

# **THE PRESERVATION OF THINGS HELD SACRED**

Cemetaries in the Mass Media  
(With emphasis placed on "Sacred Indian Burial Grounds")

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# OUTLINE

## I. Introduction

- a. a list of magazines and newspapers from which the articles were extracted

## II. The use of the word "sacred"

- a. a definition
- b. frequency
- c. science vs. religion
- d. NAGPRA

## III. "Sacred" materials discussed in the articles

- a. cemeteries as tradition
- b. human remains
- c. other
- d. chart

## IV. Geography

- a. sites
- b. the readers
- c. chart

## V. Timeframe

- a. chart

VI. The significance of the grave sites according to the articles

- a. the controversy
- b. non-Native American gravesites

VII. Conclusion

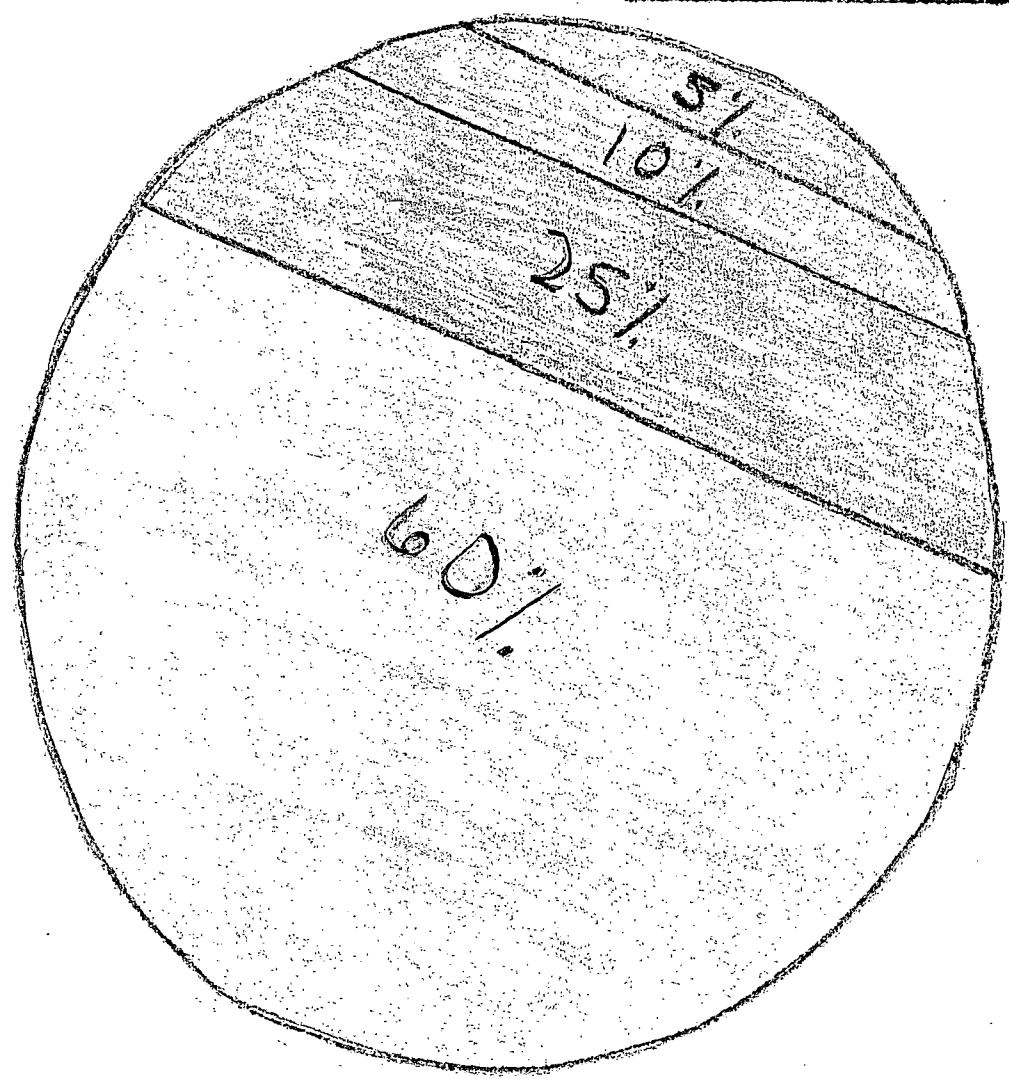
- a. a perspective

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Humans have been burying their dead for over 60,000 years. Perhaps the best example of this can be seen in the caves of Iraq's Zagros Mountains in which nine Neandertal individuals were found. One of these individuals had sustained crushing wounds to his head and body during his life, leaving him with a withered arm and blind eye. He would not have survived without the help of the rest of his clan. This is important knowledge for scientists for it reveals the first arrival of commitment to other human beings. In fact, among these nine individuals was found the grave of a young Neandertal male who had been buried on a multicolored bed of flowers. So it would seem that human commitment to one another survives even after death. This was perhaps the dawning of religion, and undoubtedly the beginning of those things which humans consider "sacred." There can be no other sacred item in humanity held more dear than the burial places of those we love. Scientists, philosophers, and theologians have battled the significance of burial sites for many years. It is a battle that does not appear to be over any time soon. This paper will discuss the significance of science and sanctity as most people have been conditioned to view it - through print media. The articles discussed here were extracted from such sources as the *New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Journal for the American Society for Information Sciences Magazine*, *American Anthropologist*, *Civil Engineering Magazine*, *Field and Stream*, *Time Magazine*, *New Orleans Magazine*, and *USA Today*.

Webster's defines the term "sacred" as: "dedicated to worship; holy," and defines the term "holy" as: "regarded with or characterized by divine power." So then it would seem, according to the frequency of the word "sacred" when referring to cemeteries and burial sites, that most Americans consider burial sites as possessing some form of divine power. If one is a religious person, then one surely believes in the concept of a soul, or life after death. Indeed, within twenty

Native American Gravesites
Caucasian Gravesites
African American Gravesites
Other: General Coon dog cemetery Detective



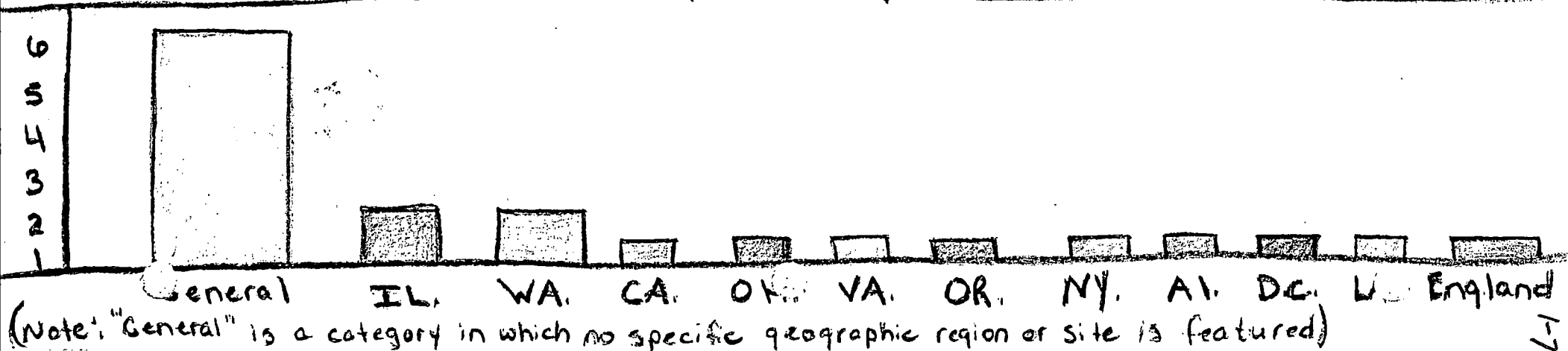
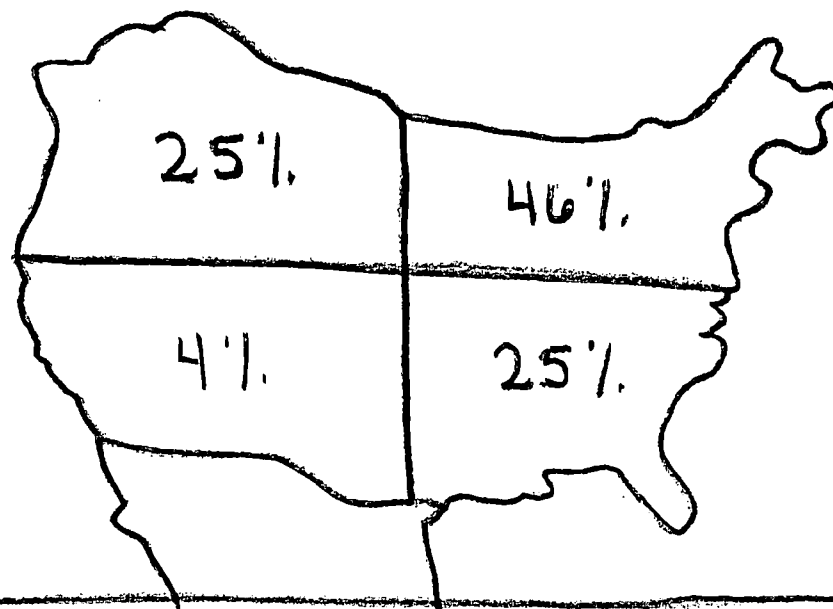
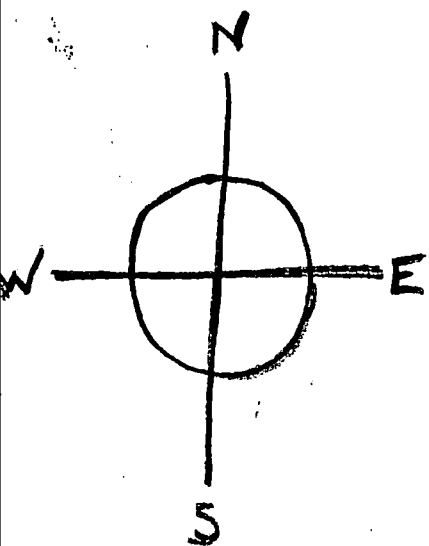
Article Contents

articles researched here, the term "sacred" was used a total of nine times - that's forty-six percent of all the articles. Twelve of these articles focussed on the controversy of science vs. religion/preservation of burial sites. In most cases, the burial sites in question were those belonging to Native Americans who can now protect their dead with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. NAGPRA, passed in 1990, requires that all museums on federal land, or receiving federal funds, to give Native Americans a say in gravesite or artifact protocol and must inventory their Native American remains and notify tribes that might claim them. Of the twelve articles that focussed on the controversy of disturbing Native American burial grounds, nine mentioned NAGPRA.

The fate of the dead and the sanctity of their resting place was not the only issue discussed in these articles. Five articles dealt only with the preservation of cemeteries as traditional or historical landmarks, one spoke of an excavation to take place at Arlington Cemetery in order to add an additional memorial wall dedicated to women in the military, and one article was solely about a cemetery for coon dogs. No matter what the subject, each article attached significant meaning to the burial sites. Even hair remains were the subject of a tug-o-war between scientists and Native Americans who believe that all aspects of the burial site must be protected - even naturally shedded hair.

Apparently, there is no part of the country which biases the significance of its cemeteries. These twenty articles wrote of cemeteries and burial sites from all four corners of the country. They included states of Washington, Illinois, California, Ohio, two from Virginia, Oregon, New York, Alabama, Louisiana, and Washington D.C. The remaining nine articles were of no particular region, and it was these that were the most adamant about the preservation of cemeteries in general. Indeed, the articles themselves appeared in many different forms of print

# Distribution of Burial Sites:



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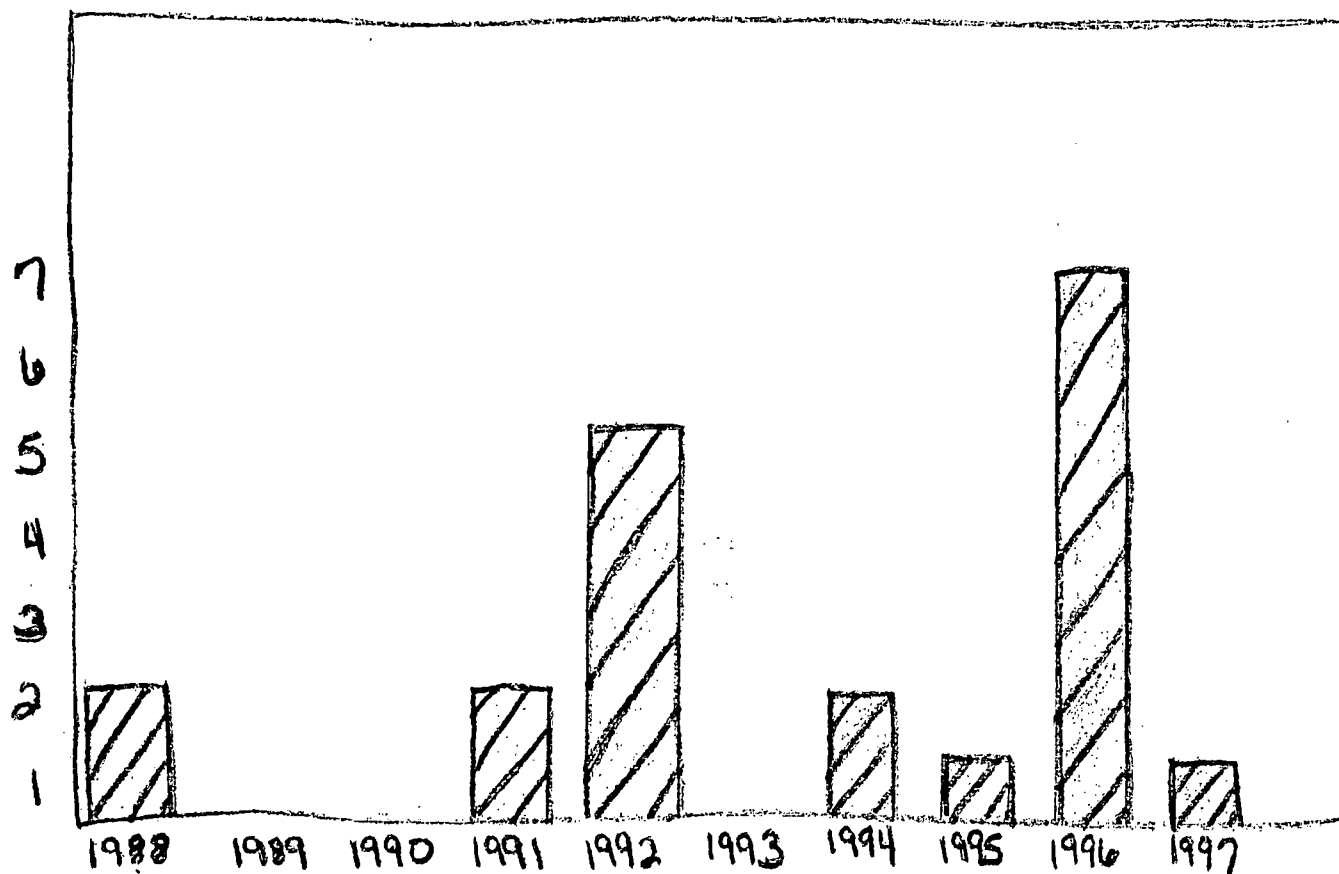
media from scientific journals, to *Time Magazine*, and *Field and Stream*. As the leading newspapers in the country, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* each had the highest frequency of "cemetary articles." For this paper, three articles from each of these newspapers were used. The Boston Globe had the second highest frequency, containing two of said articles. Only one article was gathered from each of the remaining media print. It would appear, then, that every type of reader from every portion of the country has some interest in the preservation and/or studies that take place in and around cemeteries.

The articles collected for this research ranged in date from 1988 to 1997. In this ten year period, 1996 contained the most articles dealing with cemeteries with seven of the twenty articles coming from that year. Following 1996 was 1992 with five articles. In the years 1988, 1994, and 1991, two articles were found for each year, followed by the year 1995 with only one article found. One article from *Time Magazine* was pulled off the internet, and no date for this article was found. I dare not speculate on the reasoning for such variation in the years in which these articles were written. There does not appear to be any discernable pattern.

Perhaps it would be pertinent here to discuss further the contents of the articles. It is important to know who we are preserving when we claim sanctity of burial grounds, just as it is important to understand the significance of the sites according to each article. As mentioned earlier, twelve articles focussed on the controversy of "disturbing the spirits" when excavating a burial ground, yet two additional articles that were about Native American graves made no mention of such a controversy. In fact, they simply informed the reader of new sites that were found. One of the remaining six articles was about detectives who dig up old graves in order to solve mysteries. This certain detective was involved in the exhumation of Abraham Lincoln to find out if Lincoln had Marfan Syndrome. Another article was concerned with the graves of



Years in which the articles are written:



Note: The article entitled "Ashes to Ashes..." contained no date.

individuals buried in a slave cemetery who would be moved to another location so that the city of New York might build a 36 story office tower in its stead. Many in New York were outraged by this, according to the article, especially the African American community. The author of this article made that point abundantly clear. One author even focussed on the fashion of the gravesite, giving many examples of how to decorate one's gravestone. A coon dog cemetery was the subject of another light-hearted article. This particular article gave coon dog owners a chance to commemorate their pets, and gave the audience something to relate to - afterall, most everyone has loved a dog at least once in their lives. The remaining three were concerned only with the preservation of cemeteries in general. One focussed on New Orleans cemeteries as tradition and the role of Save Our Cemeteries, an organization dedicated to the restoration of grave sites. There is no end to the meaning given, and interest in graveyards - even if the graveyard is for dogs only.

There is much concern about those things that humans hold sacred. When beliefs are the subject of any topic, there is bound to be some form of bias present, especially in the heat of some controversy. In each of the twelve articles which dealt with the controversy of science vs. sanctity, I interpreted the author's view to blatantly lean toward one side or the other. Some could even have been considered commentaries rather than actual impartial information. It is hard to know whether articles such as these reflect the ideas of the public or if the public is swayed by the media. If the media is simply a reflection of the public, then it is clear here that most people feel very strongly about the resting places of the deceased. But if the public is so easily swayed by the media, then we all need to turn off our tv's, burn our newspapers and magazines, and crawl into a very deep hole.

# 1

## ARTICLE

- Chicago Tribune
- Washington Post
- Sciences
- New Orleans Magazine
- Usa Today
- Early American Life
- Choice Magazine
- Field & Stream
- Civil Engineering
- American Anthropologist
- Time
- Journal of the American Society for Info. Science

# 2

## ARTICLES

- Boston Globe

# 3

## ARTICLES

- Los Angeles Times
- New York Times

# 4

## ARTICLES