

# The Role of Cemeteries in Historical Research: The Curious Case of Pioneer Park

By

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Historical archaeologists seek to provide a more complete understanding of our past through the analysis and interpretation of both documentary sources and material culture. One specific type of material culture is that pertaining to death and commemoration, which possesses a long history of usage within archaeology for the purpose of understanding past societies.<sup>1</sup> For the historical period in particular, such studies initially focused on inscriptions, but later expanded during the twentieth



*Calvary Cemetery ca. 1895. ©SDHC #16063-10.*

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century to include research about regional variations in commemorative practices, as well as the symbolism associated with different styles and motifs.<sup>2</sup> Further, research of grave memorials has demonstrated its value with regard to understanding the individual identity of both the commemorated and the commemorators themselves.<sup>3</sup>

On one level, burials can be used to research age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and vocational identity.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, inscriptions and epitaphs, monument typology, and cemetery orientation, all provide information about the people's identity they commemorate, as well as additional information about those surviving the deceased.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this is due, at least in part, to the fact that mortuary evidence has always had a rich history of being 'qualitative' as well as 'quantifiable' in nature. Being that, qualitative scales measure name-based data (which lacks numerical characteristics), such as genders, styles, and emotions, and quantitative scales measure data that is numerical, such as age and date.<sup>6</sup> For instance, in the course of analyzing the 'quantitative' number of epitaphs that contain introductory formula such as 'in loving memory of', one can also allow for the 'qualitative' content of the inscription which relates to the specific feelings (of loss or other emotions) expressed by those who mourned the deceased.

Of course, the scale of measurement applied to a particular data set is not fixed, and a list of qualitative styles, when placed in rank order, begin to take on the numerical concepts of higher and lower, or earlier and later. Ultimately, the inclusion of more qualitative scales of measurement, along with quantitative measures typical of the Processual Era has led to more complex analysis and interpretation of burial and commemorative data.<sup>7</sup> This allowing for the qualitative aspects of mortuary data can even make room for the inclusion of the researcher's own experiential insight.<sup>8</sup> However, with regard to identity, one must also note that individuals possess multiple identities, some of which can be imposed from the outside, and might even contradict one another.<sup>9</sup>

## **San Diego's Calvary Cemetery**

In 1873, Joseph Manasse, Prussian immigrant and shop owner who became a successful entrepreneur at the time, sold a parcel of 10 acres to the City of San Diego, California for the purposes of establishing both a Protestant and Catholic cemetery.<sup>10</sup> It was not long after, however, when Father Antonio Ubach, Reverend of the Church of the Immaculate Conception, surveyed the land and found it to be too rocky for the purposes of a cemetery. Father Ubach, who had studied to become a priest at Cape Girardeau, Missouri, came to San Diego in 1866 after traveling extensively as a missionary. Therefore, the land was exchanged for another parcel owned by Manasse in 1876. Although the Protestants never used their land, and that particular adjacent 5-acre

parcel became Mission Hills Park, a new Catholic cemetery was established to serve as a burial area in replacement of El Campo Santo, a previous cemetery originally located within the Pueblo of San Diego. Known as Old Town as early as 1850, it was San Diego's first American municipal settlement. In accordance with the ethic of improvement, this comprised the movement of the burial area away from the middle of Old Town to a bluff on the outskirts of the growing town area.<sup>11</sup> The bluff afforded not only more burial room, but offered a picturesque view of the bay from the cemetery grounds.

Father Antonio Ubach, who was a native Catalán from northeastern Spain, laid out the graveyard and named it Calvary Cemetery. There are no precise figures to let one know exactly how many individuals are buried in Calvary Cemetery, but in 2007 estimates ranged from 1,650 to as many as 3,400 burials.<sup>12</sup> In fact, more recent research by the San Diego Hall of Records has placed the number somewhere around 4,000 individuals interred.<sup>13</sup> This includes some of San Diego's



*Joseph Manasse. Photo courtesy of USD history archives.*



*Father Antonio Ubach. Photo courtesy of USD history archives.*

earliest pioneers. For half a century, Calvary Cemetery served the needs of San Diego's Catholic community, and is purported to have seen its greatest usage during the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919. The cemetery, however, soon after fell into disrepair, and following the opening of Holy Cross in 1919, a new Catholic Cemetery, Calvary began to elicit signs of further neglect and even vandalism. Even a WPA project during the late 1930s and early 1940s was not enough to save Calvary Cemetery, and in 1960 the graveyard saw its final burial. Despite its varied and intriguing use as a cemetery for almost a century, perhaps another as yet interesting story consists of what was soon to follow.

In 1968, through a municipal law that was specifically introduced a few years earlier, the City of San Diego declared Calvary Cemetery to be abandoned, and soon commenced to declare



*Pringle Hill aerial - 1935 showing Calvary Cemetery. ©SDHC #79\_741-21.*

the area a health hazard. A year later, the city had all of the gravestones razed and removed, and literally dumped into a ravine at another local cemetery, Mount Hope. In fact, riders of the San Diego Trolley were treated to the display of the unceremoniously discarded stones along a local route. Some time later, public outrage led to the vast majority of the gravestones being buried in a 'mass grave' at Mount Hope Cemetery. Archeologist Seth Mallios, who runs the San Diego Gravestone Project, stated that he has been unable to find any other examples of a mass grave for gravestones from any time period, region, or culture.<sup>14</sup>

The only indication that Calvary Cemetery was ever in existence is a memorial consisting of about 140 gravestones which were selected for their historical significance, and were set in cement in the southeastern corner of Pioneer Park in 1988. Additionally, most of the dead are commemorated by six flush brass plaques listing the known dead, and a relatively unnoticeable small plaque reading "dedicated to the memory of those interred within the park." It is the first half of these one hundred and forty monuments that have been recorded for the purposes of this research project.

### **Identity: Age and Sex**

The usage of cemetery data for demographic purposes is usually not desirable, given the existence of much more accurate sources of information available through census data, business records, and otherwise, for the historical period.<sup>15</sup> Basic demo-

graphic information, however, such as age and sex of the interred is useful when the data are applied more specifically to understanding the parameters of the cemetery or mortuary data itself. Of the 70 burial monuments researched, the ages of the individuals ranged from less than a year old to 92 years old, with an average burial age of 54 years old. Of these, slightly more were male than female. Chart 1 displays the distribution of individuals with respect to age and sex of those commemorated. The chart illustrates that there are significantly more men than women commemorated in the first half of the Pioneer Park memorial, and that the average age of death is fairly advanced. Most likely, this does not reflect the actual demographics of the entire cemetery, but sample bias due to the inclusion of the priests' burial markers in the first half of the memorial.

From a historical perspective, information from the memorials used in the calculation of age, such as the year of death, seems to illustrate more clearly the history of the cemetery when it was analyzed on a ranked scale. When burial year is manipulated and ranked from earliest to latest, familial names such as Ames, Bogen, Stewart, and Coutts begin to illustrate a timeline of the first families that began interring their dead at Calvary Cemetery. Interestingly, many of these same surnames are amongst the last of the individuals interred from the 70 memorials sampled. Nevertheless, it must be noted that once again specific grave markers retained at the site are purported to have been selected based on their historical significance, which very well affects their ability to represent the original demographics of the cemetery.<sup>16</sup>

### **Identity: Religious Affiliation**

The religious affiliation of the commemorated individuals is highly evidenced as Catholic. Documentary evidence supports that the cemetery was laid out by a Catholic priest, and was serviced by the Parish of the Church of the Immaculate Conception, which is in the center of Old Town.<sup>17</sup> In addition to such evidence, religious symbolization associated with Christianity and Catholicism is directly displayed on a number of the memorials. Symbols such as the cross, a praying Jesus, a book, and in particular, a cross within a circle are all Christian symbols. Further, the cross within the circle might be construed to be more Catholic specific, given its associations and resemblance to the Eucharistic host, which is an integral part of the Catholic Mass.<sup>18</sup>

### **Identity: Ethnicity**

Ethnicity in itself is difficult to define, and ethnic identity has been construed as being more of a variable social phenomenon than a fixed static construct.<sup>19</sup> Still, for the purposes of this study, ethnicity is defined as evidence of identification or



*Pioneer Park 2011. Photo by Gabriel Lawson.*

commemoration, with reference to one's particular geographic origin at birth, or more loosely defined evidence of ethnic heritage via particular surnames. Of the 70 memorials researched, seventeen contained specific information regarding birthplace. These ranged from countries such as Ireland, Belgium, Austria, Spain, and France; to states such as Tennessee and Illinois; to specific cities such as Los Angeles and El Cajon. The inclusion of one's native place of birth seems to have been most prevalent among the Church Reverends, with more than 50 percent including such information. Perhaps the inclusion of one's native country, state, or even city on the burial monument, evidences pride or at least an association with these particular places of origin with the identity of the deceased, by the commemorators. In fact, many of the people buried at Calvary Cemetery were pioneers who migrated from other areas, and perhaps these commemorations are evidence of the conscious awareness of this among the community members themselves.

It is also interesting to note that when comparing the stated area of birth, there is variable level of agreement when compared to the ethnic origins of the surname. This seems to be related to the nature of location regarding birthplace on the burial markers. Table 1 shows the comparison between the birthplace listed on the memorial and the ethnic associations with each surname. There is much more agreement between the two sources of information when the reference is to a different country. Further,

when birthplace references become more within country or state, the associations are much less related geographically. This seems to suggest that when inferring ethnicity from surnames, the inferences are more valid when addressing the ethnicity of an immigrant, as opposed to a pioneer that traveled from a different region of the United States to settle the area. Still, all references emphasize the idea that the individual was born someplace ‘other’ than where they were buried.

Table 1: Level of Agreement between Birthplace and Surname

Individual	Stated Birthplace	Ethnicity of Surname	Level of Agreement
	Country Level		
Rev. H.J. Baert	Belgium	Germanic	High
Rev. C.L. O'Brien	Ireland	Irish	High
Maria L. O'Brien	Ireland	Irish	High
Rev. Patrick McGreevy	Ireland	North Irish	High
Elizabeth Mayrhofer	Austria	Czech	High
Anton Mayrhofer	Austria	Czech	High
Rev. Bernard Smyth	Ireland	Irish	High
Rev. Jos. M LeCerf	France	French	High
James McCoy	Ireland	Irish	High
Francis D. Murtha	Ireland	Irish	High
Michel Bernard Pedot	France	French	High
Eugenie Ollevier Pedot	Belgium	French	High
Patrick Powers	Ireland	English	High
Rev. A.D. Ubach	Spain	Unknown	Unknown
	State and City Level		
Cave Johnson Coutts	Tennessee, U.S.	Scottish	Low
Manuel Del Castillo	Los Angeles, CA.	Spanish	Low
Jesus Chacon	El Cajon, CA.	Spanish	Low
Lizzie C. Malloy	Illinois, U.S.	Irish	Low

Source: Sample of 70 memorials from Pioneer Park



*McCoy-Murtha headstone. ©SDHC #OP 13030-330.*

## Identity: Vocation

The inclusion of information regarding the vocational identity of the individuals represented by the burial monuments was in general, infrequent. The large exception of this seems to be the church reverends that invariably included within their name the abbreviated title of 'Reverend'. This is not unique to Calvary Cemetery, and Mytum lists 'religious leadership' as a major category of commemorated vocations across time periods.<sup>20</sup> In further support of this is the marble stone family marker of the Mayrhoferes, who were the only family to be buried in the same original area as the priests.<sup>21</sup> Although they were not priests, at least two Mayrhoferes were members of The Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, today

known as the Equestrian Order of the Holy Knights of Jerusalem. This organization, which has its origins in the late eleventh century, is listed as a confraternal secular organization devoted to the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church, and whose mission is the equality of man and equal access to the Holy Land by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim alike.<sup>22</sup>

Although the vocational identity of another prestigious trade, a doctor, was included on one individual stone sampled the other memorials researched seem to be more centered on a fraternal organization known as Woodsmen of the World. Woodsmen belong to a fraternal organization in the United States based in Omaha, Nebraska, that operates a large privately held insurance company for its members, the Woodsmen of the World, which was established in 1890 by Joseph Cullen Root.<sup>23</sup> One of the most enduring physical legacies of the organization may be the number of distinctive headstones erected in the shape of a tree stump. This was an early benefit of Woodsmen of the World membership, and the headstones can be found in cemeteries nationwide. Although originally included with membership for the purposes of 'giving honorable burial to our sacred dead', this program was abandoned in the 1920s as too costly.<sup>24</sup> The sample of stones reviewed does not include any tree shaped examples, but a number of different stones are ornately shaped and include

the inscription ‘woodman of the world’ or ‘woman of woodcraft’, as well as the circular symbol of an ax, a cut log, and the Latin motto ‘Dum Tacet Clamat’, translated as ‘though silent, one speaks’.

### **Inscriptions and Epitaphs**

Most of the markers researched did not include an introductory formula. Out of the 70 individual memorials, however, thirteen did include such formula. The introductory formula seemed to be consistent within particular family groupings. As Table 2 illustrates, the family groups of McCoy/Murtha, Marron, and Stewart all incorporated introductory formula on most of the memorials.

Table 2: Individual Memorials including Introductory Formula

Individual	Introductory Formula	Separate or Shared Marker
James McCoy	In Memory Of	Shared (1)
Francis D. Murtha	In Memory Of	Shared (1)
Winnifred A. Murtha	In Memory Of	Shared (1)
Matilda F. Marron	In Loving Memory Of	Separate
Elias Marron	In Memory Of	Separate
Maggie Stewart	In Loving Remembrance of Our Dear Sister	Separate
J.B. Stewart	In Loving Remembrance of Our Dear Brother	Separate
James Stewart	In Loving Remembrance of Our Dear Brother	Separate
John C. Stewart	In Loving Remembrance of Our Dear Father	Separate
Rosa Machado Stewart	In Loving Remembrance of Our Dear Mother	Separate
Mary J.E. Stewart	In Loving Remembrance of Our Dear Sister	Separate
Francisco Arguello	In Memory Of	Separate
Maria Guadalupe De Smith	In Memory Of	Separate

Source: Sample of 70 memorials from Pioneer Park



*Ubach headstone, Pioneer Park 2011. Photo by Gabriel Lawson.*

Of these, further analysis of the Stewart Family led to an interesting finding. Not only do many of the markers contain the same introductory formula, but the markers' material and form are extremely similar. The almost identical form of the markers, considering the wide range of dates of death, seems to suggest that the markers are not all original and had been replaced at some time, quite possibly when the cemetery was rehabilitated during the late 1930s. Another piece of evidence that suggests replacement is the marker for Mary J.E. Stewart which states 'In Loving Remembrance of Our Sister', but then lists the individual as 'and Grandma' even though the individual was only 20 years old when she died.

Concerning epitaphs, most of the grave markers do not include a long epitaph, which coincides with previous research of grave memorials for the 1870s to 1940s relative to previous time periods.<sup>25</sup> Many had abbreviated or short inscriptions, including 21 'R.I.P.'s and two 'I.H.S.'s. Still, some of the larger monuments incorporated longer epitaphs. Father Ubach's memorial stone, besides being one of the few constructed from atypical (for the sample) white limestone, displays the epitaph:

Native of Spain  
For over forty years faithful  
And beloved pastor in San Diego  
Requiescat in pace

The final line is currently below concrete level. One of the other longer epitaphs is on the marker of Rev. Bernard Smyth that reads:

The law of truth in his mouth  
And iniquity was not found in his lips:  
He walked with me in peace

And justice and did turn  
Many away from iniquity  
Malachi 2.6.

The longest inscription, however, is on the McCoy/Murtha marker and reads:

Though many tears for him are shed  
Tho' hearts are rent with parting pain  
Yet who'd recall the happy dead  
Or bring the blessed soul back again  
Ah why should we grieve that  
The spirit has flown  
To that heaven of rest where no  
Sorrow is known

It is not surprising that the longest epitaphs in the sample memorialize individuals with Irish surnames, given the rich tradition of epitaphs from that region.<sup>26</sup>

## **Symbolism**

A number of different symbols were present on the memorials surveyed, the most common of which was a cross. Of the 70 memorials researched, 34 directly incorporated a cross. This is close to 50%; however, at least seven of the memorials which did not have the cross symbol, were originally grouped together in family plots with a family name marker that did include a cross symbol. In addition to the cross symbol, eleven memorials incorporated a circle encompassing the cross and fifteen incorporated some type of foliage. These were by far the most prevalent symbols. Aside from these symbols, there were occasional symbolization in the form of shaking hands, a praying Jesus, columns, a book, and a heart.

The cross has a long history as a symbol of life. Associated with cre-



*Gassen headstone, Pioneer Park 2011. Photo by Gabriel Lawson.*



*Pioneer Park 2011. Photo by Gabriel Lawson.*

ative power and eternity by the Assyrians and Celts, as well as fertility and future life by the Phoenicians and Egyptians, the cross is a symbol of immortality through Christ.<sup>27</sup> The cross is also comprised of two intersecting lines which could be construed to represent the crossing from life into the afterlife. The foliage symbols bring to mind the cyclical and ephemeral nature of life.

### **Monument Size, Form, and Material**

In general, most of the stones were small (under 1.4 m), and composed of a grey granite material. Both the oldest dated and newest dated stones, when ranked according to date of death were composed of this material. Also with regard to height, the current memorial site incorporated a number of stones which were flush with the ground level, but at one time seem to have been upright. The only other stone materials included in the sample were 1) white marble and 2) white limestone. The white marble was only exemplified by three stones, two from the late 1800s and one from the mid-1940s. The white limestone seems to have been reserved for larger carved stones, including large family name markers. Limestone is a typical choice for memorials based on its workability and durability, even though it has a tendency to flake with time. Interestingly, the limestone markers were very ornate, but included a rough-hewn look, possibly to mask future damage over time.

### **Orientation and Position in Cemetery**

The analysis and interpretation of the orientation and position in the cemetery was challenging because none of the memorials were in their original positions. Still, a burial plot map drafted in 1942, before the grave markers were moved from their original positions, is available.<sup>28</sup> When the cemetery was transformed into Pioneer Memorial Park, the headstones were originally to be completely eliminated; however, the concern of citizens led to some of the headstones being returned to the park some 18 years later. This led to both similarities and differences in the current orientation

as compared to their original placement. On the most general level, the grave markers have become memorials, in the sense that they no longer marked the place of interred remains. This is in agreement with the trend outlined by James Deetz, consisting of markers becoming removed from the remains of the deceased over time.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the continued presence of a marker at all, aside from one which is no longer in the same location as the physical remains, seems to be the exception, instead of the rule.<sup>30</sup>

One similarity between the current positioning and the original placement of the markers centers on the placement of the priests' headstones. When Calvary Cemetery was originally plotted out, a separate area was set aside for the priests' plots.<sup>31</sup> In fact, only one family was buried in the area reserved for the priests, that being the Mayrhoferes who were members of a devout Catholic organization, The Equestrian Order. In the current configuration, all of the priests and the Mayrhofer markers are positioned together. Another interesting similarity between the original and current positions concerns the placement of markers into familial groupings. The Gassen, Stewart, and Ames families all were originally grouped into family plots, and the current groupings are similar in position. One interesting difference concerns the Coutts family. While currently grouped together, some burials with the surname Coutts were not originally buried within the family plots, but outside and in different areas of the cemetery. One wonders what the reasoning was for the burial of some Coutts



*Randomly placed headstones in Pioneer Park 2011. Photo by Gabriel Lawson.*

outside of the family plot. Nevertheless, whatever the reason was, they're together now.

Particular attention should be paid to one difference—the placement of the grave markers in the most southeasterly area of the park at the current time. Keep in mind that without citizen activism, no original markers would be present in the park. Additionally, although the markers are present, they can hardly be seen from most of the park and the street that runs in front of the area. All of the markers are in perhaps the least prominent and lowest elevated position in the area's expanse. In fact, the only real direct indication that the remains of over 4,000 individuals are in the park is a rather unnoticeable brass plaque measuring 3 inches by 18 inches with the inscription 'dedicated to the memory of those interred within this park'.

This evidence, coupled with the fact that the markers were not originally intended to be a part of the park and were only brought back in 1988, some 18 years after their removal in 1970, greatly suggests that the fact that Pioneer Park—even though it contains the remains of 4,000 people—was meant to be forgotten.

Two main topics of concern need to be brought up. The most basic is the almost complete lack of recognition of the physical remains of the deceased. If cemeteries are a reflection of the society that commemorates the dead, then at least as far as Pioneer Park is concerned this suggests a complete and utter desire to not visually memorialize, and even ignore the physical remains, which means, in effect, ignoring or hiding physical death. If one interprets the memorials as more of an active agent



*View of Pioneer Park 2011. Photo by Gabriel Lawson.*

in the formation of societal qualities, one would most likely argue that the current positioning of the memorials drastically decreases their effectiveness as an impetus for contemplation. Even though the stones complete removal was interpreted as over zealous, and some memorials were brought back in 1988, the move has been criticized.

Secondly, the reservation of space as a place reserved for the dead, is dead in and of itself in Pioneer Park. People play, picnic, make out, and walk their dogs within the park and on top of the ground containing the dead. The space has become a place of rest and enjoyment, but not for contemplation of mortality.

## **Conclusion**

Numerous aspects of identity were available in the analysis and interpretation of the 70 memorials researched. They helped to shed some light on the basic demographics of Calvary Cemetery, but more specifically, the Pioneer Park memorial. Also, the historical transformation of Calvary Cemetery into Pioneer Park demonstrates the changing nature of grave memorials in San Diego over time. The founding of the park, followed by its usage for fifty years, its decline and rehabilitation, its abandonment and conversion, and the call to activism and return of some memorials--all illustrate the dynamic nature of this memorial in San Diego. Further research would consist of analysis and interpretation of the second half of the memorials, followed by research of the photographs taken of the many headstones before being removed and later buried at Mount Hope.



*El Campo Santo, original Pueblo of San Diego Cemetery.* ©SDHC #3889.

NOTES

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