

# How Distance Affects Funerary Culture and Values in the 19th Century: A Comparison Study

Fiona Taylor

## Abstract

By using public resources and photography, I have comprised a data set that illustrates the similarities and differences between two comparison cemeteries. My research comes from the local cemetery in Hamilton, Virginia and the Shockoe Hill Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia. The iconography of the two cemeteries have common themes with a few exceptions; however, epitaphs are different, but each one has a similar theme within the respective cemeteries as well. In brief, the stone materials vary between the cemeteries, as well as the typology of headstones versus monuments.

## Background

The distance that a place has to the cultural focal point can have an affect on how people bury their dead. Perhaps the materials are not as readily available to them, or perhaps the local culture became more independent and adjusted to what they have. In 1800s America, 130 miles was immensely far, a three week journey on average, most likely slower due to the poor road conditions. This would be the case from Hamilton, Virginia to Richmond, Virginia. A two and a half hour drive, thanks to cars, would be two weeks perhaps a week and a half if one were lucky enough to have a horse or carriage. Regardless, it just might be enough of a difference for cultural variation. I visited two cemeteries to compare the differences in their iconographies, epitaphs, stone types, and obituaries to see if cultural variation occurred between the two.

## Methodology

For my comparison data:

- Used data from a previous survey in the local Hamilton cemetery in Virginia.
- Reviewed death records in Richmond, Virginia during the 1800s on microfilms.
- Photographed headstones in each cemetery for comparison of stones, information, and how recently they have been restored or replaced.

Limitations I ran into:

- However, the Library of Virginia is missing several decades of records, due to their loss in the fire of 1865, causing limitations in data available. The library only has records for Richmond, Virginia beginning in 1853 and ending in 1896, which is half of the anticipated data set.

Ethical Methodology:

- All research is comprised of information that is accessible to the public.

## Results

### Similarities of Both Cemeteries:

- Iconography
  - Poppy: Eternal Sleep
  - Fully Bloomed Roses: Deceased in the Prime of Life
  - Lambs: Innocence, commonly used for children's headstones
  - Ivy Leaves or Ivy Branches: Friendship and Immortality
  - Masonry Symbols: Occupation - Wedge and Level
  - Crosses: Emblem of Faith
- Materials Used
  - Grey Granite
  - Grey Sandstone
  - Marble
- Common Epitaph Theme
  - *"Blessed are the Dead, Who die in the Lord"*

### Differences: Hamilton Cemetery

- Iconography
  - Praying Hands: Asking for Eternal Life
  - Oak Leaves: Position of Authority
  - Cast Iron Crosses: Confederate Soldiers of America
- Materials Used
  - Local Fieldstone
- Common Epitaph Theme
  - *"Blessed are the Dead"*
  - *"Dearest loved one we have laid, In the peaceful graves embrace, But thy memory will be cherished, 'Till we see thy Heavenly face"*

### Differences: Shockoe Hill Cemetery

- Iconography
  - Anchors: Mariner
  - Broken Columns or Tree Stumps: Decay or the loss of a Family head
  - Star of David: Judaism
  - Torches: Immortality or Resurrection
  - Laurel Wreaths: Heroism, Commonly used on Military headstones
  - Crossed Swords: High ranking Military personnel
- Materials Used
  - Slate
  - Red Granite
  - Black Granite
  - White Granite
- Common Epitaph Theme
  - *"Asleep in Jesus"*
  - *"Faithful Ever in all Relations of Life"*
  - *"He died as He Lived, Without an Enemy"*

## Conclusions

According to Research:

- Found that most epitaphs and the kinds of stones used are different between the two cemeteries.
- Many iconographies had the same or a similar meaning in both cemeteries, due to the popularity or the value of personal beliefs.
- Shows how distance can affect personal and religious values throughout communities in both the rural and urban areas.

Further Steps:

- Obtaining newspaper obituaries can elevate understanding of familial and religious values that were held within Virginia in the 1800s.
- Studying how far the similarities travel, before they change completely.

## References

Reid, Pam. Cemetery Art and Symbolism, March 3, 2004.  
<http://www.angelfire.com/ky2/cemetery/reid.html>.

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