

Robin Simonton, Executive Director of Historic Oakwood Cemetery in Raleigh, spoke to us on 22 March 2016 about "Monument Art & Symbolism: The Stories behind the Stones."



She began by giving us some history of burial grounds, and explaining the difference between graveyards and cemeteries. We learned that the first "garden"-type cemetery was Père Lachaise in Paris, founded in 1804, and the first of that type in the US was created in 1831 in Boston—the Mount Auburn Cemetery. We then learned about the history of Oakwood (also a garden-type cemetery), founded in 1869, and the many burials that were moved there after its creation. After explaining a little about how the graves are organized, Robin gave many examples of different types of symbolism that can be found on headstones. These ranged from organizational emblems, such as the International Order of Odd Fellows and Masonic symbols, to natural elements, such as the iris and narcissus which represent resurrection and rebirth. The Victorian period used a great deal of complicated symbolism, such as roses, which could give clues as to the age of the deceased: A rose bud with a broken stem represented a child, a rose in partial bloom a young adult, and a rose in full bloom would be on the stone of a mature individual. There are many more examples of symbolism in gravestones, but Robin also warned of over-analyzing elements on stones. For example, is an apparently unfinished stone representing an "unfinished life," or just what happened when funds ran low? She also told us that shortly after arriving in North Carolina she had a detailed discussion of the meaning of various elements of a symbol that was found on a grave, when finally one of her group pointed out that the symbol was actually the State Seal!