

Written in Stone

This is just a sampling of the symbolism you may find on your ancestors' tombstones.



A hand pointing upward indicates the deceased's ascension to heaven. A downward-reaching hand symbolizes the hand of God.



Engravings may be clues to membership in a fraternal organization. This shield bearing the letters AOUW represents the Ancient Order of United Workmen.



Lambs, which often mark the graves of children, symbolize the innocence of the young. They also can refer to Jesus, whom Christians call the "Lamb of God."



The weeping willow-and-urn motif, which symbolizes sorrow, was one of the most popular gravestone decorations of the late 18th and early 19th century.



Angels of all varieties appear throughout cemeteries. A cherub like this one is likely to adorn the grave of a child.



Common symbols on Jews' tombstones include the Star of David, menorah, Levite pitcher and Cohanim hands (with thumbs and forefingers touching).



The compass and square with the letter G (which may stand for *God* or *geometry*) is a common symbol on tombstones of Freemasons. The all-seeing eye is another classic Masonic symbol.



Especially during Victorian times, flowers, leaves and fruits convey an entire language of meanings. The lily signifies purity.



Clasped hands may be a symbol of marriage if one sleeve looks masculine and the other, feminine. Hands with neutral-looking sleeves represent an earthly goodbye or a welcome in heaven.



The winged death's head is one of the most common tombstone symbols in Colonial cemeteries. Early interpretations, with a skull and crossbones, reflect the gloomy Puritan belief that humans have little chance of entering heaven. The evolution of the death's head charts the waning influence of the Puritans: As cultural attitudes toward death softened, the symbol evolved into winged skulls representing the fleeting nature of life. In later stones, a more human-looking face takes the place of the skull in a symbol called a soul effigy. By the mid-19th century, a winged cherub replaced the death's head.

