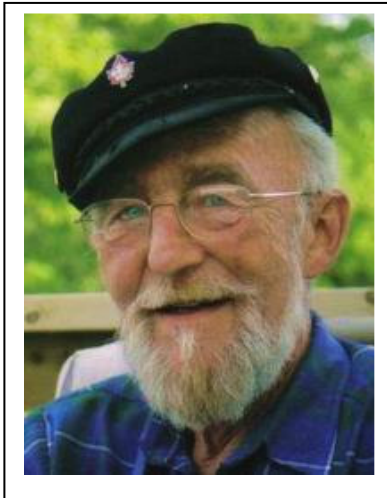


The Family Historian Patrick Wohler

Column #149

'Old Glory' Shows the Date



I recently tried to date a medallion from the American flag on it only to find that the flag was merely symbolic and very inaccurate.

The 'Stars and Stripes' shows up in so many documents, decorations, and photographs that it can be a very useful dating tool. In 1795 the Continental Congress decreed a flag with 15 stripes and 15 stars. Actually the 15 stars had been in use since 1792. The number of stripes was reduced to thirteen in 1818, one for each of the founding colonies. Each State of the Union was to be represented by a star.

As each new state entered the Union, a new flag had to be made. People did not normally throw away their old flag as soon as a new one came out but the number of stars on the flag gives us a reliable 'not before' date. Here is a brief table of the number of stars and the year of the change:

15-1792; 20-1818

21-1819; 23-1820
24-1822; 25-1836
26-1837; 27-1845
28-1846; 29-1847
30-1848; 31-1851
32-1858; 33-1859
34-1861; 35-1863
36-1865; 37-1867
38-1877; 43-1890
44-1891; 45-1896
46-1908; 48-1912
49-1959; 50-1959

When dealing with paintings, we have to be aware of the possible dangers of artistic license, but otherwise, the frequency of change can make this a useful dating tool.

Tombstone Fauna

Animal carvings on tombstones can symbolize characteristics of the deceased or philosophical considerations. Their symbolism is usually easier to understand than that of flowers because the characteristics of the various animals is more commonly known.

Bees symbolize industriousness and Christianity, while their Beehive represents domestic virtues, education, and abundance in heaven. The Butterfly refers to early death and resurrection and the Caterpillar to life and metamorphosis. I have never seen a carving of a caterpillar on a tombstone and I wouldn't thank anyone for putting one on mine.

A Dog, of course implies a good master, worthy of love and Dolphins suggest the ferrying of souls to heaven. Doves are quite popular and represent purity or eternal life, while, if they are in flight, they refer to the resurrection. The Fish is a very old religious symbol for faith and life and the Lamb refers to innocence (especially for a child).

The symbolism of some animals is quite obvious: Lion (courage and strength), Owl (wisdom and solitude), Rooster (awakening, resurrection).

Seashells are interesting. In general they refer to life everlasting but the Conch symbolizes wisdom and the Scallop refers to baptism.

A Squirrel clasping a nut symbolizes religious contemplation and a Spider Web refers to human frailty. The swallow suggests motherhood, spirit of children, and consolation.

There is certainly more to those tombstones than just the vital data.

I welcome comments, queries, and suggestions at: p_wohler@hotmail.com

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