

*Examining Gravestones as
Markers of Death and
Culture in Early America:*

*A Collaborative Effort
Between the Library and
English 2110 Faculty*



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About Jackson State Community College



- ④ 4,089 students
- ④ 43.7% part-time students
- ④ 32.1% first time freshmen
- ④ 22.5% adults (25+)
- ④ 27.3% dual enrollment
- ④ 44.5% low income (Pell Grant recipients)

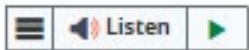


④ Main campus in Jackson

④ Satellite campuses in Lexington, Savannah, and Trenton

④ Ten county service area





Death, Doctrine, and Design: Reading Early American Gravestones

In this module, we have explored how early American writers interpreted **fear**, **suffering**, and **salvation** through sermons, narratives, and spiritual autobiographies. This assignment asks you to examine how those same beliefs appear not in printed texts--but in **stone**.

Early New England gravestones are not simply markers of death. They are theological statements. The images carved into them--**death's-heads**, **winged skulls**, **cherubs**, **willow trees**, **hourglasses**, **biblical verses**--reflect deeply held beliefs about judgment, divine sovereignty, and the fate of the soul.


Your task is to "read" gravestones as cultural texts.

One of Jackson State's librarians--Ms. Sylvia Rowe--took the following sets of photographs on her travels through New England. Take your time looking through these photos, and start to pay attention to what makes these tombstones and grave-markers not only unique, but also representative of the early American culture we've been studying.

- Started as an idea for possible exploration from the embedded librarian in the course
- She reached out to me because of my knowledge and interest in early New England graveyards and gravestone art
- I provided eBooks and journal articles from the library and information from outside sources
- In addition, I sent the professor photos from among my personal collection of gravestone photos taken over the years
- The research assignment was built from there and fine-tuned to reflect additional resources before going live for the students

Sources

Choose two or more of the following sources and resources to complete this assignment.

1. [Association for Gravestone Studies Collection](#)
2. [Gravestones of early New England and the men who made them, 1653-1800](#) 
3. [Carved in Stone: The Artistry of Early New England Gravestones](#)
4. ["African American Gravestones in Western Massachusetts"](#)
5. ["Stone Faces"](#)
6. ["Some Social Aspects of New England Colonial Mortuary Art"](#)
7. ["American Gravestones and Attitudes toward Death: A Brief History"](#)
8. ["Early American Gravestones: Archaeological Perspectives on Three Cemeteries of Old New York"](#)
9. ["Death's Heads, Cherubs, and Willow Trees: Experimental Archaeology in Colonial Cemeteries"](#)
10. ["Seeing the self "in frame": Early New England material practice and puritan piety"](#)
11. [The Farber Gravestone Collection](#)

12. [A Bibliography of New England* Gravestone Carvers](#)

13. [Iconography of Gravestones at Burying Grounds \(City of Boston resource\)](#)

14. [Winged Skulls and Poetic Epitaphs: The Art and Soul of New England's Gravestone Carvers](#)

Additional Sources

Websites

[Symbolism on Gravestones](#)

[Gravestone Evolution in America From the First Settlers to the Early Victorian Era, part 1](#)

[Gravestone Evolution in America From the First Settlers to the Early Victorian Era, part 2](#)

[Field Guide to Early American Gravestones in New England](#)

[Early Gravestone Carvers of New England](#)

Facebook Groups

[Early New England Gravestones, and the Men Who Made Them](#)

[Graves of New England](#)

The Mannings

<https://ctgravestones.org/carvers/manning-family-carvings/>

<https://anarmchairacademic.wordpress.com/2014/03/04/new-england-graves-flight-of-the-soul/>

The John Stephens Shop

johnstephensshop.com

 Sources from the library include two eBooks and several journal articles (items 2-10)

 External sources include websites, Facebook groups, and information on my favorite family of gravestone carvers, the Mannings of Eastern Connecticut (active 1750s-1810)



20 photos from my personal collection – taken at historic graveyards in Boston, North Andover, and Salem, Massachusetts



Graveyards represented: Broad Street Cemetery and the Old Burying Point/Charter Street Cemetery (Salem), Granary Burying Ground and King's Chapel Burying Ground (Boston), and Old North Parish Burying Ground (North Andover)



Step by Step Instructions for the Assignment

▼ Step 1: Choose Three Gravestones

Using the provided collections (Farber Gravestone Collection, Association for Gravestone Studies, Boston iconography resources, Ms. Rowe's personal photos, etc.), select:

- Three gravestones dated between 1650–1800
- From New England or colonial New York
- Ideally from at least two different decades

Include images of all three stones in your submission (embedded or attached).

▼ Step 2: Identify the Visual Elements

For each gravestone, briefly identify:

- Name (if visible)
- Date
- Location
- Carver (if known)
- Symbols present (e.g., death's-head, cherub, willow, urn, hourglass, soul effigy, etc.)
- Any visible epitaph language or biblical references

Be specific and descriptive. Treat the stone as you would a literary text and observe carefully.

> Step 3: Cultural Interpretation (At Least 350 Words)

In a unified response of at least 350 words, analyze what these three gravestones reveal about early American culture.

Consider questions such as:

- What do these stones suggest about attitudes toward death?
- Do they emphasize judgment, warning, hope, or comfort?
- How does the imagery evolve across time (if applicable)?
- What do the carvings suggest about beliefs concerning the soul, salvation, or divine authority?
- Do the stones reflect Puritan severity, emerging sentimentality, or theological transition?

You must incorporate at least two sources from the provided list to support or deepen your interpretation, and your source in selecting the gravestones can count as one of those sources.

🎯 Assignment instructions for students encouraged use of my photos and/or those in outside collections

🎯 Emphasis on reading gravestone images for analysis and examining them as literary and historical texts

🎯 The big questions: What does each stone mean? How do they represent the attitudes towards life, mortality, and theology reflected in literature of the time?

Submission Guidelines

- Include all three images.
- Clearly label each gravestone.
- Minimum 350 words for interpretation.
- Cite at least two outside sources (MLA or APA acceptable).

I recommend reaching out to Ms. Sylvia Rowe for her insights into this topic and for her expertise in library research and using sources: [Book a Librarian](#).

This project asks you to see that early American belief systems were not confined to pulpits and printed pages. Theology shaped landscapes. Fear shaped art. Salvation shaped stone.



When you learn to read gravestones as cultural texts, you begin to see how deeply religion structured early American identity, not only in literature, but in everyday life and death.

[7.8 Dropbox for Gravestone Project](#)

Benefits of the assignment:

- 👤 All materials are readily available in the LMS or via links to library resources and external sources
- 👤 Project-based learning gives students the opportunity to apply their learning in Early American Literature to tangible examples of beliefs and cultural expressions
- 👤 We can't take the class to New England graveyards, but we can bring New England graveyards to them to study and explore

🎯 Student outcomes for the project: 17 of 22 students earned a grade of C or higher on the assignment, one student earned a D. Overall assignment pass rate = 81.8%

🎯 Increased opportunities for collaboration with English faculty, plus it adds to the good reputation of the librarians as being information professionals who can assist in creating engaging original assignments for students



© Thank you for attending our panel discussion