

1-1

The Use of Mussel Shells in  
Decorating Graves in Daviess  
and McLean Counties

Comments somewhat brief  
and footnotes should  
have been employed.  
Photos very good. I was  
pleased/surprised to learn  
of the prolific use of shells  
in McLean County.

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Kevin Eans  
Fieldwork  
2:10 W  
Problem Centered Research

Grave decoration has fascinated me since I was a child. Lately, one particular type of beautification has raised my interest more than others and that is the use of mussel shells to decorate graves. In this paper I propose to answer this question: Were mussel shells a popular grave decoration in Daviess County and surrounding areas? I will present possible explanations for the use of the shells and reasons for the scarceness or proliferation of this grave adornment in certain areas.

The use of mussel shells in Daviess County, Kentucky is fairly rare. I was able to find only one example of the practice in this county while the shells were abundant in McClean County. The one example in Daviess County was found in a cemetery adjacent to a plot of earth where a Presbyterian church once stood. The church burned down in the thirties but people are still buried in the graveyard. The grave with the shells is that of a six year old child. A layer of cement covers an area of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  by 5 feet and in the cement are mussel shells arranged in rows. The child's name, Albert, is imprinted in the cement near the headstone and towards the foot of the grave the word 'son' is imprinted.

In a Methodist graveyard in Island, Ky there are twelve graves decorated with shells. The presence of a button factory in Livermore, two miles from Island and on the Green River, may explain the proliferation of shells on McClean County graves.

The button factory used the shells to make buttons for apparel. Since the factory got thousands of the shells from the Green River they were easily obtainable. There was no button factory in Daviess County and there aren't many mussel shells in the Ohio River.

While interviewing people about the shells I heard of several reasons explaining their purpose. Back when grass seed was unavailable, people mixed shells in with the dirt used to fill in a grave and then put more shells on top of the grave. No cement was poured on the graves because this use was of a practical nature. The shells helped keep the dirt on top of the grave from washing away if it rained before grass would begin to grow naturally. The shells that were mixed in with the dirt helped keep weeds from growing on the grave. Another reason people used the shells was economical. If a family could not afford a headstone, the shells were used to mark the grave. The shells were most commonly used simply for beautification. Long ago, the blacks of Roanoke Island decorated graves with sea shells. The practice eventually extended to the whites. The custom appears to have arisen from a desire to beautify the grave and maybe to define the limits of the grave. Sea shells were believed by primitive man to have magical powers. One of these powers was to avert death and to help the dead to rise again.

Of all the people I talked with about the shells, most said they were used for decoration.

Sources of information

Rose Merritt, 53, resides in Daviess County.

Sadie Cain, 81, of Daviess County.

Ewan Bale, 55, of Daviess County.

Daisy Elliot, 65, of McClean County.

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Index for Photographs- Kevin Evans

1. Located in Daviess Co., this grave has the mussell shells and a headstone.

The arrangement of the shells in a straight line was popular in several graveyards in Daviess and McLean Counties.

2. Detail of shells on McLean County grave. Photo by Kevin Evans.

3. Sometimes the shells were used in place of a headstone as was the case with this McLean County grave. Photo by Kevin Evans.

4. McLean County grave. The pattern here is uniform sized shells in a straight line.

5. Detail of a grave in McLean County.

6. McLean County graves.

7. Family plot in McLean County graveyard. Two patterns are present and the grave on the left is decorated with shells that aren't uniform in size.

8. Detail of McLean County grave.

9. Two McLean County graves side by side showing a popular shell pattern.

10. Family plot in McLean County One has shells but the other has only concrete.

11. McLean County grave.

All photos by Kevin Evans.