STANDARDS FOR TRANSCRIBING MONUMENTAL INSCRIPTIONS - REVISITED

- A DISCUSSION PAPER & PROPOSAL[1] -

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for the newsletter of the Society of Indexers' Genealogical Group (England)

"Graveyard prowling has been a genealogical pastime for generations. The amateur and professional alike know that valuable data is gen on old tombstones which may not be recorded elsewhere. Where church burial records and municipal death records have been lost or destroyed, the cemetery often provides the only source of this information."[3] - Walter Lee Sheppard Jr.

I. Introduction

How time has flown, and how much "water has gone under the bridge" since last introducing this subject discussion more than ten years ago in June of 1991[4] as a retort to a series of comments made by a genealogical peer, Mr. Stephen Hayes, in *Genealogical Computing*[5] six months earlier. At that time, Mr. Hayes was interested as well in the transcription of cemeteries and how best to accommodate this.

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[1] This article is a summary of a full presentation of this discussion paper and proposal archived at the following website: www.gen-find.com.

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[3] Walter Lee Sheppard Jr., *Institutional Records- Cemetery Records and Inscriptions in Genealogical Research: Methods and Sources - Volume I*, ed. by Milton Rubincam, (Washington, DC: The American Society of Genealogists, 1980), p. 111. The late Walter Sheppard Jr., was an eminent American genealogist and friend.

[4] Hutchison, Brian W., "Standards for Transcribing Monumental Inscriptions - A Discussion Paper" in *Generations*, (Winnipeg, MB: The Manitoba Genealogical Society Inc., 1993), Vol. 18, No. 2 (June 1993), p. 14-18. Though first presented in June 1991, the discussion paper was formally first published with this magazine issue. A copy of this earlier 1991 discussion paper titled *Standards for Transcribing Cemetery Headstones - A Discussion Paper* by Brian W. Hutchison may still be found archived at the following website: <ftp://ftp.rootsweb.com/pub/roots-l/genealog/genealog.headston>.

[5] Hayes, Stephen, "Editorial Comments" in *Genealogical Computing*, (Salt Lake City, UT: Ancestry Inc., 1991), Vol. 11, No. 3 (Jan/Feb/Mar 1991), p. 47.

A few years later, Hayes went on to co-develop a software database program to provide for the transcription of monumental inscriptions, however this software never really took off and to my knowledge is no longer available. Numerous others have come and gone with similar dreams though not one to-date has really addressed the requirements well, in my opinion.

I don't propose that I was the first to initiate the importance of these source records, I think that this is quite evident with the typical and early 1980 statements of such genealogical masters as Walter Lee Sheppard with his quote offered at the beginning of this paper, though I suspect that I was one of the first in the genealogical community to raise the level of significance by suggesting how and what we should record on this source information for posterity. Prior to 1991, through very in-depth research on what has been going on with monumental inscription transcriptions, it was readily apparent that there was no rhyme or reason as to what got recorded and what didn't, what was deemed relevant genealogical information and that which wasn't; how we recorded and archived it and how we shouldn't. This, today, continues to be the case.

Probably for genealogical purposes, we have been recording cemetery tombstones for more than a hundred and fifty years, if not longer, though it is only within the past fifty years that most of us have truly understood the significance of these records for full extension of our pedigrees, other than our early masters in this field. Eminent genealogists' such as my American friends Elizabeth Shown Mills and Helen Leary, late British friend Kathleen Cory, along with my mentors & late friends Milton Rubincam and Walter Lee Sheppard - not to mention a host other experienced genealogists' - have long understood the value of these monuments (e.g., tombstones, burial plaques, etc.) & their recordings. They have for years expounded on their importance to those in the genealogical community. Sadly, however many never really "got it" until genealogical research became more than just a prime hobby and sadly I still see almost complete naivety when it comes to what to record and how to with these sources.

Many of my peers today, including many eminent ones, would suggest that they know fully the importance of these inscriptions and yet I continually see them, as well as many others, professional and otherwise, relegate important information on these markers to places of obscurity within their recordings or worse, simply not record them at all. How many times must we recreate the wheel with this? How many times do we need to recreate a standard for it to become acceptable? Was there ever a standard for transcribing monumental inscriptions? If so, where and what is it? If not, why not? We certainly have had enough experience and practice over more than fifty odd years to develop one! Sadly, I do not have the answer for this. Ten years, ago, my article which saw widespread audience and examination in such a notable magazine as *The National Genealogical Society CIG Digest*[6], receiving a great deal of praise and some self-evaluation

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[6] Hutchison, Brian W., "Computerize Your Cemetery Records" in *NGS/CIG Digest*, (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society Computer Interest Group, 1991), Vol. 10, No. 4 (Oct/Nov/Dec 1991), p. 1-5.

of what each of us was doing with these recordings. More than ten years later, however, I continue to see the same indifference to the importance of a standard for recording these quickly disappearing sources of our history. Further, even my own ideas and suggestions for the same have changed somewhat over this period given the transmission of time and technology.

I believe that we will all agree that standards for recording and storage are paramount to usefulness and record archival, particularly in our world of digitization. What is more important, however, is that we can rely on some basics with standardization. Namely, that we will find certain pieces of information recorded and archived that will be relevant to genealogists and provide permanence of record on an ever-disintegrating piece of historical account. Standards are good - they provide us with consistency, they provide us with relevant information and, more important, they provide us with a permanent historical record.

To me, I have never really cared what the standards are only that we define collectively what they should be for extraction & recording and that we, as individuals and societies, then follow those standards. Look how well we have benefitted from GEDCOM and source referencing standards in our field. Look at the preservation that we have benefitted from with the simple standards of genealogical information and date recording. Who today would suggest that recording genealogical dates without related place information for an event would be useful genealogy. I suspect, very few of us, beginning genealogists or advanced would do so.

This article presents a re-discussion, if you will, of this subject matter and hopefully, collectively, we can move further forward to see a standard established for the extraction and recording of monumental inscriptions. A standard which, I am sure, will be further extended in concept to other sources in the years ahead by later concerned genealogists. These standards are legacies we leave for ourselves, future genealogists and family historians to come. This article presents a view of what is relevant in this record class and how to record it, though I am not technically competent to say how digitally we need to handle this information. As an executive manager and an experienced researcher, my goal is to help identify what is relevant and how genealogists want to refer to this information, while leaving it to the technical people to make sense of the methodology for archiving the data.

II. Cemeteries and Inscriptions

Cemeteries were once an important part of our culture. In them we celebrated the birth of our living & mourned the loss of our dead and, in turn, individuals along with family members remembered those that passed on, celebrating a "rebirth" of sorts. In fact, many eastern cultures still maintain this active involvement with the deceased in their everyday lives. Life and death are simply extensions of each other.

Over the centuries, however, we in the West see the cemetery as a vile and cold place - a place of insignificant necessity! Somewhere to place our dead and depart, never to return again except in our own death.

How many of us have been to our family's headstones recently? How many of us even know where our family members are buried? I suspect that the numbers would be few, however, nevertheless, it is encouraging to hear that so many people, genealogists and otherwise, have developed a renewed interest in the cemetery. The cemetery is truly a "time-capsule" on our own lives and those who came before us. It is one of the earliest archival's of people, places, events, and lifestyles to the past - a 'window on history', ours and that of others. How many of us have felt a sense of interest and excitement after walking through the rows of a cemetery and reading the inscriptions? I grant you, when death and burial is immediate and personal, the sense of loss and pain is immense, however as a bystander and a spectator of these historical events, they are a very interesting and informative encounter with our past.

With the following paper, I have attempted to identify the rationale, the need and the objectives for the standardization of cemetery source information and in particular, monumental inscriptions. Without doubt, however, some of these ideas could lead to the standardization for formally recording and archival of other genealogical information, if application is developed. Certainly, it is a proposal and, as the title notes, we are open for "discussion" concerning the attributes for "standardizing" the transcription and reporting process of monumental inscriptions.

III. Interested Parties and Their Objectives

The whole subject matter, in my opinion, needs to be dissected into three major components: (i) - the collection/transcription process, (ii) - the recording/archival process; and (iii) - the digitization methodology. The latter of which I will not discuss here but rather leave for those more in-tune with the technical hurdles that need be addressed with this matter. Many countries, Canada included, have for fifty years or more been actively recording *"monumental inscriptions" which for the purpose of this paper will mean cemetery tombstones, burial plaques, and other death monuments*. The problem has always been that experienced and less-experienced genealogists, family historians as well as social historians alike have not really understood what is important to be transcribed, how much of it to transcribe, and how to record for archival purposes.

The methods and tools for undertaking this activity have been numerous and many without a sense of reason. Even in my own country, the number of different methods of recording this kind of information is too numerous to count. Some have recorded complete monumental inscriptions while others use a host of

abbreviated forms. Some create partial lists, recording only stones/markers with dates prior to some designated period, while others do complete archaeological mappings and records for an entire cemetery. Some record the inscriptions and yet completely ignore the important comparison of sexton or burial registers to the markers found. Still others avoid recording, what are perceived to be, extraneous carvings/emblems/poems while the remainder overkill by recording the most superfluous of epitaphs and mortality emblems. The end result is, of course, that we now have a "hodge-podge "of recordings, worldwide, that vary in usefulness from being 'great' to being 'complete wastes of time and energy.' It is such a shame given the amount of energy expended here over many years on so many inscriptions which are, in all likelihood, no longer in existence due to vandalism and normal deterioration by weather.

Let us break this discussion into components so that we may better assess the proposal. As with our discussion in 1991, we have to ask ourselves some **objectives** such as, *Just what is it we are trying to accomplish and for whom?* I think, without question, that we need to ask ourselves these two points and then try to develop a framework of thought around this. Firstly, we need to ascertain why we want to standardize data collection and recording of monumental inscriptions. As alluded to earlier, objectively it is in our best interest to standardize the data collection and recording of these records in order to better facilitate our data gathering practices, our data manipulation and reporting expectations and ultimately, the data archival interests we all wish to access at some future point. Over the past twelve years, I have not been convinced otherwise that any of these higher interests are well-served without standardization, given the immensity of the decaying source material we have in the world to provide for.

Secondly, *for whom do we wish to serve with these higher interests?* Again, as I expressed twelve years ago, the focal groups remain the same - we need to provide for the objectives of several users: the genealogist, the cemetery administrator, and the local archivist. The interests of each are not necessarily mutually exclusive either. Too many times, we have ignored one or more of these groups in conducting these transcription projects and too many times, persons or organizations who hold these records have thwarted good intentions with political agendas in meeting an effective transcription project. We want to meet everyone's interest in this matter and some might even say that there was a fourth party that should be considered - that being the government responsible for vital records. However, I reject this suggestion because I believe that government is already too eager to restrict access to such information on the deceiving grounds of 'privacy' for the simple sake of 'secrecy', the restriction of such information which holds little benefit to anyone - a particular insidious problem with provincial governments here in Canada.

- The *genealogist's*, interests lie in data compilation which will identify life events - whether the information is primary or secondary, direct or indirect - on all identified individuals that will increase their "extension factor" on pedigree development. They in no way want the material censored, altered

or abbreviated to satisfy recording or archival purposes.[7]

- The *cemetery administrator* is interested in only the basics of information, namely, the ownership and burial of whom lies in their cemetery, exactly the locations of burial for these subjects, and the contents/depths/sizes of each of the vaults or plots. On a lesser note, you will find many also archive varying amounts of information on the deceased that arose out of the plot purchase and interment process (e.g., ages, dates/places of birth, dates/places of death, dates of burial, name of the undertaker, names of next-of-kin, names of informants, etc.) as well as other administrative bits of information for their record-keeping. The prime concern is to provide for the accurate cataloguing of plots, locations and contents. For most, the cemetery administrator is only interested in monumental inscription transcriptions where the official burial records are lacking information on these older burials. In no way, is the monumental inscription transcription a replacement for the official cemetery burial or sexton records. He or she is in no way interested in the carving and inscriptions found within the cemetery as they relate [to], or differ from, the official records of the cemetery.

- The *local archivist* most closely matches that of the genealogist in that he or she is interested in data recordings that will enhance, and archivally protect, our understanding of the local history of the area - its people, places, events, and lifestyles - affected by the political, social, economic and technological events of the day.

Therefore, to provide for these concerns and a form of standardization that will benefit all of the interested parties we can isolate four needs:

A). Data compilation that will document fully the markers, the details of their inscriptions and carvings - maintaining accuracy and integrity of the material being transcribed or recorded;

B). Comparing the results to cemetery administrative records and other local history sources on the cemetery;

C). Maintaining a recording that will allow for the digitization, reporting, and indexing of particular components of the transcription upon which a standardized database can be compiled; and

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[7] This statement in itself can be contentious among my peers as some would suggest, certainly by looking at their recorded transcriptions that abbreviations and partial recordings are acceptable.

D). Developing a document, whether it is in digital or bound format, that will be well-organized and properly catalogued for archival purposes, as well as represent a 'complete authority' on the cemetery being recorded.

IV. Collecting/Transcribing Cemetery Inscriptions

Generally, we are going to find a host of information on monumental inscriptions. Information that may be directly or indirectly expressed, and which may provide primary evidence or secondary evidence.[8] During the collection & transcription process we need to look for cemetery evidence in several places: the monuments themselves, the sexton registers, and the local library & history society. All three of these repositories, and possibly others, need to be examined with relevant information incorporated into the monumental inscription transcription process. Regardless, of where this information is from, we need, at the beginning of the project and not at the end, to obtain permission to access the records from the relevant owners or repositories. More and more organizations, which are much different from the times of 1991, are

having to be concerned with privacy and the legal ramifications of releasing even this type of information (regardless of whether the persons' we are compiling information on are deceased) and thus we need to be sensitive of this concern. We need to work with these parties and encourage them to assist and show them benefit from such a project. Many of my colleagues and myself have found that, for the most part, they will want to work with you in preserving our mutual heritage.

The monuments will provide us with the inscriptions themselves. The sexton registers will provide us with additional information on the subjects interred in these plots and others that have interments which no longer have monuments recording the deceased resting there. While the local library and history societies, will provide further historical accounts of the cemetery, further details on those interred in the local cemetery (recorded or unrecorded) and additional details on other standalone death monuments in the area with inscriptions. Further, records of the latter will provide for an historical accounting (political, social, economic, and technological) of the cemetery, its period of operation, and similar details for the community and region. *Our overall objective should be to provide for an accurate full accounting and complete authority on the cemetery and death inscriptions for the region.*

It is of my opinion that **all relevant information as noted above should be compiled and transcribed as recorded in these various sources during this process**. It should be of our intention to compile a complete

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[8]In most cases, the information provided by cemeteries will be secondary evidence for the information is provided much after the fact, many years in some cases before the monuments and inscriptions are placed however, because often the information is all that survives, it may be as primary a evidence as you might ever get. No matter, the information must always be considered circumspect until proven or disproved through many other sources.

authority of these matters and to do so the only way is to record "fully" (without abbreviations) the inscriptions found. We must leave the interpretation of these records to the reader. How many of us have received transcriptions of civil vital records from state agencies concerned about identity theft in releasing copies of original source entries, only to find that the transcriber has misread or misinterpreted the details of the record. Of course, we often find this out only after we have been led down the wrong 'garden path' of research a few times over as a result of the errors. None of us can be sure of what the inscriber, or the recorder, meant with his/her entry. We, as transcribers, are not equipped to decipher these accurately time and time again. We have no intimate knowledge of the families, nor the intentions of the inscriptions and carvings, as provided by the family and the stonecutter.

Now, there are a host of computer programs, both commercial and shareware, available to us that provide some degree of digitization though I have seen none to-date over more than ten years that I have been preaching standardization of these inscriptions that provide us clear "full" and indexed transcription, other than one which comes close, created by The Association for Gravestone Studies out of Greenfield, Massachusetts. If you, or your organization, are interested in transcribing cemeteries, you might want to consider this software until something better is developed. There may be others that I am not aware of and would certainly appreciate feedback in these matters.

Regardless of whether you plan on compiling your material via computer or not, the needs remain the same, and the data elements as well. Again, keep in mind that everything should be recorded on the deceased, regardless of methodology undertaken and regardless of where the information comes from. Often we forget the inscriptions themselves are only a part of the cemetery transcription process and not the end-all of the project. Further, as mentioned above, no assumptions or assessments should be made when transcribing these records. Connecting words that serve no documentary purpose could be ignored however, do so with caution. We should never run the risk of changing the meaning or interpretation and flavor of the reading or information - even if you know the information or the spelling is factually wrong.

Keep in mind that much of this may seem like overkill to the "max." Let's not forget that recording cemeteries take a great deal of planning and an even greater level of work, and our efforts should not be wasted by duplicated efforts over time as standards and expectations change. We need to make an authoritative account of the 'disintegrating' cemetery, once, instead of changing our expectations with the prevailing winds of genealogical ideology requiring us to re-do our transcriptions repeatedly over.

V. Recording/Archival of Cemetery Inscriptions

For archival purposes, I impress upon you again that, we need to record all the relevant information, including where it came from, allowing the reader to interpret and decide on its accuracy and relevancy. It is not enough today as genealogists to record an abbreviated transcription of names, dates, places and ages

coming off of headstones. Nor is it adequate enough to record only headstone carvings and not compare the related sexton and local history records on the same. We need to provide for a higher form of interpretation & compilation of these source records which, for some individuals, may be the only surviving account of that persons' existence. We need to provide a more complete archaeological recording and mapping of the cemetery than we previously have ever done. Photographs of each stone or marker could, in-turn, also be incorporated into this compilation to further supplement the historical archival of these slowly decaying and destroyed monuments.

With this end in mind, I would then propose three major components to an inscription transcription record, with their associated data elements to be incorporated:

- *File or General Cemetery Header Information* - documents the cemetery location and description of the cemetery in a directional and historical way. It presents a narrative on the history of the community and cemetery and an index to the contents of the inscriptions. It serves as an overall 'source and comment' section for the entire recording. Therefore, with each transcription project we need provide some brief perspective on the cemetery, and the community(s) that used it, in terms of a historical accounting of the political, social, economic and technological events of the period. Here you will find much, if not all of this information, from local libraries and historical groups.

- *Monumental Inscription & Burial Details* - documents, line by line, the subjects found for the cemetery based upon the scope of the recording being undertaken. This infers that the inscriptions themselves are, also, fully recorded. Markers that are partially unreadable need to be recorded as such by using some delimiter such as a question mark [?] and for each character found illegible. It is not necessary to show line breaks found in these inscriptions unless they are found to be relevant to the interpretation of the record. Here, we will find four components:
  - *Grave Marker Information* - providing such details as grave numbering; grave location; and marker type, colour, material, condition & placement.
  - *Transcription of Inscriptions* - it may contain many or all of the following (list is not exhaustive) important elements which should be inscribed, preferably without abbreviation or censure:

- *Grave Emblems*[9] - some of the most common emblems used in the past are:
    - Emblems of Mortality (might provide you with some insight into the ideologies and mind-set of the deceased or his family about life or the deceased themselves whilst living). Here you will find some emblematic depictions along with the usual meanings.
    - Emblems of Trade or Occupation
    - Miscellaneous Emblems
    - *Miscellaneous Inscriptions*

- ***Sexton or Burial Register Information*** - this information cross-references the names & details on the inscription to any similar information that may be found in surviving sexton or burial records. The information may be the same or it may be slightly different. As well, many older cemeteries have no sexton registers or have burial records but no remaining headstones, so the two areas need to be investigated when undertaking monumental recordings and need to be compared but documented separately.

VII. Conclusion

Again, as this is a summation of points, for a full presentation of this discussion paper and proposal, please refer to the following website: www.gen-find.com/resources/index.html. Clearly, some of my aspirations and forecasts did come true over the past twelve years when this concept was originally considered in 1991. I did foresee the development of provincial and state databases of cemetery inscriptions, some hold full inscriptions while many still only provide an index to the detail inscriptions themselves. Sadly, however, we still see a potpourri of data collection and recording standards making some of the material incomplete, "un-digitizable," and in some severe cases, unusable. In either case, the state and national databases that I envisioned many years ago, though within our grasp for many years, have not seen fruition, primarily because of the lack of standardization and initiative on what is still a fragmented, or at least less-than-coordinated, industry in many ways. With that said, however, we as genealogists' have made great strides with our endeavors and in no way do I wish to diminish the size of those 'mountains.'

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[9] For a good list of carving and other symbols on gravestones refer to those listed in this paper on the GEN-FIND website, however please also consult: Rotundo, Barbara, Laurel Gabel and Francis Duval, *Symbols on Gravestones and Their Interpretations* (Worchester, MA: Association for Gravestone Studies, 1979) or the following websites: Susan Hawkins; *Cemetery Iconography* <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~txcemeteries/symbol.htm>; *Headstone Hunter* <http://www.headstonehunter.com/meanings.htm>; *Association of Gravestone Studies* <http://www.gravestonestudies.org/>.

Regardless of whether one is involved in the physical aspects of cemetery transcriptions every genealogist, beginner and advanced, will someday need to use cemetery transcription records to advance their family research, so it should be of prime interest to all of us that undertake this work!

Your feedback here is always welcome. Best of luck with your genealogical recordings and research!