

# The craft of tombstone rubbing

Tombstone rubbings using household goods. Included also are tips on conducting historical and geneological searches.

Tombstones are eyes into the past. Whether the stone is carved from an exquisite piece of marble, an ornamental flawless piece of granite, or a crude yet sentimentally chiseled rock, the tombstone serves as a monument to a life lived. Tombstones can convey various messages about the people buried beneath them. Epitaphs not only tell us when the person lived and died, but also an epitaph may reveal much about the decedent's character. For example, while exploring an old forgotten graveyard in Texas, I found the following epitaph on the tombstone of a "gentleman" who died in 1822:

John CrossB.

1760 D. 1822

He can no longer woo our wives.

This gentleman obviously had an active life!

I made a rubbing of Mr. Cross's tombstone and it hangs in my home library. Everyone who visits comments on it. We've made stories and gestures as to who Mr. Cross was and the sort of life he must have lived!

Epitaphs, as well as the often delicate, and painstaking ornamental artwork of the tombstone have fascinated graveyard enthusiasts for years. The art of tombstone rubbing is a splendid and skilled craft. It is a way to take and preserve a paper copy of the tombstone. At the end of the article, I'll give you instructions and a list of supplies so that you may get to work and begin your own collection of rubbings. What follows is a brief history of tombstone rubbings as well as how the hobby of genealogy has brought the craft of back into fashion.

Tombstone rubbings date back as far as the ancient Egyptians. When a person died and was entombed, the Egyptians carved stories, songs, poems and prayers in relief style Hieroglyphics on to the stone work inside of the tomb. Since the tomb was to be sealed, the only way that the family members could keep a momento of the lovely writings was to take a rubbing. They did this using papyrus, stones and oils. In the centuries to come, when people would move from place to place to seek a better life, they would take a rubbing of the family tombstones. This helped them to feel that they were not abandoning their loved ones. In Europe, during the 17th and 18th centuries people were leaving their homelands to explore new territories. They could not be sure if they were ever going to

return home, so taking a rubbing of a deceased loved one's tombstone was often all that the traveler had to show as a family history.

The recent interest in genealogy has inspired many people to research their ancestors. A great many surprises have been discovered by geneologists who have been able to locate an ancestor's tombstone. One friend of mine in Los Angeles, California, traced an ancestor's tomb to a largely overgrown and untended graveyard outside of Philadelphia, PA. Once the ancestor's tomb was located, she noticed at least half-a-dozen other tombstones which bore the same last name, only with a few letters missing. Further research indicated that those tombstones belonged to her great-great grandparents. The great-great parents had come from Poland with very long surnames. The later generations had chosen to shorten the name. My friend then learned that her "true" surname contained an 6 extra letters!

The craft of tombstone rubbing can be a sentimental act of preservation, a way to honor family members and friends. Also, rubbings can be used to capture unique art and ornamentations. You'll find many tombstones that are ostentatious and showy. Quite often a wealthy family erected the tombstone. Often people will leave a will that lays out specific instructions as to how the tombstone is to be sculpted. I've come across tombstones in the shapes of cats, rabbits, books, musical instruments, benches, and even a cigar. In many cases, the tombstone has been engraved with the most glorious of adornments. The ornate engravings may be of loved ones, buildings, flowers, pets, or of a religious nature.

Tombstone symbolism expresses personal choice as well as feelings that the family or the decedent wished to convey. Some of the ones that you may see are:

Flowers: flowers immortalize beauty. Specifically, Lilies convey innocence and purity.

Roses: tell of immortal love.

Lamb: most often found on the tombs of children, the lamb symbolizes gentleness.

Wreath: represents victory, either in a personal sense or as a war time memorial.

Hourglass: conveys that time passes quickly, and life is short.

Hands: When clasped in prayer, the ring finger points toward heaven in hope that the person will be admitted through the gates of heaven. Sometimes the hands will hold a chain in which a link has been broken. This signifies that God has in fact broken the chain of life and has taken the person to heaven.

Torch: symbolizes life and truth. Often used as a war commemoration.

Now to get started! Some basic rules apply. Firstly, use caution when entering a graveyard that appears to be untended. Such places tend to be a haven for rodents, insects and poisonous plants. Some graveyards are private property, so be sure to get permission. The town's historical society can usually help out with securing permission.

Supplies:

Roll of Rice Paper (can be purchased in any craft store)

1-2 WIDE black crayons. Cut them in half so that you have 4 blunt pieces.

Pair of scissors

Roll of masking tape

Small spray bottle filled with water

Pencil with eraser on the end

Old Nylon stocking

Locate the stone from which you wish to make a rubbing. If there are weeds about the stone, cut them back with the scissors. Spray the stone thoroughly with water from the spray bottle. Wait about 20 mins-30 minutes for the stone to dry. Do not attempt to dry the stone with paper towels or rags. Such items can be very abrasive to fragile stones. Once the stone is dry, take the eraser end of the pencil and cover it with the nylon stocking. Then clean out the engraved letters. Never use sticks or wire brushes, as they can damage the stone. Once you have removed the debris from the letters, use the nylon stocking to gently wipe away any excess dirt and debris that may be on the stone. Cut a piece of the rice paper that will cover the entire stone. Using the masking tape, tape the paper tightly, but not too tight; you don't want your masterpiece to rip when you begin rubbing. Take one of the blunted crayons and starting at the bottom of the stone, start

your rubbings in an upward position. Stay with the upward rubbing, or else you'll get a rubbing with lines that go every which way. Take caution when rubbing over the engravings. If you press too hard, you may rip the paper. When finished, carefully remove the tape and then gently roll the rubbing with the clean side out.

Congratulations!

### Ideas for Rubbings

If you choose to display the rubbing, framing is best as this preserves the paper and prevents it from any sort of damage.

Many people photograph the rubbings and place them in albums of interest, such as: The Wild West, Civil War Veterans, Writers, Funny epitaphs, Famous People, and so forth.

Start a family album so other generations will have a piece of family history.

Try your hand at selling the rubbings to some of the chain restaurants that display memorabilia.

Donate the rubbings to your local library or historical foundation.

Photograph the more humorous rubbings and make greeting cards.

Shellac the rubbings on to a large piece of wood and construct a conversation piece coffee table.

Start a business of photographing your rubbings for people who are conducting genealogical research, but who are unable to travel to your area.