

Why Are Headstones Arranged in Circles

By Leland L. Hite

Curiosity can be the engine of discovery. That inquisitiveness from a good friend, [Dr. Robert T. Rhode](#), caused me to answer the question about why cemetery headstones are occasionally arranged in a circle.

Bob was curious about the Oak Wood Cemetery in Stryker, Ohio where headstones are placed in a circle. Knowing I was from the nearby town of Wauseon, Ohio, he suspected I might be knowledgeable about this arrangement.

I was unfamiliar with this cemetery, but Bob's question sparked my curiosity. The answer turns out to be as fascinating as the question, once we better understand what mattered most to pioneers dating back to 3500 BC.

If you suspect the circular arrangement is to honor a group of people, you are correct, but who? You might expect one of the answers, but the other two may surprise you.

My lack of knowledge about this subject caused me to seek an expert, and what better source to consult than the funeral home director in Stryker! Graciously, Fred Grisier, owner of the [Grisier Funeral Home](#), answered many of my questions. The funeral home has been in the Grisier family for five generations since 1896, and Fred explained the history passed down from his ancestors.

The story begins when Stryker was organized on March 30, 1835, by James Guthrie, the first settler in Williams County, Ohio. James settled along the Tiffin River in 1827. The community continued to grow, and, by 1840, it was ranked as one of the leading agricultural areas in the United States. The [Village of Stryker](#) was surveyed on September 19, 1853, and officially recorded at the county seat (Bryan, Ohio) on January 15, 1854, with an authorized description of 97 lots. Shortly after the village became a legally recorded settlement, the wheel pattern in the cemetery was laid out, according to Fred.

The traditional placement of a headstone positions the marker along an east–west axis so the body is pointing west, thereby allowing the feet to see the rising sun. That tradition was not followed with some of the headstones in the Stryker cemetery. A select group of headstones were arranged in a circle, but why?

First, it is important to understand 1800s settlement traditions. You may know that, when the original pioneers were traveling from east to west in the U.S., adversity often caused the end of their journey, and a broken wagon wheel was a common contributor. If travelers could not locate a replacement wheel or repair the existing wheel, they would end their journey right there and settle. The wagon wheel became an ad hoc symbol for the end of the journey westward as a pioneer.

Stryker was the first settlement in [Williams County, Ohio](#), and, as the first in the county, it was deemed important to identify the first settlers by using the wagon wheel pattern in the cemetery.

When a person was buried on the spoke of a wheel, the individual was an original settler. There is not an accepted standard for positioning the body with the head pointing toward or away from the hub of the wheel pattern, according to Fred, who added that burial practices vary across the country with patterns other than the wheel that are in keeping with local customs. Such alignments do not always designate settlers but commemorate other topics of significance.



Here is the wagon wheel layout in the Oak Wood Cemetery, Stryker, Ohio.

For example: circular headstone arrangements have been chosen to record military events such as the [Fairmount Cemetery in Denver](#). Here headstones are arranged in a circle to mark the graves of the

Colorado Volunteers. A second circular arrangement, The Garden of Honor, has headstones facing inward toward the flag, while the Colorado Volunteers memorial's headstones face outward.

At the [Hedge Row Trench Cemetery](#), Zillebeke, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium, locations of First World War burials are not known, so the headstones are arranged in a circle.



The Garden of Honor has headstones arranged in a circle around the United States flag. The

Additional examples of circular and semicircular configurations are found in the Evergreen Cemetery (in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania) for the [Soldiers National Cemetery](#) and the [Friend to Friend Masonic Cemetery](#), in the Arlington National Cemetery (in Arlington County, Virginia) for the [Confederate Memorial](#), and in the [Glendale National Cemetery](#) (near Richmond, Virginia).

Memorializing a family's legacy as having descended from an original settler became an important tradition. The members of such a family might honor their heritage by positioning a wagon wheel at both edges of their property adjoining the road. Later, it became fashionable to display a wagon wheel by the mailbox; such wheels were common sights in Northwest Ohio.



Shown is the circular arrangement for headstones in the Hedge Row Trench Cemetery, Zillebeke, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium. The photo source is [WW1 Cemeteries](#).

A third category for this circular arrangement is to position the headstones around a circular earthen mound constructed by ancient mound builders from about 3500 BCE to 500 CE.

Pictured below is the Odd Fellows' Cemetery Mound in the Flag Spring Cemetery in Newtown, OH.

This cemetery was established in 1863 by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, Lodge No. 152, and has gone by many names: Flagstone Cemetery, Flagg Spring Cemetery, Flag Springs Cemetery, the Newtown Cemetery. Image source: Wikipedia.



During the nineteenth century, residents of the village of Tiltonsville founded a cemetery around a small hill on the northern side of their village. A round, cone-shaped knoll with a tree growing from its top, the hill is surrounded by gravestones as old as the 1870s.

At some point since that time, erosion of the hillside revealed human bones, including a skull with evidence of artificial cranial deformation. This practice was common among the prehistoric Adena culture; consequently, the bones allowed archaeologists to determine that the hill was a burial mound built by the Adena, who are believed to have inhabited the area at some point between 500 BCE and 500 CE.

Below are two views of Hodgen's Cemetery Mound in Tiltonsville, Ohio. Image source: Wikipedia.





I thank Fred Grisier for helping preserve a fascinating part of our national heritage and Dr. Robert T. Rhode for asking the question.

I gleaned useful information from a variety of sources including the Village of Stryker, Williams County records, Google Maps, Indian Mounds of the Middle Ohio Valley by Susan L. Woodward, and Jerry N. McDonald, 2002 and Mound Builders Historian Jerry McFeeters.

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