



Headstone Carvers Overview

Did you know that early headstone carvers sometimes signed their work as a form of advertising? Most signed markers were carved between 1860 and 1890.

Finding these signatures is not easy. If present, the signature is typically on the lower bottom right of the headstone, usually, but not always, on the front.

Complicating matters, tombstone sculptors did not want to be seen as upstaging the subject of their efforts. Signatures, if present at all, were small and often faint. Why some headstones are signed but most aren't remains a mystery. Most Sacramento stone masons signed their pieces at least occasionally, leaving us to guess if similar unsigned headstones are their work.

Another mystery involves the extent of carving done locally. Headstones signed by different masons often contain similar design elements. It seems logical that common motifs were carved at the factory before being shipped to the local stone cutter for completion.

Early stone cutters formed and reformed alliances frequently. Many became family affairs. Their tombstone "signatures" changed often. Competitors one year could become partners the next. A partner might appear on one headstone and then be lost to history.

Most of these men were immigrants, which might explain the many spelling errors on 19th century tombstones. Names of the deceased were routinely misspelled. Dates are sometimes incorrect. Families might spend months of income on a tombstone for a parent or spouse. What must they have thought?

In the photo below, Andrew Aitken's name appears to be spelled "Aitkon." Stone cutters typically apprenticed for years before hanging out a shingle on their own. Perhaps the spelling errors can be attributed to an apprentice or trainee who didn't pan out.

Signed headstones can still be found in many 19th century cemeteries. Each region had local stone carvers. Cemetery explorers enjoy finding and cataloguing these unusual links to the past. For a timeline of specific Sacramento Stone Carvers, see separate article. Can you find a signed tombstone in Union Cemetery? The cemetery is located at 650 Bee Street in Placerville, CA? Hint: Look down when you are viewing a headstone.

Epitaph

• The old saying captures the irony of these men's lives. They dedicated their careers to memorializing others but never constructed monuments to themselves. Not one of these stone cutters mentioned was buried with a headstone or monument.



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