



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE CORTLAND RURAL CEMETERY

SPRING 2025

The Symbolism and Evolution of American Headstones... Shapes of Remembrance

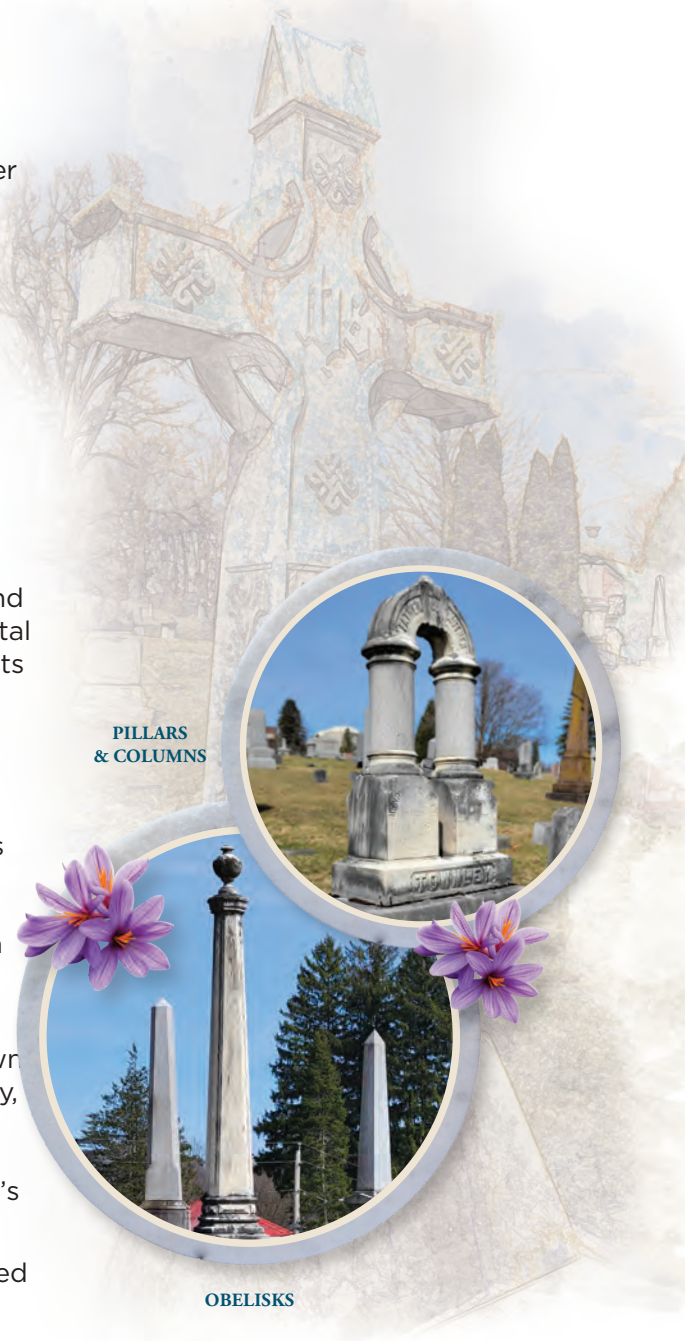
BY JOHN HOESCHELE, CRC TREASURER

Cemeteries are often seen as places of mourning, but they are also silent storytellers of history, culture, and shifting societal values. One of the most striking aspects of any graveyard is the shape of its headstones: Varied in form, each shape carries meaning, whether intentional or inherited from tradition. Over time, these forms have evolved, reflecting changes in religious beliefs, economic realities, and even the way we perceive death itself. You can see all of this 'at work' in the Cortland Rural Cemetery, if you look close enough!

Traditional Headstone Forms

From the earliest colonial grave markers to the towering obelisks of the 19th century, the shapes of headstones have been rich with symbolism. (Examples from the CRC are shown throughout this article, photos by J. Hoeschele.)

- **Tablets:** Some of the earliest grave markers in America were simple upright tablets, often with a rounded or peaked top. This shape was both practical — allowing rain to run off — and symbolic, sometimes seen as representing a doorway or portal to the afterlife. The tablet profile, too, suggests writing tablets or book-like forms (think “ten commandments”) — ideal for capture one’s life story. Today, many tablet-type headstone have succumbed to gravity or sheering that can occur over time with slate or other sedimentary rock.
- **Obelisks:** Inspired by ancient Egyptian monuments, obelisks gained popularity in the 19th century, particularly in the Victorian era. Not unlike church steeples, these tall, tapering structures symbolized aspiration, eternity, and the connection between earth and heaven.
- **Pillars & Columns:** These classical shapes symbolized a life aspiring to heaven. A pillar that terminates in a point or crown suggests the deceased lived a full life and is with God; conversely, if the column is truncated and/or covered with a shroud, it symbolizes a life cut short or ended in youth. (It should be noted that both obelisks and columns also hinted at a family’s or an individual’s prestige, standing, or worldly wealth.)
- **Crosses:** Whether Celtic, Latin, or Gothic in design, cross shaped headstones reflect strong religious faith. The ornate stone crosses of the 19th and early 20th centuries were a visual declaration of Christian devotion. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 2](#)



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Shapes of Remembrance... CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

- **Books & Scrolls:** Headstones shaped like open books or scrolls symbolized the Bible, the 'book of life,' or the deceased's personal story coming to an end.
- **Tree Stumps:** Popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s, these naturalistic monuments, often commissioned through the Woodmen of the World fraternal organization, symbolized nature's cycle of life and death, as well as unity with the natural world.
- **Drapes & Shrouds:** Drapes and shrouds on headstones symbolize mourning, the passage of life, and the soul's transition to the afterlife. (In this, it is similar to the phrase 'beyond the veil' – which suggests someone has moved beyond life into the hereafter.)
- **Orbs, Spheres & Globes:** These forms can carry multiple symbolic meanings, depending on the context or intent of the deceased or family. Orbs can symbolize eternity and wholeness (aka: the eternal nature of the soul, continuity, and completeness); worldly or universal connection; perfection, unity, and a connection to the divine; suggestions of the celestial or cosmic; the cycle of life/death; among other interpretations

Why Headstone Shapes Have Changed


Modern cemeteries developed after the mid-20th century look markedly different. The towering obelisks and book-shaped stones have given way to simpler, more austere markers — often little more than rectangular granite slabs lying flush with the earth. Several key factors have contributed to this shift.

1. Cost and Mass Production: While early headstones were typically carved by hand, today's markers are largely mass-produced using computer-guided engraving techniques. This shift has reduced craftsmanship but also made simpler, standardized designs more affordable. The grand monuments of the 19th century were often commissioned by wealthy families, whereas today's middle-class families opt for more modest markers. Additionally, as cremation has grown in popularity — now accounting for over 55% of American burials — many families choose smaller columbarium plaques or memorial benches over traditional headstones.

2. The Rise of Lawn Cemeteries: In the mid-20th century, a movement toward 'lawn cemeteries' transformed the way burial sites were designed. These cemeteries favor uniformity, requiring low-profile or flush grave markers to maintain a simple aesthetic, as well as making maintenance/mowing easier.

3. Changing Attitudes Toward Death and Burial: Historically, cemeteries were not just places of mourning but also communal spaces where families picnicked and even socialized. Today, though, fewer people visit cemeteries regularly, many see headstones as an unnecessary expense rather than a meaningful tribute, and increased mobility means fewer ties to specific locations.

4. Secularization and Simplicity: As religious observance declines, so too does the desire for overtly symbolic markers. Many modern headstones feature simple names and dates, with little decoration beyond perhaps a small emblem. Some contemporary cemeteries even offer 'green burials,' where biodegradable markers, plantings, and GPS coordinates replace traditional stone memorials altogether. CONTINUED ON PAGE 3



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Looking Forward: The Future of Headstone Design

While traditional headstone shapes may be less common, innovation continues. Digital and interactive memorials — such as QR codes on gravestones linking to personal tribute websites — are growing in popularity. Customization is also making a comeback, with laser etching allowing for more detailed imagery and even personalized artwork.

In a way, the evolution of headstone shapes mirrors the larger changes in American culture — once deeply rooted in tradition, now embracing efficiency, practicality, and personalization. Whether grand obelisks or minimalist markers, the stones that mark our graves remain a testament to the times in which we live, offering future generations a glimpse into how we chose to remember our dead.

BOOKS
& SCROLLS



TREE STUMPS

ORBS, SPHERES
& GLOBES



MODERN ENGRAVING



CRC Trustee Candidates Wanted

Have you ever felt the urge to help preserve our cherished cemetery? We're looking for the next generation of Trustees! If you, or someone you know, has any of these desires, we can help satisfy them!

- **Preserve Local History** — Founded in 1863, and 'home' to over 19,000 souls, the CRC is a living records of the Cortland and surrounding communities. Serving on our board allows you to help protect and interpret the stories of those who came before us, including veterans, community leaders, and everyday citizens!
- **Ensure Long-Term Stewardship** — CRC Trustees play a key role in maintaining the beauty, safety, and sustainability of our cemetery grounds. Your leadership helps safeguard these spaces for future generations.
- **Promote Community Engagement** — The CRC is more than a place of rest: It's also a space for reflection, education, connection, and nature. Come help us develop and support programming that fosters all of these goals!
- **Leave a Legacy of Care** — Serving as a trustee is a meaningful way to give back to your community. Your contributions — whether strategic, financial, or organizational — can have a lasting impact on a treasured public space.

To learn more about becoming a CRC Trustee — and following your instincts to serve our community and fulfill your civic responsibility — contact our Treasurer/past Board Chair, John Hoeschele with a call to the CRC office.



Your Generosity Can Make a Difference: Donate to Help Preserve Our Chapel.

Designed by the celebrated architect and Cortland native George W. Conable and constructed in 1922, the Gibson Memorial Chapel has undergone several renovations over the years. But like any historic structure, upkeep and the battle against time, weather, and gravity is constant. Fortunately, you can help! By designating your Spring donation to **“Chapel Repair”** — you can help us get a start on needed repairs, like much-needed masonry work. (We say ‘start,’ because we are considering a full-blown capital campaign to fund a comprehensive engineering study of the structure and, then, to make the resulting next-generation improvements.)

Help us preserve this beautiful building and Tompkins Street Treasure: Please donate today!



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