

## Talking Tombstones or Grave Gossip

Well, I have heard of tombstones that have electronics that speak to you about the deceased when you walk up to it—but that is not the subject of this article. I thought it would be good to give a general discussion about graveyards with a specific discussion about local tombstone materials. Hopefully it will give you new eyes as you look at graveyards.

I have had training in graveyard restoration. The key guidance organization is the Association for Graveyard Studies.

### Graveyard History

Before 1831, America had no cemeteries. It's not that Americans didn't bury their dead—just that large, modern graveyards did not exist. But with the construction of Mount Auburn Cemetery in 1831, a large burial ground in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the movement to build cemeteries in America began. The old church burial grounds were beginning to be seen as inadequate, dangerous, crowded, expensive to maintain, and as carriers of disease. Therefore, these new large cemeteries were built as “rural” cemeteries. Of course as cities grew, we would no longer see these as rural. (The Atlantic March 16, 2011) These cemeteries were modeled after French ones. In contrast, Germany considers a grave to only exist for 25 years. Unless the family takes measures to preserve it, headstones are broken up and used for roadbed. In the United States, a headstone would represent a permanent record of that person. Today, many of those early headstones are unreadable and a permanent record would be an entry in a database, see FindAGrave or BillionGraves.

### Williamson County Historical Commission

In Williamson County the two key players are Wayne Ware the Chairman of the graveyard committee of the Williamson County Historical Commission. The member of the committee is John Christeson. In Texas, graveyards and historical sites are administered by county historical commissions and there is also a state office called the Texas Historical Commission. If you use FindAGrave in Williamson County, you will see John is the main contributor. His work is priceless in documenting this history.

### Graveyards decay.

Marble stones deteriorate because of weather and pollution. Grass and weeds grow. Trees destroy stones. Vandals tear down and break up headstones. Construction covers up or relocates graveyards.

The best preservative is a well-kept graveyard. This is the objective of the Williamson County Historical Commission. By Texas law desecrating a graveyard is a punishable offense. Per the law, a graveyard is anywhere a person is buried. A court order is needed to relocate a grave.

### Tombstone Design

There are only three types of tombstones: tablet, slot, and stacked.

There are a lot of designs with special meanings. The internet can provide you with a description. For example, a lamb means it was a child that died.

### Grave Layout

Modern layout is with the inscription facing the interred remains. People standing by the grave can see the inscription.

Historically the layout was as follows:

- Inscription is on the opposite side of the stone from the remains. You can read the stone without standing on the grave.
- The grave is positioned so that when the person sits up in their grave at the resurrection, they are facing east to greet the Savior at his Second Coming.
- There is a footstone, usually with initials.

### Tombstone Material

Materials used have been wood, slate, sandstone, marble, granite and metal. Most are made of marble or granite.

In my training, the rule of thumb given was that granite gravestones came into use about 1920, because prior to that they did not have the tools to cut the stones. The first issue this year of the Chisholm Trail mentioned the grave of A R Rude, and included a photo of the gravestone which is of granite and dated 1883. I felt this must be newer in origin (not an original), but in discussion with Karen Matheson, she challenged that idea and felt it occurred much earlier. This exchange resulted in the following research and data.

Karen found the following references:

- "Granite came into fashion in America in the middle of the 19th century, and remains the gravestone material of choice today." Source: [http://www.headstonesandmemorials.com/History\\_of\\_the\\_Headstone\\_Granite\\_Headstone\\_History.php](http://www.headstonesandmemorials.com/History_of_the_Headstone_Granite_Headstone_History.php)
- "The most popular materials for gravestones during this era were marble (1780-1930), granite (1860-until date), iron, and wood." Source: <http://www.iscga.org/history-of-gravestones.html>
- "By 1850, granite became the preferred headstone material due to its resilience and accessibility. In modern memorials granite is the main raw material used." Source: <http://www.madehow.com/Volume-7/Headstone.html>

I found the following reference:

<http://www.monuments.com/blog/grave-markers/why-granite-is-preferred-for-cemetery-monuments>

#### Why Are There So Many Marble Monuments?

Many older cemeteries from the 1850's through the 1940's are filled with monuments made of marble because it was less expensive to cut, polish and carve with the tools of that time. Unfortunately, this is why many of those old marble memorials are nearly unreadable today—while granite memorials from the same time, are easily read and show almost no deterioration.

Certain conditions (salt, hydrocarbon and sulfur dioxide pollution) contribute to the decomposition of the calcite structure of marble and allow it to be eroded rather rapidly. Some

marbles are more durable than others. Also, dry, rural areas (without major automobile and industrial pollution) are less damaging to marble.

Marble was used almost exclusively before the 1920's. Then, gradually, better tools and techniques—wire saws, sandblast carving, carbide and diamond tools—allowed more efficient quarrying, cutting, polishing and carving of the harder granite. Today granite has proven the most durable and is the preferred choice of most customers for cemetery headstones.

The major organization for gravestones is The Association for Gravestone Studies. They have annual conferences. The following comment about marble is at the following site

Marble - Predominant stone for gravestones in the 19th century

<https://www.gravestonestudies.org/component/content/article/88-preservation-conservation/100-preservation-and-conservation-2#faqnoanchor>

I suspect the difference in information is one of practical use. Marble could be hand chiseled whereas granite could not. Granite needed more sophisticated tools. Marble hand carved with chisels was a step up from using an awl on a piece of slate. So the question really is what did the local gravestone cutter have at his disposal.

The Texas State Capital Bldg was completed in 1883 and is built of red granite with a limestone base. Originally its exterior was to be of limestone, but it streaked and more expensive granite was chosen after a 2 year debate. Many of the outside surfaces are not polished to reduce expense, whereas in today's construction we always polish the granite. So whereas we could cut granite in the late 1880s, we generally did not.

Michaelangelo's David is made of marble. He would not have been able to carve it in granite. So carved tombstones are made of marble.

Climatic variations also influence the weathering rate of granites. For about two thousand years, the relief engravings on Cleopatra's Needle obelisk had survived the arid conditions of its origin prior to its transfer to London. Within two hundred years, the red granite has drastically deteriorated in the damp and polluted air.[14] from Granite in Wikipedia

For tombstones it is generally considered that granite does not weather and marble does. Incidentally, most tombstones from the late 1800s that people think are sandstone or limestone are actually weathered marble.

The following key historical information is also from Granite in Wikipedia

#### Sculpture and memorials

In some areas granite is used for gravestones and memorials. Granite is a hard stone and requires skill to carve by hand. Until the early 18th century, in the Western world, granite could only be carved by hand tools with generally poor results.

A key breakthrough was the invention of steam-powered cutting and dressing tools by Alexander MacDonald of Aberdeen, inspired by seeing ancient Egyptian granite carvings. In 1832 the first polished tombstone of Aberdeen granite to be erected in an English cemetery was

installed at Kensal Green cemetery. It caused a sensation in the London monumental trade and for some years all polished granite ordered came from MacDonalds. Working with the sculptor William Leslie, and later Sidney Field, granite memorials became a major status symbol in Victorian Britain. The royal sarcophagus at Frogmore was probably the pinnacle of its work, and at 30 tons one of the largest. It was not until the 1880s that rival machinery and works could compete with the MacDonald works.

Modern methods of carving include using computer-controlled rotary bits and sandblasting over a rubber stencil. Leaving the letters, numbers and emblems exposed on the stone, the blaster can create virtually any kind of artwork or epitaph.

I think that paragraph gives the essence of the issue. You needed a mechanized stone works to deal with granite. The local stone cutter did not have access to that. You also learn in the last paragraph, that the letter work even in today's granite gravestones is done by sandblasting instead of actually carving. That is why you see the flat lettering on granite and the carved groove lettering in marble. Remember we transitioned from horses to cars in the early 1900s. The industrial age was just settling in.

I conclude that while it is true in the middle 19th century they became available from the MacDonald works in Scotland and were preferred, granite was not generally used until 1920 when tools became more available to gravestone cutters and granite stones became generally affordable.

#### Williamson County

However, I note the death date for A R Rude was 1883, the same year the state capital was completed. Could it be that in the Austin area that granite technology was available at an earlier date because of the construction of the capital? I tried calling a monument company in Georgetown TX which had started business in 1906. However, the lady who answered the phone did not know if they had been providing granite headstones when they started. One other thing puzzling about the A R Rude headstone is that it appears to me to be placed on a piece of concrete.

It seemed a little cataloging of a local cemetery may be in order to resolve the question. I could take a sample of a local cemetery and document the material of the headstones and correlate with dates.

I selected two small cemeteries near my home. They are Union Hill and St John's.

Union Hill has 63 interments consisting of the following markers:

- Slate 1
- Marble 46 1878 to 1934
- Granite 13 1894 to 2000
- Missing 3

So the results show that marble did not phase out quickly.

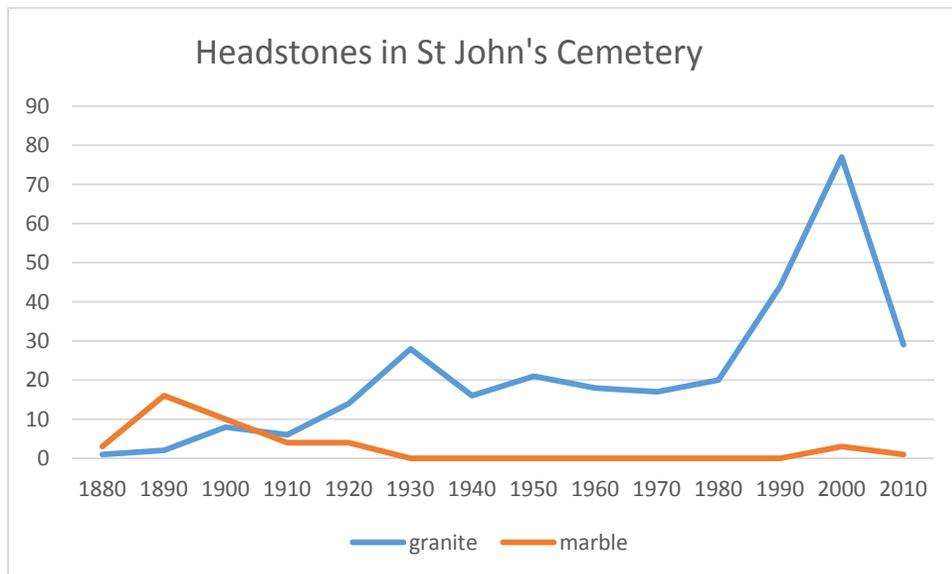
The 1908 headstone may be new. I noticed it was not on the interment list for Union Hill cemetery.

I am suspicious of the 1894 and 1911 headstones. These could both be replacements as well. The only way to check is see if Avalon, who is the main monument store in Georgetown, had made replacements.

I don't think there is any question about the 1927 and later granite headstones being original.

St John's has 370 interments.

- Slate 0
- Marble 42 1881 to 2011
- Granite 327 1884 to 2015
- Bronze 1 1968



The chart shows that marble was essentially done by 1930 and that granite surpassed marble in 1910. The oldest granite (1884) is part of a family that had a nice marble monument with individual granite stones dating until 1971. So that stone may be a duplicate.

### Conclusion

The transition from marble to granite did not occur rapidly. Granite required better tools and technique and expense. Marble was still used for many decades either because it was easier/cheaper to manufacture or because it had to be used to make a desired ornate tombstone. However, some granite may occur as early as the 1880s, but would have been obtained at considerable effort/expense—a status symbol for the dead. Alternatively older granite stones may be replacements for original marble stones. Families may replace them to make them more permanent or match the family stones currently in use. Research for an individual stone would likely be necessary to make a determination.