

## WITCHES' GRAVEYARD? -- THE TRUTH ABOUT STAMPS CEMETERY

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(Pictured: This downward pointing star and the unusual symbol between the initials on this gravestone sparked rumors of buried witches in Stamps Cemetery. Photo by Ty Kernea | Herald-Citizen).

Tucked into the mountains off of Brotherton Mountain Road, Stamps Cemetery is a small graveyard, easy to miss. For decades it's been nicknamed "The Witches' Graveyard" because of the site's spooky features.

Settled among the more modern gravestones are graves from the 1800s, but instead of the typical setup of the coffin in the ground and a tombstone to mark the location, these have two giant slabs of rock in a tent formation over the spot where the body is buried. Small triangles of stone prop up the slabs, while a headstone and smaller stone cap off the head and foot of the structure.

In addition, most of these headstones are marked with stars, some of them pointed downward, and have strange marks mixed in with the person's name, birth date and death date.



(Pictured: Michael Birdwell, TTU history professor, discusses the "witches' tombs" found in Stamps Cemetery in Cookeville. Photo: Ty Kernea | Herald-Citizen)

Somewhere along the

line, the rumor bloomed that these were marks of witches. A right-side-up star marked those of the “good” witches, while the upside down ones marked the “bad” ones. Some even said if someone touched the pentagram engraved on one of the stones at midnight during a full moon, it would awaken a demon.

Adding fuel to this tale was the claim that a boarding house near Tennessee Tech had a pentagram painted on the house, marking it as the original home of the coven of witches. In fact, in the Oct. 30, 1987, issue of *The Oracle*, TTU’s newspaper, an article quotes a member of Kappa Sigma — the former location of the boarding house — as saying there was indeed a symbol that looked like a pentagram that had recently been painted over, plus there were similar symbols hidden all over the house.

The real explanation of the stars’ origins is less thrilling, but still interesting.

“According to local folklore, the original Mr. Stamps was illiterate,” Michael Birdwell, TTU history professor, said, “He didn’t want to just sign his name with an X, because somebody would confuse his mark with somebody else’s. So he supposedly came up with the star. Another story is this is a masonic symbol. Stamps may have been a mason, which is not unusual at all. You’ve got to have a real talent to do this stuff. These (stones) were clearly done by skilled craftsmen.”

And the pentagrams in the Kappa Sigma house? According to the 1987 TTU article, they are actually stars that are a part of the badge design of the group.

The strange grave construction has an explanation, too. They are called “tent graves” or “comb graves.”

“There are lots of rumors as to how this tradition got started,” Birdwell said. “The one that makes the most sense to me is that the folks who moved here originally were Scots-Irish. The Scots graves are ‘cairns,’ where they heap up stones on top (of the grave). Well, this is much more efficient instead of heaping up a whole bunch of rocks, and plus there’s not a lot of top soil here. So it’s a modification of the traditional cairn.”

Historians also theorize that the comb graves could have come from the Swiss or Eastern Europeans, who had a similar style of grave construction.

Even though the cemetery’s strange appearance has had historical explanations in place for years, TTU students and other locals still occasionally use the spot to spook friends and newcomers to the area.

“The whole notion of it being haunted is a Tech tradition, not a local Stamps Cemetery tradition,” Birdwell said. “It was a great spot to bring somebody, maybe dare them to stay overnight, and then hide in the woods back there and really scare them.”

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\*Read more about the cemeteries in Putnam Co., TN & surrounding areas at:  
<http://www.ajlambert.com>