupy hilltops, which are associated with God and heaven.