World Archaeological Congress 4

University of Cape Town

10th - 14th January 1999

Symposium: Contested Landscapes & Landscapes of Movement and Exile

THE DECEPTION OF TOMBSTONES: (MIS)REPRESENTATION IN AN INDIANA CEMETERY

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Burial grounds can be important sources of information. Mortuary furniture and the spatial relations of the dead have the potential to tell us about the statuses or status aspirations of individuals who might otherwise be unknown to us. They also can provide clues to an overall social organization that might otherwise remain obscure. (Binford 1971; Cannon 1995; Chapman 1980 Orton and Hodson 1982; Pader 1980; Renfrew and Bahn 1991: 175-176; Tainter 1978). However, these relationships can not be assumed to be obvious, transparent, or simple. There is always the disturbing possibility that mortuary furniture and the arrangement of graves can misinform. Grave goods can be manipulated to invert, disguise, or misrepresent social practices rather than to reflect them. (Arnold 1982; Hodder 1986; Pearson 1982; Shanks and Tilley 1987: 142). At the very least there will be certain social facts which seem so obvious to local people that they need no explicit statement in burial arrangements.

One way to shed light on the relationship between mortuary practices and individual status or social organization is to focus on small historic cemeteries in which something may about the dead can be known, and in which the relationship between mortuary furniture and other cultural and social systems may more easily be identified than in prehistoric cemeteries. One such small historic cemetery is Maple Hill, in rural Indiana [Figure 1]. Begun as a public cemetery in 1832 and still in use today, Maple Hill is located along the top and on the east slope of a low hill just south of the village of New Harmony.[Begun as a simple repository for the dead, Maple Hill was transformed into garden cemetery in the middle of the nineteenth century through the addition of steps, benches, urns, and other decorations (See Farrell, 1980;

French 1974; Harris 1977; Saum 1977; Sloan 1991). The cemetery is nondenominational but in fact most persons buried there are Protestants.

New Harmony is located in the Wabash Valley in southwestern Indiana. The village has consistently had a population of between seven hundred and a thousand persons since its founding in 1814. The surrounding farm area likewise has had a fairly consistent population of about a thousand persons. Because New Harmony and its environs are particularly well documented, much can be known about those who lie in Maple Hill. There are county, state, and federal records, obituaries, newspaper articles, letters, diaries and other documents available in a variety of archives.

This study is concerned only with those persons born before 1830; that is, with residents who were or would have been adults in 1850, and who would have lived most of their lives in the nineteenth century. Altogether, 181 stones were recorded, representing 279 people. Of the names inscribed on these early tombstones, only eight could not be identified from other sources.

Settlement in Posey County, in which New Harmony is located, began in 1805 with migrants from the upland regions of the south. These people were part of the general Trans-Appalachian migration to the west, when thousands of yeoman farmers poured over the Alleghenies or down the Ohio River into what are now Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. (Kamau 1991a, 1998; Otto 1985; Rohrbaugh 1978; Rose 1985; 1986; Swearinga 1989; Wilhelm 1991) These settlers were mostly of British ancestry, but their families had lived in the United States for several generations, and they had little or no sense of European identity. Sometimes referred to as “plain folk” by modern historians, and universally denigrated as “backwoodsmen” by contemporary travelers, they were almost uniformly small farmers practicing a mixed agriculture based on corn and hogs, raised both for subsistence and for the market. While some of these plain folk in Posey County came to own large and valuable farms, southern farmers ranked low in the local social hierarchy, just above landless laborers.

New Harmony itself was founded in 1814 by a communal society called the Harmony Society. Members of the Harmony Society were German millenarian Pietists who had rejected secular society and lived in isolation while they awaited God’s call (Arndt 1975, 1978). The Harmony Society was closed to outsiders, and it left little permanent impact in Posey County. When the Society moved to Pennsylvania in 1825, a few attached German families remained in the New Harmony area. This early population of German settlers combined farming with small-scale entrepreneurial activities such as brewing or store keeping. This group was very small, and they intermarried with non-German families as well as with each other. Some of these early Germans became members of the elite.

The Harmonists sold their entire village, together with its extensive fields and orchard, to Robert Owen in 1824. Owen was a British cotton manufacturer who was dismayed by the worst excesses of the industrial revolution. Influenced by Enlightenment thought, he believed that environment was the only determinant of character and that the ideal environment for human happiness was a small egalitarian communal society. (Bestor 1950; Harrison 1969; Owen 1857). Owen widely publicized his ideas, and a number of people from the Atlantic states as well as some from England and France were attracted to his communal experiment at New Harmony. Two of Owen’s sons were among the New Harmony communitarians. Also drawn to New Harmony were a number of scientists, educational reformers, and artists who were to teach in special schools that were established at New Harmony.

Owen’s communal society lasted only one and a half years, from January, 1825, to July, 1827. Torn by dissension, it collapsed. Many of its members left New Harmony,

but some stayed. Owen's sons remained, to be joined by two more sons and a daughter. A number of former teachers remained, as did other community members. Owen's community may have had a short life, but it left behind a lasting legacy. Its former members became the elite of the county.

Some were quite wealthy. In 1850, Owen's offspring owned real estate worth $39,825 in a township with a median assessed property value of $300.00. (United States Bureau of the Census) Some former Owenites were considerably less well off than the Owen family, but regardless of income, they made up a rather sophisticated urbanized elite in this little settlement. Wealth by itself was less important in determining membership than education, occupation, and social refinement.

Immigration into the New Harmony area continued in the 1830's and 1840's. Many of these newcomers were from Germany or from England. German migration into southwestern Indiana during these decades was widespread. These later Germans were likely to be farmers or artisans. They intermarried with their non-German neighbors less frequently than did the earlier and smaller German population, and, unlike the first German settlers, those who immigrated in the 1830's and 1840's were Catholic. None of these later German immigrants, no matter how prosperous, became members of the township's elite.

English immigration into Indiana was not at all common, but in Posey County, English-born residents made up 18% of the population in 1850. (Rose 1986; Kamau 1998) English families settled in and around New Harmony because there was already a sizable English population left from Owenite days. Most English immigrants were farmers or craftsmen, although a few were in professional occupations, and English immigrants also made up the largest number of landless agricultural laborers. The county also had a small French and French-Swiss population. Most had come to New Harmony with Owen, although one of the wealthiest families in antebellum New Harmony was a French born family who arrived in the 1840's. Elite British and French families often combined farming with a profession or with entrepreneurial activities. Members of both groups trended to be gentlemen farmers, and this predilection sometimes led to families that were land-rich but cash-poor. Finally, there were also a few Yankees from the northeast, many of whom were merchants.

Represented in Maple Hill, then, there are the following possible groups: settlers from the upland south, early German settlers, later German settlers, early and later British settlers, and a small number of persons of French or Yankee origin. Crosscutting all these categories are differences in sex, age, occupation, and wealth. Since it is possible to know so much about the people buried there, it is also possible to determine the extent to which Maple Hill reflects these social categories.

The most misleading aspect of Maple Hill is the fact that the largest segment of the population, farmers, overwhelmingly made up of southern Methodists and Baptists, is underrepresented. Consequently, other social segments are overrepresented. Maple Hill is not the only cemetery in the area, nor is it the oldest. There are many small private cemeteries scattered around the county. After its inauguration in 1832, many village residents were buried in Maple Hill, but farm families continued to inter their dead in domestic cemeteries. As a result, Maple Hill does not represent the entire population of the area and it would be necessary to conduct a regional study in order to gain a complete picture of mortuary practices.

Within Maple Hill, two styles of marker predominate: simple vertical slabs and pillars [Figures 2, 3]. For the population under consideration, there were 113 vertical slabs (62% of the total) and 59 pillars (33%). Five markers (3%) were horizontal limestone slabs measuring six feet by two feet that rested on twenty-four-inch-high

brick bases [Figure 4]. These markers outline the coffins that lie beneath. Four markers (2%) were unique and did not resemble any other memorials in the cemetery. Nearly all markers were made of locally available limestone, although late-nineteenth century pillars were sometimes made of polished granite. The two earliest markers are made of soapstone, three markers are made of sandstone, and there are two made of granite and bronze.

Vertical slabs are simple. They are two to three feet high with straight sides. Tops are round, square, or peaked. Most slabs represent only one person. Decoration is simple and usually consists of scroll work around the name of the deceased. Inscriptions are brief. Most simply give the name, date of birth. and date of death. Twenty-six stones (23% of vertical stones) name the birthplace of the deceased. All but two of these individuals were born outside Indiana. Epitaphs of any sort are very rare, size alone prohibiting wordiness. However, even "Father" or "Mother" are uncommon.

Pillars vary from four feet to six feet in height. Some are simple obelisks, while others have geometric bases that are surmounted by gothic crowns, vases, or sculptures of shrouds draped over urns [Figure 5]. Pillars provide more space than slabs, but only eleven (19% of pillars) made use of this space by including epitaphs. Most of the epitaphs that do exist are brief. Epitaphs stress loss to the nuclear family and occasionally loss to friends as well. They are mainly limited to simple conventionalized expressions, such as "The fairest flower is doomed to die," or "A loving husband and father dear/A faithful friend is buried here." There are no references to life after death. The additional space provided by the shape and size of pillars was used to memorialize additional family members. Pillars, more expensive than slabs, in this way were made economical, because additional stones were not necessary for spouses and children (See Cannon 1995: 7).

These two types of headstone overlap in time [Table 1]. The vertical slab is the oldest type and was exclusively used in the 1830's and 1840's. It predominated from 1840 to 1870. Pillars began in the 1850's and proportionately increased during the last three decades of the century, but only in the 1870's and 1890's did they outnumber slabs. Both styles continued into the twentieth century. As a result, although the pillar can be identified as a late nineteenth century style, one can not assume that a vertical slab is necessarily older than a pillar. Likewise, ornamentation on pillars usually does not usually correlate with decade, although gothic pillars made of polished granite were erected exclusively in the 1890's.

The oldest horizontal marker was erected in 1844, while the latest is dated 1877. Despite the considerable space these flat stones make available, only one contains an elaborate epitaph. This is the grave of James Swift, a southern merchant who was one of the earliest inhabitants of the area. His epitaph is a long religious poem. The remainder of these flat markers give only biographical information.

Differences in tombstone type are not correlated with differences in wealth or social ranking. Among vertical slabs, 18% mark persons of wealth, including all but two members of the Owen family. Fifteen percent of pillars represent wealthy families. Two of the five flat slabs marked persons of wealth. Of the four unique stones, two represent an extremely wealthy family, while the other two mark families of moderate income.

There are ethnic preferences among types of stone, but there is no difference in preference between earlier or later immigrants [Table 2]. Southerners, Yankees, and English immigrants, all Protestants, strongly preferred vertical slabs. Persons of German and French descent, some but not all of whom were Catholic, preferred

pillars, but many, perhaps because of cost, were memorialized by simple slabs. Vertical slabs were preferred by all occupational groups [Table 3]. Laborers may have been constrained by cost, but the remaining occupational categories included persons of considerable wealth as well as those of very little wealth.

There is no difference between the stones of children and the stones of adults before 1850. It is likely that many children who were buried before 1850 were given no markers. For many, childhood did not have the significance that it did after 1850. Except among the bourgeoisie, Victorian sentimentalizing of childhood did not reach southwestern Indiana until rather late. After 1850, children's stones were smaller than adult stones, and small limestone lambs often mark the graves of children under ten years old.

With the exception of one family plot, differences in gender are marked, but not strongly. Slab headstones of women are identical in size and style to those of men. Very often women were identified by their maiden names, with “wife of,” placed beneath. However, on pillars which memorialize more than one person, the husband’s name is placed on the front of the stone and his wife’s or wives name(s) are on the side. Alternatively, the husband’s name is placed on top, with his wife or wives placed underneath.

These slight differences in commemoration reflect the blurring of gender differences in midwestern farming communities as compared with eastern urban communities. Women in southern Indiana had a fair amount of legal and economic independence. Farmers were as dependent on their wives as farm wives were dependent on their husbands. Women could represent themselves in court, and a woman could get divorced as easily as a man. Widows, particularly farmers’ widows, were usually made executors of their deceased husband's estates, and they controlled family property during their widowhoods. Women could own and control their own property, and daughters inherited wealth equally with sons. (Kamau 1991a). On the other hand, because marriage was patrilocal, the wealth that women inherited was usually in the form of movables whereas men inherited real estate. Moveable wealth such as furniture or cash does not create more wealth, whereas, in a farming community, land is the chief source of wealth. As a result, the wealth that a woman inherited was less valuable than the wealth her brother inherited, even though the dollar value was the same. Moreover, women were less able to pass their wealth to offspring, because most was consumed during the life of the marriage. Women were by no means insignificant in this community, but they were of lower social status than men, and this difference is represented in mortuary furniture.

Maple Hill reflects the importance of the nuclear and especially the stem family in this community. Subordinate nuclear families are often found clustered around dominant ones. The graves of unmarried children and sometimes married male offspring, together with their wives and children, are clustered around the founding patriarch and matriarch who first settled the land. Occasionally married daughters and their families are also interred in the family plot. The amount of clustering, however, was limited by constraints of space, and it was impossible for every descendant of a prolific family to be buried in the same plot. In such cases, one usually finds offspring buried in the same general area of the cemetery as their parents.

Apart from family clusters, spatial organization in this cemetery provides few clues regarding the social organization of the living. Kindred, which were important in networks of mutual aid in the early days of settlement, and are not insignificant today, are not reflected in the cemetery (Kamau 1991b). More importantly, because of domestic burial grounds, southern farmers and their descendants are extremely

underrepresented and the artisans and bourgeois elites who lived in New Harmony are overrepresented. This dispersal of burials is significant; there has always been tension and a sense of difference between surrounding farm folk and the residents of New Harmony. Only in one respect does location in Maple Hill itself provide other than chronological information: older graves on the steeper slopes of the hill or immediately at its base are always of isolated men. It is these individuals who are most difficult to trace, and it is probable that many were transients who happened to die in the area. In at least one known case, this guess is substantiated. A small stone marks the grave of a keelboatman who died of smallpox in the 1830's. He was taken off the boat and secretly buried at night, and a small stone was later erected over his grave (Stallings 1993).

As noted, four grave markers are unlike any others in the cemetery. All were erected in the 1880's and 1890's. A large sandstone arch marks the grave of a southern farm couple. Another contains a four-foot-high figure wearing a toga and pointing heavenward. [Figure 5]. This figure rests on a granite base. On the reverse side are two coffin shaped metal troughs meant to hold flowers. This marks the grave of David Schnee and his wife. Schnee was a moderately prosperous saddler, a member of one of the first German families in the township.

The other two unusual stones, however, do mark an unusual family. The entire burial area stands out because it is so different from typical midwestern memorials. It is bounded by a wrought iron fence, the only fenced section of the cemetery [Figure 6]. Inside are extremely elaborate markers that are in style and size unlike anything else in Maple Hill. The body of the paterfamilias is marked by an imposing monument. It is a gothic pillar made of granite that is fourteen feet high and four feet wide [Figure 7]. On the lower part of the monument is a larger-than-life-size bronze bas-relief portrait bust of the deceased. On the monument is written "Ribeyre" in relief. On a footstone is written "John Ribeyre, 1812-1893."

Next to Ribeyre's marker is the marker of his wife, Emily, who was born in Dienne, France. [Figure 8]. Her stone is appropriately smaller than his, and it is also more elaborate and "feminine." It is an ornately carved limestone pillar surmounted by a life sized bronze portrait bust of the deceased. Hers is the only signed stone in the cemetery, and it is certainly the best made.

As Mrs. Ribeyre's marker indicates, the Ribeyres were French. There were other French born residents in the area, but they were rather austere reformers and intellectuals. Their gravestones are similarly austere. The flamboyant Ribeyres, on the other hand, were drawn to New Harmony by its commercial possibilities.

John Ribeyre was a business agent for the French army sent to the United States in the 1840's to buy mules and horses. He spent some time in New Orleans, where at some point he decided not to return to France. Neither did he return the French army its money. Instead, he got out of town and headed for the hinterlands where the French government was unlikely to find him. He traveled up the Mississippi, up the Ohio, and up the Wabash until he arrived in New Harmony, where he found a good investment. An island in the Wabash with three thousand fertile acres was for sale cheaply, due to a disastrous flood the previous spring that had bankrupted the occupant. Ribeyre still had with him much of the money belonging to the French army. He bought the island and from this he built his fortune (Elliott Papers). Ribeyre is listed in the 1850 census as a trader with property evaluated at $8,500, making him the fourth largest landholder in the township. According to his obituary, he was the richest man in the county when he died (Local History File) Photographs of the home he built in New Harmony, no longer standing, show an extremely large and ornate

house. Even today the only house in the county that is called a “mansion” by local residents is inhabited by a Ribeyre.

The iron fence, portraits, and baroque style of Emily Ribeyre’s marker are identical to monuments in New Orleans cemeteries. Ribeyre’s monument is stylistically similar to other markers in the Maple Hill, but it is far more imposing. Extremely masculine in style, it forcefully proclaims that this is the grave of an important man. These markers stand out against the simplicity of other markers not only in this cemetery but in the region. The distinctiveness of this plot suggests that the Ribeyres were not only wealthy but different from their neighbors. Modern residents speak of this family with a certain reserve, and it is possible that the Ribeyres were not readily absorbed by this small society. On the basis of their tombstones, they look like misfits, and it is possible that they were.

It would be a mistake, however, to read too much into differences in mortuary furniture. The Ribeyres were not the only French family in New Harmony, merely the only French family who erected tombstones in the French style. They were indeed wealthy, but the Owen family also had a good deal of wealth. Had they so desired, they could have erected an imposing family plot. They did not so choose. In fact some of the Owen stones are downright modest [Figure 9]. Similarly, their homes were rather simple and not very much different from other houses of the moderately prosperous in the village.

Matters of social standing can not always be directly inferred from tombstones. Simple tombstones do not necessarily mean that the deceased was socially unimportant or had little wealth, nor do elaborate stones necessarily indicate the opposite, although they may indicate these conditions. The simplicity chosen by the Owen family and by other prominent New Harmony families is related to the belief, shared by many of their neighbors, that it is bad form to flaunt one’s assets. The Owen family did not have to exhibit their social standing; everyone already knew what it was. As we know from the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), style is a potent weapon in the class war, and understatement can be efficiently wielded by elites in the maintenance of social hegemony against upstarts. In Maple Hill, social and economic differences were expressed materially, but sometimes in ways not directly reflected in tombstones. On the sole basis of mortuary furniture, it would seem that the John Ribeyres were extremely important in the community. The Owen family would seem to be far less important.

The symbolism of cemeteries can distort as easily as it can reflect social reality. Distinctions that exist in life can be obliterated in death, as the Owen markers testify. Distinctions can also be emphasized, as in the Ribeyre plot, or they can be fabricated, as in the Schnee plot. In short, mortuary furniture, like so many other aspects of material culture, can be made to serve competing constructions of reality (Shanks and Tilley 1987: 163).

On nineteenth-century Maple Hill, as in modern England, mortuary furniture “expresses an ideal of equality, humility, and non-materialism which is blatantly in contrast with the way we live our lives in practice” (Hodder 1982: 201). Most tombstones in Maple Hill are very similar in their simplicity. In death, this society appears far more homogenous and tranquil than ever it was in life. New Harmony has a long history of animosities, factions, disagreements and deep and abiding hatred which continue to this day. Maple Hill does not reflect actual social relations. Instead it speaks to an idealized expression of serenity and concord. Dead souls have here been manipulated to create a community of the dead that never existed among the living. This cemetery is not an exact microcosm of society but is instead the

expression in material form of an ideal.

TABLE I
PROPORTION OF TOMBSTONE TYPES,
1830-1909

Decade	vertical	pillar	horizontal slab	other
1830-39	100%	-	-	-
1840-49	83%	-	17%	-
1850-59	84%	-	18%	-
1860-69	81%	-	6%	-
1870-79	40%	8%	6%	-
1880-89	60%	13%	-	-
1890-99	42%	52%	-	-
1900-09	14%	49%	58%	29%
		58%	57%	

7%
-

TABLE TWO
ETHNIC PREFERENCES IN TOMBSTONES

place of origin		
Upland South		
Great Britain		
Germany		
France		
Eastern US	vertical slab	
64%		
67%		
36%		
35%		
29%	pillar	
27%		
26%		
55%		
65%		
14%	horizontal slab	
4%		
7%		
-		
-		
29%	other	
4%		
-		
9%		
-		
29%		

TABLE THREE
OCCUPATIONAL PREFERENCES
IN TOMBSTONES

occupation	
farmer	
professional	
entrepreneur	
artisan	

laborer	vertical slab
58%	
61%	
50%	
57%	
100%	pillar
39%	
28%	
38%	
29%	
-	horizontal slab
-	
11%	
6%	
14%	
-	other
3%	
-	
6%	
-	
-	

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