Couple preserves early American gravestone carving

By Greg Kowalski
Staff Writer

"Here lyeth buried the body of Mr. Timothy Lindal. Aged 56 years and seven months. Deceased Jan. 6, 1698."

Timothy Lindal has been known but to God and possibly a few distant descendants for the past 292 years. But he is not forgotten.

Franklin residents Donald and Betty Odle have meticulously made a copy of his gravestone face from an obscure New England cemetery.

The Odles are part of a growing group of people who are dedicated to preserving a quaint and until recently overlooked type of American folk art — gravestone carving.

They are grave rubbers.

Rubbers are preservationists who make careful copies of the faces of gravestones that date back to Colonial times.

"They absolutely intrigued us," said Betty about the gravestone designs. The Odles began their interest in the stone carvings in 1967 while on a trip to Charleston, S.C. With some free time, they wandered to a local cemetery and discovered the historic atmosphere of the site.

Most of the richly carved stones date from the 17th and 18th Centuries and are in New England cemeteries.

Unlike the graves of today, these often reach monumental proportions, several feet tall.

The styles are distinctive, ranging from crude portraits to flowing patterns of stylized willow trees.

"It's folk art, " said Betty. "It started with the Puritans. They mainly carved a skull and crossbones."

They took death very seriously, Betty said. Perhaps that's because so many of the gravestones mark the graves of children and people barely into their 20s. Life was harsh in young America.

Angel face: *By the late 18th Century the tone of gravestone art had shifted from skulls to angels. This stone dates to about 1793 and is in a cemetery in Rhode Island.*

But in time the mood lifted and the stones featured cherubs and other angels. Still later, trees, flowers and geometric patterns were introduced.

A gravestone rubbing is something like a print. They are relatively easy to make by taping a sheet of rice paper or linen over the stone and rubbing it with a thick, black crayon usually used by wood cutters. That crobosses the pattern onto the paper creating a permanent tracing that can be mounted or turned into a silkscreen pattern for reproduction.

"We've made some into Christmas cards," said Betty.

Over the years the Odles have made about 200 rubbings, which they store in their house.

The Odles both have a background in art. Don was a freelance commercial artist before he retired. He did extensive ad and magazine artworks, including designing the "Thank you, Canada" billboard that was erected after the Canadians smuggled some Americans out of Iran during the 1979-80 Iran hostage crisis.

Gravestone rubbing may seem like an unusual hobby, but its popularity is growing. So many people have taken an interest in it that a national Association for Gravestone Studies was formed.

It now has about 1,000 members, including the Odles, who tour New England grave sites making gravestone rubbings. The association holds an annual meeting and publishes a journal called "Markers."

"Once we discovered the organization, every chance we'd get we'd look for cemeteries," said Don.

Although there are many historic cemeteries in this area, none date back to the oldest in New England and none locally have the elaborate carvings as shown on the Colonial gravestones.

Don said some members of the association are interested for the historical aspect; others seek (and occasionally find) ties to ancestors.

"We're interested in it for the art background," said Don.

Having former neighbors who have since moved to New Jersey gives them an excuse to head out east every so often and prowl through old cemeteries, said Don.

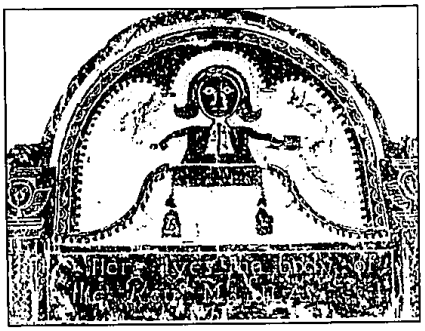
He said the cemeteries have been cooperative with the rubbers. "They're interested in having people come in," Don said.

The Odles said they plan eventually to donate their collection to the Association for Gravestone Studies.

"They're not for sale," he said.

Staff Photos by Stephen Cantrell

Preseving history: *Betty and Don Odle demonstrate how gravestone rubbings are made, this time in the Franklin Cemetery. The most historical gravestones, however, are in cemeteries in New England that date back to the 17th Century.*



The dead remembered: *This is a crude depiction of a colonial vicar, complete with wig.*