Picture an urban forest of mature trees that provide peace and comfort, educate people, and are historic assets as beautiful as any work of art—but they don’t require any maintenance and have lifespans of thousands of years. To municipal arborists that may sound too good to be true, but you could have all of this and more if you managed a cemetery with a population of “treestones.”

Treestones are grave markers carved in the shape of trees, or more precisely in the shapes of tree trunks, stumps, and logs. Dead men may tell no tales, but their tombstones surely do, and treestones are particularly intriguing for both their history and the stories they tell.

The use of the tree motif as a grave marker arose in the 1800s during the Victorian Age and the associated Rural Cemetery Movement, which championed the idea of the cemetery as a retreat for the living. New cemeteries were built on the outskirts of towns with rolling hills, flowers, trees, and water features and were meant to be a place of rest for the dead and comfort for the living.

The Victorian Age influenced the style of everything from furniture to clothing to architecture and even gravestones. During this era, grave markers became bigger, more elaborate, and filled with poignant, personalized inscriptions and symbols. And since so many people used cemeteries as parks then, families of means would spend fortunes on large, showy mausoleums and elaborate headstones that told a story, so visitors could admire and remember.
The Woodmen’s motto, “Dum Tacet treestones to cemeteries.” The membership proviso for a free grave marker, bringing even more of men and their families exercised for their grave markers, and plenty already popular tree stump motif Woodmen naturally selected the rest in an unmarked grave.” The teed that “no Woodman would ever need to provide both life and death benefits to its members. Root’s use of the word “woodmen” had nothing to do with members being loggers or foresters; instead Root was inspired to forge a new brotherhood in the wilderness that his organization would clear away problems of financial security for its members. Membership in Woodmen guaranteed that “no Woodman would ever rest in an unmarked grave.” The Woodmen naturally selected the already popular tree stump motif for their grave markers, and plenty of men and their families exercised the membership proviso for a free grave marker, bringing even more treestones to cemeteries. The Woodmen’s motto, “Dum Tacet Claret,” (meaning “Though silent, he speaks,” a more formal way of saying “Gone, but not forgotten”) appears on each of their members’ treestones. And that is exactly what the symbols on treestones do—they speak silently to us to reveal the owners’ values and send messages to the living.

Treestones provided a ready canvas for personal messaging because so much symbolism is closely tied to nature to begin with. The stump itself represents a life cut short or the brevity of life. A jagged and rough break marks the sudden, unexpected termination of a life. A leaning trunk or the height of the stump can indicate a child and even give hints about their age. Double tree stump tombstones often have intertwined branches or joined roots to indicate two lives that have become one. Branches can be twisted and broken as well, with the number of branches associated with the number of children an individual or couple had or how many family members are buried in the plot. When a branch is cut close to the trunk, it can mean anything from shared inheritance to the living.

Scans embellished with ferns and flowers were carved as part of many treestones to artisitically provide a place for the family name and birth and death dates. Scroll shoppers. This woodland cross festooned with ivy illustrates the fascination with all things rustic in the Victorian Age.

Plants are frequently carved into treestones. Ivy on the tree trunk indicates the deceased was the head of the family. The Christmas fern and English ivy, both evergreen plants, symbolize the promise of life after death. The lily and morning glory are used to represent resurrection. The oak leaf and acorn stand for power and authority and are often seen on military graves. Mushrooms represent life emerging from decay or death. A fern carved at the base of a treestone symbolizes humility and sincerity because these plants are generally found deep in the forest and only by those who have honestly searched. Animals are also common motifs on treestones. A dove with a broken wing is often nestled in a branch or is shown in flight, representing the Spirit descending from heaven, or carries an olive branch, depicting peace. A squirrel symbolizes planning for the future. A butterfly’s meaning is derived from the three stages of a butterfly’s life: caterpillar, chrysalis, and the butterfly—symbolizing life, death, and resurrection, respectively. A dog symbolizes loyalty, indicating that the deceased was worth loving.

Tools, chairs, buckets, swords, and a variety of other earthly items were carved into treestones to tell the story of the deceased’s vocation and interests. A less mystic or cryptic way of identifying the deceased was carving a treestone so it appeared that a scroll had been hung or nailed to the trunk, or that the bark had been peeled away to place the epitaph of the deceased person. Branches set at right angles to the trunk form a cross and represent the Christian beliefs of the deceased.

The family (or the carve) took the family name to heart when they included woodpecker or sap sucker holes in the trunk as a detail on this treestone. The family name “Marla” was originally carved in relief and simply be ordered from Sears & Roebuck, which might explain why they were most popular in the Midwest where more people were catalog shoppers. However, the main reason treestones are abundant is probably due to the fraternal organization known as Woodmen of the World, founded in 1883 by Joseph Cullen Root. “Woodmen” was a non-denominational fraternal organization intended to provide both life and death benefits to its members. Root believed men in the north were most popular in the south central Indiana. Where you see one treestone, usually many will be found. This suggests not only their popularity among the bereaved, but also that there was a ready local supply of limestone or a particularly aggressive monument dealer who liked treestones. Interestingly, during this time, treestones could also simply be ordered from Sears & Roebuck, which might explain why they were most popular in the Midwest where more people were catalog shoppers.

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There is a particular treestone that every municipal arborist should visit—that of the Morton family plot in Nebraska City, Nebraska. It was commissioned and erected by J. Sterling Morton for his wife Caroline. This towering 20-foot treestone is bursting with touching symbolism, made even more poignant by the Morton family’s connection to trees (J. Sterling Morton founded Arbor Day).

The top of Caroline Morton’s treestone is broken, referring to a life cut short (she died in 1881 at the age of 47 after succumbing to rheumatism). At the base of the tree are an artist’s palette, pencils, and brushes, which refer to Caroline’s passion for the arts and painting. Beside the palette are embroidery items that represent that interest of hers. Around the trunk is a sheet of music engraved with “Rock of Ages.” Near this are ferns and a tipped-over vase of lilies.

High on the treestone is a cavity serving as an opening for a bird’s nest. Inside, the carved nest contains three young birds, their mother, and a fourth smaller bird tucked under her wing. This scene is a touching representation of the four sons Mrs. Morton left behind.
Treestones come in all shapes and sizes. Perhaps the deceased was a sawyer by trade or simply a very organized person!

Short tree stumps can represent the death of a child. Perhaps the open book on this treestone is reminiscent of a favorite bedtime story.

There is something that brings peace and encourages me when I look at the rustic design of treestones and take in their symbology. It all conveys to me the message that though life has ended, as part of nature, we go on.

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*Michigan State University study published in June 2003 Landscape magazine