

## A Guide to Common Alabama Grave Markers



Above-ground tomb

**Above-ground tomb** -- A structure for the entombment of human remains, which is entirely above ground, and which is designed in such a way that space is available for one or more coffins. In Alabama, true above ground tombs generally are located in colonial period cemeteries established or heavily influenced by the Spanish and French populations who originally settled in the area.

**Artificial stone** -- A term used to describe various materials also known as art marble, artificial marble, cast stone, and composite stone. Some mixture of stone chips or fragments is generally embedded in a matrix of cement or plaster, and the surface may be ground, polished, molded, or otherwise treated to simulate stone.#

**Bluestone** -- A trade term applied to hard, fine-grained, commonly feldspathic and micaceous sandstone or siltstone of dark greenish to bluish gray color that splits readily along bedding planes to form thin slabs. Commonly used to pave surfaces for pedestrian traffic, this material may occasionally be seen in gravestones.#



Box tomb

**Box tomb** -- A structure resembling a rectangular box, with approximate measurements of three feet by six feet and two to three feet high, with a flat top designed to hold a ledger stone and placed over an in-ground burial. Box tombs were usually built of brick or the local stone, although some were constructed of marble. Occasionally, a box tomb in the shape of a coffin is identified in a cemetery. Box tombs were sometimes referred to as “vaults” or “crypts” during the time period that they were popular (in Alabama this was during the first half of the nineteenth century). Another term occasionally used for this structure is “chest tomb,” although this usually infers more massive structures with decorative carvings that are associated with higher social classes.

**Brownstone** -- A trade term applied to dark brown and reddish brown sandstone quarried and extensively used for building in the eastern United States during the middle and late nineteenth century. In gravestones, most commonly used as bases, although common in some areas for tablet stones as well.#

**Burial ground** -- Also “burying ground” and “graveyard” (see below).\*

**Burial site** -- A place for disposal of burial remains, including various forms of encasement and platform burials that are above ground or enclosed by mounded earth.\*

**Burying ground** -- A term usually applied to public spaces (during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) dedicated to the interment of bodies (also burial ground).

## Cemetery Glossary—Page 2



**Cast iron** -- Iron in a molten state that is poured into molds and allowed to cool. The patterns were often highly decorative. Cast iron is brittle, and when broken, exhibits a gray interior with a coarse texture. Fences, sometimes incorporating funerary motifs such as inverted torches, draped urns, weeping willow trees and reclining lambs, are the most common cast iron features in cemeteries. Grave markers and above-ground tombs were occasionally made of cast iron; two excellent examples of cast iron tombs are located at Magnolia Cemetery in Mobile.

**Cemetery** -- An area for burying the dead.

**Cenotaph** -- A monument, usually (but not always) of imposing scale, erected to commemorate one whose remains are elsewhere; literally “empty tomb.”\*

**Chapel** -- A place of worship or meditation in a cemetery or mausoleum, either a freestanding building or a room set apart for commemorative services.\*

**Churchyard** -- A burying ground that immediately surrounds a church and is generally restricted to interments of members of its congregation or particular faith.

**Cinerary urn** -- A receptacle for cremation remains, or ashes, in the shape of a vase.\*

**Closure tablet** -- An inscribed stone tablet placed over the sealed opening of an above-ground tomb to commemorate the deceased.

**Coffin/Casket** -- Today, these terms are often used interchangeably, however, they have distinctly different historical meanings. The coffin was typically hexagonal in form, taking the general dimensions of the individual to be interred. Usually made of wood, these are also known as “toe pinchers” because of their constricting shape toward the feet. While typical of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (gradually replacing the use of only a shroud), the term did not fall out of fashion until the first decade of the twentieth century. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, the term “casket” was frequently used, likely as an effort to avoid the connotations of the coffin. As part of the change, the early caskets were anthropomorphic in form, taking a vague human shape, and often had a glass viewing plate over the face of the deceased. Gradually the shape became rectangular, replacing the earlier hexagonal forms.

**Coffin hardware** -- Includes the handles, breast plates, back plates, name plates, lid and corner ornaments, viewing glass plate and fixtures, and other devices used on and in coffins (also called coffin furniture).

**Columbarium** -- A vault or structure for storage of cinerary urns.\*

**Column** -- A pillar, usually circular in plan.

## Cemetery Glossary—Page 3



Comb Grave

**Comb grave** -- A stone structure built over an in-ground grave that is triangular in shape. It most often consists of two rectangular sandstone slabs placed together to form a gabled roof over the grave.

**Composite stone** -- See *artificial stone*.



Coping/curbing

**Coping** -- The use of brick, marble, cement, granite or other materials to outline a single grave plot or group of graves. This term is sometimes used interchangeably with “curbing” (see below); technically, a coping is the top course of a masonry wall, usually sloped to facilitate water runoff.

**Crematorium** -- A furnace for incineration of the dead; also crematory.\*



Cradle

**Cradle** -- A decorative curbing that surrounds a single grave. It is usually made of the same material as the headstone and incorporated as part of the overall marker design.

**Curbing** -- A very low wall or edging surrounding a grave or plot of graves, can be masonry or stone, and is sometimes decorative. This term is often used interchangeably with “coping” (see above).

**Crypt** -- An enclosure for a casket in a mausoleum or underground chamber, such as beneath a church.\*

## Cemetery Glossary—Page 4

**Epitaph** -- An inscription on a grave marker identifying and/or commemorating the deceased.\*

**Exedra** -- A permanent open air masonry bench with high back, usually, patterned after the porches or alcoves of classical antiquity where philosophical discussions were held. In cemeteries often used as an element of landscape design and as a type of tomb monument.\*

**Face** -- In stone masonry, the surface visible from setting. In gravestones, commonly the carved surface of tablet stones and slabs.#

**False crypt** -- See box tomb.

**Family cemetery** -- A small, private burial place for members of the immediate or extended family; typically found in rural areas, and often, but not always, near a residence; different from a family plot, which is an area reserved for family members within a larger cemetery.\*



**Fieldstone** -- A stone taken from the ground's surface. In cemeteries, it is often placed at the head and/or foot of a grave to mark its location. Fieldstones are found primarily in graveyards that were established before sources of gravestones were available in the area, or where lack of stone carving skills and/or limited economic circumstances made use of fieldstones necessary. Occasionally, fieldstones were lightly etched with some information about the deceased, such as initials or name, and perhaps a death date.



**Flush marker** -- A flat, rectangular grave marker set flush with the lawn or surface of the ground.\*

**Foot stone** -- A small stone placed to mark the foot of a grave. It is usually made of the same type of stone, and in the same style, as the marker at the head of the grave. It is usually not inscribed or inscribed with only the initials of the deceased's name.

**Gatehouse** -- A building at the main entrance to a cemetery that is controlled by a gate; a shelter or habitation for the gate keeper.\*

## Cemetery Glossary—Page 5

**Granite** -- Geologically, igneous rock with crystals or grains of visible size and consisting mainly of quartz and the sodium or potassium feldspars. The commercial term includes gneiss and igneous rocks that are not granite in the strictest sense. # Granite became very popular for gravemarkers by the mid-twentieth century, although the stone was used earlier, particularly for large monuments and mausoleums.

**Grave** -- A place for burial.\*



Grave Articles

**Grave articles** -- Items placed on a grave that have spiritual significance in the deceased's culture.

**Grave marker** -- A sign of a burial place, variously inscribed and decorated in commemoration of the dead.\*



Grave Shelter

**Grave Shelter** -- A wood structure placed over an in-ground burial, usually with a gable roof and sides made of vertical pickets or boards. Some have boards with decorative "jig" work and a few are constructed with doors and windows to resemble small houses. Grave Shelters were common in some areas of the South and are generally associated with Native Americans and groups of Scotch-Irish ancestry.

**Graveyard** -- An area set aside for burial of the dead.\*



Headstone

**Headstone** -- An upright stone marker with a base; usually inscribed with demographic information, epitaphs, or both; sometimes decorated with a carved motif.\*

## Cemetery Glossary—Page 6

**Incised carving** -- In gravestones, ornamentation made by cutting into the stone; engraving.#

**Interment** -- A burial; the act or ritual of committing the dead to a grave.\*

**Laminated stone** -- Stone consisting of thin sheets; stone built up in layers, such as slate.#



Ledger Stones

**Ledger stone**-- A large (usually 3' x 6') rectangular grave marker of stone laid flat over a grave, or set on the top of box and table tombs. Ledgers often contain detailed information about the deceased. Most ledger stones in Alabama are of white marble, although sandstone examples have been identified.

**Limestone** -- Rock of sedimentary origin composed principally of calcite or dolomite or both. Commonly used in gravestones and tomb structures, in some cases considered to be marble.#

**Lych gate** -- A roofed gateway to a church graveyard under where the coffin was placed prior to burial (also spelled lich gate).

**Marble** -- Geologically, a metamorphic rock made up largely of calcite or dolomite. As used commercially, the term includes many dense limestones and some rock dolomites. Numerous minerals may be present in minor to significant amounts in marble, and their presence and distribution account for much of the distinctive appearance that many marbles possess. Marble was the predominant stone for gravestones in the nineteenth century.# In Alabama, local marble was available by 1830, when marble quarries were opened in Talladega County.



Mausoleum

**Mausoleum** -- A large building or structure housing a tomb or several tombs.

**Memorial park** -- A twentieth century cemetery cared for in perpetuity by a business or nonprofit corporation; generally characterized by open expanses of greensward with regulated or flush gravemarkers; the earlier manifestation, in the last half of the nineteenth century, was called a “lawn” cemetery.\*

## AHC Cemetery Pamphlet 3c Cemetery Glossary—Page 7

**Military cemetery** -- A burial ground established for war casualties, veterans, and eligible dependents. Those established by the Federal government include national cemeteries, post cemeteries, soldiers' lots, Confederate and Union plots, and American cemeteries in foreign countries. Many States also have established cemeteries for veterans.\*

**Monument** -- A structure or marker erected as a memorial.\*

**Mortuary** -- A place for preparation of the dead prior to burial or cremation.\*

**NAGPRA** -- Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, a federal law intended to protect Native American burial sites and to control the removal of human remains, funerary objects, and items of cultural patrimony still located in archaeological sites on federal and tribal lands. The law also requires federal agencies and museums receiving federal funds to inventory human remains and funerary objects in their collections and develop written summaries. They must also attempt to identify the likely cultural affiliation of these objects and notify presumptive Native American organizations.

**National Cemetery** -- One of 130 burial grounds established by the United States Congress since 1862 for interment of armed forces servicemen and women whose last service ended honorably. Presently, the Department of Veterans Affairs maintains 114, the National Park Service (Department of the Interior) administers 14, and the Department of the Army has responsibility for two.\*



Obelisk

**Obelisk** -- A tall four-sided shaft of stone, usually tapered, popularized by romantic taste for classical imagery.\*

**Pet cemetery** -- An area set aside for the burial of cherished animals.\* In Alabama, an example of this type of cemetery is the Coon Dog Cemetery (est. 1937) in Franklin County.

**Potter's field** -- A place for the burial of indigent or unknown persons. The term derives from a Biblical reference, Matthew 27.7, where, with regard to Judas throwing down the silver to betray Jesus, is written, "And they [priests] took counsel, and bought with them [the pieces of silver] the potter's field, to bury strangers in."

## Cemetery Glossary—Page 8



Pottery Markers

**Pottery** -- Grave markers made of clay that has been hardened by heat. In Alabama, pottery markers are generally of two types: earthenware, which is often unglazed and fired at a low temperature, and stoneware, which is glazed and fired at a high temperature.

**Receiving tomb** -- A vault where the dead may be held until a final burial place is prepared; also receiving vault.\*

**Relief carving** -- Ornamentation projecting forward from a surface through shallow or, occasionally in gravestones, deep carving.#



**Rock Cairn** -- A mound of stones erected as a memorial or a marker.

**Rostrum** -- A permanent open air masonry stage used for memorial services in cemeteries of the modern period, patterned after the platform for public orators used in ancient Rome.\*

**“Rural” cemetery** -- A burial place characterized by spacious landscaped grounds and romantic commemorative monuments established in a rural setting at the dawn of the Victorian era. So called for the movement inspired by the French model. The term is used with quotation marks to distinguish this distinctive landscaped type from other kinds of burying grounds occurring in the countryside.\*

**Sandstone** -- Sedimentary rock composed of sand-sized grains naturally cemented by mineral material. In most sandstone used for building and gravestones, quartz grains predominate.# Sandstone was a relatively common material used for early gravestones in Alabama. A type called “potsville,” available in the Tuscaloosa area, was used for gravestones and also in construction of the state capital in the 1820s. “Potsville” is a soft and easily worked stone. Church Street Graveyard in Mobile has good examples of early sandstone markers.

**Sarcophagus** -- A stone coffin or monumental chamber for a casket, often inscribed or decorated with sculpture.\*

**Sepulcher** -- A burial vault or crypt.\*

**Sexton** -- Traditionally, an employee or officer of a church who is responsible for the care and upkeep of church property and sometimes for ringing bells and digging graves.\*

**Shelter house** -- A pavilion or roofed structure, frequently open at the sides, containing seats or benches for the convenience of those seeking a place to rest; erected in rustic and classical styles to beautify a cemetery landscape.\*

**Slant marker** -- A rectangular grave marker having straight sides and inscribed surface set at an acute angle for easier reading.\*



## Cemetery Glossary—Page 9

**Slate** -- A hard, brittle metamorphic rock consisting mainly of clay minerals and characterized by good. A popular gravestone material of the eighteenth century, particularly in coastal areas, many of the best-preserved examples of gravestone art are found in slate, an extremely stable stone.# Mobile's Church Street Graveyard has a small number of slate markers; some of these are deteriorating because of natural weathering and poor grounds maintenance practices.

**Spall** -- A chip or flake of stone. #

**Statuary** -- One or more statues.

**Stucco** -- A coating of various mortarlike mixes mixed with water and applied over the exterior of stone or brick structures to give a finished appearance and to prevent water from entering the masonry. It is sometimes scored to resemble stone block. The term "plaster" is sometimes substituted, particularly if the work is executed well.

**Tabby** -- A material comprised of oyster shell, sand, lime and water. Burning oyster shell in kilns fueled by wood fires made the lime for the mixture. Tabby was used primarily in coastal areas of Georgia, South Carolina and north Florida. The porous surface is covered with a coating of stucco to protect the exterior. In some cemeteries, tabby was used to construct walls around grave plots.



**Table tomb (or Table stone)** -- A type of grave monument in which a stone slab, usually at least two inches thick by about three feet wide by six feet long, is supported by six (or more) pillars or columns. The columns, or legs, are usually two to three feet high, in turn rest on a stone set on the ground. In most cases, an inscription is written on the slab top [ledger]; the stone columns are generally carved, sometimes ornately.#



**Tablet (or Tablet stone)** -- A marker made of a single piece of stone (usually slate, sandstone or marble) approximately two to three inches thick, that is set vertically into the ground. It does not have a base. Markers of this type usually date from the eighteenth through the first decades of the nineteenth centuries.

**Tomb** -- A grave or other place of burial.

**Tombstone** -- An inscribed stone. This term is often used to describe any inscribed grave marker.

**Tympanum** -- In gravestones, the semicircular (or occasionally, triangular) decorated face at the top of a tablet stone.#

**Upland South Cemetery** -- A type of folk cemetery widely dispersed across the southern United States. Characterized by hill top location, scraped ground, mounded graves, preferred species of vegetation carrying symbolic meaning, highly personalized forms of grave decoration, and associated cults of piety such as graveyard workday and Decoration Day.

## Cemetery Glossary—Page 10

**Vault** -- A burial chamber, especially when underground.\*



White Bronze

**White Bronze** -- A material fairly popular for grave markers during the last decades of the nineteenth century, “white bronze” is almost pure zinc. When exposed to the elements, a protective blue-grey colored coating forms on the exterior. A number of companies made white bronze items, but the Monumental Bronze Company, based in Bridgeport, Connecticut, was apparently the only one that made grave markers. The firm had at least four subsidiaries, including one in New Orleans. The markers range from modest to elaborate and contain a variety of funerary designs popular during the time period. with the Woodmen of the World Life Assurance Society that historically provided an insurance rider to furnish memorial stones to its policyholders. Common in the States.



Woodmen of  
the World

**Woodmen of the World** -- A unique genre of markers crafted to resemble tree stumps or arrangements of logs. Attached tablets or handing scrolls are used for biographical data and epitaphs. Associated with the Woodmen of the World Life Assurance Society that historically provided an insurance rider to furnish memorial stones to its policyholders. Common in the southern United States.

**Wrought iron** -- Malleable iron that is heated and then worked into the desired shape by hammering, bending and twisting. This type of ironwork is generally associated with blacksmithing. Most wrought iron found in cemeteries tends to be from earlier time periods. Fences and other items were manufactured for decorative use in cemeteries.

**Zinc** -- See “White Bronze.”

\* denotes definitions provided by National Register Bulletin #41, Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering Cemeteries and Burial Places.

# denotes definitions provided by Lynette Strangstad’s A Graveyard Preservation Primer.