

Obelisks and Columns

Two articles in the 2008 newsletters entitled “Stories in Stone” by Stu and Danielle Richards showed pictures of a variety of headstones and discussed the symbolism of accessories on them, such as ivy and urns. The newsletters in 2009, discussed and showed pictures of the wide variety of crosses. This issue focuses on obelisks and columns. The Egyptian origin of the obelisk complements the Egyptian Revival style gatehouse entrance into the Baber cemetery.

The obelisk, defined as a thin, four-side tapering monument which ends in a pyramidal top was first erected by the ancient Egyptians and later built, copied or shipped to Rome and Greece, and much later to Paris, London, New York, and Washington D.C. The obelisk was called *benben* or *tekhenmu* in Egyptian and meant “protection” or “defense”. The word “obelisk” is Greek, from the word *obelos* or *obeliskos*, meaning a spit, a pointed object, or a prong for roasting. The obelisk is a stone that is frequently monolithic (one solid piece) with a quadrangular base, placed upright and ending with a pointed (pyramidal) top, called the pyramidion. The pyramidion was often sheathed in gold as an offering to the sun god Re or RA, the giver of life, whose golden rays glistened at the top. The obelisk was a sacred symbol of purity and divinity, or conveyed the essence of a ruler, such as the pharaoh, or in Rome, the emperor. An obelisk can be used as a sundial or calendar, as was done by Augustus in Rome. The end of the shadow can be marked for certain important times, as well. From the shadow of an obelisk, the compass directions can be accurately determined by standard observations, as can the latitude of the place.

Coming to Europe and America, the Egyptian Revival style flourished from 1820-1850 and was used primarily for memorials, cemeteries, and prisons. During the 1800s, the stonemasons used a variety of obelisk types and different tops from blunt (truncated Roman influence), to pointed, to cross-vaulted. The Egyptian Revival made a comeback during the 1920s with the Art Deco style and the fascination with the discovery of King Tutankhamen’s tomb in 1922.

Columns, whose origins are primarily Greek, but can also be Roman, come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and heights. Like the obelisk they are slender and can be tall, but the majority are circular vs. four sided like the obelisk. Both columns and obelisks have three distinct sections: the base (bottom support), the shaft (centre column piece) and the capital (the top structure). A great advantage of obelisks and some columns is the four sided surface space for inscriptions. Often these types of monuments are found on family plots or for the family patriarch or signifying a person of high social status. The Europeans and Americans of the Christian religion found the obelisks and columns tasteful, with pure uplifting lines, associated with ancient greatness, patriotic, able to be used in relatively small spaces, and less costly than large sculptured monuments. The Christians’ association was as a divine symbol pointing skyward to God or to the heavens. Other variations were of the eyes lifting upward as in Jesus’ ascension, or the length of a person’s life as they followed their religious path to heaven, or as it directed their spirit upward. If the top was intentionally left flat, it represented a person’s life cut short.

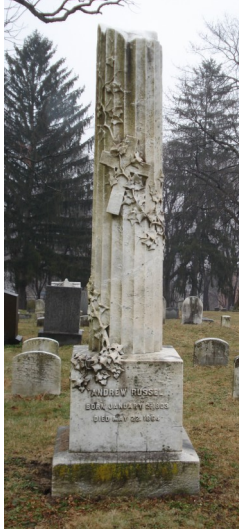


The obelisks and columns found in Baber cemetery date to the late 1800s and early 1900s from 1842 to 1920. The Baber obelisk (to the right) is quite tall and very ornate on both its base and its capital. The arches at the top of the base represent a gateway entrance and are referred to as “the portal to eternity”. The obelisk belongs to the founder of the cemetery, Charles Baber and dates to 1885. The obelisk is the focal point when entering through the Egyptian Revival gateway as a continuation of the Egyptian Revival architecture, although Baber’s chapel directly behind the obelisk is gothic in design. Other members of the Baber family are buried in the Baber plot, but the obelisk only bears Charles Baber’s name and his wife Louise.



The Baird (1842) obelisk (left) is in the oldest part of the cemetery, known in 1848 as Mt. Laurel, and is the oldest obelisk found that is legible to read. It is called a standard obelisk.

The Yuengling column dated 1877 (far left), located to the west or left side of the gateway entrance, is very tall, has a rounded shaft, a fluted capital and a torch above the capital. It has a motif midway on the shaft. It has “the portal to eternity” arches at the top of the base. It sits at the center of the family plot encircled by a stone parameter with other family members identified by standard grave markers. The 2nd from the left Lessic column is a standard column. The shaft, has no flutes with a smooth surface running to the capital and with an urn on the top. It is made of pink granite.



The 3rd column from the left (Russel-1884) is a broken column, It is fluted and is classical Greek style. Usually made of marble or grey granite. It originated in England about 1815. The broken column denotes the burial spot of a child or a young person whose life was cut short.

The far right column (Hoffman 1866) is a pilaster column. It is a combination of an obelisk and a column. It has a rectangular shaft and is topped with an urn. A pilaster column tends to be smaller than most columns. Baber obelisk behind.

The four obelisks to the right are all made from different materials. The shaft of the obelisk on the far right (Gray 1878) is not wearing well with time. The Kirtpatrick 1867 (2nd from right) obelisk is made of grey marble, vaulted at the top and has a motif at the capital and the lower part of the shaft. The Milliken (3rd from right) obelisk is standard, simple in design, no etchings or motif and is quite tall. It is at the center of the plot and has 4 inscribed family headstones at its base dating 1905, 1926, 1938, and 1950. The far left obelisk (Lineweaver) has a square portal created by four columns at its base with the deceased family members inscribed inside the four portals.



Early headstones were made out of slate, which was available locally in New England. The next material to be used was marble because it was soft and easy to carve, shape, and inscribe; however, it erodes over time and the names and particulars of the deceased become indecipherable.

By the late 1800s granite became the material of choice because it could endure the harsh elements and acid rain. Brown granite comes from North & South Dakota, pink from Canada, and grey from Vermont and some from Georgia.

The picture (on left) illustrates 4 obelisks –2 of pink granite and 2 of marble, 1 square marble column (2nd from the left), and 1 standard marble column with an urn on top (center). The obelisks are simple in design, but differ from each other in material composition of the marble and granite. One of the marbles ones shown here and several more throughout the cemetery are no longer legible to read. The standard column in the center has the rounded capital. These obelisks and columns date from 1843 to 1873. The granite obelisk to the left of the standard column was taller, but its capital has been broken off and is laying at its base. It dates to 1908.

