Wherever they occur, these formal links to our past reveal cultural identities and traditions.

Places of the Past:
Reading and Understanding Cemeteries

Story and Photos By
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Scattered throughout rural Illinois, cemeteries are visual reminders of our past. Almost all communities contain cemeteries. In addition, travelers of back roads frequently observe isolated cemeteries located some distance from today’s communities or churches. These locations reflect an evolving rural landscape. For example, regional economic development and shifts in population may have resulted in changes to the transportation system. New roads were developed and old roads were abandoned. Consequently, some early cemeteries may be situated along now-abandoned roads.

Not just places to put the dead or static snapshots of older views and attitudes about death, all cemeteries contain social and cultural values reflecting specific choices and therefore provide insight into how people structured and organized their social and physical landscape. Cemeteries are dynamic, reflecting changing cultural institutions, social values and regional ethic composition.

Cemetery gravemarkers tell us not only about the individual who died, their

Variation in headstone shape and inscription is frequently a matter of choice and reflects values of those who make the selection.
Cemeteries provide excellent opportunities to view older trees that have grown with little competition from other plants.

placement and appearance (raw material, inscriptions and motifs) provides information about the society from which the individual has departed. For example, 19th century changes in gravemarker motifs reflect varying attitudes toward death, from harsh and cruel to sentimental and spiritual.

For more information on how to study a cemetery and the different things that may be learned, read “Your Guide to Cemetery Research” by Sharon DeBartlo Carmack or visit www.gravestonestudies.org or www.vintageviews.org/vv-tl/pages/Cem_Symbolism.htm.

During the nineteenth century, cemetery locations varied but frequently were placed on the highest ground near streams.