



# The Fine Art of Dying

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Every township, county, village, town and city in Ohio has cemeteries. Some are tiny with only a few graves and others have tens of thousands of lots and memorials. They all have a history along with a firm grounding in folk and formal art. The purpose of this article is to provide a modest taste of the styles and construction of the markers, monuments and memorials of cemeteries of Ohio's smaller town and rural areas. This review will concentrate on the universality of many of these smaller cemetery styles. However, many cemetery markers, much like architectural structures, have their own local stylistic flavor to them.

One of the earliest and certainly simplest of marker styles was the Tablet Style. It can be found in hundreds of cemeteries throughout Ohio prior to the Civil War. It was rectangular in shape, about four feet tall, relatively thin and usually made of marble. This was the easiest and cheapest way to carve tombstones from larger blocks of marble that came to a community by wagon, canal boat and later by rail. Originally thought to be very durable, Ohio's acid rain (particularly in the nineteenth century) has turned many of these grave stones soft with a powdery surface. Of all the markers, the tablet style is the most likely to crack or break off at its base. These are the stones often seen lying flat on the ground or

stacked up against a fence line. The earlier Tablet Style in Ohio have a squared top while the later Domed Style Tablet is often thicker with a rounded or domed-like top. A smaller Tablet Style marker found next to a full sized marker is an indication of the burial site of a child.

After the Civil War, the marble Egyptian Revival Obelisk Style became very popular. The earliest variant of this style was the Simple Obelisk Style. This marker began with a square limestone base with an additional marble base (often used for the family name) topped by a marble squared shaft (obelisk) with a modest pointed top. Family names and dates could be carved on all four sides of the shaft which was roughly five to six feet tall. By the late 1870's and 1880's, the obelisk itself became highly decorated while sitting on the top of substantial square pedestals. These pedestals raised the height of the obelisks (height was status) thus reducing the need for taller and more expensive marble shafts.

The Egyptian Revival Obelisk Style slowly gave way to the Pilaster Pillar Style. This style uses the square pedestals while replacing the obelisk with other toppings such as draped squares (mourning) and large urns (representing the earthly vessel). This style becomes more and more elaborate with toppings consisting of Gothic points, stylized flames and crowns. The highest development of this style includes marble statues of angels, mothers and apostles. A popular

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*The Domed Style with adult and child's markers*



*Left: The early Egyptian Revival Obelisk Style) Right: The Pilaster Pillar Style with draping and urn)*

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statue of this nineteenth century style was the “Rock of Ages” which shows a woman draped over a cross. This was inspired by the popular hymn verse “Simply to the cross I cling”.

The twentieth century brings many new grave marker styles. This parallels Ohio architectural styles that saw towns grow from homes built in just Federal or Greek Revival Styles in the early part of the nineteenth century to dozens of styles after 1900. By the turn of the century, it was common to find large headstones (at the top of the lots) with smaller footstones at the bottom of the burial. Changes also came in the building material. People saw what was happening to the marble markers, so the practically impervious granite (in colors such as gray, rose and red) became the stone of choice. The Grand Egyptian Revival Obelisk Style made a comeback. These newer granite obelisks were generally plain and reached heights of fifteen to twenty-five feet or taller.

The Victorian Rustic Cross Style became popular with rough carved logs in the shape of a cross. They were decorated with vines and sat on relatively low carved stone-like bases. This style was too intricate for granite, so they are usually done in marble. Another style shows square granite slabs with rough cut (undressed) sides and bases which are known strangely enough as the Undressed Base Style. The smooth front of the memorial often has a scroll with the family name, palm leaves or grape leaves and upside-down torches (life extinguished). Other styles include the Stump Style which is a realistically carved stump of a tree covered in vines (life cut short), the Gateway Style which has two columns on a base topped by a semi-circular arch or cap (entrance to heaven) and the horizontal above ground Sarcophagus Style with minimal decorations. There were even marble monuments (up to four feet tall) sold in the Sears & Roebuck Company catalog (with prices reaching over fifty dollars). This is just a brief sampling of styles from c.1890 to c.1930. The Great Depression and World War II led to simpler styles of polished granite.

Visiting a cemetery should always be done in a respectful manner. Sometimes the best way to enjoy the art is just to walk around the graveyard and not be looking for an individual marker. Our cemeteries (coming from the Greek for a sleeping place) hold physical reminders not only of our ancestors but also a wonderful snapshot of stone carving and burial customs of our communities. The internet is a wonderful place to find the meaning of all the symbols you will find on or around the memorials such as the hand pointing to the sky (going to heaven), the broken rose stem (a person who died before their time) or the lamb (a child’s grave). ■



Left: The Pilaster Pillar Style with “Rock of Ages” statue  
Right: The Victorian Rustic Cross Style on carved rocks



The Undressed Base Style with front scroll