

## THE EVOLUTION OF SAN DIEGO CEMETERIES AND GRAVESTONES

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*San Diego County is home to well over 100 historical cemeteries and grave sites, many of which have vanished from the modern landscape. During their comprehensive survey and analysis of the region's grave markers, individuals participating in the San Diego County Gravestone Project have discovered many of these lost cemeteries. Close examination of San Diego's cemeteries and grave markers have revealed significant patterns in commemoration strategies, evident through temporal, spatial, and formal trends. In offering an overview of all of San Diego's cemeteries, this analysis spotlights those types of grave sites that have disappeared and discusses how they fit into multiple classifications of the region's cemeteries. It also outlines relevant stylistic evolutions in San Diego's grave markers, pinpointing particular transformations in gravestone material, type, and mortuary art.*

Started in 2002, the San Diego County Gravestone Project entailed the inventory and analysis of all of the region's historical grave markers. An assortment of San Diego State University faculty, staff, and students documented and photographed southern California's old gravestones. The information collected included spatial coordinates; standardized color readings; and gravestone type, material, condition, dimensions, orientation, decorative techniques, motif, and inscription. The database currently has nearly 15,000 individual grave marker cases in terms of 45 different variables.

An overview of San Diego cemeteries published in 1982 listed a total of 38 county graveyards (Bissell 1982). The San Diego County Gravestone Project pinpointed the exact location of more than 100 additional graveyards. Some were on private property; others included cemeteries that had fallen prey to development or were overgrown. This project serves to record permanently these precious and non-renewable historical resources before they fall prey to further development, vandalism, decay, and neglect.

### SAN DIEGO COUNTY CEMETERIES

San Diego County cemeteries fit a general developmental classification that follows a multi-linear evolutionary scheme with three stages of increasing size and complexity. The first consists of individual graves and small, private cemeteries. These grave sites range in size from one to 30 burials and are found predominantly in rural, backyard, or ranch settings. These "Stage 1" cemeteries often evolve into "Stage 2" small, multi-family community cemeteries, which contain between 30 and 200 burials and are most common in rural areas. The third and final stage in this tripartite evolutionary scheme is the medium multi-family community cemeteries. These gravesites can have up to 5,000 burials and are centered on a small historic section of interments.

There are three other types of cemeteries which are not included in this evolutionary scheme but are still part of this analysis and its

classificatory systems. The first is large, multi-family community cemeteries that contain between 5,000 and 100,000 burials. These "mega-cemeteries" are planned in advance near major population centers and do not slowly evolve in the same manner as the previous three cemetery stages. A second exception concerns military cemeteries. Following military protocol, these cemeteries and their stones are standardized in a particular way that strays from the usual ebb and flow of culture change in non-military gravesites. The third potential anomaly is American Indian cemeteries. Various American Indian groups have chosen not to participate in this study for now, and thus, their cemeteries contain data that may stray from the aforementioned classification. Their decisions are respected, but it is hoped that this project's initial results will encourage these groups to participate at a later date.

Certain spatial, temporal, and formal parameters governed the San Diego County Gravestone Project. A starting date of 1881 was used, as this year marked the date that enough stones were being placed in the ground to have an adequate sample size to analyze. In addition, 1960 was the cut-off date for this study. The '60s marked a time in which the County's gravestone population began to spike emphatically, dramatically increasing the difficulty and breadth of our collection strategy. The year 1960 also serves as the 45-year designation for historical significance under the California Environmental Quality Act.

### SAN DIEGO COUNTY GRAVESTONES

San Diego County boasts an incredible variety of gravestone shapes, but the ones from 1881 to 1960 fall predominantly into six major categories. The first is tall, vertical, statuesque monuments, including columns, spires, obelisks, and statues. The second consists of rectangular, vertical slabs, predominantly tablets but also including screen memorials, pulpits, and blocks. Group three consists of slant markers, stone slabs that rest at a 60-degree angle from the earth and whose heights exceed their depths. Group four includes bevel markers, stone slabs that rest at a 30-degree angle from the ground and whose

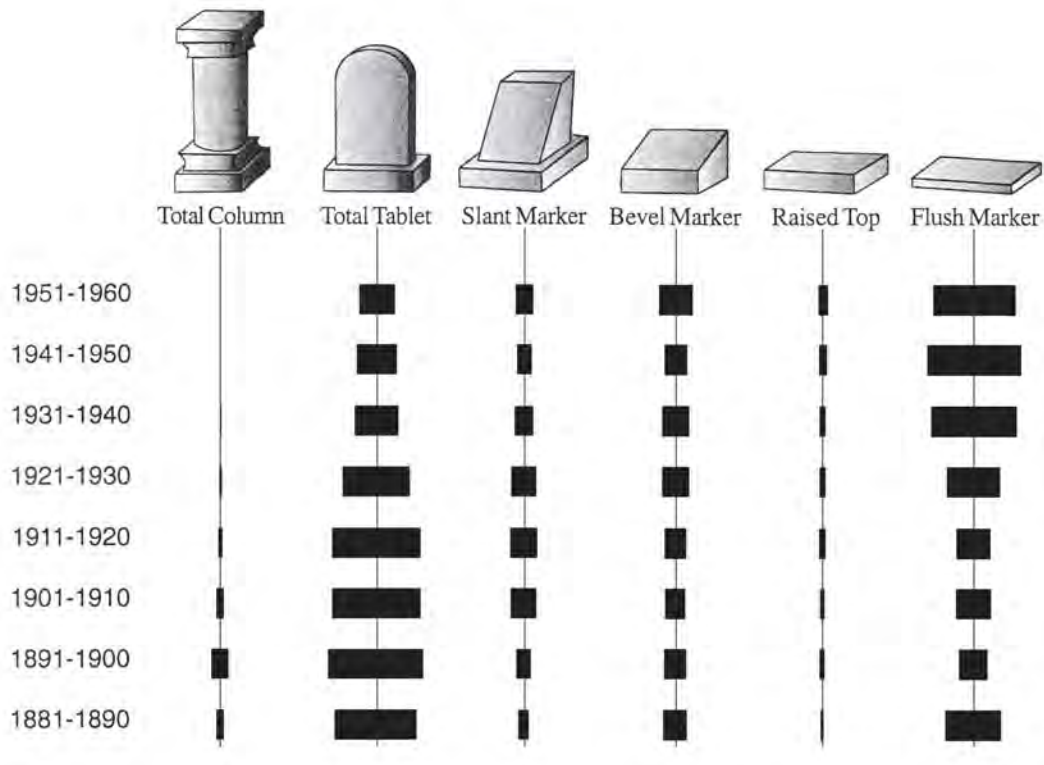


Figure 1: Battleship curve of San Diego County gravestone shape vs. time.

depths exceed their heights. The fifth gravestone class includes raised tops, flat rectangular markers that rest horizontally a few inches above the earth. The sixth gravestone class consists of flush markers, flat rectangular stones that are completely flush with the ground.

San Diego County gravestones collectively undergo regular change in form over time. “Battleship” diagrams clearly demonstrate the temporal-formal evolution of these stones through the six major categories (Figure 1). The decades in which each gravestone category exhibits its peak of popularity is linearly sequential. The column and tablet families peak first in the 1890s, followed by slant markers in the 1910s, and bevel markers, raised tops, and flush markers in the 1940s and '50s (Figure 2). Most of the six categories are unimodal. The hourglass shape of the later bevel, raised-top, and flush marker battleship diagrams are due to the refurbishing and replacing of historic-period stones with newly-made grave markers that have old dates.

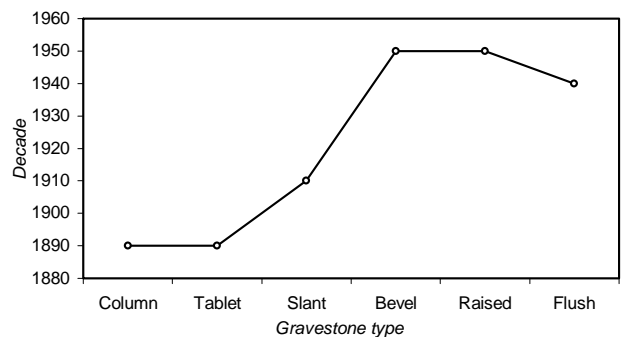
**GRAVESTONE PERIODS**

The first period of monumentalism seen in San Diego County gravestones in the form of large statues and tablets corresponds with an audacious time in Western history. From the erecting of the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty in the 1880s to the construction of the largest moving object ever built—the Titanic—in 1912, this time period is typified by defiance, audacity, size, artificiality, and individualism. The gravestones embody this, whether in the form of pyramids that symbolically resist “the sands of time” or white marble tree stumps and

logs that showcase humanity’s ability to out-create and improve upon Mother Nature (Hijiya 1983). Even the surge in embalming practices during this period pinpoints the Euro-American desire to defy death, natural decay, and the superiority of the supernatural (Hijiya 1983; Mitford 1963).

The second period of flatter and flatter stones, often called the Modern Plain Period, consisted of entirely different images. In line with the high casualties of World War I, Americans demonstrated a resigned attitude toward death and constructed humble and inconspicuous grave markers. These stones are not at all individualistic; they almost seem to sink naturally into the earth, or appear collectively as one cell in a honeycomb of crypts. It is death in the context of humbled conformity. These flat gravestones also correspond with a decline in displays of grief and diminished death-based rituals.

Figure 2: Scatterplot of peak decade by gravestone type.



This transition from statues to flatter and flatter forms was not just a landscaping decision. It is no easier to mow over a bevel marker than a slant marker. The transition from Monumentalism to Modern Plain was incredibly gradual, not a sudden shift to the flat flush markers. In fact, the transformation was so regular that there is a significant negative correlation of -0.4 between the height of a gravestone and the date of death of the individual interred next to it.

Local gravestone form followed a significant spatial gradient, as well. There are three predominant patterns, each of which follow the general reduction from Monumentalism to Modern Plain, but nonetheless spotlight intra-regional variability. Spatial Pattern 1 cemeteries consist of those in the more-urban parts of the county, including central and north-county gravesites. They evince a change in the form that showcases flush markers and raised tops first outnumbering tablets in the 1920s. Spatial Pattern 2 cemeteries are those from the more-rural east county. Flush markers did not outnumber tablets until the 1950s, a 30-year lag. Spatial Pattern 3 cemeteries—the smallest and most rural folk cemeteries—never have more flush markers than tablets.

These differences led to separate regression analyses for each of the spatial patterns. The differing r-squared values and the differing slopes of the regression equation offer insight into the speed and uniformity of formal change in San Diego County gravestones (Table 1). Larger inverse correlations equate with uniformity in change. Lower inverse correlations demonstrate non-standardized change. Steeper negative slopes in the regression equation showcase a rapid rate of change: flatter negative slopes in the equation reveal slower change. What this shows is that urban cemeteries change quickly and uniformly, whereas small, rural folk cemeteries change in a non-standardized manner and very slowly. Medium-sized rural cemeteries mediate the two. Their moderate correlation and slope, when compared with the other two extreme categories, showcase semi-standardized change and an even-paced rate of change. The urgency for gravestone change diminishes the farther one strays from the urban centers of the county. Rural communities ultimately follow the general trends established in the downtown area, but in their own way and at their own speed.

One San Diego County cemetery, Home of Peace, does not correspond with these spatial patterns. It exhibits virtually no change in form at all. Throughout the past 150 years, the stones all have been large tablets. Home of Peace is the only exclusively Jewish Cemetery in the county, and its conservation in style reflects trends in Jewish culture. As a people repeatedly separated from their homeland—their primary space—Jews often emphasize time in lieu of place (Kern 1983). Their temporal commemoration resists the current fad of gravestone plainness.

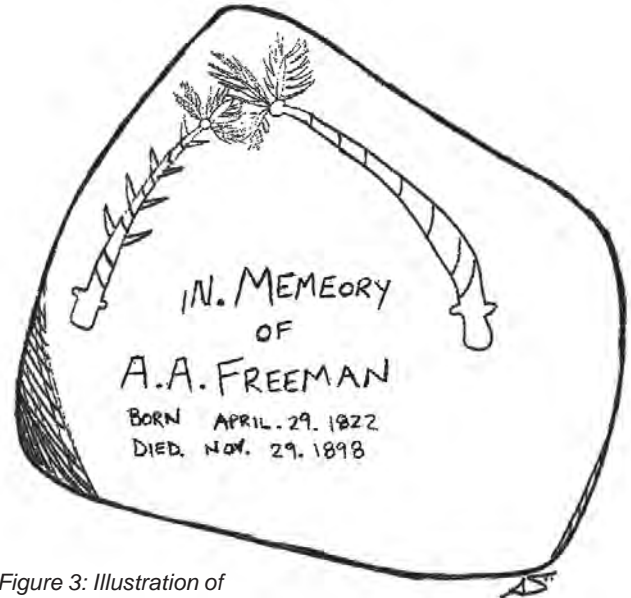


Figure 3: Illustration of A. A. Freeman gravestone in San Luis Rey Pioneer Cemetery, San Diego, California.

CONCLUDING EXAMPLE

This analysis concludes with one of the region’s most distinctive grave markers, the heavily weathered 1898 stone marking A. A. Freeman’s grave in the San Luis Rey Pioneer Cemetery (Figure 3). American gravestone motifs during the nineteenth century were dominated by the urn and willow, symbolizing mourning and sorrow. Local San Diego carvers appreciated this design trend but gave it regional distinction. They made it their own. True to local character, the San Diego weeping willows are a couple of laid-back, tilted palm trees.

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Table 1: Differential r<sup>2</sup> values, regression equation slopes, and their ramifications.

Spatial Pattern	Correlation Coefficient	Slope of Regression Line
1: Urban	0.52 Standardized change	-0.85 Rapid change
2: More Rural	0.32 Semi-standardized change	-0.66 Moderately paced change
3: Most Rural	0.13 Unstandardized change	-0.17 Slow change