

Mormon Gravestones: A Folk Expression of Identity and Belief

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FOR YEARS CULTURAL GEOGRAPHERS, folklorists, and other researchers have identified and delineated the Mormon region of the American West by charting characteristic elements of its cultural landscape. In his 1952 work *The Mormon Village*, Lowry Nelson studied the village settlement patterns and the grid system of intersecting streets typically used by Mormon settlers from the Canadian provinces to the Mexican colonies. Likewise Richard V. Francaviglia's 1978 study, *The Mormon Landscape: Existence, Creation, and Perception of a Unique Image in the American West*, discussed several distinctive features including in-town irrigation ditches and outbuildings as well as the widespread use of Lombardy poplars by Mormon homesteaders. But other less prominent yet equally significant expressions may be found in the Mormon cultural landscape: Gravestones, with their visual symbolism and wealth of cultural information, represent a category of expression offering another way to recognize and understand this unique cultural region.

During the nineteenth century, the image of a handshake or handclasp, often described as the clasped-hands motif, appears to have been the most commonly chosen gravestone symbol within the Mormon cultural region. As Allen Roberts noted in a 1979 *Sunstone* article, this symbol was most likely of ancient Egyptian or Hebrew origin and was used extensively in Masonic ritual. Incorporated into Mormon symbology during the Nauvoo period, clasped hands appeared on numerous other nineteenth-century objects including the east facade of the Salt Lake Temple. In a 1982 study, Richard Poulsen proposed that although this symbol was found in graveyards throughout the United States, its widespread use in the Mormon West suggests its appropriateness and perhaps even special significance to Mormons. Certainly, whether Mormon or non-Mormon, hands clasping each other, with cuffs depicting

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male or female clothing or with gender ambivalent robes, logically represent either parting at death or greeting at rebirth between friends, family members, or deity. What better symbol could nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints have chosen to represent their concept of life after death?

Although clasped hands were sometimes carved onto locally produced sandstone markers before 1869, the popularity and widespread use of this symbol roughly coincided with the availability of upright, hand-chiseled marble markers. Such grave markers were either imported from eastern quarries or made locally from imported marble. They became accessible after the completion of the transcontinental railroad and were in common use from that time through the first quarter of the twentieth century. But by the 1920s, with the advent of a new stoneworking technology based on air-powered or pneumatic chisels, granite began to replace marble as the stone of choice. And as gravemarkers became more horizontal in design to accommodate the new material and styles, the amount of lettering diminished and the sculpted images, like clasped hands, were soon replaced by geometric designs and decorative borders.

Yet even as these changes were beginning to take place, a new, albeit short-lived trend in marble gravestones emerged to succeed the popular clasped hands. Temple gravestones — that is, gravestones featuring an image of a Mormon temple — began to appear around 1910. Originally carved and distributed by New England marble companies attempting to serve a growing regional market, the first temple stones displayed a recognizable Salt Lake Temple along with the names, birthdates, and deathdates of those being memorialized. Like their predecessors with clasped hands, these stones communicated a message of reunion after death between husband and wife or between the deceased and God, a concept central to Mormon belief.

For the next fifty years, aside from an occasional metal plaque, the image of the temple was not commonly used on gravestones. But by the 1960s, the monument industry had again shifted to a newer technology that relied on finely tuned sandblasting equipment instead of air-powered chisels to incise and sculpt images into stone. Latex stencils made it not only possible, but commonplace, to engrave a variety of images onto granite, including very detailed renditions of the various Mormon temples.

Today commercially produced double gravestones featuring a temple as a central symbol more and more frequently mark the graves of faithful Latter-day Saint couples. Over the last twenty-five years, without any particular institutional sanction, these temple gravestones have become increasingly popular. Their distribution, like that of Lombardy poplars, is an important indicator of cultural boundaries. Yet it is their unauthorized development, acceptance, and use that make them both a folk expression of organizational affiliation and religious beliefs and a particularly rich source of information about contemporary Mormon culture.

From the Church's early years, the temple has been a central symbol in Mormonism. Just as the children of ancient Israel built temples for their most holy ordinances, so the early Saints, considering themselves modern-day "Isra-

elites," constructed temples for God's work. The construction of temples in Kirtland and Nauvoo was followed by ground-breaking for the Salt Lake Temple, built in the Gothic Revival style popular during the nineteenth century from granite blocks quarried from nearby mountains. For Latter-day Saints, the forty years it took to complete the temple made it both a "symbol of Mormonism's triumph over adversity" (Hamilton 1981, 6) and a "visual statement of faith, commitment and permanence" (Oman and Oman 1980, 120). The temple's location at the center of the city's grid system puts it at the geographic center of a city that has become the theocratic headquarters of a worldwide church. Throughout the world, the Salt Lake Temple has come to symbolize the city, the state of Utah, and Mormonism. The image of a temple, particularly the Salt Lake Temple, often serves as an institutional symbol of Mormonism in much the same way as the variously styled Christian crosses represent Roman Catholicism, Greek or Russian Orthodoxy, or various Protestant sects. Hence, the image of a temple on a gravestone becomes a universally recognized form of identification.

It is interesting that another Mormon symbol, the Angel Moroni, has been chosen by the Mormon hierarchy for use by the United States military as the official symbol of the Church ("Gravestone Emblem" 1980, 13). But despite the institutional sanction of this symbol, it is not Moroni but the image of the temple that accounts for 25 to 30 percent of all current gravestone orders at monument companies in Salt Lake City, the heart of the Mormon cultural region.¹ It is also interesting to note that not one of the gravestones memorializing a Mormon prophet includes an image of a temple.

Thus using the image of a temple to mark a grave appears to be an unofficial "folk" practice, neither sanctioned nor discouraged by Church leaders, that represents much more than a mere statement of religious identity. Like the engraved likenesses of temples on wedding or funeral announcements or the small replicas of temples placed atop wedding cakes, the image of the temple symbolizes temple marriage and eternal relationships. Marriage within a Mormon temple is more than a peripheral component of the Mormon belief system. The sacred ordinances performed within the temple, for both the living and the dead, are at the core of Mormon theology. Thus the image of the temple on a gravestone becomes a rich, multifaceted symbol that embodies, serves as a reminder of, and visually demonstrates the core precepts and beliefs of Latter-day Saint theology.

Basic Mormon beliefs of eternal progression, marriage for time and eternity, and the sealing together of families are displayed and expressed through the various components of the Mormon temple gravestone. First, the stones are generally double markers that memorialize a husband and wife, or a family unit, rather than an individual. Second, the family name is prominently displayed across the top of the stone. The given names of the husband and wife,

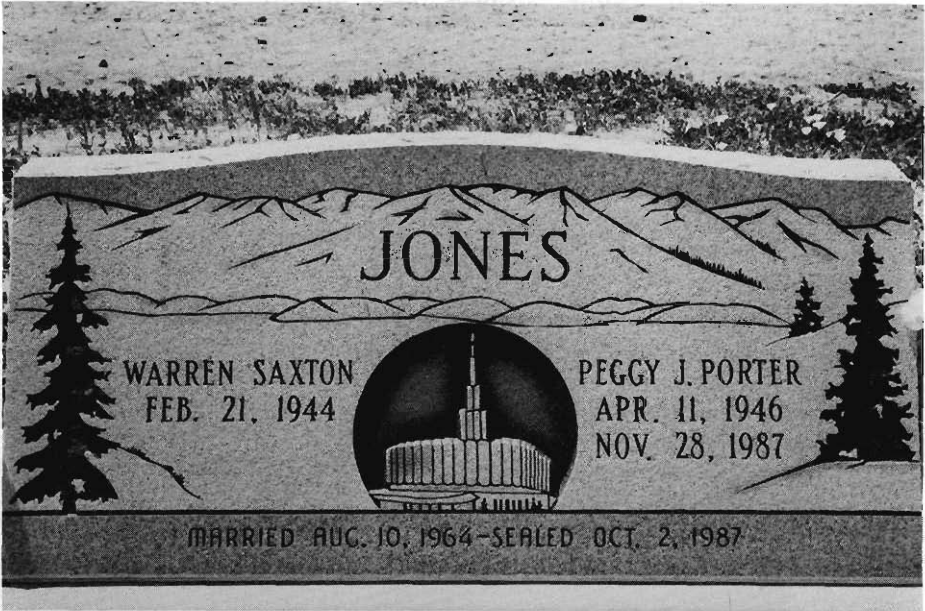
¹ These statistics are based on information gathered through interviews during October 1985 with several monument producers/dealers in northern Utah including David Bott (Bott Monument in Ogden), Mike Ellerbeck (Salt Lake Monument), Hans Huettlinger (Hans Monument in Salt Lake City), and a representative of the Boyd Mildon Company.

including the wife's maiden name and both of their birth and death dates, are written on the left and right sides of the stone. Third, in the center, above these facts and under the family name, is a recognizable representation of one of the Mormon temples. Fourth, the date of marriage is included, and for couples initially married in a civil ceremony the date of the temple sealing ceremony may be noted. The names of the couple's children are often included, either along the bottom edge of those markers positioned flush with the ground or on the backside of those that stand upright.

The theme of family unity is central to each of these components — from the double configuration of the stones themselves to the specific information contained on them. Inclusion of the wife's maiden name and the names of all of the children underlines the importance of the family unit. It also creates a permanent genealogical record similar to those used to establish family relationships so that temple ordinances may be performed by proxy for those who have died — an activity leading to unity of the extended family in the afterlife. The marriage or sealing date, signifying that the husband, wife, and any children born after that date have been sealed together for eternity, represents the temple ordinance that is a prerequisite to the reunion of the family after death. Most graphically, the image of the temple itself symbolizes the place and the means through which the goal of eternal marriage and family unity is achieved.

Additional elements on the markers often amplify these ideas. Birth and death dates written on an open book suggest that life is a chapter in a much longer story, that the story of a person's earthly life has been written, or perhaps that writing life's story is important. Roses may represent the love shared by marriage partners or family members, the rebirth suggested by growing flowers, the beauty of maturity, or the fragility of beautiful things, such as life and relationships. Such phrases as "TOGETHER FOREVER," "LOVE EVERLASTING," or "OUR END IS OUR BEGINNING" explain the purpose of temple marriage and the sealing ordinances. Individual temples are not only recognizable on the stones, they are often depicted in the tops of the mountains or high in the clouds, calling to mind Chapter 5 of Isaiah, where he prophesied that the saints would be established in the tops of the mountains. While some temple stones incorporate personalized motifs representing occupations, avocations, or organizational affiliations (an increasingly popular contemporary style of western grave-stones), the temple generally provides the central theme (Edison 1985, 184–89).

Temple gravestones are a folk expression of organizational affiliation and religious belief. They speak not only to outsiders as a statement of Mormon religious identity, but also to insiders as a reminder and visual reinforcement of the essence of Mormon belief. Temple gravestones remind believers of the possibility of family unity after death for all who are worthy. The image of a Latter-day Saint temple represents more than the success of the Saints' nineteenth-century westward migration and their triumph over adversity. It symbolizes the belief that there is a way to achieve victory over death, not just for the individual, but for the family unit, both nuclear and extended. What better, more appropriate place than a gravemarker to proclaim, through sym-



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bolism, a belief in an afterlife and the reunion of the family? Certainly the widespread acceptance and use of temple gravestones throughout the Mormon cultural region, just like the preference for stones with the clasped-hands motif in the previous century, point to their significance as an unofficial, twentieth-century folk expression of personal and community beliefs. An understanding of Mormon gravestones not only helps identify the Mormon cultural region but can lead to a better understanding of both historical and contemporary Mormon culture and identity.

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