

Native American Graves and Grave Markers

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Making a presentation on Native American grave markers creates unique problems. There are 574 recognized Native America tribes, including 28 in Alaska. There are people who live in the plains, the forest, the desert, and in the cities, plus there are the unique qualities of Alaska.

As I thought about this presentation I was worried about the sin of reductionism --to suggest that there is a collective First-Nation peoplehood. This presentation is not comprehensive. It pulls together images from six different states: Ohio, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Arizona and Alaska. They are very different from each other.

What emerged is similarity and diversity. Native Americans share symbols of native culture and life, and an affirmation of traditional names for example. But there are also stones with common names that reflect American identity and honor U. S. military service. And there are themes of living as a subject people within a powerful state, including humiliation and even death.

This paper will focus upon several different locations:

- Minnesota where the Chippewa-Obibwe live and where feather images are common.
- Burial mounds, including the awesome Mississippian mounds in Cahokia, Illinois.
- A mass grave in Gnaddenhutten, Ohio where there was a massacre of 96 innocent Moravian Christians in 1798.
- The Trail of Tears, which crossed the southern tip of Illinois.

- A beautiful Native American – Catholic cemetery in Southern Arizona with a mix of Catholic and Native American symbols, including the Man in the Maze image.
- The Tlingit of southern Alaska where some people are buried in public cemeteries and others are in Native American cemeteries. Many have traditional clan totems.

These places illustrate the diversity among Native American peoples. Some of these are living graveyards. Others are historic locations, no longer active.

Minnesota

Back in 2019 Jane and I went to Minnesota, me for the first time. We have relatives and friends in Minneapolis but also wanted to go north to see the origin of the Mississippi. Driving through central Minnesota we saw a sign that said “cemetery.” It did not say what kind of cemetery but I decided to check it out. It was a small cemetery, with maybe a hundred or so graves. Looking across the fence I saw some mobile homes. Not until I had wandered around for a time did I realize it was for Native Americans. I noticed a full range of expressions: crosses, carpenter tools, a Vikings fan, fisherman, feathers, a few distinctive names (such as Ten Bear) and a few handmade markers. Most markers were typical of what one would find in a small town where a few people are well off but most are not. \

Let’s look at a few

- Alice Campbell has three names. Alice, Ten Bear, and Sprout. Sprout sounds a bit like a girlhood nickname that stuck.
- One was a Minnesota Vikings fan, with a jersey placed on a cross
- One stone has feathers and flags and a cross.
- Another has a beautiful handmade wooden feather. (This is one of my all-time favorite photos).
- Not shown was one identified as a basketball star. Another had carpenter tools.

- And there were some handmade markers: Jim Mink was written on a simple wooden cross, and there was a bench-like structure, possibly for flowers. One had what looked like red mulch.







Burial Mounds

One theme found in the Midwest (and elsewhere) are burial mounds. .

At Beloit College, just on the Wisconsin-Illinois border, the mounds are in the middle of campus. There are signs reminding people that these are burial mounds and should be treated with respect, i.e. don't sit on them. And the college is very aware of its location. They began their graduation ceremony, which I attended, by acknowledging that the campus is built on Native American land. But of course, when it is spring, and young people are having a picnic or just visiting, or when there are crowds for a graduation ceremony, you can be certain that the students will enjoy themselves.



Speaking of mounds, the most spectacular mounds north of Mexico are the Cahokia Mounds east of St. Louis. They were built by a great civilization that reached its peak during the 11th and 12th centuries. Probably 15,000 people lived here, plus thousands more in the surrounding areas. They had trade links with the Great Lakes and the Gulf. Around 1200, their population was greater than London. Not until the 1780s did Philadelphia reach 40,000 and surpass it.



There are 80 mounds in the area. Monk's Mound, which housed the government, is the greatest of all. It is not a burial mound, although it has an underground burial site, probably for prominent people. The walkway is modern but is located where the traditional one was positioned.



There is also a Woodhenge. As with Stonehenge, it was used to measure seasons and predict eclipses. It took a long time for local researchers to discover that there were wood remnants under the ground and that they were of exceptional significance. (Shown is our friend Sibylle, who passed too soon).



But Mound 72 (shown below) is of a different nature. Modern excavation revealed the body of a man in his 40s, apparently an important ruler. He was surrounded with 20,000 marine shell disc beads, brought from far away, arranged in the shape of a soaring falcon. But in that mound there were also 250 other skeletons. 62% appear to be sacrificial victims who died by ritual execution. Four young men are missing hands and skulls; 50 young women around the age of 21 are



arranged in two layers, separated by matting. 40 men and women were violently killed. Some were buried alive, their fingers digging in the sand, trying to free themselves.

I am sorry to tell you such horrible stories.

Two Shameful Events

I have one more mound story to discuss. But first we need to look at two shameful events. All of us are aware that our wonderful country is built on a painful history regarding Native Americans. Two incidents bring this home.

The Gnadenhutzen Massacre

One is the Gnadenhutzen Massacre. In the early 1780s, on the frontier, what historians call the First-West, there were frequent raids upon American settlers. Often raiding parties would move hundreds of miles from their homes, stopping at friendly Indian villages for supplies or to trade. One such village was the Christian Indian community at Gnadenhutzen in central Ohio (30 miles south of Canton). These Pennsylvania Indians had embraced Christianity in the early decades of the century, won over by the pacifist Moravian Brethren. They had lived in the Moravian settlement of Conestoga near Lancaster but had been forced to evacuate in 1763 after an attack that left six Moravian Indians dead. By 1772 they had settled in Ohio on the Tuscarawas River, a branch of the Muskingum. It was a quiet, isolated place, in a beautiful setting. Their advocate,



MASSACRE OF THE CHRISTIAN INDIANS.

“Of the number thus cruelly murdered by the backwoodsmen of the upper Ohio, between fifty and sixty were women and children — some of them innocent babes.”

Reverend Zeisberger, had moved to that place so it was natural that they follow him. But a decade later their peaceful lives become a nightmare. In the fall, there had been an Indian raid near Pittsburgh in which an American woman and her five children had seemingly been killed. (It later turned out they had just fled but that was not the initial report). 160 armed and vengeful whites, including the surviving husband, approached the settlement. They were given a gracious welcome. When they found what they believed to be a dress belonging to the missing woman, they debated what to do and then decided upon a plan of extermination.

They separated their victims into two groups – 42 men in one group, 20 women and 34 children in another. The captives were then led by small clusters into designated “slaughterhouses” where they were bludgeoned to death.¹ One small boy hid under one of the houses, as blood dripped on him, and was able to



report what had happened. The bodies were left on the ground and not discovered until a few months later by Reverend Zeisberger, who prepared a mass burial. Today there is a mound, and a monument, and a faded plaque. The plaque says “Burial place of Remains of Indian Martyrs.”



¹ The image of the massacre was produced in 1852, decades after the event. It illustrates the barbarity of the incident but is not factually authentic. The murders took place inside.

When Jane and I visited in the 1990s, the mound was exposed. Now there is a small fence around it, to protect the dignity of the graves.



In a restaurant in the town, there is a story on the placemat telling how the British caused this massacre, and the Americans tried to prevent it. I am reminded of the teaching of South African theologian Allan Boesak that “Innocence is a Sin.”

No one involved in the massacre was ever brought to trial or punished in any way.

Trail of Tears

The second event is one you know – The Trail of Tears. The story is well known. President Andrew Jackson believed that racist settlers would never allow the Cherokee and other Native groups in North Carolina and the surrounding states to have peace. Jackson decided to

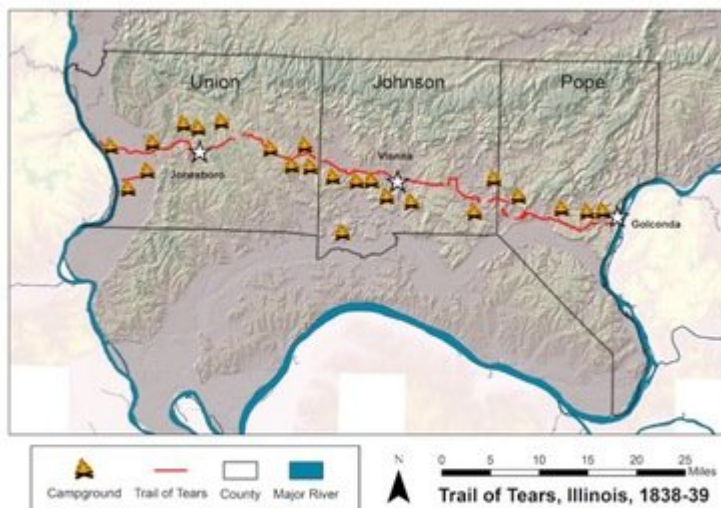


evacuate them to distant Oklahoma where they could live in their own land with their own culture. The implementation of this policy by President Van Buren produced massive suffering and death. The numbers are not precise but there were probably 60,000 people evacuated over a 20 year period of whom 16,000 were Cherokee. There were between 2,000 and 4,000 Cherokee deaths. The deaths were accelerated because the main evacuation began in the fall of 1838 in what was a record cold winter. Many died along the way and were buried in anonymous locations, now lost to history. While various towns have stories of individual graves, there are no known Cherokee graveyards along that route.

But there is an interesting anecdote about the Cherokee passage across Illinois. They crossed the Ohio River at Golconda, went across the deep southern tip of the state, and crossed the Mississippi at Cape Girardeau. (There is a mural at Golconda commemorating this passage).



Map 2. Southern Illinois Trail of Tears



Illustrating with Evidence (2017). Trail of Tears in Southern Illinois. Collaborating GIS Maps and Primary Sources. Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL.

It took them three months to make this 60 mile journey. Most of the Cherokee deaths occurred during that time. Their route led them straight through Union County, where Jane's family are from. There is a reason I mention this. Just a few months ago, a graveyard researcher in Union County (Diana Scherer) was in an isolated forest and came across a mound. It was very different from anything else in



the area. As she checked out the terrain she noticed that there was not just one mound but nine, lined up in a row. The later ones were smaller, but still, they looked as if they were of human origin. At this point, there is no way to confirm that these are burial mounds from the Trail of Tears, but they certainly appear to be of human origin.

San Xavier del Bac Mission

In Tucson, in southern Arizona, there is a very prominent Native American population. Today they are called Tahono O'odham. That means "desert people." Over the centuries they have accommodated themselves to Spanish and American cultures. One illustration of this is found in the large public cemetery in Tucson. The people on this marker



have given names that sound as if they might be from New England. But their last name has a definite Spanish sound – Contest-able. And the Kachina symbol is definitely Native American. Is this a Native American couple, or is it just an American couple who happens to like the image? It is hard to know but it illustrates a point.

There is one place where the population of a cemetery is not in doubt. Just outside of Tucson is a beautiful Catholic mission that dates to the 1600s. You notice on the school (located just next to the mission) the symbolic Man in the Maze. This represents our twisting path through life, especially the spiritual path of growth and development as we move from baby through elder through ancestor. The center circle is both death and fulfillment as an in-spirited person. . Sometimes the man is shown at the beginning of the circle, sometimes in the middle.



From the very beginning, the mission was there to serve the needs of Native Americans. The culture of the place reflects a mixture, even a fusion, of Catholic and Native American and Hispanic themes. Inside, many statues and paintings have a Native American look. The carving below is typical. The famous local artist, Ted de Grazia, mixed these themes, often using the image of Madonna and child. The painting below (on wood) is in his gallery in Tucson. Is it Native American or Hispanic? Does it matter?



If you walk half a mile or so down the road from the mission, there is a Native American cemetery. It is a beautiful cemetery with a beautiful setting. The mission is in one direction, the mountains in the other. The graves are well maintained. Often there are mixed themes – Catholic, Hispanic, and Native American. The Man in the Maze and the cross appear side by side. Most people have Catholic sounding given names, but there are a few names that obviously have traditional meanings. My favorite was the person named Two Two, which is not shown. I have been told that name means Grandma, or perhaps Auntie.





One thing I found interesting was the mounded graves. Not all graves are mounded, but many are. They look very neat, without any grass growing or litter or deterioration of any kind. I was told by a local person that family members – men -- come once a year with rakes to maintain the mounds. There is a pile of dirt nearby in case anyone needs it. And if there is someone who does not have family to perform that function, there are volunteers who will see that it is done. I guess there is a sense of community that still exists.



Alaska

A few years ago Jane and I went to Alaska. I was excited to do this, for a variety of reasons. The spectacular beauty of the state was one thing, but I also wanted to see the Native American gravestones. Alaska is an amazing state that was settled quickly by people who came from all over the world seeking to make their fortune. Many died young and poor, but the gravestones are like a documentary record of their lives and deaths and origins. What became almost immediately clear was the extent to which native peoples had a dual culture, mainstream and traditional. They would have two names listed on their gravestones, and often a totem symbol and frequently a Christian symbol.

I suspect most of us in the lower-48 reduce Alaskan natives to a simple category, traditionally Eskimo but now Inuit. My niece, who lived a few years in a very distant, very northern village as a teacher, says that people still call themselves Eskimo, but that term is out of favor so I will skip it.

In the south, near Juneau, the people are called Tlinget. They are different from other groups. Many are connected to the fishing industry. According to one person I met, they have eight different sub-groups, each with its own totem, or animal symbol. Salmon, bear, eagle, orca, owl, fish, turtle, raven. Their gravestones are often a mix of images drawn from different cultures. Many have a western-sounding name, but then will have a traditional name below. Often there will be a Christian symbol, sometimes a reference to military service. The Russian Orthodox Church had been influential in this state, but I did not see one of their cemeteries.

Several gravestones in the public cemetery in Juneau caught my attention.

James White had an eagle totem and two names.

John Enge had a salmon totem and a farewell passage: “Fair winds and Following Seas.” I suspect he was a sailor.

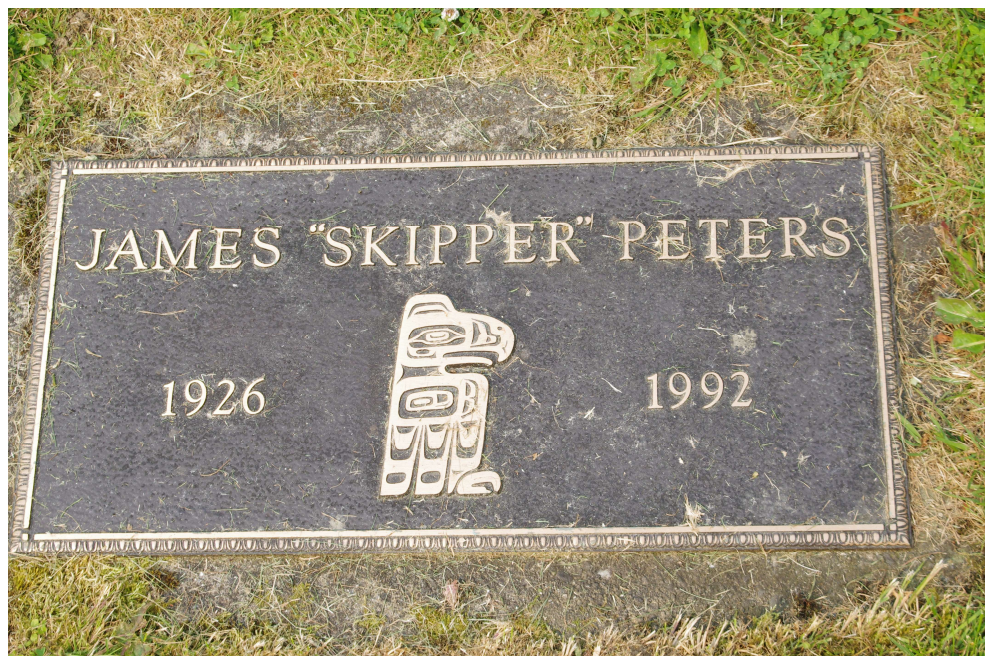
Ernest Walter Hillman had **two** totems, perhaps honoring paternal and maternal lines. That was the only time I saw this. He also had three names, his common name, his family name and his nickname “judge. That got my attention because that



was my dad's nickname in the mines. Hillman also had an eastern cross, perhaps reflecting the influence of the Russian church.

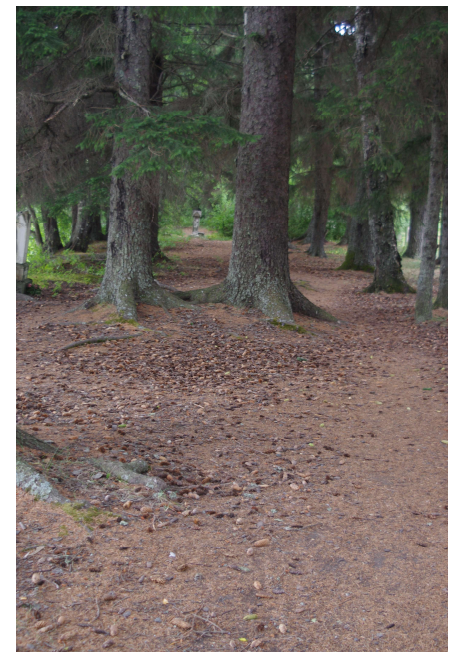
James Peters had a totem, and his nickname, "Skipper." He was probably another a man of the sea.

William Smith had two names and a Madonna and child.





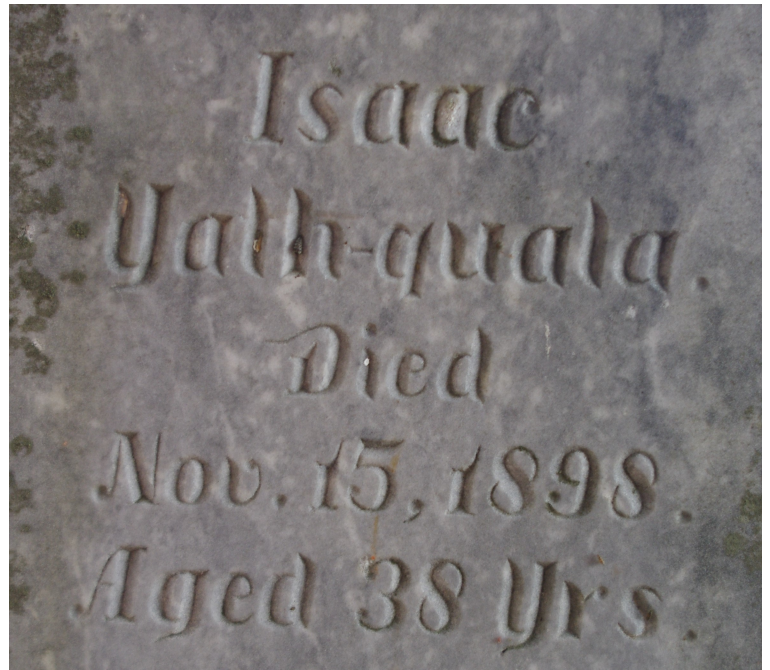
To the north, in the town of Haines, accessible by water or air, I saw an old Tlingit cemetery. It was on a hill, overlooking the city. Most of the graves were from the late 19th or early 20th century. Its sign affirmed the desire to maintain the culture of the ancestors. “Respecting our Grandparents and our Children.” The sign also had a wonderful face. It was a generic face that would not show favoritism to any clan or sub-group.



Inside the graveyard, there was a lovely path, shaded with trees. It was very peaceful.

Many of the markers were mass produced, the kind you could buy from Sears. The carving was done by non-Native carvers, people who had those skills. Traditionally people had made their own markers of wood, but when they saw the stone markers they realized that these were more impressive and permanent, and could show great respect for those who had passed.

I saw one marker for Isaac Yath-quala. He was 38 when he died. The marker was a standard one, nothing unique. But I liked his name. And the carving is very elegant.



Nearby was a husband and wife. George Paddy was 25 when he died. Rose was 19. Life was often short and fragile. Their stones were routine but George and Rose both had nice passages. George had one that is familiar.

*Remember youth, as you pass by
As you are now, so once was I
As I am now, so you must be
Prepare for death and follow me.*



That was very popular in New England (and in Europe). George must have liked it.

Rose had a more personalized inscription.

Let me speak, my hands are ready

I am ready to go

I am going to Jesus

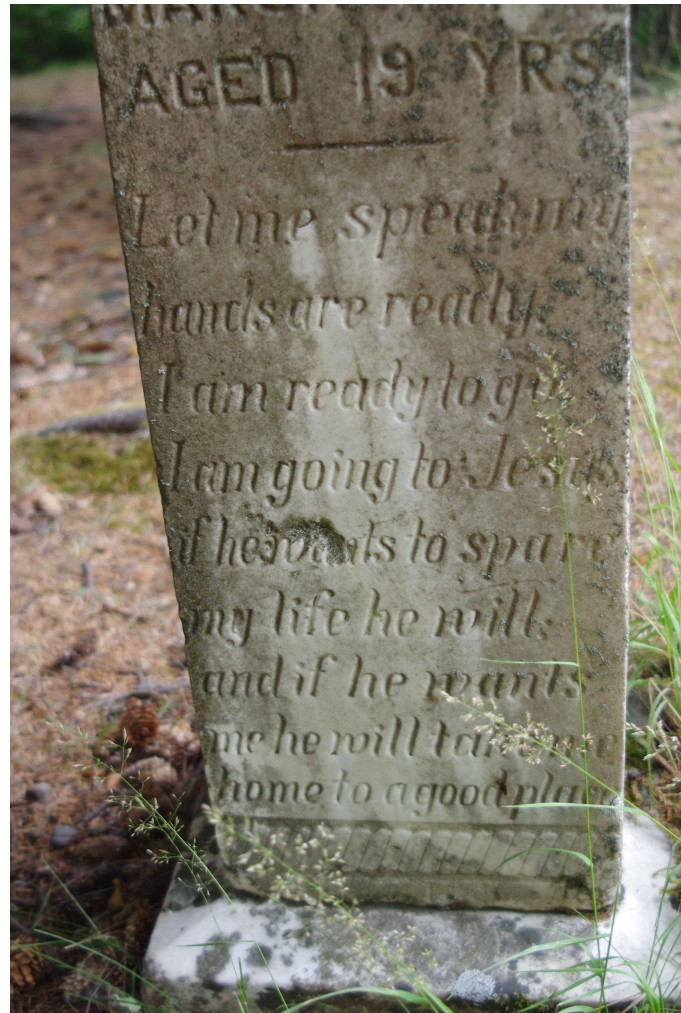
If he wants to spare my life He will.

And if He wants me, He will take me

To a good place.

George and Rose died three years apart. She would have been 16 at the time of their marriage. I wonder if maybe Rose had an illness that she knew might take her. Certainly, her message sounds as if it were written by a living person, at peace with life, and possibly death.

In another isolated village (called Kake) there was an island just off the coast. All the Tlingit burials in Kake took place on that island. I asked if it might be possible to visit it. I was told that there was only visitation twice a year, a time when family could go there. The person to whom I spoke said he had been there. He said that the pattern of two names was found, and the presence of totems. He did not say this, but I got the impression that visitation was restricted to Tlingit people.



I left Alaska thinking that maybe that island sends a message - - that some things are just beyond our reach, or our understanding.

Supplementary Story

Back in Juneau, in the public cemetery, I saw an amazingly unique stone. It is not Native American but I want to include it, just for the sake of recording its content. It was the stone of Kaurbek Hodoff. He was born in 1886 and died in 1933. To someone who grew up during the Cold War, and who had lectured from time to time on the Soviet Union, it certainly jumped out to me as worthy of attention. The first thing is that Hodoff identifies himself as “comrade.” This is not unusual in Europe (German soldiers identify each other with that greeting) but to Americans it certainly has an association with Communism. The second thing was that Comrade Kaurbek Hodoff includes the hammer and sickle, the symbol of worker and peasant revolution. Finally, he says he was born in “Soviet Russia” in 1886. Of course, the Communists did not come to power until October of 1917 (and the “Soviet” designation did not appear until even later) so this identification was historically inaccurate. Still, to Comrade Kaurbek Hodoff Russia was a Soviet state even before it came into existence. Or, to borrow from the Bible, “I knew you before you were born.” And in 1933 he had no hesitation in identifying himself with the Soviet Union and its revolution.



