

1984

"Depart From Hence and Keep This Thought in Mind": The Importance of Comparative Analysis in Gravestone Research

Elizabeth A. Crowell

Norman Vardney Mackie III

Follow this and additional works at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha>

 Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Crowell, Elizabeth A. and Mackie, Norman Vardney III (1984) ""Depart From Hence and Keep This Thought in Mind": The Importance of Comparative Analysis in Gravestone Research," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 13 13, Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol13/iss1/3> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol13/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Northeast Historical Archaeology by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

"Depart From Hence and Keep This Thought in Mind": The Importance of Comparative Analysis in Gravestone Research

Cover Page Footnote

This paper developed out of suggested Middle Atlantic and Chesapeake-Tidewater patterns first presented in Crowll's dissertation (1983:220). Several people were important in the development of these ideas, particularly Dr. Robert Schuyler, Dr. James Deetz and Dr. Henry Glassie. In the later development and discussion of these ideas the authors are particularly indebted to Dr. Garry Wheeler Stone, Mr. Fraser Neiman, Ms. Karen Stuart, Mr. Edward Flanagan and Ms. Janice Artemel. In addition, we would like to thank Ms. Gail Frace, Mr. Daniel Nolin, Mr. David Babson, Mr. Edward Tormay, Ms. Evelyn Tidlow, and Ms. Mandy Hosny for their assistance in all phases of data collection.

"DEPART FROM HENCE AND KEEP THIS THOUGHT IN MIND": THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN GRAVESTONE RESEARCH

Elizabeth A. Crowell and
Norman Vardney Mackie III

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the scope of gravestone and cemetery analysis has broadened to include not only New England, but other regions of the country. Information gleaned from regional analyses yields a wealth of data for comparative purposes with important implications for the archaeologist. One of the major goals of anthropological study is to compare data from different investigations. Observation of gravestones and burial patterns from Anglo-American settlements in the Middle Atlantic and Chesapeake-Tidewater regions has demonstrated that distinct patterns exist in these regions which are dependent upon environmental and cultural phenomena.

James Deetz has stated that distinct regional traditions developed in different areas in the colonies (Deetz 1977:38). These discrete traditions were the result of differing cultural backgrounds of the settlers, the purpose of settlement, and environmental conditions. Material culture and behavior in these regions should reflect these differing regional traditions. Investigations of gravestones and burial patterns from the Middle Atlantic and Chesapeake-Tidewater regions suggest that two distinct patterns do indeed exist (Crowell 1983:220).

METHODOLOGY

This study addresses gravestones and burial practices dating from circa 1607 to

1820. Data from the Middle Atlantic region is based upon studies conducted in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Crowell 1981) and Cape May County, New Jersey (Crowell 1982, 1983), while the Chesapeake-Tidewater examples include studies from Tidewater Virginia (Crowell 1978) and southern Maryland (Mackie 1983, 1984, 1985).

A survey was conducted of all cemeteries in Philadelphia with gravestones dating prior to 1820. Quantitative data was collected from two churchyards (St. Peter's Episcopal and Old Pine Presbyterian), and the resulting patterns derived through analysis are representative of the city's burying grounds in general. The Philadelphia sample consists of 196 stone markers.

The Cape May County data was derived from a non-arbitrary 100% collection strategy, with a resulting total of 233 stones examined and recorded. These markers originally were located in as many as 29 plantation cemeteries and seven churchyards. One hundred fourteen stones (49%) were originally located in plantation cemeteries.

Data representative of the Chesapeake-Tidewater results from an examination of extant stones observable in ten Tidewater Virginia counties (Surry, Charles City, Isle of Wight, Gloucester, New Kent, Lancaster, Middlesex, Matthews, James City, York), one Tidewater Maryland county (St. Mary's), and three Virginia cities (Norfolk,

*In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, gravestones in Cape May County and in Virginia were often moved from their original locations in plantation cemeteries to churchyards. This was done in order to insure their preservation. In Cape May County today, there are 12 extant plantation cemeteries containing 37 gravestones. Documentary evidence (in the form of wills, church records, family papers, and recorded gravestone inscriptions) reveals that there were as many as 29 plantation cemeteries containing 114 gravestones. In Virginia, six extant plantation cemeteries were examined which contained 19 stones. In actuality, there had been 33 plantation cemeteries which contained 94 stones. This evidence indicates that the present position of a gravestone cannot be assumed to have been its original position. Historical documentation must be consulted before spatial locational analysis can take place.

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF GRAVESTONE STYLES BY REGION

	Headstones	Box Tombs, Table Tombs, Slabs	Obelisks
Philadelphia	167 (85.2%)	29 (14.8%)	0 (0%)
Cape May County	221 (95%)	12 (5%)	0 (0%)
Chesapeake-Tidewater	20 (10%)	175 (89%)	2 (1%)

Petersburg, Williamsburg). As with Cape May County, a 100% data collection strategy was applied, and all stones occupying churchyards and private burying grounds were examined and recorded. The Tidewater Virginia data base consists of 194 gravestones originally located in association with 11 churches and 33 plantation cemeteries. Ninety-four gravestones originally were located in plantation cemeteries. The St. Mary's County data base consists of 96 stone markers from 11 churchyards and 15 plantation cemeteries. Forty-six gravestones were located in plantation cemeteries.

Information from all gravestones in the various geographic regions was recorded on index cards. For each marker, inscriptions and epitaphs were copied, preserving original capitalization and spelling. In cases where gravestones were illegible, stones which could be dated using historical documentation were included in the data bases. In addition, gravestone material, size, and style were noted. Finally, a sketch was made showing form and any motif, and photographs (color, black and white) were taken of all stones discussed in this study.

REGIONAL PATTERN ANALYSIS

The most fundamental concerns of recent material culture analysis have been the identification and explication of patterning. These problems have been addressed by prehistorians (e.g. Binford 1978, 1980) as well as by historical archaeologists (Deetz 1977; Dickens 1982) and folklorists (Glassie 1968). In the following section, regional patterning is discussed as it is manifested in Middle Atlantic and Chesapeake-Tidewater Anglo-

American gravestones. In attempting to explicate observable isolated patterns we have chosen to focus on (1) status as reflected in gravemarkers, (2) style, form, and decoration of stone, (3) gravestone procurement, (4) presence or absence of gravestones, and (5) loci of burial.

The Middle Atlantic Pattern

The Middle Atlantic pattern demonstrates little status difference represented by the style or size of gravestone chosen. Presence or absence of stone gravemarkers, however, can be seen as indicative of status. The major style of stone in this region is the headstone, an upright stone erected at the head of the grave (see Table 1). Little or no carved iconography appears on the gravestones. The form (i.e. exterior silhouette) of the gravestone, however, as will be explained below, can be seen as indicative of meaning (Crowell 1983:120). Burial patterns differ in rural areas and towns. In Philadelphia, churchyard burial is customary throughout the period. In rural areas, (Cape May County), the earliest burials occurred in a village burial plot at the location of initial settlement. As the population moved away from the original settlement onto plantations or farms, burial in family cemeteries on the plantation became customary. Beginning in approximately 1780, there was a trend toward more burials at the church (Crowell 1983:120).

The Chesapeake-Tidewater Pattern

The Chesapeake-Tidewater pattern demonstrates a pronounced status difference reflected in gravemarkers. The overwhelming



Figure 1. Box Tombs



Figure 2. Cherub Shaped Stone

majority of the population did not have stone gravemarkers (Crowell 1978:19; Mackie 1983, 1984, 1985), and as of yet, there has been no documentary or archaeological evidence forthcoming which supports the use of wooden markers in this region. For existing gravestones, there was variation in the style of stone chose. The predominant styles of stones chosen in the period prior to 1780 were the flat slab, the box tomb, and the table tomb, all indicative of status (Burgess 1963:183) (see Table 1: Figure 1). The slab is a large, flat stone placed flush to the ground. The box tomb is comprised of a brick or cut stone base upon which a large carved slab was placed. The table tomb is a slab supported by six or more large stone legs. Some of the stones bear carved imagery, while others do not. When decorated, heraldic imagery was most often chosen. Burial patterns in this region are identical to those in the Middle Atlantic region.

Characteristics described in each of the regional patterns are important to the understanding of these distinct areas. This data can be analyzed in a much broader context, however. The anthropological approach requires a comparative analysis of data in a holistic manner. Underlying factors for regional differences must be explored and reasons for similarities and differences must be explained.

DISTRIBUTION, PROCUREMENT, AND STATUS

The distribution of gravestones is dependent upon the availability of a source of local stone. With respect to Philadelphia, marble and limestone quarries in neighboring Montgomery and Chester counties in Pennsylvania provided local stone which was both readily available and easily exploited. Within forty to fifty years of the establishment of the city, there was a local stonecarving tradition in operation (Crowell 1983:86).

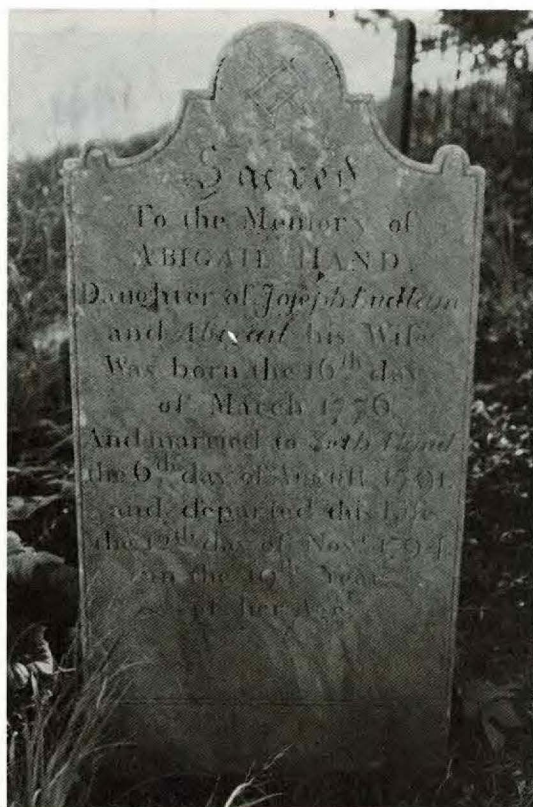


Figure 3. Neoclassical Stone

The availability of stone made gravestones a relatively affordable commodity and enabled a wide segment of the population to procure them (Deetz 1977). Conversely, in the Middle Atlantic and Chesapeake-Tidewater areas, in locations where there was a dearth of local stone, gravestones, when desired, had to be imported. Indeed, this was not an unusual practice in the colonial period. Residents of Charleston, South Carolina (Ravenal 1942:193) and other areas of South Carolina and Georgia (Gorman and DiBlasi 1976:80) imported their gravestones from New England and elsewhere. Inhabitants of Long Island, New York, imported their gravestones from New England, New York, and New Jersey (Levine 1978:47).

Persons from the Middle Atlantic and Chesapeake-Tidewater regions wishing to procure gravestones had to order them from a source area and pay the cost of shipment as

well as the cost of the stone. This factor caused gravestones to be less widely distributed in areas where they had to be imported. The cost of gravestone procurement in areas dependent upon importation limited the purchase of gravestones to a wealthier segment of the population. Gravestones thus became indicators of socio-economic status.

Although merely a myth in New England, the overwhelming majority of gravestones in Tidewater Virginia prior to 1780 were imported from England (Crowell 1978:16). This is documented by evidence appearing in wills, estate inventories, family papers, signed gravestones, and Public Records Office Accounts of Imports and Exports to Virginia and Maryland. Dependence upon English gravestones in Virginia continued until the time of the American Revolution due to the close ties with the motherland. Concerning southern Maryland, similar historical sources indicate that gravestones from the earliest period were also procured from England (Mackie 1985). Beginning around 1740, an increasing number of people from St. Mary's county imported their gravestones from Philadelphia and, between 1785 and 1820, stones manufactured in Baltimore and Washington were predominant. This pattern of gravestone procurement is indicative of increasing localization in trade patterns involving St. Mary's County and outlying market areas (Mackie 1984, 1985). Cape May County, New Jersey was also dependent upon imported gravestones, procuring them from Philadelphia (Crowell 1983:86). In the Middle Atlantic and Chesapeake-Tidewater regions, when importation was necessary, the number of stone gravemarkers was limited and merely the presence or absence of stones indicated status.

Persons of higher social and economic position were more likely to have gravestones than the poorer members of the community. This phenomenon is particularly demonstrated in Virginia and southern Maryland. In Virginia, 47 stones dated to the seventeenth century while 147 dated from the period 1700 to 1780. In St. Mary's County,

the extant data base in combination with an early printed survey (Ridgely 1908) revealed that 6 stones dated to the seventeenth century, and 11 stones represented the period 1700 to 1780. In both Virginia and St. Mary's County, gravestones marked the graves of the more prestigious residents of the areas. Even accounting for the natural attrition of gravestones through time, neglect, and vandalism, the dearth of grave-markers indicates that thousands of graves were either unmarked or marked with wooden markers which have since deteriorated. Use of wooden gravemarkers has been demonstrated in England (Burgess 1963:28) and in the New World (Deetz 1977:88; Crowell 1979:14; Parker 1985). As previously mentioned, however, no archaeological or historical evidence definitively indicates the use of wooden gravemarkers in either the Middle Atlantic or the Chesapeake-Tidewater regions. With regard to unmarked graves, there was English precedent. John Weever noted in 1631:

it was the vfe and cvftome in reuerend antiquitie to interre perfons of the rvfticke or plebeian fort in Chriftian bvriall without any fvrtther remembrance of them either by tombe, graueftone or epitaph (10).

FORM AND DECORATION

Gravestone styles being utilized in differing regions varied widely (see Table I). Flat slabs, box tombs, and table tombs were utilized in both regions to commemorate the deaths of prestigious individuals. In the Chesapeake-Tidewater in the seventeenth century, these styles of markers comprised 100% of the stones, and continued to dominate during the period 1700-1780 (85.7%). Conversely, however, these styles made up only 14.8 of the Philadelphia sample, and 5% of the Cape May County assemblage. Markers of identical styles were being utilized in England as well. John Weever observed that:

Sepvlchres fhould bee made according to the qvalities and degree of the perfon deceafed that

by the Tombe everyone might be difcerned of what rank hee was liuning (1631:10).

He continued:

Perfons of the meaner fort of Gentrie were interred with a flat graueftone . . . Noblemen . . . had . . . their tombes raifed aloft aboue the ground to note the excellence of their ftate or dignitie (Weever 1631:10).

Slabs, box tombs, and table tombs were a visible representation of status.

Headstones were the predominant style of stone in St. Mary's County, Maryland after 1780 (89%), and throughout the period in Philadelphia (85.2%) and Cape May County, New Jersey (95.7%) (Table I). In the Philadelphia sample, since a large percentage of the population had marked graves, headstones can be seen as a rather democratic style of marker. Conversely, the mere presence of a gravestone in Cape May County and in St. Mary's County, where importation was necessary, indicates some degree of status.

Gravestone decoration also varied widely from region to region. In Virginia, the predominant decoration on gravestones was the coat of arms, which revealed the importance of status. All individuals having gravestones which bore this imagery were members of the gentry. The other motif in Virginia, the skull with crossed bones, appeared on only seven stones. The remainder of the stones were undecorated.

In the Middle Atlantic area gravestones were customarily undecorated. Philadelphia and Cape May County residents both acquired their gravemarkers from Philadelphia. Because Philadelphia was a Quaker stronghold throughout the eighteenth century, predominant views against ornamentalism resulted in a lack of gravestone decoration. Consequently, other gravestone attributes had to be examined to derive meaning. The most important of these was the exterior shape of the stone. It was noted that the upper halves of some gravestones in silhouette resemble winged cherubs in flight. These eighteenth century "cherub-shaped" stones were followed by several transitional styles culminating in a Neoclas-

sical style appearing in the 1780's (see Figure 2 and 3). Inscriptions and epitaphs associated with the "cherub-shaped" style correspond to those of the New England cherub, while those associated with the Neoclassical style correspond to the New England urn and willow. From these observations the concept of "sensitivity of form" was defined (Crowell 1983:120). This concept suggests that the exterior shape of undecorated gravestones can represent meaning.

BURIAL PATTERNS

Regional variation also occurs in burial patterns. Spatial- locational distribution of burials is dependent upon settlement patterns and the development of transportation. In a town setting such as Philadelphia, the churchyard was the sole locus of burial. The lack of space in urban areas may also have contributed to the establishment of more formal areas for burial. In the cases of Cape May County, Tidewater Virginia, and St. Mary's County, there were three patterns of burial which changed as the settlement patterns changed. When the settlers in each of these areas arrived, an area was sequestered at each of the original settlements (Town Bank, Cape May County; Jamestown, Virginia; St. Mary's City, Maryland) for the burial of the dead. When the population began to move out of these settlements onto plantations, this necessitated the establishment of plantation cemeteries. Although the English settlers preferred the idea of burial of the dead in churchyards, they realized the necessity of burying people in private family burying grounds on plantations, as is illustrated in this letter from James Blair to Alexander Spotswood in Virginia, written in 1719:

But it is a common thing all over the country now (what thro' the want of ministers, what by their great distance, and the heat of the weather and the smelling of the corps) to bury at places other than churchyards (Perry 1870:230).

A second account of Virginia by Hugh Jones states:

The parishes being of great extent (some sixty miles long and upward) many dead corpses cannot be conveyed to the church to be buried (Jones 1956:97).

This necessitated the custom of interring the deceased:

in gardens and orchards where whole families lie interred together, in a spot usually handsomely enclosed, planted with evergreens and the graves kept decently (Jones 1956:97).

Beginning in about 1780, burial at the churchyard began to become a more common practice. The transition to churchyard burial can be attributed in part to improved road conditions and other improvements in transportation. In addition, the fervor of religious revivals occurring at this time (as is evidenced in Cape May County) may have stimulated additional interest in churchyard burial (Crowell 1983:32).

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of similarities and differences in regional patterns discloses some of the causation behind them. When local stone was abundant, more people had the opportunity to procure gravestones. In the absence of a source of local stone, the presence of the stone gravemarker was a symbol of status. Availability of local stone, cost, and ease of procurement determined whether the presence of a gravestone was related to status. Form and decoration of gravestones was determined by social and religious considerations. Virginia was a very class-oriented society and style of stone chosen (slabs, box tombs, or table tombs) and predominant decoration (coat of arms) reflected this orientation. Philadelphians, most likely influenced by the simplicity of the dominant Quaker culture, chose to produce undecorated gravestones, however the sentiments reflected by the form and inscriptions closely paralleled New England. Burial patterns differed according to settlement patterns.

Similar patterns should occur in other studies conducted in the Middle Atlantic

and Chesapeake-Tidewater regions, and there are new patterns to be discovered. There is a need for additional studies to be conducted in these regions to provide more comparative data and to test the findings presented in this paper. Additional investigations should be conducted in these regions and at different time periods. In later periods, different variables may be seen as the cause for patterns occurring in the data. As important, there is a need for data comparison among these studies to determine why the patterns and variables occur. Only with further regional and chronological research will we be able to obtain a more holistic picture of American mortuary customs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper developed out of suggested Middle Atlantic and Chesapeake-Tidewater patterns first presented in Crowell's dissertation (1983:220). Several people were important in the development of these ideas, particularly Dr. Robert Schuyler, Dr. James Deetz and Dr. Henry Glassie. In the later development and discussion of these ideas the authors are particularly indebted to Dr. Garry Wheeler Stone, Mr. Fraser Neiman, Ms. Karen Stuart, Mr. Edward Flanagan and Ms. Janice Artemel. In addition, we would like to thank Ms. Gail Frace, Mr. Daniel Nolin, Mr. David Babson, Mr. Edward Tormay, Ms. Evelyn Tidlow, and Ms. Mandy Hosny for their assistance in all phases of data collection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Binford, Lewis

- 1978 Dimensional Analysis of Behavior and Site Structure: Learning from an Eskimo Hunting Stand. *American Antiquity* 43:330-361.
- 1980 Willow Smoke and Dog's Tails: Hunter Gatherer Settlement System & Site Formation. *American Antiquity* 45:4-20.

Burgess, Frederick

- 1963 *English Churchyard Memorials*. London: Lutterworth Press.

Crowell, Elizabeth A.

- 1978 Gravestones of Colonial Virginia. Unpublished manuscript. Available from author.

- 1979 Gravestones and Cemeteries in Charleston, South Carolina 1830-1860. Unpublished manuscript. Available from author.
- 1981 Philadelphia Gravestones: 1740-1820. *North-east Historical Archaeology*: 10(1981) 23-29.
- 1982 Cape May: Uncarved Images and Migratory Gravestones: Problems in Cemetery-Gravestone Studies. Paper presented at Society for Historical Archaeology Meetings Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- 1983 Migratory Monuments and Missing Motifs: An Archaeological Analysis of Mortuary Art in Cape May County, New Jersey, 1740-1810. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

Deetz, James

- 1977 *In Small Things Forgotten*. Garden City: Anchor Books, Doubleday.

Dickens, Roy S. Jr.

- 1982 *Archaeology of Urban America: The Search for Pattern and Process*. New York: Academic Press.

Glassie, Henry

- 1968 Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gorman, Frederick and Michael

DiBlasi

- 1976 Nonchronological Sources of Variation in the Seriation of Gravestone Motifs in the Northeast and Southeast Colonies. In Peter Benes, ed. *Puritan Gravestone Art*. Boston University Press and the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife. Boston.

Jones, Hugh

- 1956 *The Present State of Virginia*. Richard L. Morton, ed. University of North Carolina Press (originally published London, 1724) Chapel Hill.

Levine, Gaynell Stone

- 1978 Colonial Long Island Gravestones: Trade Network Indicators, 1670-1799. In Peter Benes, ed. *Puritan Gravestone Art II*. Boston University Press and the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife.

Mackie, Norman Vardney, III

- 1983 An Analysis of Early Gravestones in St. Mary's County, Maryland. Paper presented at Council on Northeast Historical Archaeology meetings. New Windsor, New York.
- 1984 The Gravestones of St. Mary's County, Maryland: An Analysis of Source and Status 1750-1830. Paper presented at the Society for Historical Archaeology Meetings. Williamsburg, Virginia.
- 1985 The Socioeconomic History of Gravestone Procurement in Southern Maryland, 1645-1820. Paper presented at the Society for

Historical Archaeology Meetings. Boston, Massachusetts.

Weever, John

1631 *Ancient Funerall Monuments*. London.

Parker, Jeffrey S.

1985 O'er Neptunes Water I've Crossed: New Perspectives on the Ancient Tradition of Wooden Gravemarkers. Paper presented at Society for Historical Archaeology Meetings, Boston, Massachusetts.

Perry, Bishop William Stevens

1870 Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church. Church Press. Hartford, Connecticut.

Ravenal, Beatrice St. James

1942 Here Lies Buried: Taste and Trade in Charleston Tombstones. *Antiques* 41:193-195.

Ridgely, Helen

1908 *Historic Graves of Maryland and the District of Columbia*. Grafton Press. New York.

Authors:

Elizabeth A. Crowell

Engineering-Science Company

Division of Cultural Resources

1201 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.

Suite 520

Washington, D.C. 20036

Norman Vardney Mackie III

College of William and Mary

Department of Anthropology

Williamsburg, Virginia 23185