



stone foundation

Carved by 19th-century German cabinetmakers, the unique pierced tombstones in Davidson County transform soapstone grave markers into extraordinary works of art.

By Shannon Farlow



Elaborately carved motifs embellish centuries-old soapstone grave markers at Abbott's Creek Primitive Baptist Church in Thomasville.

The sun, slowly setting across the hill, casts a rusty glow over the graveyard. The shifting light penetrates the crescent moons, fylfot crosses, and other folk symbols that are cut completely through a group of weathered tombstones. The 19th-century gravestones seem to come alive with movement.

Grave markers are typically brief epitaphs of an individual's life immortalized in stone. The pierced tombstones found in Davidson County, however, are unique not only because they are believed to be unparalleled in the world, but also because they are virtually the only remaining evidence of extensive German settlement in this part of the Piedmont during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Cabinet to coffin

"To me a cemetery is kind of like a

museum without walls," says Catherine Hoffmann, curator of the Davidson County Historical Museum. "Within these cemeteries, these stones are real important indicators of a period of history here that we don't have a lot of evidence of in other ways. There's not a lot of German-style building around here. At the time the Germans came here through the settlement era — even though you can still see German [inscriptions] on some of these stones — assimilation was very fast."

Information about the Davidson County artisans who conceived the idea of piercing the tombstones is also very limited. What little evidence exists points to a group of highly skilled German cabinetmakers, collectively known as the Swisegood School. Named after John Swisegood, the area's foremost 19th-century cabinetmaker, the group of craftsmen built ornate Baroque-style cabinetry, typified by arched glass doors,

extensive moldings, and tympana topped with finials.

During the 1800s, cabinetmakers supported their families primarily through farming, which, at the time, was a stable occupation, not to mention a steady source of food. Crafting cabinets was a part-time job that relied heavily on building that final piece of furniture — the coffin. Records indicate that members of the Swisegood School indeed made coffins. According to art historian Ruth Little, cabinetmakers also took part in other funeral arrangements, so it would have been a natural progression for the cabinetmakers to carve gravestones, especially since they could use their woodworking tools to shape the relatively soft soapstone.

Soapstone is found throughout the mountains and Piedmont of North Carolina. The local presence coupled with its natural qualities contributed to soapstone's use for grave markers. Also known as steatite, soapstone



STACEY HAINES

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is made up of chlorite, dolomite, magnesite, and talc. The presence of talc endows soapstone with its smooth feel. While it can be found in a variety of colors, a large portion of Davidson County grave markers today appear gray or dark green. Soapstone is often used in the construction of fireplaces, countertops, sinks, and even cookware. Although you can’t bathe with soapstone as the name might suggest, it is relatively soft, making it an ideal medium for the Swisegood School to practice their style.

“You can see in the graveyard the very earliest sort of germ of this pierced style actually has the same shape top — that Baroque tympanum at the top, that triangular tympanum at the top — and they have cut, just sort of incised, a fylfot cross into the stone, but they haven’t cut it through,” explains Little, author of *Sticks & Stones: Three Centuries of North Carolina Gravemarkers*. “At some point they just started realizing that they could cut it all the way through instead of just cutting it in

relief on the surface.”

Signed stones

The piercings took the form of German folk symbols like the fylfot cross, which, in addition to representing the cross, also symbolized the sun and eternity. Another popular pierced design was the tulip, which symbolized life, love, and immortality. Other motifs, including compass stars, hearts, and trees-of-life, were likely adopted from ornate German certificates called *Frakturs*, which recognized events like births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths.

Little believes that the first stonecutter to pierce a tombstone in Davidson County was Jacob Clodfelter. Records indicate that Jacob Clodfelter owned an extensive set of cabinetmaking tools — all the ones needed to carve and pierce gravestones. The gravestones of Jacob’s grandparents, Sara and Felix Glatfelter, are the oldest known examples of the pierced style. The small stones are located at Bethany United Church of Christ, and Little

Created by a band of German cabinetmakers, pierced gravestones, like these at Pilgrim Reformed Church of Christ, are thought to exist nowhere outside of Davidson County.

conjectures it was most likely Jacob Clodfelter who created them.

Jacob’s son, Joseph Clodfelter, later took up the craft of carving and piercing tombstones, probably learning the craft from his father. There is concrete proof that Joseph carved pierced tombstones. In fact, he is the only Davidson County stonecutter to sign a tombstone. Joseph was one of the most creative and accomplished German stonecutters in Davidson County, and his work can be found at Bethany United Church of Christ, Pilgrim Reformed Church, and Abbott’s Creek Primitive Baptist Church.

Abbott’s Creek is home to some of the most creative pierced tombstones ever carved. The church is located

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within sight of where John Swisegood’s sawmill and gristmill stood and within a few miles of where his home was thought to be located. Here, the highly evolved tombstones include some of the best examples of fylfot crosses and other symbols, including a lover’s knot and a bird combined with a half moon.

German cabinetmaker and stonecutter David Sowers was another member of the Swisegood School who mastered tombstone piercing. His work — of which at least 16 examples can be found at Pilgrim Reformed Church, Emanuel United Church of Christ, and Bethany United Church of Christ — is a unique style marrying German folk symbols with Gothic style. Although soapstone can be easily carved, creating intricate designs like those of Sowers or Clodfelter is no easy feat.

According to Little, there were no less than three skilled stonecutters and possibly as many as 12 less-skilled imitators in Davidson County between 1813 and 1850. Perfunctory examples of pierced tombstones can be found interspersed with the finer examples, and even a few are located in cemeteries just across the county line in Randolph County.

Today, the pierced stones are prized as both unequaled artwork and as genealogical links. “As far as the museum is concerned, they are one of the prime historical assets of Davidson County, right up there with our historic architecture,” Hoffmann says. They are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, drawing national attention to them.

“There’s a lot of interest in genealogy and that kind of thing, and with a church as old as our church is, frequently we see people come and look,” says John Thomas, a member of Beulah United Church of Christ. “We’re just proud that we have those and that people are still interested in that kind of thing. We hope to preserve our history through those tombstones.”

Permanent scars

Unfortunately, the intrigue of the historical monuments is accompanied by the inherent danger posed to the stones from tourists perusing the

graveyards. One example of damage to the tombstones comes from people copying the epitaphs by “rubbing” them.

“We’ve tried to keep people from doing that. Some of [the tombstones] have got a moss or fungi growing on them — they’ll want to scrape all that off, and the stones are soft enough they can be damaged,” says elder Steven Nichols of Abbott’s Creek Primitive Baptist Church. “We have told people that there are records of the names of all of the people that are buried there so they don’t have to come and do that.”


But the damage does not just come from curious visitors. The cumulative effects of the weather have taken a toll on the soft soapstone. The headstones, which are set in the ground about eight or nine inches deep without the support of a concrete base, are occasionally blown over by strong winds. Vandalism has occurred at some of the cemeteries over the years, with mischief makers senselessly turning over and breaking some of the irreplaceable stones. Lawn mowers and weed eaters can also leave permanent scars on the gravestones.

To counter the problems, some churches have separated the pierced tombstones to make them easier to

maintain, while other congregations have set the stones in concrete bases or even laid them horizontally in concrete. But these solutions can obscure significant parts of the gravestones.

“I’ve been worried about this forever and I know other people have, too,” Hoffmann says.

Some experts, including Little, propose placing the oldest and most historically significant stones in museum collections and replacing

them in the cemeteries with cast replicas — something that has already been done with historic grave markers in many New England cemeteries. Solutions like this can be expensive, but without some judicious method of preservation, these windows to Davidson County’s past may eventually see their last setting sun. 

Shannon Farlow lives in Asheboro.

to know more

To learn more about the pierced tombstones, contact the Davidson County Historical Museum. The museum is located in the Old Davidson County Courthouse in Historic Uptown Lexington. The museum is open to the public Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and the first Sunday of every month from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is free.

Genealogy records from Abbott’s Creek Primitive Baptist Church can be found at the Wake Forest University Library. The Davidson County Community College Library also maintains an index of pierced tombstones.

Davidson County Historical Museum
Two South Main Street
Lexington, N.C. 27292
(336) 242-2035
www.co.davidson.nc.us/museum