

Why Are Headstones Arranged In A Circle

In The Oak Wood Cemetery, Stryker, Ohio

by Leland L. Hite, Cincinnati, Ohio

Assuming I was knowledgeable about Stryker, Ohio, was the conclusion from a good friend of mine when he discovered I was from the nearby town of Wauseon, Ohio.

He had always wanted to know why burial headstones were arranged using a circular wheel pattern in the Oak Wood Cemetery in Stryker, not Oak Ridge as some maps display.



Grisier Funeral Home, Stryker, Ohio

I was unfamiliar with this cemetery but his question did peak my curiosity. It turns out the answer is straight forward once we understand the culture for society in the 1800s.

My first source of information was from Mr. Fred Grisier at the Grisier Funeral Home located in Stryker, Ohio. The Funeral Home has been in their family since 1896. In addition, the family now owns and operates the Grisier Funeral Homes located in Wauseon, Delta and Archbold, Ohio.

www.grisierfh.com/fh/home/home.cfm?&fh_id=13150

Stryker was officially recorded as a settlement located in Williams County, Ohio in 1853, and shortly after that event the wheel pattern for the cemetery was laid out, according to Mr. Grisier. The tradition of facing the headstone east-west 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?



First, some background. You may know when the original settlers were traveling from east to west in the U.S.A. their wagon wheel would break at some point in the journey. If the traveler could not find a replacement wheel or repair the wheel they would end their journey right there and settle. The broken wagon wheel became an ad hoc symbol for end of

journey westward as a settler.

Displaying family heritage as a settler was an important tradition. Often a family would indicate their heritage by displaying a wagon wheel at both edges of their property adjoining the road. Later on it became fashionable to display the wagon wheel by the mailbox and was a common sight in Northwest Ohio.



Oak Wood Cemetery, Stryker Ohio

Important to my dad was to have wagon wheels at both edges of the property or by the mailbox. I never understood the importance for this tradition until researching this article.

Pictured on the previous page is the Oak Wood Cemetery in Stryker, Ohio. Mr. Grisier said wheel patterns are not uncommon for cemeteries and gave the example of the Gettysburg National Cemetery pictured below.

Positioning headstones was a custom used to record the identity of the original settlers much as was the tradition of displaying wagon wheels adjoining the family homestead. If the person was buried on the spoke of a wheel, they were an original settler. If the person was not positioned on a spoke, but inside the circle, like the Gettysburg National Cemetery shown below, they were positioned east-west indicating they were a settler but not necessarily the first.

Back to Stryker, Ohio.

Stryker was the first settlement in Williams County, Ohio and as the first recorded settlement in the county, it was important to identify the first settlers using the wagon wheel pattern in the cemetery.

There is not an accepted standard for positioning the body with the head pointing toward or away from the center axel of the wheel pattern, according to Mr. Grisier.

In addition, he indicated that practices vary across the country and patterns other than the wheel were used by local cultures, not always to indicate settlers but other locally significant events.

I thank Mr. Grisier for helping to preserve some of our national heritage. Not all of this information came from Mr. Grisier as I have stitched together information from a variety of sources.



Section of the Gettysburg National Cemetery

November, 2011