



A Brief History of Headstones (Part 2)

Among the earliest European settlers in North America, almost none were professional stone workers. When these settlers died, it was up to their loved ones to mark the grave.

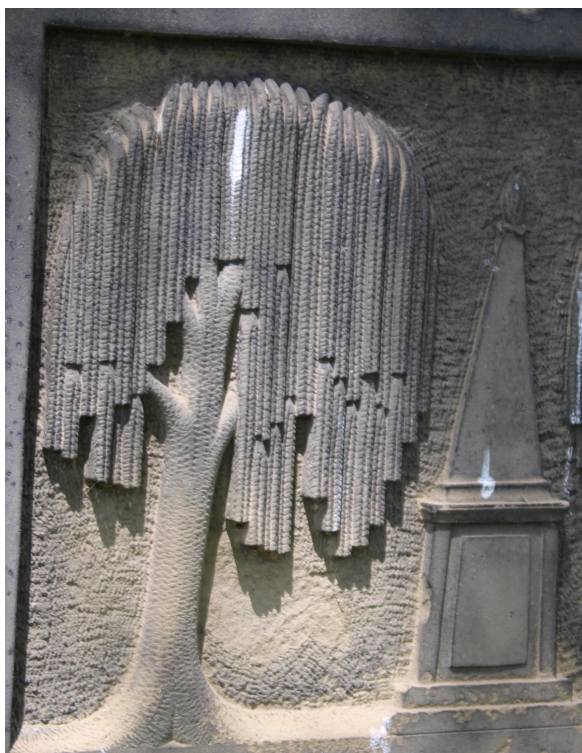
The simple grave markers they made look much like the kind of thing you or I might produce—whether made of wood or fieldstone, a memorial made with more love than expertise.

Skilled stoneworkers began to arrive during the middle 1600s, and with their knowledge of the trade came a noticeable upgrade in the craftsmanship & artistry of grave markers during this period.

At this time and for centuries to come, gravestone carving was not a full-time occupation in most parts of America. These early gravestone carvers would have spent the majority of their time working as masons, carpenters, & farmers—the sort of person you might expect to own or have access to stone working tools like hammers, chisels, and abrasives.



Above: (left to right) a hammer, tooth chisel, point chisel & flat chisel used in stone carving.



Above: Detail of William Perry Dodds' grave marker (section 77, lot 83 at Woodland Cemetery).

Here we see marks left by the carver's chisel in the panel's background and the fine detail work creating textured leaves & bark of the willow tree.

The tools they used would vary depending on the characteristics of the type of stone available for the job. Transporting a material like stone across vast distances is no small feat even today—in general, the further back in time we look, the more local we can expect the source of stone used to be. On average, these grave markers tend to be small, and are made of softer types of stone like sandstone, slate, and limestone.

The most common type of grave marker the early gravestone carvers produced is called a tablet stone; a single piece of cut stone set vertically at one end of a grave. Unlike modern memorials, no foundation was used to help keep the stone in place; instead, about 1/3 of a tablet stone's mass would be sunk into the ground.

To turn a block of stone into a grave marker, a stoneworker would first define the basic shape using a point chisel. Next, they would use a tooth chisel to create clear surfaces and add definition, followed by a flat chisel to hide the tooth chisel marks and add finer detail. Finally, the stone would be smoothed with a rasp (a tool that looks a bit like a really intense nail file) and increasingly finer forms of abrasive materials until the desired finish had been reached.

During this period, it became common to include basic information (like full names, date of death, age & place of birth) on a grave marker.

The employment of experienced stone carvers also brought the inclusion of decorative elements & verses or sayings—epitaphs—to commemorate the dead. A whole library of symbols was developed and came into wider use to denote a person's religious beliefs, social class, occupations & other characteristics of the deceased.

Over the next few centuries, these grave markers became more elaborate and made use of a wider variety of imported or luxury materials like snowy white marble. And who can blame them? Marble is highly prized to this day for a number of reasons. Many of Woodland's most beautiful and captivating sculptural monuments are made of marble.

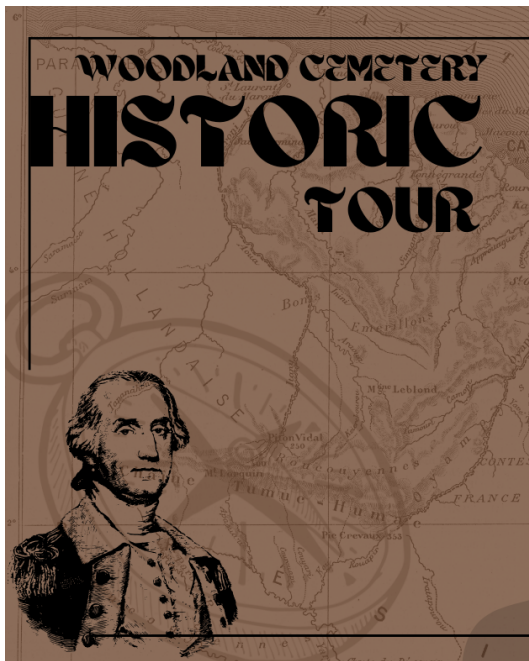


Above: Ann Linley Johnson's grave marker (section 79, lot 421 at Woodland Cemetery). Made of marble, it is a good example of the stone carver's skill.

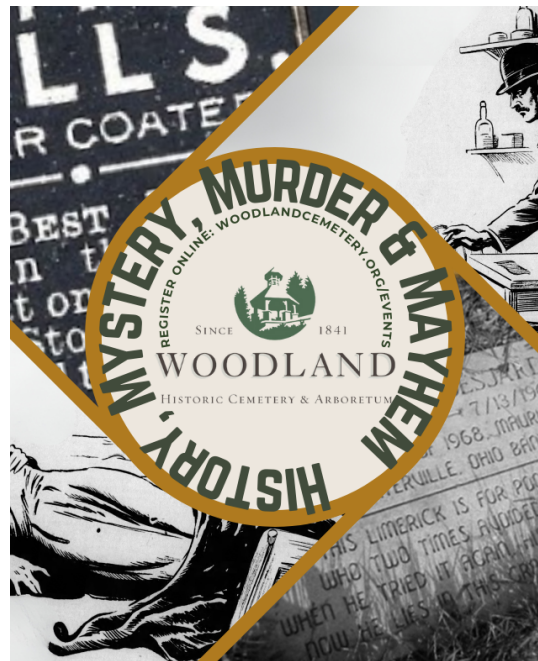
Granite, being much harder than marble, was less commonly used to make grave markers during this period, though both types of stone were being actively quarried by the early 1800s. The rise of granite to the top material of choice for grave markers would take many more years—and the development of a whole new way to cut and shape even the hardest type of stone.

Check back next week as we explore technological advancements in stone carving brought about by the Civil War, and discover the Golden Age of American memorials!

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