

WHY COMB GRAVES SHOULD BE PRESERVED

What is a comb grave?

A “comb grave” is a grave that is covered by a gable roof-like structure that sits directly on the ground, with no supporting walls or corner posts. The term “comb” is an old architectural term formerly used, mainly in the South, to refer to the crest of a gable roof. Typically, the comb is made of two rectangular slabs of sandstone, each slab being somewhat longer than the grave itself, leaned together to form the comb or gable roof over the grave. More often than not the comb slabs are supported by two triangular stones, one at each end of the gable. The resulting structure can also be compared to a pup tent, and for this reason people unfamiliar with the original term “comb grave” frequently refer to these graves as “tent graves”; however, the proper term is comb.

Comb graves are found in over 500 traditional graveyards in Tennessee, restricted to a specific geographic area: from the TN-KY borderline south to Winchester, TN, in a N-S line along the Eastern Highland Rim and on the western edge of the Cumberland Plateau. The great majority are concentrated along the eastern edge of the Eastern Highland Rim at the base of the Plateau. Over 3600 combs presently (2022) occur in this area, but originally there were more. Combs are also known from over 60 cemeteries in northern Alabama, eleven cemeteries in NW Arkansas, seven cemeteries in Kentucky, two in Texas, two in West Virginia and one cemetery each in Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina and Oklahoma. But Tennessee has the “mother lode” of comb graves and the custom likely originated in Tennessee, probably around Sparta in White County. The custom of erecting combs over graves began around 1815-1820 and remained strong through the mid-20th century, but largely died away after the 1960s. Nonetheless, the custom has not yet totally died out: a comb was erected in 2012.

While the great majority of the combs are made of sandstone slabs, other materials have been used, too: limestone, sheet metal (roofing metal over a wooden frame), concrete, marble (rarely), and even Chattanooga shale slabs (a single known example).

The oldest dated comb grave bears an 1816 date, which is presumed to also be the year the comb was erected (though this is impossible to prove).

Many early combs did not have headstones. Some of these combs were not inscribed with names, dates or epitaphs, though a few do bear inscriptions on one of the side slabs, and a very few bear inscriptions on the triangular gable stone at the head of the grave. After around 1830 most combs also featured headstones with inscriptions.

In addition to the gable stones at the ends of the combs, a few other systems have been employed to support the combs, such as the iron rod support widely used in Overton County.

Why comb graves are disappearing:

Time is taking its toll on the combs. Rocks, even hard sandstone, do weather and crumble. Comb stones sometimes settle into the ground with time and the comb

structure comes apart, eventually collapsing. Trees fall and smash combs. Metal combs on wooden frames eventually collapse when the wood rots. Cemeteries unprotected from livestock can be utterly destroyed by cattle and hogs rubbing against and rooting under the stones. Very probably accidents with mowers and other mechanical equipment damage combs in still active cemeteries. All these factors serve to destroy combs here and there.

Furthermore, cemetery groundskeepers sometimes find combs, especially combs that are in poor condition due to partial collapse, a hindrance to mowing and upkeep. Groundskeepers sometimes remove combs for this reason. In some instances, descendants of the deceased remove combs because they are “old fashioned” and they wish to replace them with modern grave markers.

There are cases where combs have been removed because people feared the fact that animals—groundhogs and sometimes snakes—find shelter under combs.

Sadly, comb slabs are sometimes simply stolen by people who want to use the big sandstone slabs for other purposes.

For all these reasons, the comb graves of Tennessee are slowly disappearing. The author of these notes knows of some 44 cemeteries which once had comb graves but which no longer do.

Why we should protect and preserve the comb graves:

- 1) Comb graves are part of our heritage, part of our material culture. While not completely unique to Tennessee, the comb custom appears to have started in Tennessee, and certainly reached its apogee in Tennessee. In Tennessee, comb graves are special to the Eastern Highland Rim-western Cumberland Plateau area, a cultural artifact very rarely found elsewhere in the state. This tradition adds a distinctive and delightful bit of color to our local history.
- 2) Comb graves were placed on graves at the request of the deceased or at the wishes of the surviving loved ones. These wishes should continue to be respected. It matters not that those buried under combs and those who erected the combs are long dead, we the living should respect their customs and wishes.
- 3) Natural attrition is slowly diminishing the number of extant combs. Those who care for cemeteries should work to maintain the remaining combs.

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For further information on comb graves visit: www.graterutabaga.com where you will find a copy of “The Tennessee Comb Grave Tradition”.