Introduction

American Cemetery Studies as Above- and Belowground Archaeology

In popular culture, archaeologists are often thought of as people who dig up tombs, find mummies, and unearth treasures. They are also dashing and exciting characters. This book is about what historical archaeologists—archaeologists who study the modern world—have learned from the archaeology of American cemeteries and burial places. As archaeologists, we are interested in what the aboveground artifacts found in burial grounds can tell us about the past, and especially how gravestones, tombstones, and cemetery design have evolved through time. We are also interested in the information that can be gleaned from the buried remains of our predecessors, in particular their skeletons, coffins, and grave goods. So, yes, like the archaeologists in the movies we do study tombs and graves. North American archaeologists rarely find mummies; however, they do sometimes find Victorians buried in mumiform metallic coffins. The treasures we find are not gold and silver but information and insights into how people lived and what they believed, information that often can be recovered only through archaeological research. Most of the individuals we study were not famous. They were ordinary people, but they are important for the insights that their memorials and their remains provide into our shared past. Unlike archaeologists in the movies, and sadly some archaeologists in real life, we advocate working respectfully and collaboratively with descendant populations.

This book is a guide of sorts to the world of cemetery studies in American historical archaeology. We examine American burial places and what makes them distinctive. We hope it provides you with a good foundation for your own research.
Cemeteries and burial places in general are important repositories of cultural information (figure 1.1). They reflect and embody changing ideas regarding commemoration and remembrance. Similar to other cultural landscapes, they have evolved through time; moreover, the human remains they hold can provide valuable information about the religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, and ethnic heritage of the deceased, as well as information about an individual's physiological characteristics: stature, sex, injuries suffered during life, and health.

Gravemarkers, the aboveground component of American cemeteries and burial places, are the ultimate historical artifact: they are part material culture and part document. They are generally dated and associated with known individuals. Unlike most other artifacts, which were discarded and forgotten once their useful life was over, gravestones were purposefully made to convey information to future generations. They cry out for study. Moreover, they usually remain in their original locations, and the material they were made from may provide information about craft traditions, trade networks, and local resources. At the same time, gravestone design and decoration may reflect religious or cultural traditions and other social norms. Their form, size, decoration, inscriptions and epitaphs, and location have proven to be useful indicators of gender, status, ethnicity, consumerism, and social change. American gravestones are essentially documents in stone, and their inscriptions may provide information on life spans, infant mortality, gender, occupations, military service, and religious traditions. When other sources have not survived, gravestones can often fill in the gaps left in the written records. In early America, they were one of the few forms of publicly accessible art. Gravestones and cemeteries reflect America's changing attitude toward death from a preindustrial, agricultural society to an industrial, capitalistic, and ultimately postindustrial society. For more than fifty years, diverse theoretical perspectives and research questions in historical archaeology have been reflected in the numerous archaeological studies of cemeteries and gravestones.

With so much literature available on the archaeology of American cemeteries and burial sites, why write a book? Because gravestone studies is in some ways a self-contained but interdisciplinary field, and many of the cemetery and gravestone articles written by archaeologists do not appear in the major historical archaeology publications (Historical Archaeology, International Journal of Historical Archaeology, and Northeast Historical Archaeology). Therefore, many archaeologists may not be aware of the
wealth of information that exists. The Association for Gravestone Studies annually publishes a list of the new books and articles on mortuary studies. With such a growing and vast literature, a global encyclopedia of mortuary studies would be useful, but that is not the focus of our book. For a useful survey of cemetery research in the United Kingdom, the interested reader should refer to Harold Mytum's excellent Mortuary Monuments and Burial Grounds of the Historic Period (2004). A useful overview of Western European–style cemeteries in a worldwide context is provided by James Stevens Curl's A Celebration of Death (1993). Our book is focused on American cemeteries and the American experience.

Although there are some fine synthetic studies of the archaeology of death and burial (Bellantoni and Poirier 1997; Parker Pearson 1999), bibliographies on burial and related topics (Bell 1994; Sprague 2005), guides to studying and documenting gravestones (Mytum 2000, 2004; Sprague 2005), and volumes on the restoration of gravemarkers and burial grounds (Strangstad 1995), our volume is the first overarching look at the archaeology, both aboveground and below, of American burial grounds. Our book provides an overview of the important themes in the field and also provides
an archaeological perspective on the American experience through the study of cemeteries.

Cemetery and burial ground publications by archaeologists often appear in diverse sources such as publications for cultural geographers, folklorists, and art historians; regional and state archaeological journals; and especially *Markers: The Journal of the Association for Gravestone Studies*. They appear in books or as book chapters (for example, Poirier and Bellan-toni 1997a; Chung and Wegars 2005; Veit and Nonestied 2008). They also appear in the gray literature of masters’ theses, doctoral dissertations, and cultural resource management reports (for example, Crowell 1983; Stone 1987; Veit 1991; Perry et al. 2009a). There is a wealth of important data on American cemeteries in the gray literature, especially in cultural resource management (CRM) reports that were produced for agencies and clients. Unfortunately, most CRM reports have a very limited distribution, so even other archaeologists may be unaware of the information they contain. Wherever possible we have highlighted some of the important research from gray literature.

**Changing Theoretical Perspectives on Commemoration and Deathways**

Anthropologists have had long-standing global interests in commemoration and human deathways. Indeed, as Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf note in *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (1979: 1), “What could be more universal than death? Yet what an incredible variety of responses it evokes. Corpses are burned or buried, with or without animal or human sacrifice, they are preserved by smoking, embalming, or pickling; they are eaten—raw, cooked, or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrion or simply abandoned or they are dismembered and treated in a variety of these ways.” Furthermore, burial practices, human skeletal remains, and associated artifacts have been central to the inquiries of archaeologists and biological anthropologists as they have worked to unravel the path of human evolution and document past societies.

Many of the major historical figures of sociocultural anthropology, including Alfred Kroeber (1927), Max Gluckman (1937), Arnold Van Gennep (1960), and Robert Hertz (1960), focused considerable attention on the ritual behaviors associated with death. They examined issues of liminality, transition, commemoration, and how funerary practices help structure
society (Parker Pearson 1999: 22). Other anthropologists, such as Mary Douglas, have focused on issues of pollution and purity and how these practices relate to death and burial (Douglas 1966; Parker Pearson 1999: 24).

Globally archaeologists are also interested in issues related to death, burial, and commemoration and have a long tradition of studying the same (Childe 1945; Binford 1971; Chapman, Kinnes, and Randsborg 1981; Parker Pearson 1999). Human remains have much to reveal about the lives of past individuals, with the potential to provide information about stature, sex, diet, nutrition, habitual activities, injuries, disease, and many other topics (Larsen 1997: 2). Indeed, Ivor Noël Hume, the doyen of American historical archaeology, has written, “The archaeologist’s concern for the preservation of human life is probably matched only by his enthusiasm for its mortal remains!” (Noël Hume 1975: 158, 160).

The rise of the New Archaeology in the 1970s saw archaeologists searching for scientific laws that would enable them to better understand human behavior. Lewis Binford, building on the work of Arthur Saxe (1970), argued that one could infer the social status of the deceased and their place within the society from the grave goods found with them (Binford 1971). Working with data from forty different societies, garnered from the Human Relations Area files, Binford tested his hypotheses and found that individuals’ identities are reflected in diverse ways in burial practices (Binford 1971; Parker Pearson 1999). Other scholars have come to similar conclusions and built upon and refined the work of Saxe and Binford (Winters 1968; Ucko 1969; Brown 1971; Tainter 1978; Carr 1995). In essence, these scholars believe that differences in burial treatment accord with asymmetries once present in the living society (Peebles and Kus 1977: 421–48; Brenner 1988: 148). With the rise of postprocessual archaeology, new interpretations of mortuary remains and commemorative processes have emerged, which rather than seeing direct correlations between status and commemorative elaboration have focused on the variability of social roles across time and space. Some scholars see ideological systems as determining the expressions that are evidenced in mortuary rites (Shanks and Tilley 1982: 129; Brenner 1988: 148). One of these scholars, Ian Hodder, sees several different scenarios that may play out in mortuary rituals:

1. A naturalizing strategy where political inequalities are symbolically expressed as an integral and inherently necessary part of the hierarchical order attributed to the natural world.