

A Sampling of Oregon Gravestone Symbols



“American gravestone art inherits its symbolism from many sources: the Bible, Greek and Egyptian civilizations, and European cultural history that pre-dates Christianity. Popular fraternal organizations, such as Free and Accepted Masons, the Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, and their many imitators, likewise drew from these same ancient sources. The symbolism essential to the mystery and pageantry of these secret societies became familiar to most nineteenth-century Americans and greatly influenced our country’s history and art.”

-AGS Field Guide №8, *Symbolism in the Carving on Gravestones.*

As you wander through a cemetery you will see many motifs on gravestones. A symbol on a marker can offer an interesting insight into the person’s life or the family’s feeling about the death. In addition to asking the question, “What does this symbol mean?” it is important to remember that a particular motif may appear just because someone liked it. For example, an anchor can be a symbol for the Christian cross, which may explain why this symbol is found on a gravestone in Oregon’s High Desert. In spite of the grave’s location, perhaps the person buried there loved the sea.

The workmanship and beauty of the gravestones and the sculptures found in cemeteries are art. In fact, in many places it was the first art available to the public. Ultimately, what a particular symbol means depends as much on what the patron, who ordered the gravestone, or the stonecutter wanted to convey. Whether or not the symbols can be accurately interpreted, it is still possible to enjoy the inherent beauty found in a cemetery.



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Anchor

Symbol of hope, can also represent the Christian cross. Sometimes represents a trade or field of military service.



Angel

Guardian or messenger between God and man. Symbol of resurrection.



Asphodel (see also Lily)

Refers to plants in the lily family having white, pink, or yellow flowers. It includes the narcissus and daffodil. It means the deceased is, in fact, dead and it reminds viewers of their own mortality.



Book

Typically represents the holy book or the Holy Bible.

OPEN BOOK

Represents “the book of life.” If a member of the clergy, sometimes the final sermon is written on the open pages.



CLOSED BOOK

Represents the end of earthly life, a completed life.



STACK OF BOOKS

Scholarly, educated.

Buds

Renewal of life. Broken branch often used for children as life cut short.



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Candle

Life



Chain with Missing Link

Removed by death. Indicates the family circle has been broken.



Column, Broken

The end of life or life cut short.



Cross

Emblem of faith for Christians. Means resurrection for some. There are many different types of crosses with many different meanings.



Crown

“Crown of righteousness,” may be a reward of the faithful Christian. Also signifies victory, or victory over death. With a cross it means the sovereignty of the Lord. Cross and crown together also indicates a member of the York Rite Masons and symbolizes authority.



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Door or Doors

Heavenly entrance.



Dove

The soul, purity, peace. In Christian symbolism it typically represents the Holy Ghost. With an olive branch it refers to the dove Noah sent out to find land.

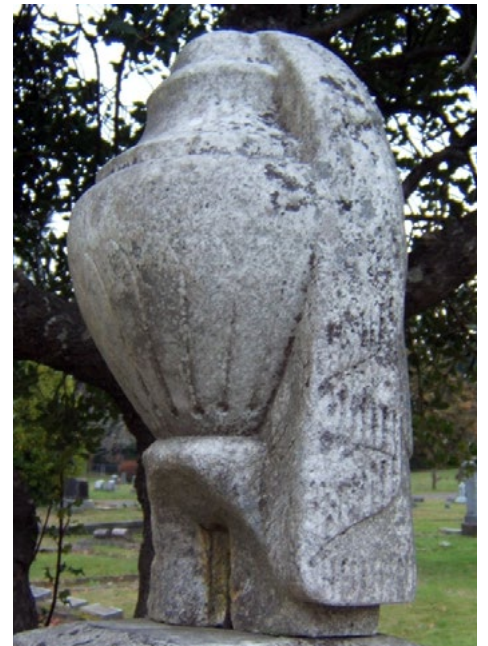


Dove (continued)



Drape

The closing off of life, sometimes early. May also refer to the veil between heaven and earth. Sometimes associated with an urn.



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Festoon or Garland

May be a garland of leaves, fruit, flowers, ribbon or fabric draped between two points. Symbolizes victory in death. Originated from Greek and Roman motifs.



Gate of Heaven

Passageway to heaven; usually gates are open. There are many different variations, usually with many symbolic motifs such as: the sun, hand of God, dove and olive branch, diving dove, and others.



Hands

Hands are common marker motifs, and can be found in various positions:

CLASPED HANDS

Farewell or bond of marriage



PRAYING HANDS

Asking God for eternal life



HAND POINTING UP

Pathway to heaven



HAND POINTING DOWN

The hand of God, or represents the presence of God



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Hourglass

Swiftness of time. Represents the impermanence of life; time has run out.



IHS

First three letters of the Greek word for Jesus; also in hoc signo vinces (Latin for “in this sign you will conquer”). Sometimes stacked and looking like a dollar sign. Means immortality.



Ivy

Immortality



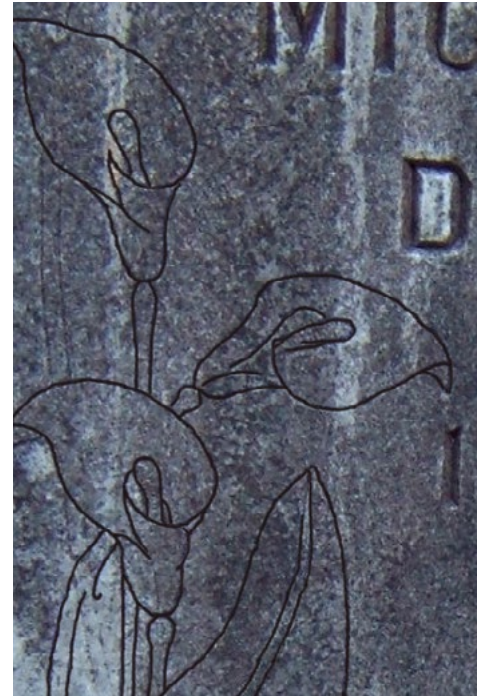
Lamb

Innocence. A common symbol on children's grave markers.



Lily (see also Asphodel)

Represents purity. On a grave marker this purity can reflect the transition of the earthly to the spiritual. May also be a symbol of chastity.



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Lyre

A bridge between heaven and earth.
My also reflect musical abilities.



Oak (continued)



Rose

A reminder that the soul achieves
its most perfect state after physical
death. A symbol of the blood
of Christ.



Oak

A sacred tree for many cultures, it
symbolizes strength, honor, virtue. In
Christian symbolism it represents en-
during faith. Also an important sym-
bol in pre-Christian pagan religions.



Pine Cone

Immortality from the evergreen tree.
Incorruptibility from the sap.



Sphere

Represents the soul waiting for
resurrection.



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Star of David

Represents the Jewish faith.



Torch

Eternal life.



Tree (see also WOW)

Represents life. With a broken branch, represents mortality.



Urn

Classical symbol of death, particularly popular in the nineteenth century.



DRAPED URN

Death, mourning.



URN WITH FLAME

Soul departing; eternal vigilance, remembrance



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Weeping Willow Tree

Nature's lament, mourning and remembrance.



Wheat

Time, the divine harvest at the end of life or life fulfilled.



Wreath

Victory or victory in death.



Military Markers

Many grave markers display military related symbols. They reflect the period of service, branch or duty, experience and religion.

GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC

An organization of honorably discharged veterans of the Union Army, Navy, Marine Corps, or Revenue Cutter Service who had served between April 12, 1861 and April 9, 1865.



GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC (CONTINUED)



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OTHER MILITARY SYMBOLS

Just two of a wide variety of military related symbols found throughout the state.



SYMBOLS OF FAITH ACCEPTED BY THE MILITARY FOR OFFICIAL MARKERS

http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/hm_hm.asp



SYMBOLS OF FAITH ACCEPTED BY THE MILITARY FOR OFFICIAL MARKERS (CONTINUED)



Membership Organizations

Symbols for fraternal or auxiliary organizations appear in historic cemeteries throughout Oregon. The most common are Masons and Eastern Star, International Order of Odd Fellows and Daughters of Rebekah and Woodmen of the World and its many offshoots.

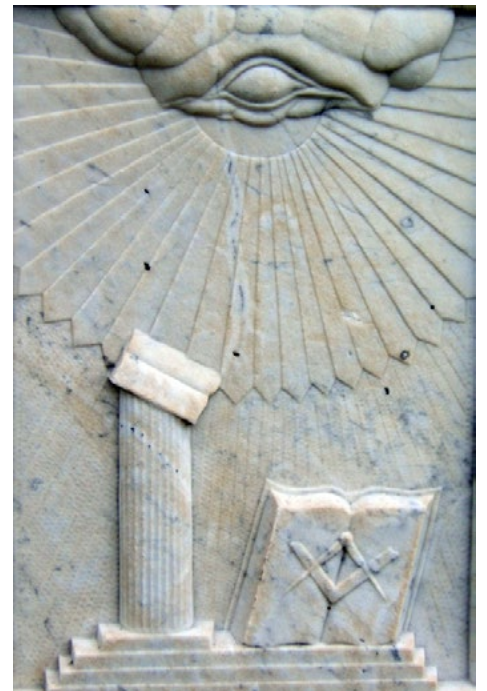
DAUGHTERS OF REBEKAH

The typical symbol for this female auxiliary of the IOOF includes a half moon for “the value of regularity in work,” a dove for peace, a lily for purity, and the intertwined letters D and R.



FREEMASONS/MASONS

The main symbol for the Masons is the letter G placed within the compass and square. The G may refer to God or geometry. The square and compass represent the transition from the material to the intellectual to the spiritual. Another common Masonic symbol is the All-Seeing eye with rays of light, an ancient symbol for God.



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INTERNATIONAL ORDER OF ODD FELLOWS (IOOF)

The key symbol for the IOOF is the three-link chain. It typically stands alone, but can be seen with other symbols, including the letters FTL for Friendship, Love and Truth.



THE ORDER OF THE EASTERN STAR

This organization is considered the female counterpart to Masons. The five pointed star is the primary symbol for Eastern Star. Each point represents a heroine and a tenet for the organization and may include additional symbols. The letters FATAL are also common and refer to a portion of the Eastern Star oath.



WOODMEN OF THE WORLD (WOW) (SEE ALSO TREE)

WOW is an insurance based organization. It is highly represented in cemeteries because until the 1920s one of the benefits of membership was a tombstone. Symbols for WOW include: the tree stump for equality and commonwealth; Dum Tacet Clamet for Gone But Not Forgotten; a dove with an olive branch for peace; and an ax, beetle and wedge for workmanship. Several organizations broke off from WOW including: Women for Woodcraft, Neighbors of Woodcraft, Modern Woodmen of America, Woodmen Circle and others.



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**WOODMEN OF THE WORLD
(CONTINUED)**



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- Gravestone Symbolism www.graveaddiction.com/symbol.html
- Saving Graves www.savinggraves.net
- The Association for Gravestone Studies www.gravestonestudies.org
- Information on Jewish Gravestones www.bloodandfrogs.com/2011/04/jewish-gravestone-symbols.html



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