

The Evolution of Gravestones in Wolfville

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Text for Display

Pre-1760

The Mi'kmaq

Prior to the arrival of the Acadians, the Mi'kmaq typically did not mark the graves of their dead as the Europeans did. They did bury their dead, but often they were marked with just a simple field stone or not at all. If a person died in the winter, the body would be placed in trees until the ground was soft enough to dig a grave. Their burial grounds were not marked off as being especially sacred, but they were often buried on islands to keep their spirits from coming back. After the arrival of the French and the conversion of many Mi'kmaq to Catholicism, they began to use wooden crosses as gravemarkers. The problem with both of these traditions is that neither are lasting materials and have since eroded or been destroyed.

The Acadians

Typically the Acadians used wooden crosses to mark their graves. They had burial grounds just like today, with a large one at what is now the Grand-Pré Historic Site. Their burial grounds were typically near the church. Since they were only simple crosses made of wood, they eroded over time. It has been suggested by some that when the Planters and other English-speaking people moved to the area they removed the cross in hopes to remove the Acadian memory from the land, but it is more likely that they have just eroded.

1760 – 1800

The Planters brought with them the New England style of marking graves with gravestones. Until the American Revolution, the stones were largely imported right from New England. After this, the Planters began to have stones carved locally. In the Old Burial Grounds we can see the work of the Horton Carver, a man whose identity has not yet been uncovered, but who was one of the first to start carving in the area. His style was typically a simple carving of a cherub with crossed bones underneath. During this time period the stones were generally upright and flat, made of sandstone. They had a straight edge and then curved at the top. They also had some type of border running around the edge. It was also a common trend for graves to have footstones to mark the length of the grave.

1800 – 1840

Early in this time period the Second Horton Carver was active in Wolfville. He had a style similar to the first Horton Carver, usually carving a cherub on the top of the stone. It is possible that it was the same man as the Horton Carver, but he changed his style, or it may have been a new person, possibly an apprentice to the first. The overall style did not change too drastically until the 1830s. While still rounded at the very top of the stone, there then appeared some jagged points coming out at the top. White stone also began to be used as well as sandstone. Another common artistic change was the use of a hand on the white stone, usually pointing up or at a book. When a stone was the monument for two people the hand would point at the direction of the grave of the second person. The willow tree, one of the symbols for mourning, is also a common feature of stones in this period.

1840 – 1880

This period appears to be a time of transition. While some stones were still made of white stone, others began to be made out of granite. It can also be seen that some stones were being manufactured, while others were still being carved by hand. During this time it is evident that drawings and pictures become less important features of stones. There is also a shift to using one large stone to mark the graves of an entire family. Initially these were column-shaped stones, and then larger rectangular monuments began to be used. With these family monuments, the footstone began to be more important as they marked where the individual graves were around a family monument.

1880 – 1920

There were very few stylistic changes during this time period. The family monument is so common that few other styles are seen. Almost all stones were being manufactured instead of being carved. Occasionally the column style stone would be used, but the large rectangular monument continued to be the most popular.

1920 – 1960

Gravestones started to become somewhat smaller in this period. They continued to be made out of granite and often had some type of flowers coming down the side of the stone. In most instances they were symmetrical so that the same carving would be on each side of the stone. Instead of the large family monuments, the stones often reverted to being just for a man and his wife. Some stones would commemorate a child as well if it died young, but generally it was just to mark two peoples' graves.

1960 – Present

More recently it has become popular for people to use a glossy black stone. The stones are usually free standing but it has also become common in some places to just have a flat headstone. Generally stones are rectangular in shape, but there are many variations as people have become more creative with the stones. Occasionally they are carved in the shape of an object. With developing technologies, it has also become quite common for people to have pictures put directly onto gravestones. Some people have their own pictures placed on them while others will have objects that were important to the deceased carved into the stone. It has also become popular for family members to place objects, such as crosses and solar lights, around the grave to further commemorate the deceased. One reason for these changes is that there has been a shift to regarding life as more important than the afterlife.