

An Analysis of Epitaphs from Ancient Cemetery Gravestones

An Epitaph is the added sentiment, poem, or short eulogy usually found beneath the name, death date, and age inscription. An inscription and an epitaph are not the same thing, although they are sometimes all referred to, erroneously, as an epitaph. Now *you* know the difference: the section with the information is the inscription; the added sentiment is an epitaph.

Epitaphs offer a window into how earlier generations thought about life, how they mourned, came to terms with death, or viewed a heavenly afterlife.

In Ancient Cemetery, only 212 of all the inventoried stones, about 17%, include an added epitaph. They appear in larger numbers during the 1840s–1850s. These 212 epitaphs can be divided into three loosely defined categories according to who is ‘speaking.’ Are the words and sentiments of the epitaph the words and sentiment of the mourners, or does the message come from the deceased? Who ‘speaks’ in the epitaph? And who are they speaking to?

(1) In about 43% of our reported epitaphs, the voice is clearly that of living mourners and the message is directed to or about the deceased. For example, William Gorham’s parents direct their voice specifically to their dead child: ***“Fare thee well our dear and fairest, dearest Willie, fare thee well. He who lent thee, hath called thee, back with him and his to dwell.”*** Phebe Gray’s epitaph tells us about her. She is remembered on her gravestone as someone who ***“looked well to the way of her husband and ate not the bread of idleness.”*** These epitaphs are for or about the deceased.

(2) Some epitaphs (24% in our sample) are in the voice of the deceased – with the message coming from the grave. A common example: ***“Reader, Stop and cast an eye, as you are now, so once was I. As I am now so you will be, prepare for death and follow me.*** Or David Bray, telling us: ***“Long did my Natural Powers the dangerous Ocean Brave, protected by my God at home I’ve made my Grave.”*** Or, from 91-year-old Lucretia Taylor: ***“My work is done, and I resign, the breath which is no longer mine.”***

(3) About 35% of our recorded epitaphs can be called generic, one-size-fits all messages that are usually short and appropriate for any gender, age, or situation: ***Rest in Peace, Gone but Not Forgotten, God is Love, Thy Will be Done, Asleep in Jesus, Parted Below; United Above, etc.***

Within Ancient Cemetery’s small inventory of 212 epitaphs, about 21% are for infants and young children under the age of 10 years, with boys twice as likely as girls to receive an epitaph. Six stones (14% of the children’s epitaphs) include this very popular verse: ***“Sleep on sweet babe and take thy rest; God called thee home when He thought best.”*** Also popular: ***“So fades the lovely/blooming flower. It fades and withers in an hour.”*** or ***“Then cease those tears and do not weep, the beauteous babe doth only sleep.”*** ***“A blessing only lent, not given.”***

The theme of children’s epitaphs is often symbolized by a rose bud on a broken stem, sometimes accompanied by the words, ***“Budded on earth to bloom in heaven.”*** All potential, all promise cut short before the child had a chance to blossom in this world. Another common theme is that death, and its heavenly reward, save the unblemished innocence of childhood from the sin and corruption of earthly life, as expressed in this epitaph for two-year-old Samuel Matthews: ***“Ere sin could blight or sorrow fade,***

Death came with friendly care, the opening bud to heaven conveyed, and bade it blossom there.

(Source: "Epitaph for an Infant," by English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

Besides the bible, epitaphs were borrowed from hymns (Isaac Watts particularly popular in Ancient Cemetery examples), classical poetry, numerous religious tracts and devotionals, and women's magazines. In *Godey's* popular women's magazine, for example, 43 % of the poems they published were about death and mourning. For children, phrases were copied from the many popular volumes of consolation literature. Typical, is the epitaph for two-year-old Frederic Dunbar. Written by Mrs. Emily C. Judson, it appeared in *Our Home Magazine and Mother's Journal*, 1848: ***"There is anguish in our home; it is desolate and lone, for a fondly cherished darling has from us now been torn. But in a heavenly mansion, upon the Saviour's breast, with his brother's arms about him, our loved one is at rest."***

For teens and young adults, the prevailing epitaph message is often expressed as a regretful warning and reminder that you never know when death will come – even to a young person. ***"Death cuts down all, both great and small."*** (from *New England Primer*) Epitaphs for younger people may lament being locked away in a tomb, missing one's friends, never expecting their early death. Sixteen-year-old Nathan Bassett reminds friends that, ***"Ye blooming youth how fair and gay, you all like me must fade away."*** "Goodbye," "Adieu," "Remember Me!" Seventeen-year-old Eliza Eldridge's epitaph borrows the words of poet William Cowper: ***"Youth oft times, healthful and at ease, anticipates a day it never sees."*** Simply put: ***"Be thou ready."***

Judi Trainor has given us a marvelous introduction to the Yarmouth mariners lost at sea and to this epitaph for Isaac Matthews, taken from an epic Portuguese poem written in the 16th century: ***"O, piteous lot, of man's uncertain state; What woes on life's eventful journey wait; By sea, what treacherous calms, what sudden storms, and death, attendant in a thousand forms."*** Or Gorham Howland's lovely verse: ***"Rest, lov'd one rest beneath the ocean's swell. We hope ere long to meet thee, redeemed, with Christ to dwell."*** After many voyages to distant ports, Benjamin Taylor's epitaph says simply, and perhaps with loving gratitude, ***"He is safely anchored at last."***

The epitaphs for men and women did not differ greatly, although the words used to describe them may differ. Men are generous, have worth, judgement, integrity, honor, firmness, and natural powers. They can also be described as gentle, kind, benevolent, and true. Women are more likely to be endowed with virtue and be described as lovely, gentle, kind, patient, meek, desirable, precious, weary, and sufferers. ***"Peaceful be thy rest, dear Mother. All thy sufferings here are o'er. Weary days and nights of anguish, never shall afflict thee more."***

Rev. Timothy Alden, himself the author of five small volumes of collected epitaphs (pub. 1814), died at age 92 and, in addition to his lengthy curriculum vitae gravestone inscription, has the following descriptive epitaph: ***"He was a faithful and beloved pastor, a man of prayer, of a mild, cheerful, amiable disposition, sanctified by grace, of great humility, exemplary in the various walks of a long life. All his hopes rested on the merits of Jesus Christ, and his end was peace. The memory of the just is blessed."***

(LKG 2/24)