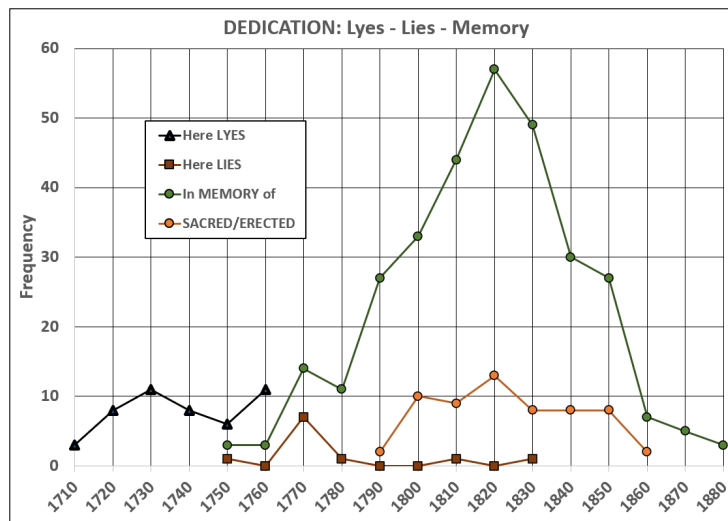


An analysis of Inscription Data on Ancient Cemetery Gravestones Here Lies / Here Lies / In Memory of

An analysis of the introduction or dedication phrases of a gravestone inscription (e.g., “Here lyes,” “Here lies,” and “In memory of”) is one way to illustrate what can be learned from the markers we clean. Just as the shape, stone material, and iconography of gravestones themselves evolved over time, so did the language of the inscriptions.

This graph displays how the introduction of “Here LYES” changed rather quickly to “Here LIES” over a ten-year period in the mid-1700s. This switch was taking place in other New England locations as well. An analysis of more than 10,000 early Boston-area stones showed the same abrupt change during the same ten-year time-period. Why? What might have precipitated such an abrupt and complete change? Perhaps it was not a single influencer. Here is what was going on outside the burying ground at the time.



It was a period of almost cataclysmic change, reform, upheaval, and new awareness. The French and Indian War, unrest and eventual rebellion precipitated by the Stamp Act, and even a major change in the calendar – the way of counting time. In 1752, the old-style Julian Calendar, which began the new year on March 25th (“Lady Day”), was replaced by the new Gregorian calendar, which began the new year on January 1st. (Six stones in our current survey show both the old and the new death dates, 1717/8 for example.) In the mid-1700s people were fleeing Europe in a wave of immigration to this ‘New World.’ And, although Webster’s Speller (our first dictionary) was still a few years in the future (1783), the impetus for this first standardization of language was already well established by mid-century. It had been many generations - more than a century - since the Puritan founders established their strict control over the community’s religious thought. The “Great Awakening” religious revival of the 1730s and 40s transformed New England’s religious climate and introduced a new fervor for *individual* spiritual connections, rather than church dictates. The old ways were losing ground; change was everywhere.

On our Ancient Cemetery gravestones, “Here LYES ye Body of” stops abruptly in the 1760s. “Here LIES Buried,” which replaced it, was soon lost in the dust as well. The introduction “In Memory of” gained widespread popularity beginning in the 1760s and reflects the profound change in religious and cultural attitudes about death and afterlife that took place mid-century.

“In Memory of....,” “Sacred to the Memory of....,” “Erected to the Memory of....”
 ~ stones with these introductions function as memorials. More than just marking the location of remains, the introduction here is placed by a mourner, a more personal dedication to the buried individual ~ placed in memory of..... I remember this person.

The commanding popularity of this dedication parallels other social and cultural events taking place. One was the emerging influence of classical revival, particularly Greek revival. Away from the sometimes overwrought expressions, simple, classical forms and fashions began to dominate. White marble, newly quarried in western Massachusetts and Vermont and decorated with classical urns and weeping willows, became the welcome alternative to hollow-eyed skulls carved on the dark slates of a left-behind era. Modern good taste in the new Republic was equated with white marble, simplicity, and understated classical forms that celebrated a new way of looking at death itself. With the founding of Mount Auburn Cemetery in 1831, there was a transformation of burial practices and cemeteries to reflect this change. In Ancient Cemetery, the “In Memory of...” introduction retains its dominance from roughly 1775 to 1875. (There are only 6 “In Memory...” stones with dates before 1775 – most probably ‘back dated’ – and only 3 with dates after 1875. 305 stones are dated between 1775-1875.) Variations such as “Sacred to the Memory...” and “Erected to the Memory...” shared popularity from the late 1700s until the 1840s and 50s. These variants disappear completely by the 1860s.

So, what came after these “In Memory...” dedications? After 1875, few stones used any introductory phrase at all. Most 20th-century markers have simply a name followed by a birth and death date. Stones with just a name and date have been in use since the 1600s and have always been an especially popular format for the gravestones of unmarried women and children, who were treated similarly on early gravestones. The stones for unmarried women and children were often smaller, less costly, and minimally embellished. Eliminating an entire line or two of introductory carving more easily fit a smaller stone and helped reduce the total cost of stones for those whose lives could be writ small.

You may also have noticed other differences related to gravestone inscriptions. Why do some stones express the age at death as a single number while others include the age in years, months, days, and, in the case of a newborn, even hours. A little trickier to explain, but here is what the data shows. There are 286 stones that extend the age at death to include the number of years, months, days, or hours. They represent 20% of the records (20% of named individuals) in the inventory. Inscriptions that include more than a single age number are more numerous for infants and children. Such stones are equally common for both males and females. Tracking the occurrence of the detailed age practice over a span of 300 years indicates that age expressed in years, months, days diminishes gradually over time. Such a detailed expression of death age is rarely seen on more contemporary grave markers.

Lastly, 170 stones in our current inventory include an epitaph, the additional epigraph or poetic writing that sometimes appears at the bottom of an inscription. In Ancient Cemetery, no surviving epitaphs have been found before 1785, in part, perhaps, because many of the earliest stones have been lost or the epitaph portion of the stone is buried. Research confirms that most of the epitaphs are inspired by the Bible, taken from the words of popular hymns, or, in many instances, can be traced to the numerous religious devotionals and denominational tracts in wide distribution in the 1800s.

So, the next time you are cleaning a gravestone in Ancient Cemetery, take time to read the inscription and see how ‘your’ stone might fit with these findings from 2022.