



SINCE

1841

WOODLAND

HISTORIC CEMETERY & ARBORETUM



A Brief History of Headstones (Part 1)

To understand the evolution of the modern grave marker, it is necessary to first describe the evolution of the modern cemetery—which is, in the span of human history, a relatively recent development.



Above: Tinkinswood Burial Chamber, near Cardiff, Wales was built around 4000 BCE; 1000 years before Stonehenge.

Some of the earliest burial markers aren't intended to mark the burial place of any particular person, but to identify an entire burial chamber.

During this period, people weren't typically buried in communal cemeteries, but in smaller plots near (or sometimes underneath) their own homes.

A typical burial chamber from this period could be expected to hold several generations of one family.

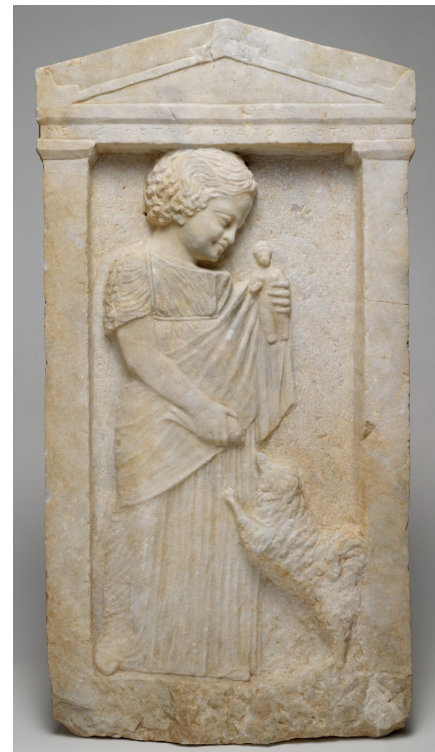
Moving forward in time, we find stelae—which begin to resemble our modern ideas of what a grave marker should be.

Fairly common throughout the ancient world, stelae were most often used for public proclamations & government notices, or used to mark borders & property lines.

Like a modern grave marker, a funerary stele was created to memorialize a specific person, but was not always used to mark the location of that person's grave.

During the mid-17th century, we see a rise in popularity of 'churchyard burials'. This refers to the tradition of burying parishioners of a particular church on land belonging to that church. Churchyards were often practical, unadorned spaces without much emphasis on aesthetics.

During this period, the use of a grave marker to identify the exact location of a specific grave became more widespread. Like the churchyard itself, these grave markers would be similarly simple; usually recording names and dates only.



Above: ca. 340 BCE, Greek funerary stele of Melisto, Daughter of Ktesikrates, aged about 7. Courtesy of the [Harvard Art Museum](#).

Below: Grave marker of Cecelia Smith in section 50, lot 618 at Woodland Cemetery. Though dating to a more recent period, it is similar in style to grave markers found in churchyards.

In the 1800's, as space in urban churchyards began to dwindle, and concerns about the health risks of urban cemeteries rose, the rural cemetery was born.

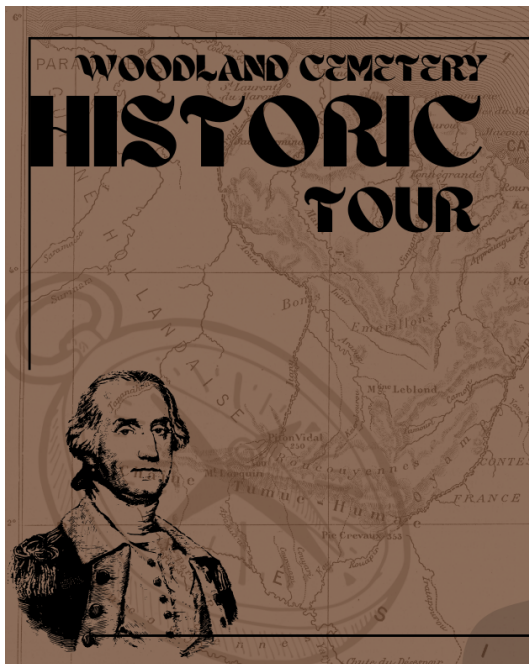
Just like Woodland, these cemeteries were intentionally situated away from the city center. By designing the layout of graves ahead of time, this new system allowed for the selling of family plots before they were needed, and shaped our modern ideas about what a cemetery 'should' look like and how it should function.

Throughout the 19th century, changes in custom, new discoveries and technological advances changed the way people thought about memorializing the dead—leading to a wider variety of much more individualized grave markers.

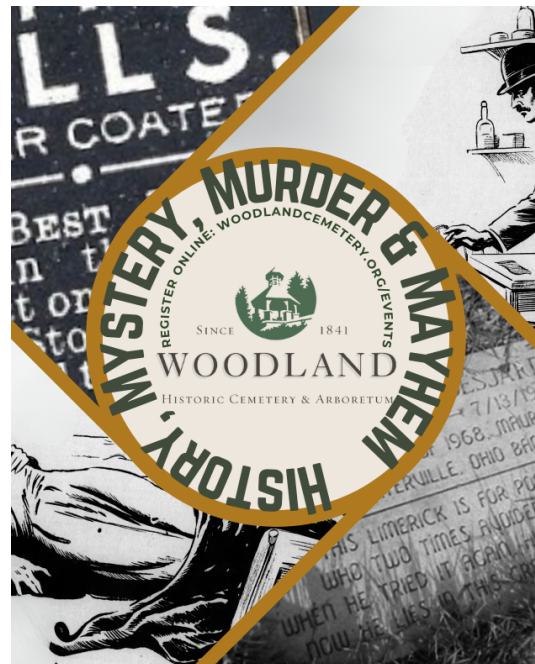


Next week, we'll look at the tools, techniques, and trends that shaped headstones through the ages.

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