

200 Years of Grave Art

at the

Fairmount Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church

Fairmount Church Road Sewickley, Pennsylvania

Country churchyards with centuries old grave markers are always interesting places to explore. Oftentimes, the weathered and faded stone markers are the only record we have of those buried beneath. In Pennsylvania, vital records were not kept until 1906, making churchyards an important source of information eagerly sought by family historians. Not only are markers valued for the information they provide, but also for their carved art and epitaphs that evolved over generations.

Eighteenth century New England markers featured images of death. Skulls, skeletons and angels of death were meant to frighten the living into leading a more godly life. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, when grave ornamentation became fashionable, art was used to portray faith or to make a statement about the person buried beneath.

Scattered throughout the Borough of Franklin Park, in the Northwest corner of Allegheny County, are six 19th Century church graveyards, the oldest being attached to Fairmount Associate Reformed Presbyterian. Although formally organized in the Fall of 1822, the congregation began meeting years earlier at David Duff's grist mill on Rippling Run, a headwater of Big Sewickley Creek. At the time, the group was known as the Duff Mill Congregation.

In 1830, James Duff deeded hilltop land overlooking Rippling Run to the congregation of Big Sewickley Creek Valley farm families on which they built a meeting house. Originally known as the Duff Meeting House, the name was changed to Fairmount in 1838, presumably when the early brick church was built. Early markers, however, indicate that the location was already being used for burials as early as 1817.

Fairmount's earliest surviving markers are of typical early 19th Century design; a vertical stone with a sculpted top and unpolished face placed directly into the ground. Markers were cut from slate, sandstone or whatever stone was readily available and featured simple inscriptions, usually a name and date.



John Andrew Emrick's marker (left) records his 1817 death, Fairmount's oldest known burial. The next oldest dates from January 1822. In total, there are ten markers dating from the 1820s, including that of Sarah Mitchell (above) who died days short of her twentieth birthday in 1823.

As transportation improved during the 1840s and 50s, stone quarried in distant places became easier to obtain with limestone and marble becoming popular choices for markers. Although easily carved, both are soft and weather quickly. Today, once pristine white marble and grey limestone markers are now lichen covered with their faded inscriptions often impossible to read. Polished granite became popular in the late 1800s for its durability and range of colors. Granite remains in wide use today.

While the earliest markers recorded a name and date without ornamentation, it was during the mid-1800s, at the beginning of the Victorian Era, that markers became more artistic and elaborate. Not only were personal details about the deceased recorded, but skilled 'marble cutters' also inscribed poetic epitaphs and carved symbolic images into the stones. Several Fairmount markers still bear craftsmen's engraved names, like that of W(illiam) H. Marshall of Roc(hester) who was responsible for creating many Fairmount markers.



Graves generally faced East in the belief that the deceased would rise to face the sun on Judgement Day. Some burials featured both head and footstones, much like a head and footboard of beds. Over time, the smaller foot stones were sometimes lost or moved.

A marker's ornamentation was intended to say something about the deceased. A broken column or cut tree signified a life too short. Lambs representing innocence often decorated the graves of children (right). Emblems of fraternal associations might also appear on markers. Crowns represented victory over death, a lamp faithfulness, a rose beauty and wheat a fruitful life. Weeping willows and ivy promised immortality. A finger pointing heavenward, clasped and praying hands, doves, books and flowers were all commonly used motifs.

Today, while most markers are made of granite, designs tend to be less ornate than those from past generations, although families sometimes take the opportunity to create their own meaningful designs to memorialize loved ones.

A stroll through Fairmount's rural churchyard offers a glimpse into 200 years of community history. Memorials to generations of families who once lived, worked and worshipped together are on view in this quiet and peaceful hilltop setting. The 120 year old sanctuary and its 200 year old churchyard are a testament to the constancy and reassuring presence of Fairmount Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.



Ollie Neely's (1865-1891) grave features a ledger style marker.



Andrew Rosensteel's (1806-1873) marker was carved by W. H. Marshall and features an open Bible and the inscription, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord."

Elizabeth H. Riley has Fairmount's most ornate marker, which features flowers and an angel guarding her tomb. It too was carved by William H. Marshall.



Emblems of fraternal organizations might also appear on markers. The compass and square denote the Masons.



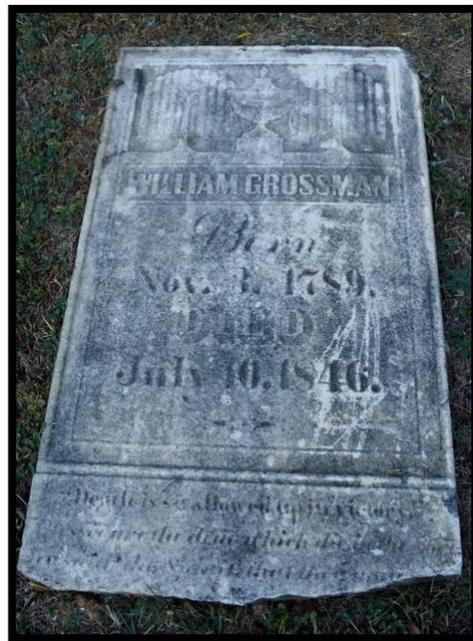
The Calla Lily represents resurrection.



A rare spelling correction!



A draped funeral urn was a popular motif representing the soul departing the shrouded body for heaven. This is the grave of W H and Fannie Morrow Riley.



William Grossman's marker features two Weeping Willows, symbols of grief and mourning, along with a draped urn. Grossman was named an Elder in 1822.



An arch signifying the door to salvation marks the graves of Thomas and Sarah Duff who passed in 1880 and 1881. Thomas was a son of David Duff, an Elder of 1822.



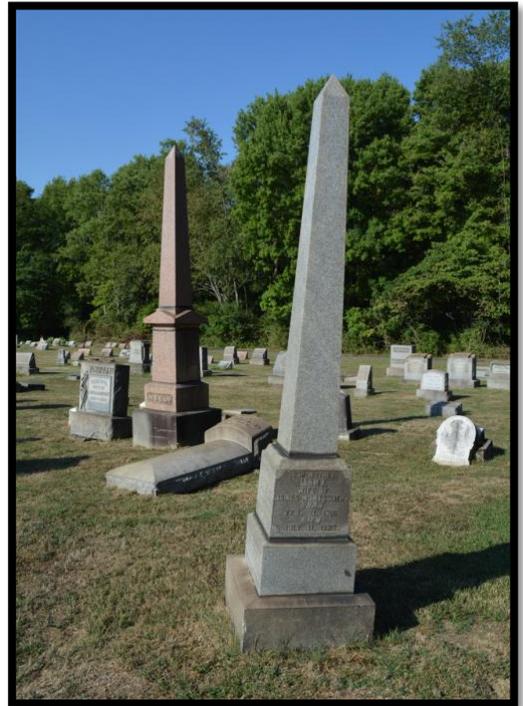
Mary Frazier's marker features clasped hands, representing a final farewell.



The pointed finger on Elizabeth Neely's marker shows the path to heaven. She is listed as the 'relict' or widow of James Neely.



Flags marked the graves of military veterans such as James Neely, who died in 1864 aged 20.



Obelisks were once popular. These mark Neely and Montgomery burials.