

Why Headstones Are Arranged in Circles

By Leland L. Hite

“Why are headstones arranged to form a wagon wheel in the Oak Wood Cemetery, Stryker, Ohio?” This is a question a good friend, [Robert T. Rhode](#), asked me. Bob knew I was from the nearby town of Wauseon and 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 to pioneer communities of the late 1700s and early 1800s.

My lack of knowledge about this subject caused me to seek an expert, and what better source to consult than the funeral home 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.

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.

The story begins when Stryker was organized on March 30, 1835, by James Guthrie, the first settler in the township and in Williams County. 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 configuration of facing the headstone along an east-west axis and positioning the body with the head pointing west, thereby allowing the feet to see the rising sun, was not followed with this pattern; instead, the wheel pattern was used, but why?



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

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 the 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.

Circular headstone arrangements have been chosen to record military events; for example, the [Fairmount Cemetery in Denver](#) has headstones 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. Additional examples of circular and semicircular configurations are to be 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.

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, and Wikipedia.

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The Garden of Honor has headstones arranged in a circle around the United States flag. The photo Source is [The Masonry of Denver](#).



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



I thank Dr. Robert T. Rhode for his important assistance with editing. Check his site, [www. roberttrhode.org](http://www.roberttrhode.org), where you find fascinating "Books and eBooks from the HeartLand" and several free documents to enjoy, including original portraits of famous authors painted in the sumi-e tradition, greeting cards, and suggestions for writers.