

Highland Cemetery Grave Iconography Tour

Arguably the most beautiful spot in Washtenaw County, Highland Cemetery offers an outstanding chance to examine 19th-century grave symbols. The following self-guided 1-hour tour highlights a range of some of the southern half of the cemetery's most interesting symbols. Numbers in the text correspond to the map.

Visitors can reach the cemetery by traveling down Washtenaw to its terminus on Huron. Turn left on Huron and right on Cross Street through Depot Town. At the remains of the Thompson Building at River, turn left. You will pass Forest Avenue and the ornate brick Swain home on the northeast corner of Forest and River. Continue down River; Highland Cemetery is a quarter mile down on the left.

Inside the main gates, open 8 a.m.-5 p.m. until April 30 and 8 a.m.-7 p.m. from May 1 to September 30, a small parking lot appears on the right. Park here and walk west to Starkweather Chapel at the end of the main driveway.

Circling counter-clockwise around the chapel, the Worden family monument (1) comes into view on the right. It is crowned by a **draped urn**. One of the most popular of Victorian-era grave symbols, the urn is a classical motif that refers to funerary urns used by the wealthier of ancient Greeks for cremated remains. The cloth is a "pall," a cover of usually black, purple, or white velvet used to cover a coffin (for some soldiers' coffins, a flag is used as a pall). The phrase "to cast a pall [on a party]" refers to this cloth associated with death and mourning.

At the Worden monument, looking southward and to the left, one sees a field of white stone obelisks. Proceeding towards them, a tall grey obelisk (2) appears, slightly to the right. This unusual metal obelisk shows three panels that display a sheaf of wheat, a wreath, and a maiden with an anchor.

The **sheaf of wheat** denotes God's divine harvest of the deceased, and often signifies a long and full life. The **wreath** signifies a victory over death. The **anchor** sometimes signifies a member of the navy or a mariner, but Colonel George Lee, buried here, was an Army man. In later life he served as the "Indian agent" for the state of Michigan. In this case the anchor likely signifies steadfastness of Christian faith; Lee was a Methodist.

Backtracking to the path, continue circling the chapel counter-clockwise. Just before reaching the first path on the right, one can see the graves of Helen and B. D. Kelly (3). Both display a **lily**, a symbol of innocence, purity or Christian resurrection.

Turning onto the path, immediately on the right, lie two tree stump graves (4). **Tree stumps** denote a life cut short, or the brevity of life. On the stump furthest from the path, carved with the name "Wilson," lies an **ear of corn**, said to be a symbol of

resurrection. On the stump closest to the path, for “Laura,” the wheat-sheaf-crowned stump includes two **branches cut short**, indicating a life cut short. Each branch has its own plaque with burial information. Though very hard to read, this is likely the grave of Laura and two of her children.

Note the small **lamb** on a ledge of Laura’s grave. Lambs are seen on the graves of children. There are, sadly, many small gravestones bearing lambs on their tops in Highland Cemetery.

Proceed down the path past the grave of the Thompson Building’s O. E. Thompson (5) on the right, towards the Civil War soldier’s monument in the distance. Look for John Reese’s white grave (6) on the left. It bears a **down-pointing hand with chain**. The hand is meant to be the hand of God selecting someone to bring to Heaven, and the broken chain symbolizes the death of a family member.

Just to the right of this grave is the James and Mary Court gravestone (7), bearing the **compass and square** that signifies that the deceased was a member of the Masonic fraternal group. The stone also shows the **inverted star** that symbolizes the Order of the Eastern Star, the onetime (now co-ed) women’s auxiliary to the Masons.

Walk to the Civil War soldier’s monument and follow the path’s rightward curve. Look for Allen P. Gale’s white grave (8) on the left. This is another, less legible, example of the **down-pointing hand with chain**. Just to the right of this grave, other Gale graves (9) lying flat on the earth show a **crown topped by a cross**. This represents the afterlife reward to believers in Jesus, who will be crowned with everlasting life. The graves also show **parted drapery**, likely signifying the parting of the veil of life to reveal the afterlife. Surmounting the crown is a **banner**, signifying victory or triumph.

Travel across the path to the large tree. Just to the right of the tree is a rare **autographed stone**. At the bottom right corner of Jonathan Ellis’s stone (10) may be seen the name of the Detroit stonecutter who carved it, W. E. Peters.

Now look to the left and behind Ellis’s stone. Eli Dickinson and Abigail Park’s tombstones (11) each show a **hand pointing to a book**. Books represent scholarship, knowledge, or memory, but usually, on non-Mormon Christian graves, the Bible. The hand likely serves to emphasize the importance of the book; “look to the Bible.” Just to the left of and behind these graves is one for H. K. Dickinson (12) showing a **scroll held by a hand with ivy**. The hand represents an angel’s hand recording the deeds of the deceased on the scroll of life. Ivy, due to its evergreen quality, represents immortality or lasting memory.

Further down the path, a white grave (13) on the left near the large Hay stone shows the common grave motif of a **dove descending**, symbolizing a descent from Heaven to guide the deceased upwards, or symbolizing the Holy Spirit.

Rounding the far corner and heading north, a pink Deubel family monument (14) soon comes into view. At its foot is a **dog**, likely just a representation of a beloved family pet. Sighting northwards from here, one can see another dog, "Watch," next to the Starkweather monument (15).

In front of and facing Watch, sight westwards behind the Starkweather monument. One white grave appears in the distance roughly thirty degrees to the right. En route to this grave is Catherine Crane's grave (16), flat on the ground, showing a **weeping willow tree**, symbol of grief and mourning.

Also en route towards the white stone one finds onetime wagon company shipping clerk Edwin Towler's plaque (17), also flat against the ground. Its **chain of three links** is the symbol of membership in the Odd Fellows fraternal charity group.

Once at the white stone, examine the far side. Here on Tinnie Booth's grave (18) is an exquisite depiction of the **clasped hands** motif. The sleeve on the left is a feminine one, and that on the right masculine; the symbol denotes unity in marriage.

Now turn around and walk to the obelisk at the top of the hill. On its right is a small white marble grave (19) near a marker labeled "84" (the graveyard section number). The **ship** depicted on the stone refers to Commodore James Patterson McKinstry's naval career which spanned the mid-1820s through the mid-1860s and included work in China.

Descending the hill and heading back towards the chapel leads to the exit.

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KEY:

- 1. Draped urn
- 2. Grey obelisk
- 3. Kelly Lily
- 4. Tree stumps
- 5. O.E. Thompson
- 6. Reese, hand
- 7. Court, Mason
- 8. Gale, hand
- 9. Gale, crown
- 10. Autograph
- 11. Book w/hand
- 12. Scroll w/hand
- 13. Dove descending
- 14. Deibel dog
- 15. Starkweather dog
- 16. Willow tree
- 17. 3-link chain
- 18. Clasped hands
- 19. ship

ICONOGRAPHY TOUR



