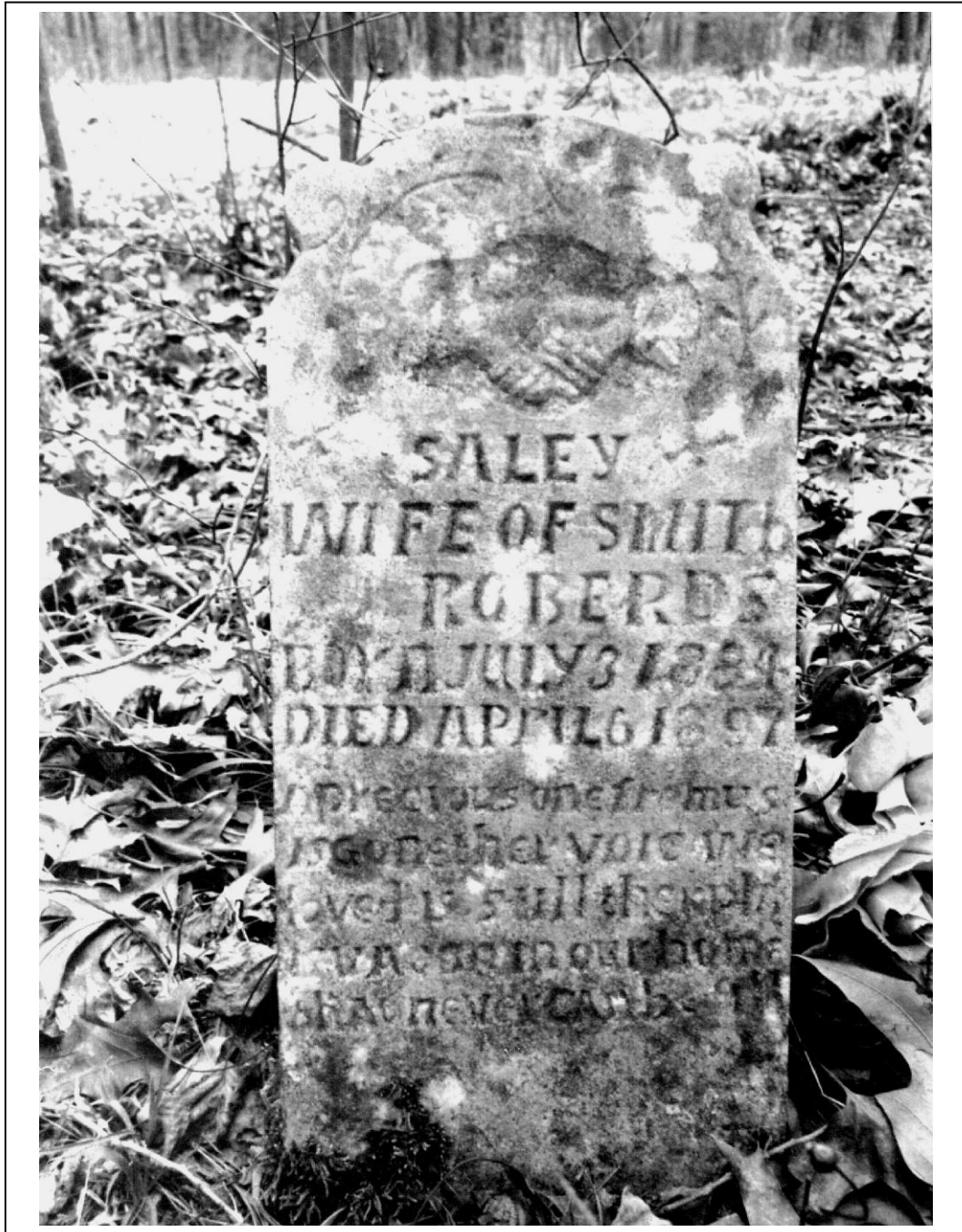


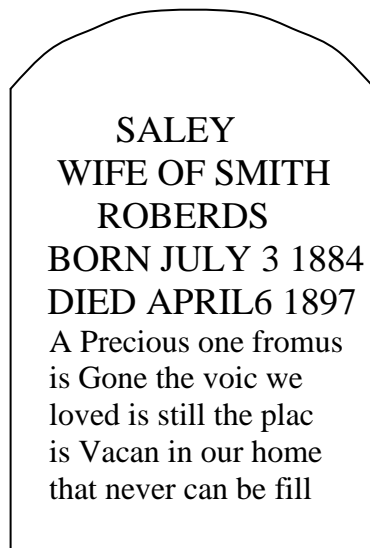
**BURIAL TRADITIONS  
IN THE REGION OF THE UPPER CUMBERLAND PLATEAU**

By

**Tom Des Jean**



**Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, 2012**



Headstone of Saley Robards, 1884-1897, located in the Chimney Rocks Cemetery, Big South Fork NARA.

# BURIAL TRADITIONS IN THE REGION OF THE UPPER CUMBERLAND PLATEAU

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*This report is a tentative step in documenting the historic burial traditions of the Upper Cumberland Plateau. The observations reported here offer interesting insight into early American burial practices and document how these first traditions changed over time. Three overlapping burial practices are defined and three periods of burial that possibly correlate with population trends are identified. Fine tuning these observations by documenting a larger sample size and comparing these data with census data are avenues suggested for future investigation.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Native Americans occupied the Upper Cumberland Plateau for many thousands of years but the intrusion of pioneering American culture is relatively recent. The Upper Cumberland Plateau, for purposes of this discussion, includes sections of Wayne and McCreary Counties, Kentucky, and Fentress, Morgan, Pickett, and Scott Counties, Tennessee (The areas around the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River, Figure 1). Dr. Thomas Walker began describing this area in 1768 (Walker 1888) followed by others who described the "new frontier", especially the Cumberland Gap and the eastern areas of Kentucky and Tennessee. This area was opened to Euro-American settlement after the second Treaty of Tellico in 1805. Pioneer long hunters, like Daniel Boone, pushed into these areas and brought with them the "refinements" of Western Culture. Much of this culture was reflected in material goods and in ideas, perceptions, and attitudes learned in Europe or in the American Colonies. One of these cultural templates was what constituted a "proper burial".

In the Southeast, as people spread out and settled the frontier areas, their dead were buried in family plots. The Southern Family Plot pattern of burial (French 1974; Combs 1986; Crawford 1995:9) is evident at many cemeteries across the Southeastern United States and accounts for the numerous small family cemeteries dotting the landscape of the hills and hollows of the Upper South. Origins for an Upland South, Folk Cemetery Complex have been suggested by Jeane Gregory (1992:106), who documented a dispersed settlement burial tradition on hilltop locations long before the establishment of churches and associated cemeteries (This early 19<sup>th</sup> Century hilltop cemetery tradition also appears to occur in the study area). Gravestone markers in cemeteries reveal information about the movement of people and often provide visible evidence of previous cultural ties and changes in burial patterns over time (Barber 1988; Kneffen 1967; Stilgar 1985; Stone 1987). As pioneers into the Upper Cumberland Plateau areas, carved subsistence farms out of the "wilderness", had families, grew old and passed away, they were frequently buried by older kinfolk and peers. These latter were educated and enculturated in the same traditions and practices as their deceased comrades. These pioneers were often buried in a manner and form that resembled a proper 18th Century European grave, a stone cairn or crypt enclosing a wooden coffin.



# Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area Vicinity

\* = CEMETERY SITE LOCATIONS  
IN THIS REPORT

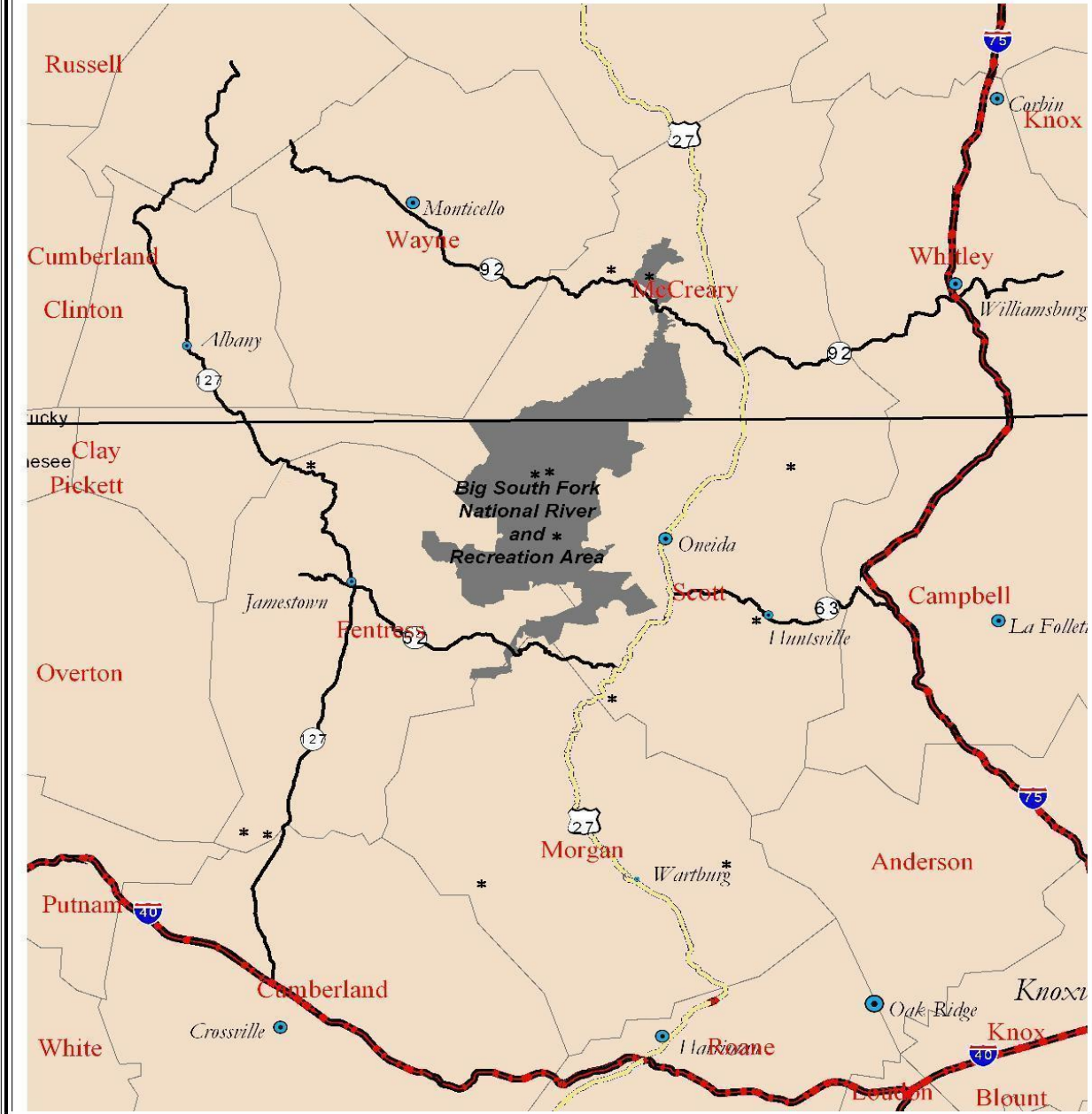


Figure 1: Upper Cumberland Plateau Cemetery Study Area.

Stone burial crypts like these are commonly found in the cemeteries of the original North American colonies. They are identified by an above-ground, rectangular crypt, usually covered with flat or coffin-shaped capstones or an arched stone vault. It also appears likely that these stately and more expensive types of construction were reserved for initiating burials or family patriarchs. As O'Shea (1981) has noted, analyses of cemeteries and burial practices can distinguish socially significant people by identifying various burial practices, and stone crypts that may reflect significant early interments. Such above-ground crypts are often marked on their surface with the name of the deceased, date of birth and date of death, and occasionally an epitaph. These above-ground crypts are almost always the earliest dated burials in any cemetery in the area.

As time passed, the pioneers on the Upper Cumberland Plateau died off and their children and grand-children, who were not steeped in European or Colonial burial traditions, were left to bury them. These later interments, initiating burials and patriarchs notwithstanding, are characterized by unmarked, hand-hewn sandstone or limestone rocks used as head and foot stones. This shift in burial practice indicates a change or loss of the previous cultural ideal of an above-ground stone crypt. The late Nineteenth Century headstones also indicate an accompanying erosion of literacy. Many of the names, dates, and epitaphs are characterized by grammatical and spelling errors that attest to a lessening of emphasis on literacy. Some of these errors even show a reversal of letters and inversion of surname letters in the short space of a few years (**Figure 2**). As this erosion of literacy continued it was reflected in a general lack of gravestone markings from about 1880 until the late 1920s. Many graves in area cemeteries are simply marked with unshaped headstones (**Figure 3**). This large number of un-marked stone grave markers may also reflect the unprecedented number of people that died as a result of the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1919. The large numbers of dead that had to be buried from that event together with a lack of emphasis on inscribed monuments that existed at that time undoubtedly contributed a great deal to the widespread increase in unmarked stone grave markers. Obviously, literacy was not a survival skill for subsistence farmers on the Upper Cumberland Plateau in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. However, following the War Between the States, when coal mining and lumbering activities began, education was brought into the area (Caudill 1962:131-137, 240-247) and literacy became a means for elevating a person's economic position towards the end of the Century.

By the late 1920s and early 1930s headstone epitaphs generally reflect a more literate population. Cemeteries consisting of fields of unmarked, unshaped sandstone markers began to fill with locally shaped and inscribed sandstone, limestone, and concrete headstones. After the late 1870s, when railroads came into the area, even a few marble headstones appeared. As cash paying jobs became available with the coal boom and the railroads in the late 1880's, the population experienced a growing prosperity. There was greater access to commercial and industrial goods, and to public education concomitant with a more industrialized society. Cemetery markers from the 1920s and on reflect this newly realized prosperity as the American cultural norm of exotic stone (marble and granite) grave monuments slowly dominated area cemeteries.

## **II. The 19th Century Crypt**

Graves of many Pioneers in and around the Upper Cumberland Plateau consist of above-ground rectangular vaults or crypts built of hand-hewn sandstone or limestone blocks. These rectangular





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Figure 2. Reversal of letters at the Owens Cemetery, Scott Co., Tennessee (NPS Photo with Field Notes).

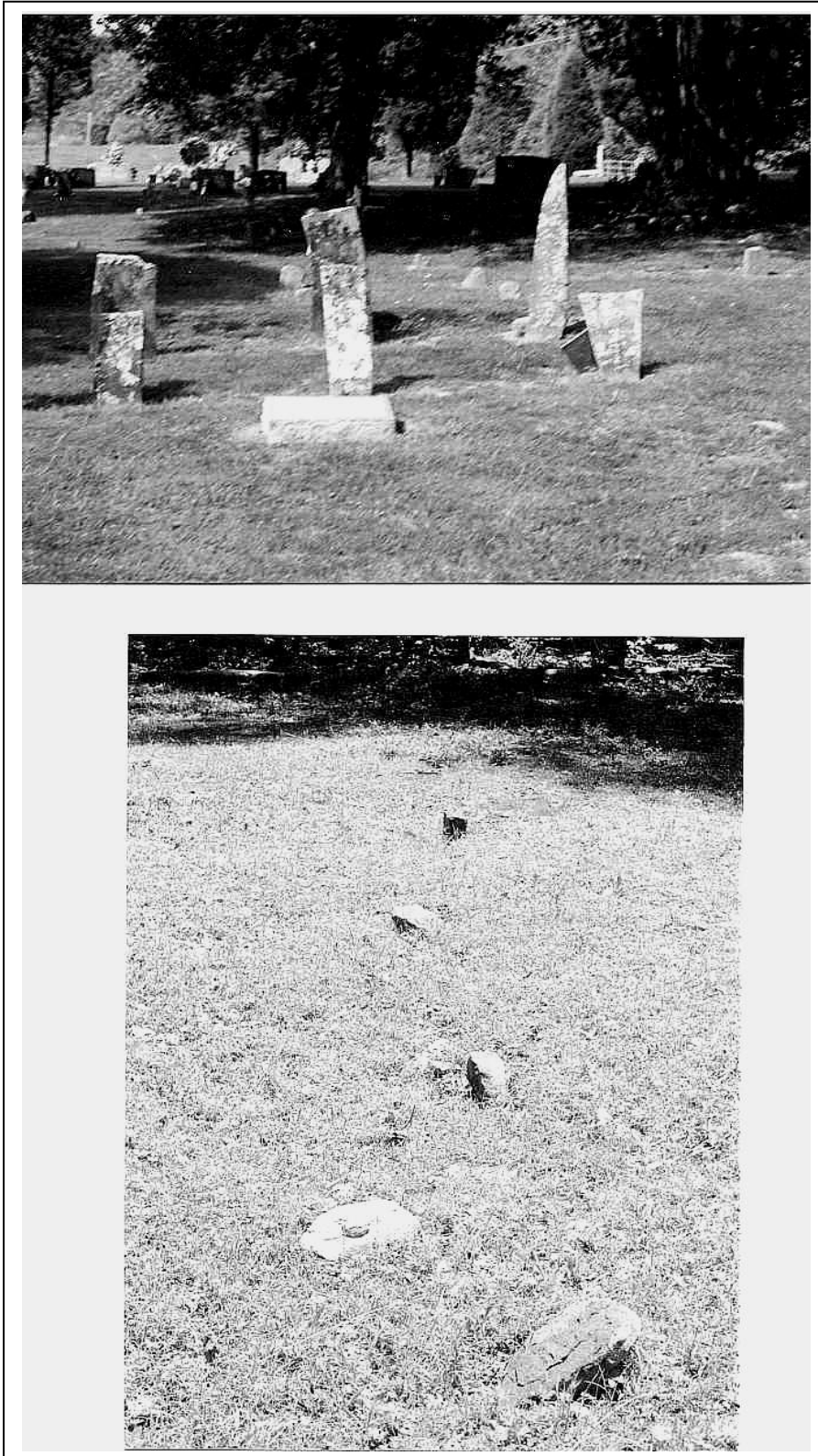


Figure 3. Hand-hewn sandstone headstones: Top, Frozen Head Road Cemetery, Morgan Co Tennessee; Bottom, Hattie Blevins Cemetery, Scott Co., Tennessee (NPS Photo).





Figure 4. Rectangular Crypts; Top, Lavender Cemetery, Morgan Co., Tennessee; Bottom, Woolsey Cemetery, Fentress Co., Tennessee (NPS photos).



vaults are of three types: (1) a Flat-Topped Rectangular type, (2) a Coffin-shaped Capstone type, and (3) a Lean-To type.

The Flat -Topped Rectangular types of crypts (**Figure 4**) average seven feet in length, three feet in width, and one and one half feet in height. A single, large, flat stone slab or two or three pieces of large, flat slabs of stone cover them. Three rather unique corbled-arch types of rectangular constructions were also documented. These latter graves used dry-laid stone to arch over and enclose the coffin of the deceased. Some of the flat rectangular constructions used stone slabs that were cut into a hexagonal shape resembling a coffin, creating the Coffin Capstone type of crypt (**Figure 5**). Alternatively, over the rectangular coffin of the deceased, two large, long slabs of rock were leaned against each other, forming the Lean-To type of crypt (**Figure 6**).

Sometimes a series of four or six leaning flat slabs of rock would be used in this type of crypt construction. Each end of these types of Lean-To constructions were then closed in with slabs at head and foot. The fact that all of these above-ground styles of burial vaults overlapped in time or were contemporaneous can be observed in the Sergeant Alvin C. York cemetery, where one of the Coffin Capstone type crypts dates to 1843 and a double Flat Rectangular type crypt dates to 1842.

One interesting note is the occurrence of Rectangular and Coffin Capstone type crypts made of heavy rock construction, and in one case a solid rock carved into this shape. These substantial constructions are used, not as burial markers, but as platforms on which to place the coffin of the deceased during graveside services in area cemeteries (Stephens 1990:61). There is no burial inside or beneath these platform structures and they are not inscribed. Undoubtedly, it is this use that explains the frequent presence of only one of these substantial types of Flat Rectangular or Coffin Capstone type of crypts in a cemetery and a lack of any epitaphs inscribed on them. The presence of this type of unmarked Coffin Capstone, platform type of construction, in an otherwise more recent or post 1880's cemetery, may cause an individual to assume an earlier mid-Nineteenth Century origin date for the establishment of a later Twentieth Century cemetery.

In the study area, 38 of the above-ground rectangular types of crypts have been found (Table 1). Unfortunately, only about 40% of these have readable inscriptions. The median date derived from still legible examples of all these types of crypt burials is 1861. If, as available histories of settlements on the Upper Cumberland Plateau indicate, pioneers to the area arrived after the end of the Revolutionary war (1783), then 1861 would be an abnormally high median date of death for this generation of pioneers. Only 15 dateable, early, above ground crypts were located in the study area and they break down in the following manner (Table 2): The Flat Rectangular crypts found in the Upper Cumberland Plateau study area have a date range of 1812 through 1878 with a median date of 1845. Coffin Capstone crypts appear to have been in use on the Upper Cumberland Plateau from 1843 through 1859 with a median date of 1851. The Lean-To type of crypts were found to have been in use during the late 19<sup>th</sup> through early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries; it has a time range of from 1860 through 1915 with a median of 1888. The use of these three types of crypt burials can be correlated and fine-tuned by comparing crypt date ranges here with crypt date ranges in larger urban areas where these styles can be found in more concentrated numbers. In fact, it may become evident that there is a time lag in the use of these types of crypts for urban burials versus pioneer crypt burials and on into later rural burial traditions.

**TABLE 1. LIST OF CEMETERIES AND TYPES OF EARLY MONUMENTS**

**Sargent York Cemetery, Fentress Co., TN:**

**Flat Rectangular: (n=11)**

Barton, John	Born 1801	Died 1842
Barton, William	Born 1832	Died 1853

(The remaining nine graves were too eroded to read).

**Coffin Capstone: (n=6)**

Pile, Mary	Born 1769	Died 1843
Pile, Conrad	Born 1766	Died 1844 (?)

(The remaining four graves were too eroded to read).

**Stockton Cemetery Fentress Co., TN**

**Lean-To: (n=5)**

James, Stockton	Born 1842	Died 1853
Stockton, Dosh	Born 1844	Died 1852
Stockton, Lemuel	Born 1817	Died 1847
Randals, Dosh	Born 1783	Died 1852
Stockton, Richard	Born 1848	Died 1862

**George Beatty Cemetery, Fentress Co., TN:**

**Flat Rectangular: (n=3)**

George Woolsey	Born 1818	Died 1866
Mary Woolsey	Born 1787	Died 1878
Jeb Woolsey	Born 1782	Died 1856

**Ann Woods Cemetery, Fentress Co., TN:**

**Lean-To: (n=5)**

Ann Woods	Born 1842	Died 1915
J.S. Woods	Born 1844	Died 1904

(The remaining three graves were too eroded to read).

**Ballou/Worley Cemetery, McCreary Co., KY:**

**Lean-To: (n=1)**

Willis Worley	Born 1806	Died 1860
Mary Neal (Headstn)	Born 1805	Died 1858

**Hunley Cemetery, Big South Fork NRRRA, McCreary Co., KY:**

**Flat Rectangular: (n=1)**

Eroded

**Coffin Capstone: (n=3)**

S.E. Roberts	Born 1832	Died 1856
C.C.	Born 1784	Died 1859

**Davis Cemetery, Winfield, Scott Co., TN:**

**Flat Rectangular: (n=2)**

???		Died 1812
Nancy McPeters		Died 1856

**Lavender Cemetery, Morgan Co., TN:**

**Flat Rectangular (corbaled): (n=6)**

Elisabeth Lavender		Died 1843
D. S. Lavender		Died 1856
???		Died 1858

(The remaining three graves were too eroded to read).

**Carpenter (Nydak) Cemetery, Morgan Co., TN**

**Flat Rectangular: (n=6)**

Smith, Margaret	Born 1799	Died 1860
GR...	Born 1816	Died 1855
Thompson, Kissah	Born 1828	Died 1878
Hall, Polette	Born 1884	Died 1885
Goad, Abe	Born 1740	Died 1816
Newport, Martha	Born 1876	Died 1877

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**TABLE 2. TOTALS OF TYPES OF EARLY MONUMENTS WITH DATE RANGES.**

**Flat Rectangular, datable (n=8)**

Date Range	1812-1878
Median Date	1845

**Coffin Capstone, datable (n=4)**

Date Range	1843-1859
Median Date	1851

**Lean-To, dateable (n=3)**

Date Range	1860-1915
Median Date	1888

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As this study was conducted it became apparent that there were other differences in cemetery populations that may correlate with changes in crypt type burials. A quick, randomly selected census of ten active area cemeteries (1991 Scott Co. Historical Society) indicates that there is a general paucity of burials with inscriptions in the time period 1805 to 1900 (Watters 1987: 55-84).

However, after this time population (as reflected by cemetery burials) reaches more or less modern levels. The lack of greater numbers of burials with inscriptions, in the time period from 1890 to 1920, may reflect a growing rate of illiteracy and may explain the numerous unmarked field stone grave markers in many of the cemeteries on the Plateau. This may be a result of, at that time, the general lack of emphasis on education and literacy as a necessary skill for subsistence farming. If there is a higher percentage of marked graves in the early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century compared to fewer graves being marked in the later 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, then that fact should be apparent through a statistical comparison of these data with population census data. As local economies grew with the arrival of industry and literacy became more economically beneficial, this trait is reflected





Figure 5. Coffin-Shaped Crypts: Top, Wolf Creek Cemetery, Fentress Co., Tennessee; Bottom, Hunley Cemetery, McCreary Co., Kentucky (NPS Photo).

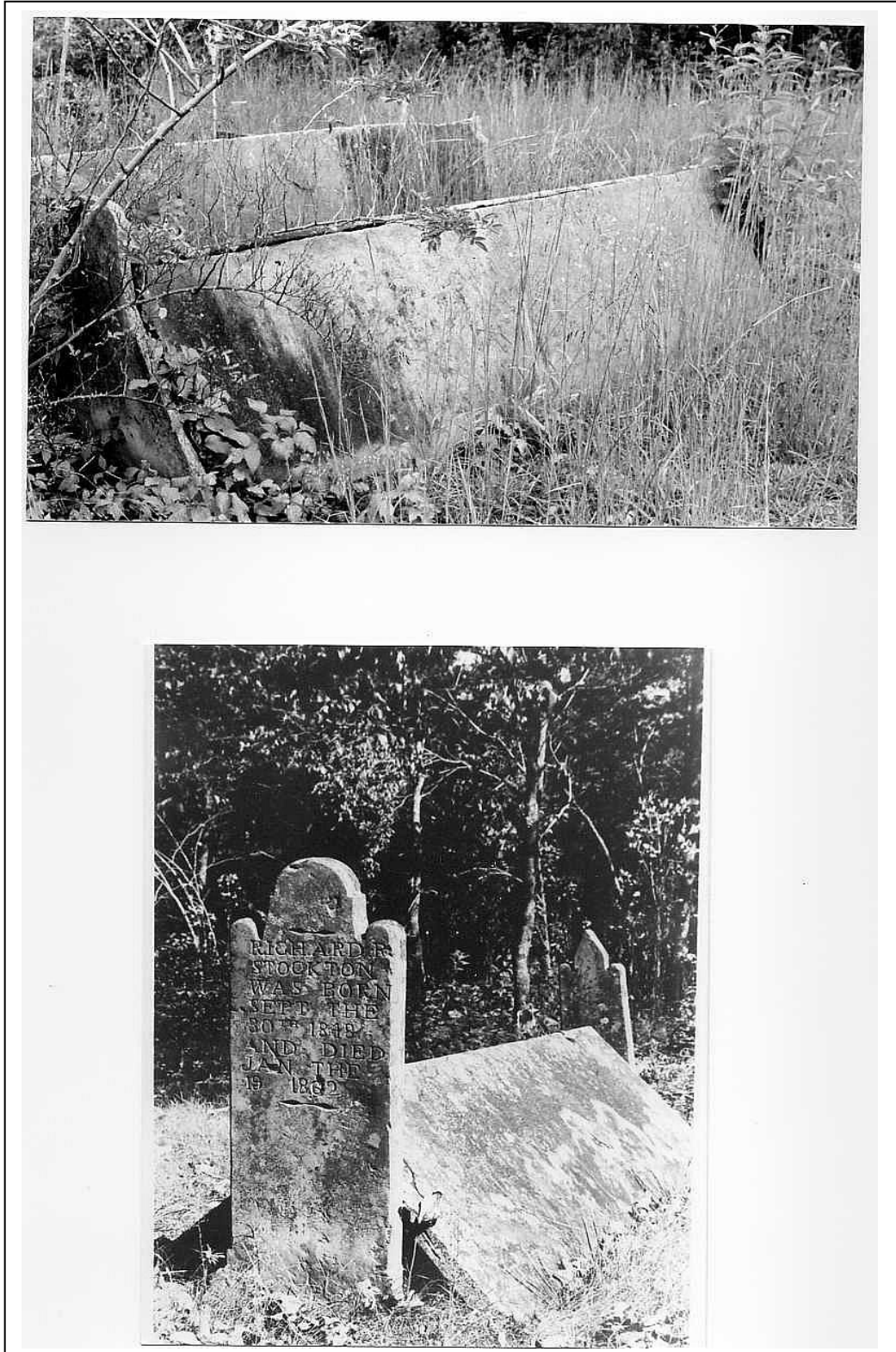


Figure 6. Lean-To type of crypts: Top, Woolsey Cemetery, Fentress Co., Tennessee; Bottom, Stockton Cemetery, McCreary Co., Kentucky (NPS Photo).

in the occurrence of imported exotic stone monuments that may be locally inscribed or inscribed elsewhere (**Figures 7 & 8**). Other socio-geographic burial patterns related to economic and social status or to family plot segregation within cemeteries and across a region, may be evident following further analyses of the cemeteries of the study area as compared to larger urban, southern areas like Knoxville, Tennessee (Matternes 1993).

## Summary

This paper offers some areas for future research into early historic mortuary behavior including three types of early burial practices (Flat-Rectangular, Coffin-Capstone, and Lean-To) that may be chronologically distinct, statistically. The changing burial customs on the Upper Cumberland Plateau are similar to changes that have occurred in other regions over time. The earliest burial patterns may be related to practices occurring in Europe and the Colonies in the 18th and 19th centuries. Specifically, these three crypt styles appear to overlap in time spanning the period from 1812 to 1915. Many factors need to be researched, though, not the least of which is the fact that there are too few graves of these early types to account for the size of the population living here throughout the Nineteenth Century. Perhaps the large, imposing, "crypt" style graves are reserved for initiating burials of "patriarchs", wives, and children of large, "first" families or for socially significant individuals that lived in the area.

This examination of burial practices also suggests three periods of burial: the Pioneer Style Crypt (1812-1875), the Transitional Field Stone (unmarked 1875-1925); and the Commercial Period or Modern Style (1925 to present). Hopefully, additional research can present more detailed and convincing data that can fine-tune and define these practices and periods with greater statistical validity. The hint at a statistically significant variance in mortality versus population growth may also illustrate some trends about literacy in the area of the Upper Cumberland Plateau.

Finally, as Matternes (1993) demonstrated, convincingly in his analysis of burial practices as they relate to social structure and function at Highland Memorial Cemetery in Knoxville, Tennessee, there is a social relationship that transcends death. The crypt burials in this study may be a case of form overshadowing function, as Matternes puts it "...their distinctive form may be more important than their simple presence" (1993:77).





Figure 7. Locally inscribed commercial headstone for Lucy Kidd, Kidd Cemetery (NPS Photo)



Figure 8. Locally inscribed commercial headstone for James Phillips, Blevins Cemetery (NPS Photo)

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