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How To Read A Cemetery

Lori Strecker

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Josie McCoy, Dunlap Colored Cemetery
Derek Hamm

HOW TO READ A CEMETERY

A cemetery is a storybook. Enter one and you can tell who settled this area and who followed, how they spent their days, what God they worshipped, what they held dear, and where they were on the societal ladder.

A community's education, social structure, immigration patterns, and economic landscape can be discerned from the cemetery like words and images of a book. Walk through a cemetery and watch its story unfold.

READING A CEMETERY—A PRIMER

To read the stories that cemeteries tell, consider the following elements:

Location Is the cemetery inside or outside of city limits? Rural? Next to a church?

Maintenance Is the cemetery neat as a pin with the fence painted, the grass mowed, and the markers upright and in good condition? Or not so much?

Arrangement How is the cemetery plotted? Are the paths straight, on a grid, or curve and meander? Are the graves oriented east-west, are markers encircling central stones, or do plots follow the lay of the land, curving around hills, ponds, and paths? Do all graves appear to be marked by some sort of headstone, or are there gaps and irregularities?

Monuments and Markers Are the markers of uniform size, shape, and material, or are they varied? What are the materials? Are they professionally produced or vernacular? Simple or ornate?

Folks Do the names reveal nationalities? Familial relationships? What languages are seen on the markers? Are there symbols that provide clues to the deceased's age, marital status, religion, interests, or social organizations? And who isn't there—do the names reflect all the people from the area, or are certain residents absent?

A TALE OF TWO CEMETERIES

The two cemeteries of Dunlap are an excellent study. Many of Dunlap's residents were Exodusters who began their lives enslaved in the South. Following the Civil War, they migrated to the Flint Hills and settled southeast of Council Grove. The two cemeteries were segregated by race: the Dunlap Cemetery and the Dunlap Colored Cemetery. Over time the townspeople became more integrated in their daily lives, but the tradition of separate cemeteries was already established.

Both cemeteries lie near a hilltop and are plotted in a no-nonsense grid, with stones facing in an east-west pattern. This is a common arrangement of rural plains cemeteries. I imagine the farmers, ranchers, and laborers who built such cemeteries probably took comfort in familiar and simple grid patterns, similar to farm and field. But the carefully landscaped, park-style cemeteries popular in the late nineteenth century urban areas were impractical and unnecessary on the plains.

While the white Dunlap Cemetery has some larger, more extravagant markers, for the most part both cemeteries have modest markers with minimal adornment in carvings or symbols. Both do contain several military markers. Both also have many vernacular stones, some with errors of spelling or engraving, indicating people of more humble education, means, and tastes. There are no saints or rosaries adorning the stones or decorating the graves—the residents were likely Protestant. The contrasts, though, are noteworthy.

Enter the Dunlap Colored Cemetery and you will immediately notice the gravestones are scattered throughout, with a few in groups, others standing alone. The gaps are graves that are missing markers. Some stones have likely sunk beneath the surface and are hidden by earth and grass, while a few may have been moved and repurposed. Most of the gaps, however, are spaces where wooden markers once stood. Wood decomposes relatively quickly on the prairie.

There are a fair number of vernacular stones to be found, primarily made of concrete or native stone. A homemade stone can be a creative expression, but usually it is the financially practical option. The farms and ranches of the Flint Hills would have had all the necessary tools and materials to create a marker out of concrete or limestone, and polished granite or marble monuments were luxury



Sylvester Hays, Dunlap Colored Cemetery
Derek Hamm



Emma Schnitzler, Dunlap Cemetery
Derek Hamm

items. Accessibility also played a role. Granite and marble were often ordered and brought in from distant states, and the opportunity to even shop for these markers may not have been afforded to the black residents of Dunlap.

Nearly all the markers in the Dunlap Colored Cemetery are weathered, cracked, crumbling, or toppled, with few markers dating from the last fifty years. The citizens of Dunlap slowly left the town seeking opportunity elsewhere, and the last black resident was buried in the Dunlap Colored

Cemetery in 1993. This emigration meant that families did not stay to maintain the cemetery, repair the stones, or replace decaying wooden markers with more permanent stones. There is a renewed interest recently in the cemetery, resulting in some basic mowing and maintenance. The Dunlap Colored Cemetery is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

In the other Dunlap cemetery, there are fewer gaps—fewer missing markers—and there are also fewer homemade stones, suggesting the white citizens of Dunlap

had more financial means and access to purchase these more expensive markers, or their families replaced the wooden or homemade markers at a later date with permanent granite or marble headstones. The cemetery is tidier and with recent burials, indicating at least some of the descendants of the original residents remain in the area and are active in the upkeep of the cemetery. The names on the stones are primarily of English and German heritage, with a few Scandinavian and other northern European names noted. The stones are on average larger than those in the Dunlap Colored Cemetery, but for the most part they remain relatively modest and traditional and include a few vernacular stones.

Most of the markers have minimal adornment, including a noteworthy lack of symbols showing membership in such organizations as the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF), the Freemasons, or the Woodmen of the World. These are common in other cemeteries across the country, as these societal organizations often provided some form of life, health, and burial insurance to their members. However, the Catholic church and some Protestant denominations opposed membership of their congregants in these fraternal societies. These organizations, in turn, originally had restrictive membership rules, often excluding people based on religion, gender, race, profession,

nationality, or economic status. The residents of Dunlap, black and white, may have not met the entry requirements; their religious or philosophical beliefs may have made them uninclined to join; or as residents of a small, rural town, they may have simply not had the opportunity or exposure to any of the common fraternal and social organizations.

What do the Dunlap cemeteries tell us? That the town was at least initially segregated, that the black residents of Dunlap have likely all left the area, and that some descendants of the white residents remain nearby. Most residents of Dunlap were traditional, humble people of simple taste and means, and they did not belong to large societies such as the Freemasons or the IOOF. They were likely Protestant. Several served in the military from the Civil War through WWII. And unlike the town of Dunlap itself, this story is not small or simple—it is nationally relevant.

As you are driving through the Flint Hills, enjoying the rolling landscapes, the open skies, the towns of limestone and the ranches with their well-fed cattle, don't overlook the cemeteries. Stop at that lonely cemetery on the hill. Walk the rows, examine the markers. Read the stories.

Lori Strecker is a nurse, cemetery enthusiast, and a life-long Kansan, currently residing in Lawrence.