

Prince George's Chapel Cemetery

Funeral ceremonies are of course highly ritualistic and bring many images to mind. I think of the traditional eulogies spoken on the deceased person's behalf, often by tear-stained and emotionally-drained survivors. I also think of the somber handshaking, back-patting and Kleenex-passing that marks every funeral service. And finally, the slow vehicular procession to the graveyard comes to mind, where once reached, awkward and hushed whispering precedes the last panegyric words that herald the deceased person's passing into a "better world."

Many of the funerals I have attended have been for family members and have taken place at Prince George's Chapel Cemetery (located in Dagsboro, Delaware), which is about a mile from my house. At every funeral my mother kindly reminds me that not only does the cemetery hold the remains of my great-grandparents, grandparents, and other family members, but it will also hold mine too when I die. Therefore, when I learned by chance that the Town of Dagsboro had no records of many of the older gravestones in the cemetery, I immediately took a vested interest in the situation. Yet, the importance of protecting and preserving graveyards and the gravestones in them should be recognized beyond the personal level. Graveyards are an invaluable resource, providing insights into the social and cultural history of past peoples; the gravestones, themselves, are in their own right "archaeological artifacts" (Strangstad 1988:1).

Graveyards are veritable outdoor museums easily accessible to the public (Strangstad 1988). Gravestones serve as a census of the local populace and at times supply the only surviving documentation of people's existence because of the impermanent nature of the written record before modern technological advances. In

addition, gravestones are unique because of their relatively stationary nature within cemeteries (excluding natural mishaps and/or theft and vandalism) in comparison to other artifacts (Chase and Gabel 1990). Gravestones thus provide an historical snapshot into the life of the deceased persons and their family members.

Prince George's Chapel, a chapel-of-ease for the Church of England, was built in 1757 and named after the then infant Prince George, who later became King George III of England. After the Revolutionary War, circa 1789, the Chapel would become a part of the newly created Protestant Episcopal Church. By the mid-1800s the Chapel was falling into disrepair, and church services became more and more sporadic. In the early 1970's, through private donations and state and federal funding, the Chapel was restored as closely as possible to its original condition. It is now a State-owned historic site, maintained by a local philanthropic group of citizens known as The Friends of Prince George's Chapel (Gerkin 1996). The Friends meet regularly to plan events and activities to raise monies for the Chapel, such as their annual ice cream festival on the Chapel grounds. The Chapel is open by appointment to the public and is also available for special events.

The Friends of Prince George's Chapel, however, do not maintain the cemetery itself. That responsibility falls exclusively to the Town Council of Dagsboro, which is the Trustee of the Prince George's Cemetery Fund—a fund to maintain the cemetery as a perpetual care cemetery. As the Trustee, the Town Council has a duty to invest prudently all monies held in trust for the cemetery (monies raised principally through the sale of burial plots) and to use the interest accrued thereon to pay for grass or tree maintenance and for other aesthetic improvements, such as the recently renovated split-rail fence that

surrounds three sides of the cemetery (in the front of the cemetery is a red brick wall, facing State Route 26). Unfortunately, a committee (the Prince George's Cemetery Committee), historically appointed by the Town Council and charged with oversight of the cemetery grounds, has been largely moribund, although I note that this research project has evidently spurred a renewed interest in the cemetery's preservation (Patricia C. Adams 2008, pers. comm.).

The cemetery that surrounds the Chapel can be divided into three distinct sections. The front section (facing State Route 26) split into two parts—east and west — is currently an active cemetery, while the back section contains most of the older graves and is no longer used as a cemetery. Gravestones in the older, unused section show dates from the 1800s; the oldest gravestone is dated 17 April 1816. The newer, front section is better documented but still needs work. For this course, my research has focused exclusively on the old section, which is completely undocumented and unmapped.

The gravestones in the older section are in poor condition—the stones are often faded, flaking or chipping, and discolored by lichen growth. As a result, inscriptions can be difficult (sometimes nearly impossible) to read. Weather is a natural decaying process that affects many surfaces. “When water gets into the cracks of a headstone and freezes, it expands, causing stress on the marker. This weakens the stone and makes it more prone to other hazards” (Carmack 2002:95). Lichen and moss exacerbate this problem. Additionally, pollution contributes to the erosion of gravestones, with the Delaware Valley region being on the list of geographic areas with the worst “graveyard deterioration” (Carmack 2002:95). Certain stones like sandstone, limestone, and marble are less weather resistant than others, which is why stones like granite are popular today

(Carmack 2008:99-101). The majority of the gravestones in Prince George's are either limestone or marble (both common to the 19th century). Because of the age and sensitive nature of the gravestones, it is thus imperative that the information recorded on them be preserved as it is uncertain how much longer this information will remain intact and legible.

A common misconception surrounding cemeteries is that a record exists on everybody buried in them. I was quite surprised when I learned that virtually no one knew the names or had a registry of information on the people buried in the older section of Prince George's Chapel Cemetery. Worse still, I discovered no layout map exists of the old section of the cemetery (Patricia C. Adams 2008 pers. comm.). During my field examinations on the site, I literally stumbled upon several grave slabs completely concealed by dirt and grass that would not have been visible to the casual observer. Gravestones serve as a physical representation not only of a person who lived and died but more broadly of the cultural and religious beliefs extant in a bygone era. The neglect and loss of such artifacts is of course detrimental on a personal and local level. Just as important, however, is the loss to our broader cultural heritage and common historical roots.

The most obvious information tombstones provide is personal history. Family "grave groupings" give testament to family relations, to close relatives, and to the personal tragedies of early settlers. "Such intimate early histories of ordinary citizens are rare to find, except in graveyards" (Strangstad 1988:3). The arrangement of graveyards reveals these connections, and the layout varies depending upon what was important to the people. The majority of the gravestones in Prince George's Chapel Cemetery were in

family plots, many of which were fairly large. Christian graves were “usually aligned east-west, with the feet to the east, though there were exceptions” (Poirier and Bellantoni 1997:204). This was done so that when the Resurrection occurred the body would rise up facing east with the rising sun. The majority of the graves in the old section of Prince George’s Chapel Cemetery were oriented eastward in this Christian fashion.

Graveyards yield more than just personal information; they often provide an insight into the economic conditions of the local community.

If there are a lot of elaborately carved markers and mausoleums, then it’s a well-off community. If you find rocks instead of markers, a lot of homemade markers, or the funeral home temporary marker still in place after many years, then the area is (or was) economically depressed. (Carmack 2002:94-95)

In the case of the old section of the Prince George’s Chapel Cemetery, most tombstones are simple with few if any decorations. Thus, although it might not have been financially distressed, Dagsboro did not have an abundance of community wealth either. Rather, Dagsboro was known for its livestock, farming and small businesses (Munroe 2003). Pepper’s Creek ran through the center of town and provided an important trade route to cities like Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Trenton. Surely, life was not easy for Dagsboro residents, and the simplicity of the gravestones supports the fact that in all likelihood Dagsboro residents were of modest economic means.

In addition, one can learn much from cemeteries about the type of work or employment prevalent in a community. The majority of the gravestones in Prince George’s Chapel Cemetery do not mention people’s occupations, and this would seem to confirm the idea that most Dagsboro residents had average, hardworking jobs. Still occasionally, people’s occupations will be listed. For example, the headstone of Edward

Dingle showed that he was a doctor whether in medicine or in education by placing the abbreviation, “DOC” before his name.

While people who had important or notable positions are more likely to have their work and achievements mentioned on their gravestones, this was not always the case. This is seen in the marker of William Hill Wells, Esquire who was a U.S. senator, but whose headstone does not convey this information. Religious beliefs and memberships in organizations are often recorded on markers. Prince George’s Chapel Cemetery gravestones show the local people to be followers of Christianity, based upon their epitaphs. Still, no evidence of organizational memberships is recorded. Perhaps the people were too busy working to become involved with organizations, or there were none in the area? The only interesting reference was one person’s membership in the P.E. (Protestant Episcopal) church—as if the family was saying, “She was a loyal member of this church!” “On some headstones, you may find where people in the community originated, such as places of birth or evidence that a person moved to the area from another state or country” (Carmack 2002:93). Migration patterns also give an insight into the community’s ethnicity. There were no such references to other countries or states at this site.

Gravestones also often inform about epidemics and disasters that struck the people. Diseases that hit the area and were otherwise unrecorded are seen in the commonality of death dates on tombstones. The late 1850’s saw the dangerous spread of influenza worldwide, and in the 1860’s through the ‘70’s diseases such as smallpox, typhoid, cholera, and scarlet fever were rampant. Notably, it was during these very years that Prince George’s Chapel Cemetery had the most burials. Thus, it is possible that these

people could have died from disease, especially since Dagsboro was an active trading center thanks to Pepper's Creek. However, the highly contagious nature of these diseases makes this theory questionable, because all those who died (except for two) were from different families. Therefore, it seems unlikely that some huge disease-related disaster hit Dagsboro.

The average life expectancy of people in the community can also be determined from gravestones. In Prince George's Chapel Cemetery many of the graves belong to children, teens and young adults. The greatest number of those are in the age brackets of zero (years) to nine years old. Still, some people did live to a reasonably old age, with the oldest being an astounding 91 years old! This individual probably had access to better health care since she (Mary E. Gray Steen) died in 1929.

The very material that was used to make gravestones can be highly informative.

The interest in

superior materials can reveal to us the trade routes and commercial patterns that were established, sometimes at surprisingly early points in history. Tracing such early routes gives us an idea of where trading was common as well as the relatively early sophistication of trade, particularly in coastal areas. Farther west, the difficulty of transporting massive stone overland is evident for many years in the overwhelming use of local stone. (Strangstad 1988:2)

Some gravestones have the name of the stonecutter and his business location on the tombstone markers. The grave markers at Prince George's indicated that the makers were mostly local craftsmen. "Most carvers distributed their product over a relatively small geographical area, perhaps thirty-odd miles across. Within such an area, distinctive styles of stones can be seen to concentrate in one town and become less common as [one] move[s] away from it" (Deetz 1996:91). Still, there were several gravestones (all

belonging to the Dingle family) that were shipped from Philadelphia (most likely transported via Pepper's Creek), suggesting that this family was much wealthier than most.

The carvings on gravestones can be quite detailed. For example:

examination of early central motifs and border carvings suggests the development of symbols and an iconography, which changed both regionally and with the development of the country. From these carvings we learn of changing attitudes toward death and immortality at different periods in American history (Strangstad 1988:2).

Most of the carvings on markers in the Prince George's Chapel Cemetery are of wilted flowers, willow trees, or leaves and vines. "Beginning in the early 1800s and into the 1900s, attitudes toward death changed, and the winged death head [popular before the 19th century] was replaced by symbols depicting mourning, hope, and the resurrection..." (Carmack 2002:130).

Epitaphs also reveal changing societal views toward death and often came from various forms of literature popular at the time. The epitaphs of this time period often praised "...the individual in terms of worldly achievements"—they were a good father, mother, spouse etc., (Deetz 1996:100). Additionally, well-cut epitaphs displayed the skill level of the carver. During the 1800s, "epitaphs, short poems, or sentiments beneath inscriptions generally appear on commercial stones and on stones carved by the most competent backcountry stonecutters" (Little 1998:16).

Without a doubt, inscriptions and epitaphs (in particular those carved in italicized, cursive font) posed the biggest problem for me, because reading them was quite difficult. Unfortunately, many of the epitaphs were difficult to transcribe due to their exposure to the elements and to their limestone composition. Thus, it was crucial for me to establish a

carefully planned transcription process that ensured the safety of the stones and that guaranteed no information was lost due to ignorance or disregard of details. A surprising amount of preparation goes into this work.

The first and perhaps most critical step before beginning work in a cemetery is to obtain permission in writing to work there. Getting in trouble with the authorities for suspicious activities in the local graveyard is certainly an undesirable fate for what one intended as a good deed. Once legal approval has been granted, the next step is gathering supplies for the work. One should bring a tote bag, sunscreen, bug repellent, first aid kit, notebook, pencil, measurement tools, garden shears, knee pads, wisk broom and, most importantly, blackboard chalk and a spray bottle filled with water.

Chalk is an essential part of transcribing gravestone inscriptions. Many sources recommend the utilization of a mirror (to shine a stronger light on the words), rubbings, or photography in the transcription process. Several people who have worked in cemeteries recommend going to the graveyards just when the sun is about to set, because then the light will shine the brightest on the headstone (because the inscribed side of tombstones often faces westward). Nonetheless, I have found that these methods are not nearly as helpful or as effective as that of chalk. White chalk, commonly used on school blackboards, is the best type to use on gravestones. Colored chalk can stain the stone; sidewalk chalk is harder than regular chalk and thus more likely to scratch the stone (Carmack 2002). One should gently rub the chalk across the inscribed area and then, after recording the information, spray the area with water, making sure all remnants of the chalk have been washed off. While chalk is an accepted aid, it should only be used if

absolutely necessary, because it still damages the stone, however minor that damage might be.

When transcribing a marker, the entire inscription should be copied down exactly as it was on the stone. This should include capitalizations, abbreviations, punctuations, misspellings, etc., because it shows the writing style common to the time period. If one is unable to decipher a number, word or letter, then brackets should be placed around the selected section within the inscription. (Carmack 2002). The current condition of the stone, the material, the style and the measurements of the gravestone should all be noted. A form for recording the information is very helpful, as it ensures that the same attention to detail is paid to each and every gravestone. Finally, it is advisable that these transcriptions be typed in order to ensure the quality of the work and to make it more understandable for future readers.

Furthermore, although photography can be particularly helpful in deciphering inscriptions, it also should be used in the overall documentation process. By having an image of the actual gravestone, one provides a visual back-up copy of the textual information one has documented. It is also helpful when one is attempting to locate the gravestone for further work, especially for those who are unfamiliar with the graveyard and its layout. The picture, moreover, preserves the image of the tombstone as it was at that moment. After all, the elements continue to degrade the stone as time goes by; therefore, the picture provides evidence as to the gravestone's condition at a given moment in time.

A crucial step in preserving a graveyard's historical authenticity is mapping it and the people resting there. If an earlier map is available, its accuracy should be checked and any possible errors corrected.

If funding permits, and especially if the yard is large and complex, the ideal approach to map making is to provide an accurate survey by professional aerial photography or ground survey. Most often the map must be made by volunteers, however. The use of a grid system and the conscientious measuring of each stone from two fixed points will ensure a reasonable accurate map. (Strangstad 1988:36)

The improvement or creation of a map will allow visitors to quickly locate gravestones of interest to them and to document the exact location of particular graves. After the graveyard has been fully documented, all associated documents and materials should be given to the local town and/or church (whoever is in charge of the graveyard) and also to the state archives. This will allow the information to be accessible to the general public and to ensure its continuity.

Once the gravestones within the graveyard have been properly documented, steps should then be taken to preserve and maintain them. Although it is certainly comforting to know that records (now) exist on the gravestones for the benefit of future generations, it is far more rewarding to know that the stones are in good enough condition to be appreciated by all. Maintaining the graveyard itself will also protect the stones. Mowing and weed-eating should be done carefully so as to avoid damage to the stones. Young trees adjacent to the gravestones can dislodge and crack gravestones and must be removed carefully, if possible. Additionally, commercial herbicides should not be sprayed near tombstones. "Virtually all contain salts or acids that are damaging to most stone, particularly marble and limestone. Fertilizers may also be acidic and should be used sparingly" (Strangstad 1988:48).

Cleaning old gravestones is an enormously controversial topic amongst those active in their preservation and conservation. After hearing horror stories about towns that were ignorant of the appropriate cleaning methods (such as power-washing), I am leery of the cleaning process. No definitive answer exists on whether it is better to restore tombstones or to leave them as they are. Although certain cleaning or restoration methods are better than others, the possibility of irreparably damaging the stone is very high. Some choose to take this risk, in a desire to reveal the characteristics of the stones, which have been hidden under years of grime and pollution.

If one decides to go ahead and clean a gravestone, then the stone should be in relatively good condition (avoid cleaning it if it seems unstable). After wetting the stone with water, it should be gently scrubbed with a soft-bristled brush and then wet again. This should be followed by an application of a very mild cleaning agent; then rinse the stone again with water. It is best to practice on a small area at the outset to check for adverse reactions before cleaning the entire gravestone (Strangstad 1988). Carmack (2002) recommends that professional assistance be requested before cleaning because of the high possibility of damaging the stone.

Dealing with theft and vandalism is another issue graveyard caretakers must confront. Although some people have no intention to do harm—carelessness with rubbings can often inadvertently damage stones—others are more aware of their actions and will purposely damage a stone out of pure vindictiveness (tombstones have been used for target practice, for example, and for other senseless purposes). “Stone fragments are vulnerable to theft by collectors and thoughtless souvenir-hunters...” (Strangstad 1988:51). Therefore, it is important that proper care and attention be given to the

graveyard and that the public be educated about the site and involved in its upkeep. A cemetery properly maintained and actively supported by its community will be far less vulnerable to abuse or vandalism.

Prince George's Chapel Cemetery has not been the victim of any form of theft or vandalism (of which I am aware) over its long history. Though it has been fortunate in this regard, however, it has suffered from moderate neglect over the years. The gravestones themselves range in condition from poor to serious, with several toppled over, broken, or completely hidden. Nor is the cemetery's condition static. Only one week after I had visited the site, I noticed that one of the headstones had completely separated from its base.

After having worked closely in the older section of Prince George's Chapel Cemetery documenting the gravestones, I became intrigued by the discrepancy in the death dates of the people buried there. The transcription of the gravestones revealed that the people buried in the cemetery dated from the 1800s—the earliest being 1816. Yet the church was built in 1757! How then can one explain why there were no burials during this almost sixty-year timeframe? Surely there were parishioners of the Chapel who perished during this period. Where were they buried?

One possible explanation is that the Revolutionary War affected the number (or lack thereof) of burials at the cemetery. That is, perhaps the Chapel (named after the King with whom the colonies were at war) fell out of favor during the Revolutionary War period. Maybe it became more acceptable to bury family members there after the war had ended and Prince George's became part of the Protestant Episcopal Church.

Alternatively, one might hypothesize that most burials between 1757 and the early 1800's

took place on the farms and plantations where most people lived, while that trend abated in the late 1800's as more people lived on smaller plots of ground in the growing town of Dagsborough.

Another more distressing concern is the unusually large gaps between grave plots in the old section of the cemetery. Since the whole cemetery can be divided into three sections, why are there some 19th century gravestones in the “newer” section if the old section does not appear to be completely full? Although it is impossible to know the exact answer to this question, one can draw another reasonable inference from the evidence. That is, it seems highly possible that there are unmarked graves interspersed amongst the marked graves. Many local people deny the possibility of this assertion, or profess to be unaware of it. Others, however, are convinced that the cemetery has more people in it than are presently accounted for. Some sources credit these unmarked graves to “the Negroes who attended Prince George’s with their masters and mistresses” (Eckman 1938:513). Of course, the missing gravestones might have been damaged and lost over time, and the likelihood of this increases if the markers were made of wood.

Nevertheless, a lot of work needs to be done to protect and preserve Prince George’s Chapel Cemetery. Further efforts must be made to record and publish gravestone information, as well as to maintain and repair damaged gravestones. Much work remains to be done with respect to investigating the “empty” sections of the cemetery. The importance of gravestones and cemeteries in our socio-cultural history—and as living artifacts—is undeniable. Their protection and preservation is equivalent to the safeguarding of our collective history. To that end, the Dagsboro Town Council, the Friends of Prince George’s Chapel, and the Prince George’s Cemetery Committee must

work together to protect and preserve these important historical artifacts. These organizations need to publicize the existing research about the site as well as the ongoing preservation and maintenance work in the Town newsletter and website and in local newspapers. The community needs to be better informed about (and more volunteers enlisted to help in) the preservation of this vanishing link to our past and to our ancestors.

Funerals always seem to end with the uncomfortable, collective wait in the cemetery as the grieving family and friends slowly make their way to the gravesite. We watch as people pace about or shuffle their feet uncomfortably, unsure what to say or do as the casket slowly is borne graveside. Others spend time curiously examining the surrounding headstones, or perhaps they stand in mournful attention at the gravestone of a relative buried nearby. Yet, what is strange about the whole situation is the realization that the grassy mounds casually crossed and the speckled stones spattered with bird poop are representative or interchangeable with living, breathing people. When one thinks of it on this level, the care of cemeteries as the “sleeping chamber” of the dead seems natural. As people are soon forgotten over time, so too are these sites. It is ironic that with the understanding of our own mortality comes the concomitant appreciation of the significance of graveyards and those long-forgotten people laid to rest in them. Viewed in this light, we should all do much more to honor and to remember those who came before us, and what better way to do so than to preserve and protect our cemeteries.

