Tombstones and their stories

• What can you learn from a tombstone?
• Early tombstones were often flat, either upright on a block or in ground, plain rectangles for with a rounded top.
• There might be a date of birth and/or the age at the time of death. There might be further information about relationships within the family.
Early stones from Forest Lawn Cemetery in Dexter and Webster Church Cemetery
• Why are there recurrent carvings seen on tombstones in every cemetery?

• What is the meaning of these carving?

• Interpretation varies depending on the persons faith or belief.
One of the most common symbols is the draped urn. The urn is an ancient symbol of death or mortality. The drapes (also called a curtain or veil) can mean sorrow or passage from one existence to another.

This example is from the Unadilla or Baseline Cemetery in Lyndon Township.
Draped urns are found in most cemeteries. The one on the right is from St. Thomas Catholic Cemetery and the one on the left is in Forest Hill Cemetery. It also has a hand pointing up and roses symbolizing life after death and sorrow.
Hands

Hands are another frequently seen symbols that can have different meanings depending on their position. Two hands in prayer symbolize devotion. One hand may symbolize the hand of God.
One hand with one finger pointing up symbolizing the reward of the righteous or confirmation of life after death is seen quite frequently. The tombstone on the right is in Unadilla Cemetery. Hands in prayer, seen on this modern tombstone from Bethlehem Cemetery, signifies devotion.
Clasped hands are another popular symbol. If the cuffs match it is a handshake of farewell to earthly existence. If the cuffs are male and female it indicates hands clasped in death as in life or eternal devotion. The one on the left is in Salem Lutheran Cemetery and the one on the right is in Forest Hill.
Angels

Angels symbolize rebirth or a messenger of God, a guardian. They may be flying, young or sorrowful looking. They are seen on children’s and adult’s graves including very old stones and modern ones.
This monument, in Forest Hill Cemetery, is for a young boy killed by a circus train. In addition to the angel symbol there is a garland of roses indicating sorrow and a tree trunk meaning cut off in the prime of life.
Angels are seen on new tombstones as well as old ones. These two stones are in Bethlehem Cemetery.
The tombstone on the left, in St. Thomas Catholic Cemetery in Ann Arbor, is a modern grave while the one on the right, in Forest Hill cemetery, is older.
Other figures can be also be found either as statues or carvings. They usually portray sorrow and mourning. The carving on the left is in Forest Hill Cemetery. The one on the right is on a stone in Salem Lutheran Cemetery.
This statue in Forest Hill Cemetery is of Niobe, a mythical figure of mourning. In the myth her pride in her numerous children led her to compare herself to Leto, who had only two. To punish Niobe, Leto’s children slew Niobe’s children and she was turned to stone by Zeus forever weeping her loss.
The cross symbolizes salvation. The Christian cross has one cross bar while the Eastern Orthodox has three, two straight and one at an angle. Celtic crosses have multiple carvings. Crosses may be combined with other symbols as is the one in our cemetery.
This cross contains the alpha and omega symbolizing the beginning and end of life and a heart symbolizing the love of Christ. It is located in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Dexter.
This cross with the weeping child can be found on the four-sided tombstone in our ‘cemetery.’ The stone is located in Forest Hill Cemetery.
On the left is an Eastern Orthodox stone in Forest Hill Cemetery. On the right is a Celtic cross in St. Thomas Catholic Cemetery. The circle is a symbol of eternity.
The crown is a symbol of a reward of the faithful, victory, righteousness, resurrection. When on a cross it symbolizes the sovereignty of Christ. It may also denote a member of York Rite Masons.
Book

Usually an open Bible, is a symbol of wisdom and resurrection. The tombstone in our ‘cemetery’ is from Unadilla Cemetery.
The Bible is often combined with other symbols. The tombstone on the left is from Salem Lutheran Cemetery. The Bible on the right, in Forest Hill Cemetery, is resting on a log.
Trees and Plants

• Flowers symbolize the brevity of life and sorrow. Certain flowers symbolize emotions. Lilies are a symbol of resurrection or purity. Roses indicate condolence or sorrow. Poppies are symbolic of sleep and therefore death.

• An ivy vine symbolizes abiding memory and friendship.

• The laurel branch symbolizes victory or glory.
Roses are one of the most common flowers seen. They are often with other symbols. This one is from Forest Hill Cemetery.
This tombstone from Forest Lawn Cemetery in Dexter has both roses and lilies. The laurel branches are on a tombstone in Forest Hill Cemetery.
Wreaths of flowers symbolize victory in death. The one on this tombstone in Webster Church Cemetery is around across adding the meaning of salvation.
Tree trunks with their cut-off limbs symbolize being cut off in the prime of life. There are very realistic stones with added carved symbols. The stone on the left is from Bethlehem Cemetery. The stone on the right is from Webster Church Cemetery.
Tree trunks are also depicted in other forms. The stone on the left is from Forest Lawn Cemetery in Dexter. The modern stone on the right is from North Lake Cemetery.
This tombstone in Bethlehem Cemetery is a simple pile of ‘logs’.
Rocks are also made into tombstones. They may stand alone or be placed on a base. These two, in Forest Hill Cemetery, are from the same family. Note the glacial striations on the stone on the left.
This stone is also found in Forest Hill Cemetery.
Animals

• The lamb symbolizes innocence, meekness and sacrifice and is used on children’s tombstones. The lamb tombstone in our ‘cemetery’ is in Forest Hill Cemetery. The lamb may stand alone or be carved into the stone.

• Birds symbolize the soul. A flying bird symbolizes the flight of the soul back to God.

• Some people include a statue or carving of a favorite pet or some other animal they care about.
The tombstone on the left is in Forest Hill Cemetery. The one on the right is in Salem Lutheran Cemetery.
The dove, a symbol of peace and purity and is the messenger of God carrying the soul to heaven, is the most frequently seen bird. If the dove is flying, it symbolizes the flight of the soul back to God. This tombstone is in Salem Lutheran Cemetery.
The significance of this deer on a tombstone in Forest Hill is unknown. Perhaps the person was a hunter.
Classical Greek and Egyptian Motifs

The architectural and other features familiar to all are among the most popular motifs seen on tombstones.

• Columns
• Temples
• Obelisks
• Pyramids
• Sarcophagus
• Acanthus leaf
• Arch
The column is one of the most popular of these motifs. A broken column symbolizes sorrow or a broken life. The drapes and the single rose also symbolize sorrow. The wreath indicates victory over death. These tombstones are in Forest Hill Cemetery.
Greek temples are popular. The tombstone on the left, in Forest Hill Cemetery, also features the classical acanthus leaf motif along with its Corinthian columns. The tombstone on the right is in Unadilla (Baseline) Cemetery.
The columns may be carved into the tombstone. The stone on left is in Forest Hill Cemetery and the one on the right is in Oakgrove Cemetery in Chelsea.
Obelisks and pyramids are also seen. Pyramids are symbolic of death. These examples are in Forest Hill Cemetery.
A sarcophagus is one of the simplest and most utilitarian stone. Although the Egyptians buried their dead in one, it rarely contains a body today. The body is usually in a vault below. The one on the left, in Forest Hill Cemetery, bears acanthus leaves, another classical motif. The one on the right is in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Dexter.
Arches, symbolizing rejoined with partner in Heaven, are another feature often seen on tombstones. The arch on the left is in Salem Lutheran Cemetery. The one on the right, in Forest Hill Cemetery, also has the male and female clasped hands.
Portraits

Portraits of the deceased may be incorporated into the tombstone in several ways.

• A small oval covered with glass is used to include an actual photograph. Water has gotten into many of the older ones so the picture is no longer visible.
• A likeness may be carved directly into the stone.
• A bas relief plaque may be attached.
Photographs in glass ovals. The one on the left, in Forest Hill Cemetery, is no longer visible. The one on the right is in Bethlehem Cemetery.
This bench in Washtenong Memorial Park bears two pictures of the deceased.
This portrait in stone is in Forest Hill Cemetery. The tombstone with the plaque is in North Lake Cemetery.
Genealogy

By studying tombstones, one can find out many facts about an individual in addition to birth and death dates.

- Other family members
- Wedding date
- Hobbies
- Occupation
- Where born
- Organizations
- Cause of death
- Military service
The tombstone may indicate a spouse’s name or a parent’s name. The stone on the left is in Unadilla Cemetery. The one on the right is in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Dexter.
The tombstone on the left is in Webster Church Cemetery. The one on the right is in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Dexter.
The tombstone on the left is in Forest Hill Cemetery. The one on the right is in Bethlehem Cemetery.
This tombstone is in Webster Church Cemetery.
Members of fraternal organizations often include symbols on their graves. One of the organizations seen most frequently in the Masons. These two tombstones are in Oak Grove Cemetery in Chelsea. The one on the right includes a star indicating the woman belonged to the auxiliary group of the Masons.
The tombstone on the left is in Unadilla Cemetery. The one on the right is in Forest Hill Cemetery.
The cause of death may be carved into the tombstone as in these two stones. The one on the left, in Forest Hill Cemetery, is for a sawmill owner who died while trying to load a log on a cart alone. The one on the left, in Bethlehem Cemetery, is for a man pinned under the wheel of a cart pulled by runaway horses. (Pictures courtesy of Wystan Stevens.)
This poem, written by Shirley S. Andress is on the back of the Andress tombstone. In 1988, when this poem was written, she had received a liver scan after treatment for breast cancer. The scan was negative at that time. She died of metastatic liver cancer in 1992.
Military service may be indicated on a traditional tombstone as this one in North Lake Cemetery. Sometimes the veteran is remembered by an in-ground bronze plaque. A flag is placed at every veteran's grave on Memorial Day.
Combination tombstone

Much like the Egyptian and Mayan steles, a four-sided tombstone may tell a story. The inscriptions list family members and their relationships. Each side usually depicts at least one symbolic motif.

This four-sided tombstone in Webster Church cemetery lists many members of the McColl family.
This side is for a husband and wife and indicates that the stone was erected by their children.
This side has the anchor of hope.
The bouquet of roses symbolizes condolences, sorrow and grief.
Was Mary a McColl daughter? Was Johnson the Mason?
Epitaph
These are inscriptions on a tombstone in memory of the person buried there. Latin or a native language is often used. These tombstones are in Forest Hill Cemetery.
New technology allows for much more detail to be added to a tombstone. Rather than being carved in bas relief or standing statues, details can be etched directly into the stones and color can be added. The stone on the left is in Oak Grove Cemetery in Chelsea. The stone on the right is in North Lake Cemetery.
Children can now be remembered with more than lambs and cherubs. The stone on the left is in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Dexter and the one on the right is in North Lake Cemetery.
Conclusion

These are not the only symbols to be found. A walk through any cemetery will reveal many more. Even the plantings may be symbolic. Oaks are a symbol of strength and eternity, weeping willows are the symbolic tree of human sadness.

A cemetery is not necessarily a morbid, sorrowful place. Take a walk through Forest Hill Cemetery. Enjoy the winding paths, hills and peaceful atmosphere of this lovely wooded spot in the city of Ann Arbor. You may encounter squirrels, raccoons and deer and other wildlife.

Read the tombstones. They represent the citizens of the area, both average and prominent. Here you will find local business men such as Philip Bach, Christian Mack and David Allmendinger; Governor and U.S. Senator Alpheus Felch; University professors such as Henry Simmons Frieze; University sports figures such as Fielding Yost, ‘Bo’ Schembechler, and Vada Murray, as well as announcer Bob Ufer. The local Asian community is also well represented.