

Genealogy & Gravestones: A Misplaced Ancestor!

Headstones, gravestones, cemeteries: all are very interesting areas of research for your family tree. There is much to discover from searching through a cemetery which contains ancestors over time. Sometimes families had all family members interred at one specific cemetery, and deceased individuals from other towns/states were transported to that cemetery. But at times, you'll find that one individual is buried many miles away from other family members. How interesting - I wonder why? Good question, interesting clue. Here are some tips to help you search on burial information of your ancestors.



Many gravestones and burials are online now and available to search, mainly free: FindAGrave is one excellent example. In addition, there are members of local genealogy societies or of "Graveyard Rabbits" - groups who have taken the time to go through the cemeteries methodically, listing every stone and detail, often including a photo as well.

You can search online at a town website for the names of cemeteries, or search at FindAGrave also. Once you find a likely cemetery, start searching with surname first; then try first names; finally, go through the cemetery listings name by name. It won't take as long as you think it might, and is well worth the search. For instance, you may well find married women with their maiden name listed as well - how helpful!!

Take a look at the year(s) in which your misplaced ancestor died. Was there a war or skirmish on? An epidemic? Did a frontier area open up and everyone moved away except this one? How can you find out this information? Local newspapers, perhaps? A lone interment (burial) can give you great clues to follow.

Multiple interments by one family could give you different clues. For instance you may find that there were more James Terwilliger burials than you knew, in one area. Which one is 'yours'? How can you tell? Look for first wives being buried in the same area as subsequent wives; it would be misleading to think they are children, but an easy error to make. Search for the details of birth and death, and remember that some women died in childbirth in the 1800s, so a death within a few months of a birth may be another clue.



After doing some searching and identifying a very likely grave, you can write to the cemetery office to request more information about your ancestor. Remember that the staff may need proof of your relationship in order to comply with your request. Provide details of why you believe this is in fact your greatgrandfather, and ask if there is a fee for the service. There may be nothing but the dates and names of the ancestors. However, for example, my grandfather's burial gave the cause of his death (massive heart attack), which I hadn't known previously.

Look at newspapers in the area where your lone interred ancestor died: there may be an article or mention of his death, such as an accident, illness, or the like. Also look in the newspaper where his other relatives lived: they may have picked up the information and provided it to the local paper as well. This is particularly true in the later 1880s and into the 1900s. For example, details of the death of one of my greatgrandfather's sons were printed in the Port Townsend WA newspaper as well as the East Berlin News PA, noting that he died in New York City, NY. If I'd only looked in the NY papers I would have missed the rich details reported in the other two papers.



You will need to remember that errors can creep into gravestones carvings, as well as irregular spellings. Be prepared to think creatively as you search for gravestones. Also, find an additional source to confirm the details on a stone, before you conclude this grave is definitely of your ancestor. Newspaper obituaries, articles, city/county histories, church notices and records, and the like, will provide you with more details.

One more tip: check the information on the cemetery, and see if there is a possibility of a volunteer taking a photograph of the headstone in question. You may find that the volunteer is a long-time resident of the area, and is quite knowledgeable about history, perhaps even has more details about your ancestor at the local museum/archives. Unless you ask, you'll never know.



I requested a photo of the headstones of my greatgreatgrandparents in a CT cemetery where they were listed on FindAGrave. I hoped I could find details of birthdates as well as possibly other relatives. In less than a day, I had 3 wonderful photos, plus information on the house in the background, and details of exactly where in the cemetery these several individuals are buried. How exciting!

Use every bit of information you find as more clues to follow up on. Is there a symbol etched onto the gravestone? What does it represent? Find out! Write to the local genealogy society and ask questions. Perhaps someone there has the exact information you are searching about your ancestor - and may actually be a cousin.

Enjoy your searches!

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