

## *Reading Weathered Marble Gravestones Requires a Knowledge of the Carver's Craft*

John E. Sterling

Most gravestones in the United States in the 19th century were made of marble. These gravestones are proving to be temporary markers. Thomas Meierding discussed gravestone weathering at the 1995 Association for Gravestone Studies conference. Dr. Meierding detailed how sulfur dioxide, from coal burning, is the main enemy of upright stones and acid rain is the enemy of horizontal gravestones. My experience in Rhode Island is that 2% to 4% of the marble stones are unreadable, even with the techniques I will detail here. That number is somewhat lower in rural areas that had less exposure to sulfur dioxide. In some areas where sulfur dioxide pollution was higher or where poor quality marble was used, the percentage of unreadable gravestones can be as high as 50%.

I have been working since 1990 with a group of volunteers whose goal is to record every gravestone in the state of Rhode Island. To date we have recorded 435,000 gravestones in 3070 cemeteries. I have seen many techniques used to read gravestones, but two stand out as far and away the best. The mirror techniques where sunlight is redirected at a raking angle over the gravestone to highlight the carving with shadows is the quickest and easiest, where bright sunlight is available. The other technique works well on gravestones in cemeteries deep in the woods where sunlight can not be reflected on the stone with a mirror, a natural bristle brush and

plain water works well. By wetting and brushing the face of the gravestone the dirt on the surface is moved into the letters while the surface starts to lighten. Most marble gravestones can be read directly with one of these techniques, but some have worn so severely that unless you know how the carver has made the numbers they can be confused.

READING MARBLE GRAVESTONE NUMBERS NEWLY CARVED NUMBERS COMPARED TO WEATHERED NUMBERS	
NEWLY CARVED NUMBERS  <b>14</b>	NEWLY CARVED NUMBERS  <b>235</b>
100-200 YEARS OF WEATHERING  <b>11</b>	100-200 YEARS OF WEATHERING  <b>235</b>
CHART 1	CHART 2
NEWLY CARVED NUMBERS  <b>690</b>	NEWLY CARVED NUMBERS  <b>78</b>
100-200 YEARS OF WEATHERING  <b>( ) ( ) ( )</b>	100-200 YEARS OF WEATHERING  <b>78</b>
CHART 3	CHART 4

'1' and '4' are the most misread numbers on worn marble gravestones. When you write on paper all strokes on numbers are equal strength but not so when they are carved in marble. The '1' and the '4' are made with heavy downward strokes. The rest of these numbers are carved with very light lines. When these numbers wear so that the light lines disappear the '1' and the '4' are indistinguishable. [see chart #1] For these situations it is helpful to look at the spacing. 1811 is spaced much closer than 1841. It is also helpful to look for a possible spouse nearby. If the husband died in 1845 at age 80, it is highly unlikely that the wife died in 1816 at age 79. In this case it is quite possible that her death occurred in 1846 not 1816.

'2', '3' and '5' are all quite similar but they have their own characteristics. [see chart #2] The deep curve on the right side of all three numbers occurs on the top of the '2', the bottom of the '5' and at both the top and bottom of the '3'. There is a deep dot to the left of this curve. The '2' and the '5' also have a straight line, at the bottom of the '2' and the top of the '5'. On a weathered stone these characteristics should be looked for.

'6', '9' and '0' are all quite similar. [see chart #3] All three numbers have heavy curved lines on the right and the left. On the '0' they are long and equal. The '6' has a similar long line on the left and a shorter line on the right at the bottom. The '9' has the long line on the right and a shorter line on the left at the top. Careful study under proper light will improve the accuracy of reading these numbers.

'7' and '8' are truly unique numbers and should never be confused with other numbers. [see chart #4] The '8' has a deep diagonal line that makes it unique from all other numbers. When it has weathered a small diagonal line is the only clue that this was once an '8'. The '7' has a horizontal line at the top,

much like the '5'. The deep vertical line directly under this horizontal line makes the '7' unique from all other numbers.

Letters used to spell out the name are usually not as much of a problem as numbers because they are interrelated and if you can read some of the letters you can usually figure out the name. There are a number of lettering styles used on marble gravestones. You can usually find a stone using the same style nearby that is in better condition where you can study the characteristics of the letters. Reading the adjacent gravestones can also give you clues, as related people are usually buried together. The most difficult problem with letters is reading initials since they stand alone with no other letters to help.

To read marble gravestones use a mirror to light the face of the stone or scrub the surface with plain water and a natural bristle brush. Learn the characteristics of the numbers by studying where the carver has cut deep lines so you can recognize what the numbers look like when they are worn.