Cemetery Analysis of Whitewater, WI

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ABSTRACT

Procedures and customs surrounding funerals, burial, and grave marking vary widely by time period, location, culture, and religion, among many other factors. This project investigated the gravestone customs of cemeteries in Southern Wisconsin, USA. Utilizing a dataset of 500 gravestone samples collected from cemeteries in Whitewater, WI, the aim of this project was to objectively measure how people choose to remember their dead and how these practices have evolved over the years. Because of the decline in American religiosity in recent decades, the expectation of this project was to see the usage of religious symbols decline. Based on this analysis, this does not appear to be the case. Practices such as the recording of one's name and year of birth/death have remained constant; however, other customs of remembrance, such as the use of religious symbols and the recording of one's date of marriage, have shifted dramatically over the years, reflecting the evolution of society and culture.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

Humans use gravesites as a method of remembering and communicating information about those who have died;[1] accordingly, gravestones can be thought of as the most permanent method of recording and memorializing those who have passed. Gravestones, then, are often used to tell the story of those whose bodies they mark.[2] This occurs through the recording of their name, dates of birth and death, and perhaps their cause of death, occupation, family role, memorable quotes, epitaphs, *etc.*[1,2] This project aims to identify how residents of Southern Wisconsin have historically and currently remember and honor their dead in cemeteries. The only peer-reviewed analysis of Wisconsin cemeteries the author could find was a 1960 study on the Eden-Scottsbluff complex, which is dated as far back as 6,500 B.C.;[3] accordingly, this study offers an original contribution to academic literature in an area for which there is little to no preexisting academic research.

For many, religion is among the most important and defining aspects of our lives; therefore, religious symbols, scripture quotations, and iconography are also important aspects of how we remember and honor our dead. For decades now, however, there has been a dramatic decline in religiosity amongst Americans;[4,5] accordingly, in this investigation of Wisconsin cemeteries, there was an expectation of a decline in the use of religious symbols, scripture quotations, and iconography on graves of those who have died more recently. In addition to religious symbols, this project will analyze the presence of temporary decorations, non-religious iconography, the type of gravestone used, and the recording of the deceased occupation, family role, or marital status.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The data from this study represent information collected from gravestones at two public cemeteries in Whitewater, WI. Between January 12-13, data was collected from the two primary, largest cemeteries in the city: Hillside Cemetery and Calvary Cemetery. In total, 500 random samples were collected between the two, with 71% (Hillside) and 29% (Calvary) split between them. Hillside Cemetery is the primary and, by far, the largest cemetery in the city; consequently, it represents a significantly greater share of the data.

From each sample, the following information was collected: whether the grave was for an individual (one or two persons) or a family, the year of death, the presence of symbols on the stone, the presence of temporary decorations, and the recording of the deceased's family role, occupation, or date of marriage. The following is a brief explanation of some potentially ambiguous measures. In consideration of married couples, gravestones that were for one or two individuals were deemed "individual graves." Gravestones for three or more individuals, however, were considered "family graves" in this study. Gravestones with symbols on them were further categorized into religious symbols (such as a cross, bible, or angel), non-religious symbols (such as a flower

design, calculator, or baby), or both (for gravestones with multiple symbols, with at least one of each type). "Temporary decorations" refers to the presence of perishable goods which were not permanently imbedded into the gravestone (such as flowers, a wreath, a picture frame, or candles). Finally, "family role" refers to the recording of the deceased's role as a husband, wife, father, mother, brother, sister, *etc.*

RESULTS

Overview

The expectation of this project was to observe a decrease in the presence of religious symbols, quotes, and icons on and around gravesites to match the decrease in American religiosity observed over the last 50+ years; contrary to this expectation, there was a significant increase in the use of both religious and nonreligious symbols on graves. In fact, gravestones have become increasingly more intricate and information-filled across all measured metrics over recent years. The increased intricacy of gravestones can be explained, in large part, by the development of laser engraving tools, making such designs easier and cheaper to implement.[6] As will be discussed throughout this paper, cultural evolution also plays a major role in this development.

The years of death measured in this sample were split into five different categories of varying sizes. 8% of the sample died between 1800-1899, 16% between 1900-1949, 16% between 1950-1974, 34% between 1975-1999, and 26% between 2000-2022. Note that the years represented in each category becomes progressively smaller. The majority of the gravestones recorded marked individuals rather than families (82% of graves) and included symbols of some kind (74% of graves). Meanwhile, only about half of the graves (49%) included religious symbols. Other gravesite features measured, including the presence of temporary decorations, or the deceased family role, date of marriage, and occupation, were significantly less common.
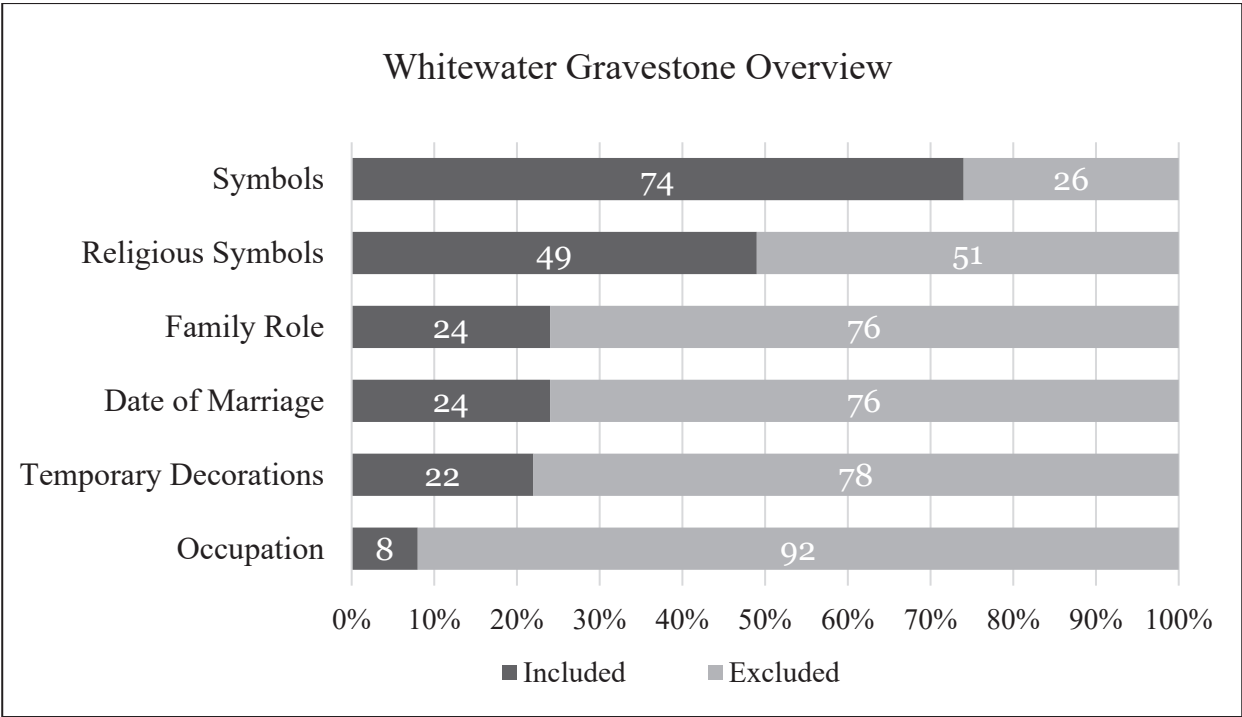

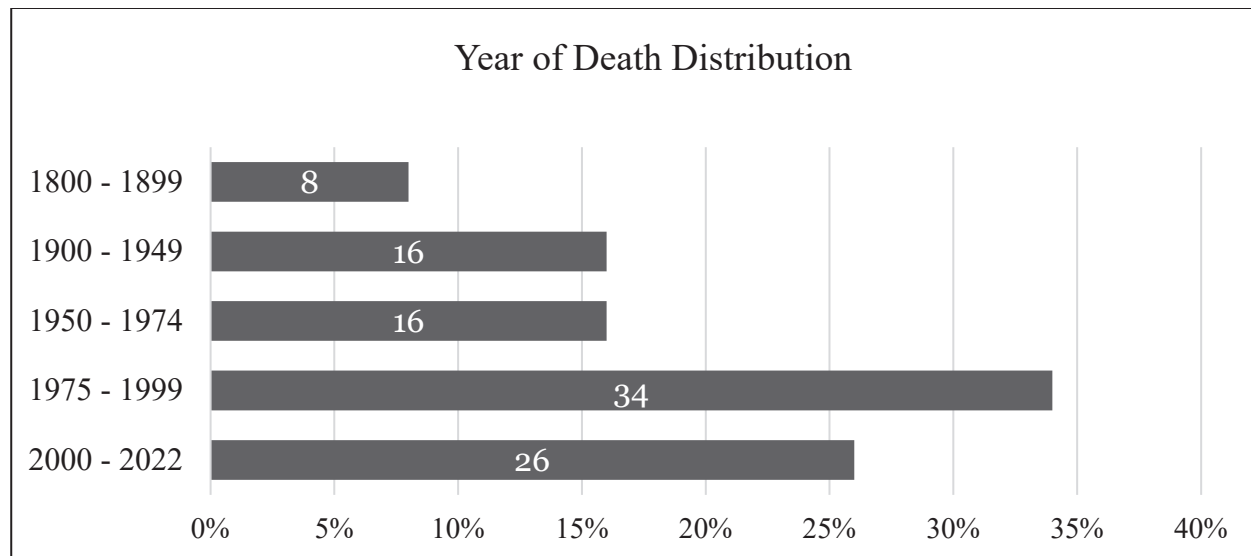**Figure 1.** Whitewater gravestone overview.

Year of Death Distribution

Range	Value
1800 - 1899	8
1900 - 1949	16
1950 - 1974	16
1975 - 1999	34
2000 - 2022	26

Figure 2. Year of death distribution.

Gravestones, Religion, and Symbology

Range	No Symbols	Both	Religious Only	Non-Religious Only
1800 - 1899	59	8	13	20
1900 - 1949	36	8	45	11
1950 - 1974	44	11	28	17
1975 - 1999	19	19	36	26
2000 - 2022	8	26	29	37

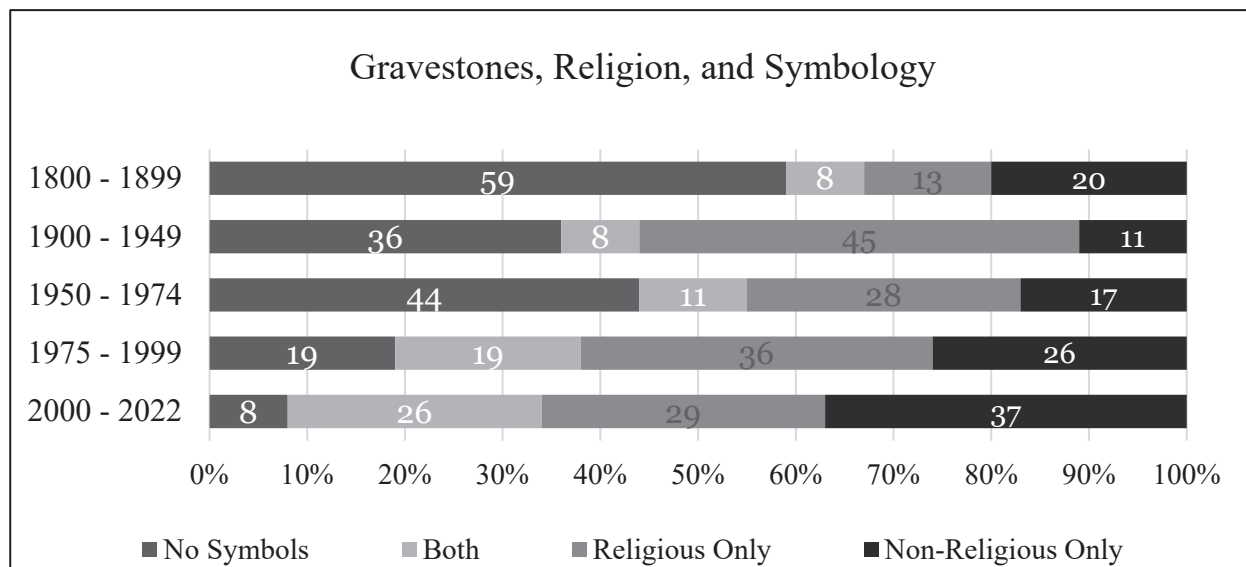■ No Symbols   ■ Both   ■ Religious Only   ■ Non-Religious Only

Figure 3. Gravestones, religion, and symbology.

Gravestones, Religion, and Symbology

This study found that the use of symbols on graves has increased substantially over the years. Between 1800-1899, 59% of gravestones sampled had no symbols of any kind on them. By the years 2000-2022, this number had been reduced to just 8%. At 55%, graves marking those who died between 2000-2022 were the most likely to have religious symbols of some kind on them. This is similar to graves marking those who died between 1900-1949, wherein 53% had such symbols. These numbers are significantly different, however, from 19th century graves, as well as graves from between 1950-1974, wherein only 21% and 39% had religious symbols, respectively. Since the mid-20th century – which is where previous research has suggested the significant decline in American religiosity began[4, 5] – the use of religious symbols on graves has actually increased by 16% in this sample. At the same time, however, the use of exclusively non-religious symbols has also increased dramatically, from 20% in the 19th century and 11% between 1900-1940, to 37% by the years 2000-2022. This growth of exclusively non-religious symbol usage has been far more linear than the exclusive use of religious symbols. Since the first half of the 20th century, the use of *exclusively* religious symbols has declined by 16%, which is also the exact percentage the use of exclusively non-religious symbols increased since this time. Religious symbols on Whitewater graves seem to be exclusively Christian, as no other religions were ever represented in this sample.

Non-religious symbols were often simple decoration, such as flowers, garlands, or designs. In many circumstances, however, symbols also seemed to represent something personal and important to the deceased, such as a calculator, stethoscope, Green Bay Packer's helmet, _etc._ Some of these symbols were likely associated with the deceased occupation; nonetheless, these cases were not counted as markers of occupation due to ambiguity. For example, a stethoscope may indicate one was associated with the medical field, however such information is not explicit. Many other symbols represented the deceased's organizational involvement, such as a masonic star or compass, or symbols from a particular sport such as football or soccer. Symbols were the only manner in which people recorded their involvement in clubs, organizations, and sports, as well as their personal hobbies, as this information was never recorded in words. The prevalence of masonic and sporting imagery may suggest that these activities were "defining" to the identity of past Whitewater inhabitants. For them, these interests may have been more important to the Whitewater culture than other interests, such as common occupation or history. The exclusive use of symbols to record such information speaks to the importance of symbolism for self-expression. Finally, some symbols played off information on the deceased stone, such as the word play with the last name "Hare," and the accompanying picture of two hares as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. "Hare" gravestone displaying wordplay.

Individual vs. Family Graves

To reiterate, the term "individual" grave, in this study, refers to any gravestone which marks only one or two individuals; simultaneously, the term "family" grave to refer to any gravestone which marks three or more individuals. While it is quite common for couples to be buried together, graves which house more than two individuals seem to be slightly different in function. In researching Whitewater cemeteries, there appeared to be three types of "family" gravestones. The first type of family stone uses one major stone to mark a family's last name **(Figure 6)**, and is accompanied by several small gravestones for each individual **(Figure 7)**, which often record nothing more their name, year of birth, and year of death. The second type of family stone is typically shaped like an obelisk, which allows four different groups or individuals of the family to have their own face of the stone, writing what they'd like on it **(Figures 8 & 9)**. The first type of family stone would have been significantly cheaper than the second due to its simplicity of design and material. As such, economics likely influenced which of these stone-types one chose. The third and final type of family gravestone looks like an individual's grave, except three or more individuals are marked by it **(Figure 10)**. The first and second types of family stones were quite popular in the 19th and early 20th century, while the third type represents those used in the 21st century. Of the few families who chose to bury several people under a single gravestone in the 21st century, all did so only for the death of an infant or young child. There were no cases of family gravestones used for adult families during this period in this sample. This suggests that unlike the first two family stone types, this gravestone is not chosen merely for economic reasons.

On average, 18% of the sample in this study was buried in a family grave. This number was slightly higher (23%) in the 19th century and nearly three times higher in the first half of the 20th century (53%). This option has become considerably less popular in recent years, however, with only 7-8% of those dying in the last 50 years using family stones. The median income has risen in recent years,[7] and laser-engraving has made engraving cheaper.[6] This suggests that economics likely played a major role in whether one was buried individually or with a family unit. In addition to economics, mortality rates also likely played a role in the use of gravestone type. Family stones were only the norm between 1900-1949. Under the weight of crises such as The Spanish Flu, World War I, and World War II, this period brought with it the lowest life expectancy of the 20th and 21st century by a wide margin.[8] Higher mortality rates may have led families to prefer cheaper burial options. Economics and the mortality rate are, together, quite useful in explaining the prevalence of family graves in the early 20th century and their rapid future decline.
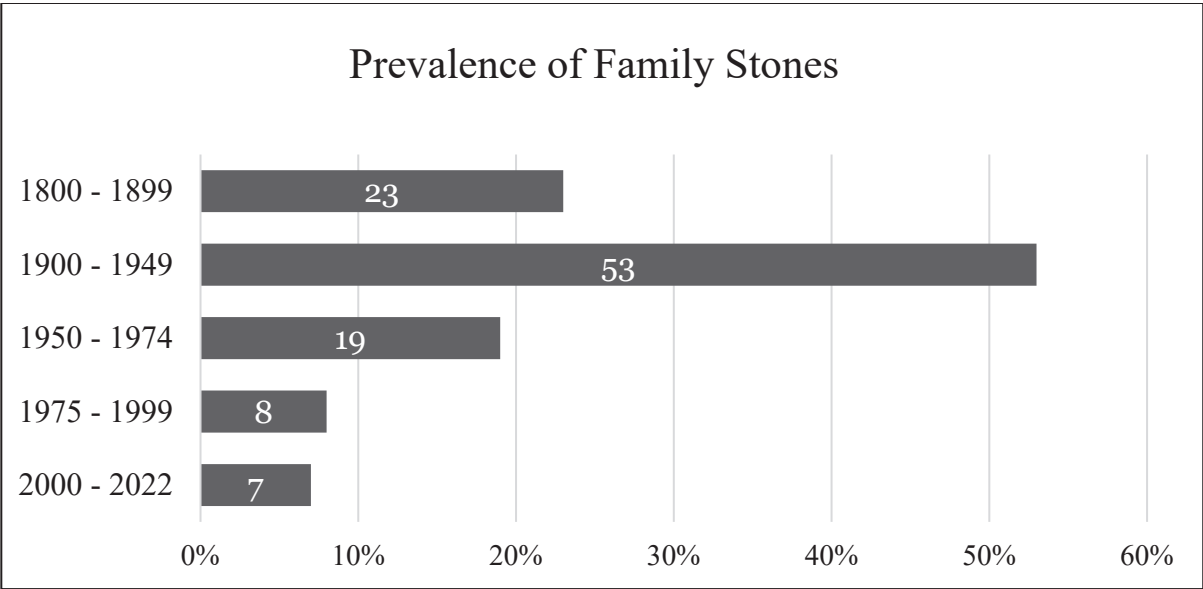

Figure 5. Prevalence of family stones.

Figure 6. The first type of family stone.

Figure 7. An individual marker of the family stone in Figure 6.

Figure 8. The second type of family stone.

Figure 9. Another face of Figure 7.

Figure 10. The third type of family stone.

Gravestones and Temporary Decorations
In this sample, 22% of graves had temporary decorations such as flowers, pictures, books, or incense left at them. As one might expect, the older a grave was, the less likely it was to have received fresh decorations. Only 3% of the 19th century sample, or one single grave, had temporary decorations left by someone. Those who died in the 20th century ranged from 10-20%, while those who died in the 21st century were significantly more likely to have temporary decorations left at their grave (45%). Interestingly, graves in the Calvary Cemetery were significantly more likely to have temporary decorations left with them, at 29%, compared to 19%. This is true despite the samples from the Calvary Cemetery being disproportionately older than the Hillside samples – the average year of death being 1962 at Calvary as compared to 1976 at Hillside.
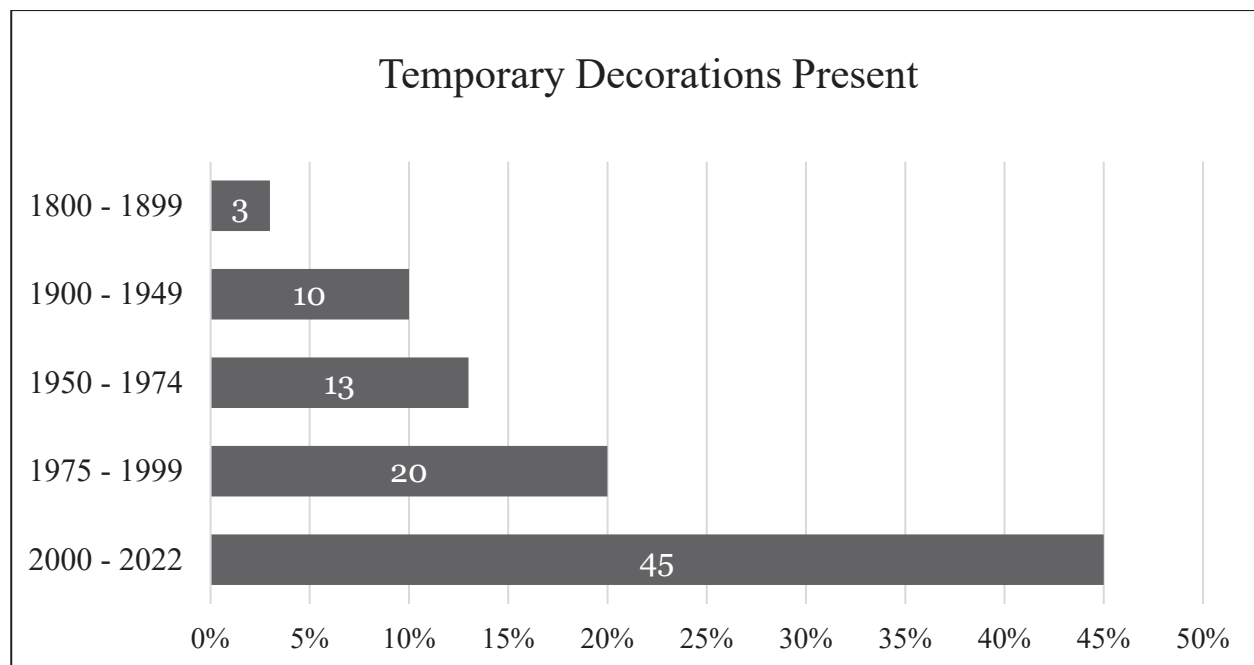

Figure 11. Temporary decorations.

Gravestones and Occupation
Recording the deceased's occupation was never popular in this sample. The simplest graves from the 19th century almost never included this detail – 3%, or one grave, did – while those in the 20th and 21st centuries included this detail about 8-10% of the time. When this detail is recorded, it is primarily from military veterans. Occupations listed that weren't military veterans included: firefighters, doctors, and professors. Only those with careers typically regarded as socially prestigious decided to record their occupation on their grave. Those who included their occupation on their gravestones tended to be buried alone; furthermore, only 10% of those who listed an occupation had included a family role (compared to 24% in the general sample), and only 12% included their date of marriage (compared to 24% in the general sample).

Gravestones, Dates of Marriages, and Family Roles

The treatment of women on gravestones has changed dramatically over the years in tandem with shifting social attitudes. For example, of the 39 gravestones measured from the 19th century, 15 of them included the description "wife of X." In many of these cases, the wife's name was never recorded, tying her identity exclusively to her husband. This description was unique to this period; furthermore, there was no single instance of any graves being marked "husband of," in this study's entire sample. Other family roles observed across all time periods included: father/mother (*sometimes* "of X"), grandfather/grandmother (of X), brother/sister (of X), aunt/uncle (of X), *etc.* The inclusion of family roles began dying out after this period and reached a low of 9% between 1950-1974. This information is becoming more common again on graves in the 21st century as gravestones become larger, more intricate, and more detailed. While this practice is becoming popular once again, social factors such as the relationship between men and women have changed significantly; as such, the treatment of men and women on gravestones has become much more egalitarian in recent years

On average, 24% of graves measured included information about the deceased's family role, while 76% did not. Those who died in the 19th century were the most likely to include this information on their grave, at 44%. The inclusion of one's date of marriage is a newer phenomenon. This did not occur once in the sample of 19th century graves, and only occurred 4-6% of the time between 1900-1974. This number jumped significantly to 25% between 1975-1999 and doubled to 51% in the 21st century. As graves continue to grow more intricate, one's marriage date seems to be among the quickest growing and most common pieces of information to be recorded on gravestones. The newer inclusion of marriage dates likely further reflects the cultural shift in which marriage is increasingly viewed as an egalitarian enterprise.
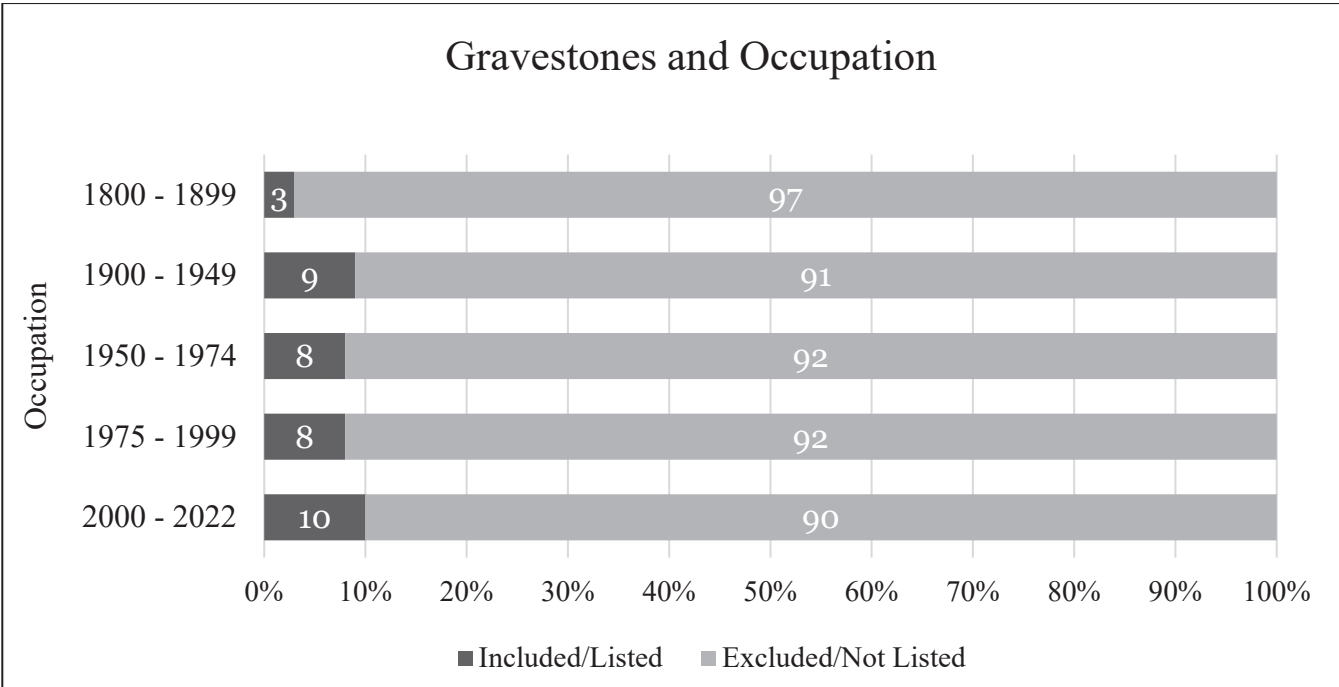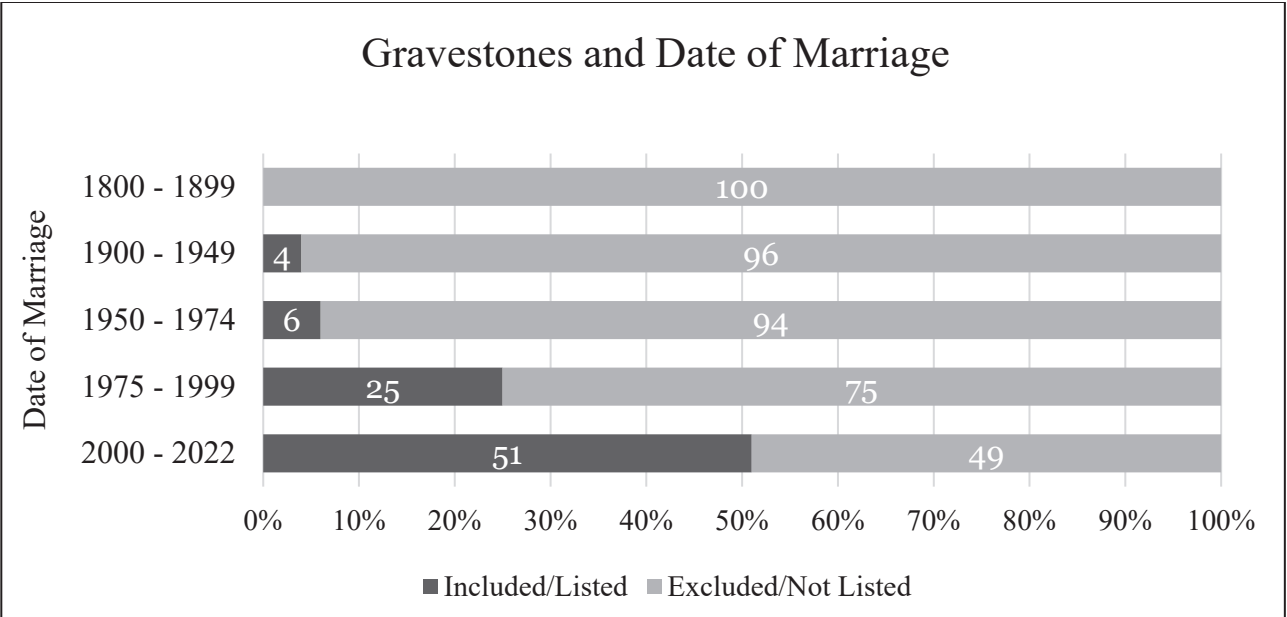

Figure 12. Gravestones and occupation.

Gravestones and Date of Marriage

Figure 13. Gravestones and the marriage date.
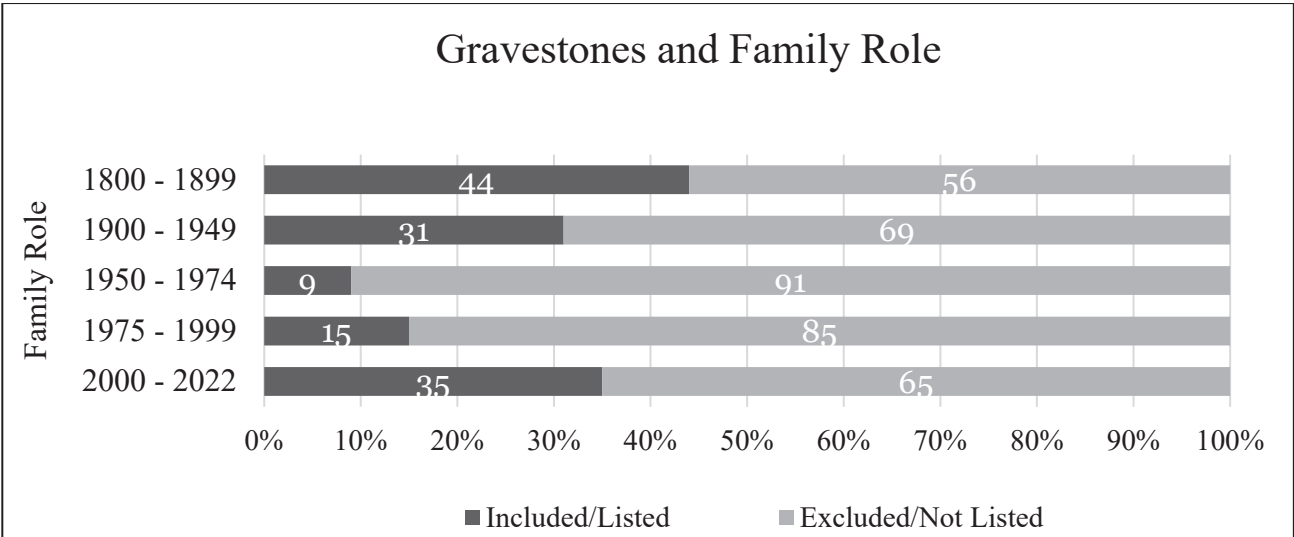
Gravestones and Family Role

Figure 14. Gravestones and family role.

What Was Not Found

In taking up this project, there were some expected observations that were never found among any of the Whitewater samples. For example, there was not a single instance of a grave recording a non-scriptural or personal quote, poem, or epitaph. The only type of quotes observed on gravestones were from the Bible. This is somewhat of a surprise, given that previous research has features to be an important aspect of gravestones in some locations.[1, 2] The deceased's cause of death was also never recorded in these samples, which is quite in line with previous research.[1] Other types of information never recorded, but perhaps expected in rare circumstances, include personal accomplishments or awards (with the single exception of a purple heart recipient) and non-Christian religious symbols or quotations.

CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Over the years, gravestones in Whitewater, WI have grown increasingly complex and information-filled. People are using more symbols than ever before to express who they were and what they valued in life, even beyond religion. There has been no major shift in the number of religious symbols used since the 20th century, but non-religious symbols have become much more common. People are beginning to be buried alone at much higher rates than before, with 93% of people using an individual grave

in the 21st century, compared to only 47% in the early 20th century. As expected, temporary decorations such as flowers were most commonly left at recent graves, with fewer people choosing to honor older graves in this way. Finally, common forms of information about the deceased on gravestones included their date of marriage, which is a newer phenomenon in the 21st century, their military status if they were a veteran, and their role in their family. Graves continue to be an excellent form of memorial for the deceased and are useful reflections of the values and priorities of the lives they mark.

Limitations

Although every effort has been made to ensure this research project is as detailed and legitimate as possible, there remain some limitations of which the reader should be aware. First, the data for this study was collected over a short, 2-day period during the peak of the Wisconsin winter, cold, and snow. Accordingly, some measures, such as the presence of temporary decorations at gravesites, were very likely affected. Were this study to be replicated in the summer, there would very likely be different results for some measures. Furthermore, some graves which were originally randomly selected could not be analyzed due to being covered in ice, snow, mud, or moss. This may have shifted the sample set toward larger gravestones, which are less susceptible to being obscured, and newer gravestones, which often have more legible writing, especially in poor weather conditions. Future work could attempt to replicate these findings, as well as account for some of these limitations.

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ABOUT STUDENT AUTHOR
David Nehlsen studied Political Science and Philosophy at the University of Green Bay, Wisconsin. He graduated in May 2022 and plans to pursue a graduate degree at the University of Chicago.

PRESS SUMMARY
Cemetery and funeral practices have changed significantly throughout history, varying by time period, location, culture, and religion among many other factors. This project investigated gravestone customs of cemeteries in Southern Wisconsin, USA. Based upon a dataset of 500 gravestone samples collected from cemeteries in the area, this project measures how people choose to remember their dead and how these practices have changed over the years. Practices such as the recording of one's name and year of birth/death have generally remained constant; however, other customs of remembrance, such as the use of symbols, have shifted dramatically over the years, reflecting the changes of society and culture.