

DEBUNKING 'WITCHES GRAVEYARDS'

Posted Sunday, Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: October 23, 2016

By MEGAN TROTTER

Strange “signs” on old headstones in graveyards in Putnam County and its fringes have long been the focus of hushed stories.



The markers, largely made between 1879 and 1901, feature often upside-down stars carved into the sandstone.

(Pictured: Richard "Ric" Finch kneels beside an example of a local grave with a star engraved on the headstone. Photo by Ty Kernea | Herald-Citizen)

These, people whispered, mark the graves of witches. The orientation of the star — and whether or not it held a dot inside — supposedly indicated if the person had been a “good witch” or a “bad witch.”

It’s a fun story, but nowhere near the truth, according to Cookevillian Richard “Ric” Finch. A geologist by profession, Finch also studies the stones used to mark burial sites. He has traipsed through older cemeteries for years studying comb graves — graves covered with tent-shaped sandstone slabs that are common around the Highland Rim. He recently moved to studying the unusual stars.

The witch myth, Finch said, has no truth.

“If every grave in Putnam County with an upside-down star held a witch, we would put Salem, Mass., out of business,” he said.

So far, Finch has inspected 58 cemeteries in the Putnam County area, and he plans to study many more. The witch myth, he suspects, began with the mid-1800s belief that a pentagram — a five-pointed star with criss-crossing lines — drawn with the central point aimed downwards was a symbol of evil.

Most of the stars carved onto these unusual Putnam County gravestones are not true pentagrams. They are merely the outline of a star.

Out of the cemeteries he has visited, 47 of them held graves with upside-down stars, while 21 held right-side-up stars, and several cemeteries held both types. Overall, 90 percent have a dot carved into the center of the star, though the right-side-up stars are less likely to have dots.

There are a few other variations: military stars with ridges along each arm, chiseled-out stars and even a Star of David. But the most prevalent, which Finch calls the “traditional stars,” are upside down outlines of stars with a dot in the center.

Finch suspects that this tradition started in the shop of a single stonecutter.

“After seeing so many of these over the years, I concluded that the upside-down star, for some reason, became a symbol that was used to represent the deceased — perhaps, conceptually, like a fallen star,” Finch said.

He found evidence to support this idea on a tombstone from 1895 in Rocky Point Cemetery. It marked the graves of a 3-year-old boy and a 6-year-old boy with the explanation, “They was killed by a log,” engraved on the stone. On this tombstone were two stars — one over the name of each deceased child.

“One star for each boy,” Finch said. “This was evidence that one star represented one person.”

The gravestone has since been removed and replaced with a more modern one. He been unable to find who has the original stone. Finch would love the opportunity to better photograph it for his research if possible.

Though the find of the tombstone with double stars was exciting, Finch found other stones that presented a problem. Some stones turned up with two stars, however the gravesite held one body.

“I think what has happened was, through time, although this was a widespread custom in Putnam County at one time, I think eventually people lost track of that,” Finch said. “I believe that over time, people kept putting stars on graves but didn’t quite know the meaning of them. They put some on without the dot and they put some on right-side-up and tilted, and some were generous by giving individuals two stars instead of one, because I think they lost sight of the original significance.”

Finch still has quite a few cemeteries to comb through to complete his research on gravestone stars, however he is looking forward to what he will find.

“It’s charming folk custom that gives some character to some of our older local cemeteries that isn’t found outside the county,” he said. “It’s our thing.”

He asks anyone with more information on the missing original headstone of the two boys to contact him at RFinch@tntech.edu.

*Read more about the people and places of Putnam Co., TN & surrounding areas at:
<http://www.ajlambert.com>