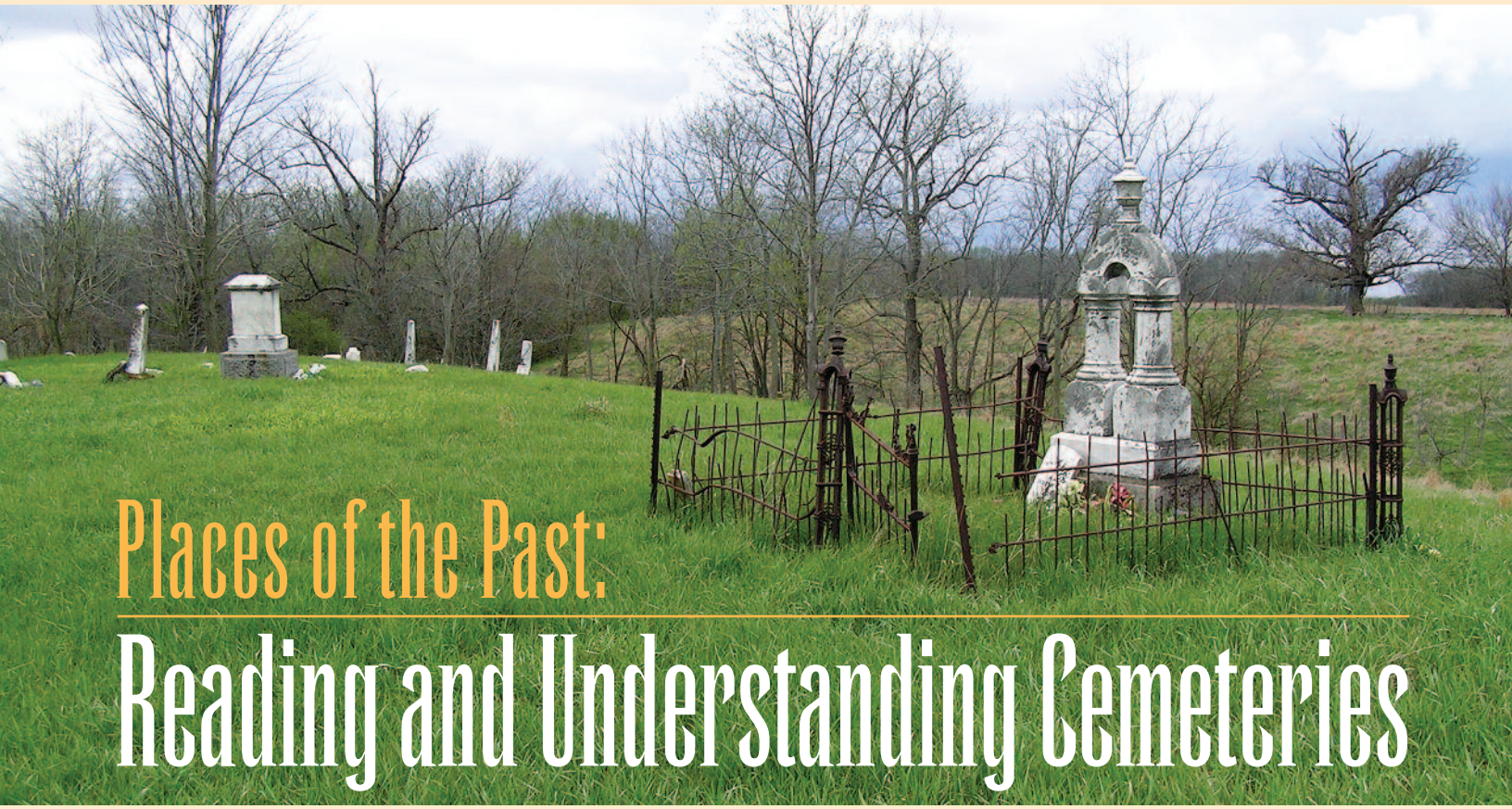
Wherever they occur, these formal links to our past reveal cultural identities and traditions.



Places of the Past: Reading and Understanding Cemeteries

Story and Photos By
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Scattered throughout rural Illinois, cemeteries are visual reminders of our past. Almost all communities contain cemeteries. In addition, travelers of back roads frequently observe isolated cemeteries located some distance from today's communities or churches. These locations reflect an evolving rural landscape. For example, regional economic development and shifts in population may have resulted in changes to the transportation system. New roads were developed and old roads were abandoned. Consequently, some early cemeteries may be situated along now-abandoned roads.

Variation in headstone shape and inscription is frequently a matter of choice and reflects values of those who make the selection.

Not just places to put the dead or static snapshots of older views and attitudes about death, all cemeteries contain social and cultural values reflecting specific choices and therefore provide insight into how people structured and organized their social and physical landscape. Cemeteries are dynamic, reflecting changing cultural institutions, social values and regional ethnic composition.

Cemetery gravemarkers tell us not only about the individual who died, their

Cemeteries provide excellent opportunities to view older trees that have grown with little competition from other plants.

By taking the time to look and learn one can come away with a better understanding of the cemetery. Students of all ages can explore cemeteries to develop a better understanding of their geography, anthropology, math, genealogy, biology, history and language arts. As you observe more cemeteries, the variations you see become more meaningful.

1. Note the relationship of the cemetery to the surrounding landscape. Is it on a hill, along a road, in the woods, etc.?
2. Walk around and become familiar with the cemetery landscape. Note the vegetation, paths, fences, etc. How are the gravestones and other landscape features arranged?
3. Make a map the cemetery. Pace the distances between stones and other features. Use a compass to determine direction. What direction are the headstones facing?
4. For each headstone, document the following: shape, material (limestone, marble, granite), date of birth, date of death, age, type of symbol (willow tree, urn, hand, etc), epitaph and name of stone carver.
5. Create a map of the cemetery by individual decades to view the changes through time. When did different families and symbols enter the cemetery?
6. What is the earliest and latest death date recorded?
7. Write down five epitaphs and record if the epitaph is for a child or adult.
8. Record any county or country of origin listed on headstones.
9. Note any foreign languages written on the headstones.

placement and appearance (raw material, inscriptions and motifs) provides information about the society from which the individual has departed. For example, 19th century changes in gravemarker motifs reflect varying attitudes toward death, from harsh and cruel to sentimental and spiritual.

For more information on how to study a cemetery and the different things that may be learned, read "Your Guide to Cemetery Research" by Sharon DeBartlo Carmack or visit www.gravestonestudies.org or www.vintageviews.org/vv-tl/pages/Cem_Symbolism.htm.

Cemeteries and gravemarkers are a focus of study for art historians, architects, folklorists, cultural geographers, archaeologists, anthropologists and historians. Increasingly, cemetery studies are the focus of amateurs searching for ancestors, or individuals with an interest in learning about the past or understanding the rituals of death. In particular, it is the participation of these latter two groups that will be instrumental in saving cemeteries for future generations.

When cemeteries are ignored and allowed to deteriorate and gravemarkers are damaged or destroyed, societies lose information that is an important part of ourselves. School children who become familiar with the information contained in cemeteries are less likely to vandalize cemeteries. Adults who appreciate cemeteries are more likely to support preservation efforts. By documenting, preserving and publicizing cemeteries, it is hoped that future generations will use this information to learn about the past and support preservation efforts.

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During the nineteenth century, cemetery locations varied but frequently were placed on the highest ground near streams.