

Article

# Investigating Gender on the Frontier: 19th-Century Crooked Creek Cemetery

Sandra Schroer <sup>1,\*</sup> and Ellen Jayne Hine <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Muskingum University, New Concord, OH 43762, USA

<sup>2</sup> Creative Kids, Head Start, Medina, OH 44356, USA; ehine@cawm.org

\* Correspondence: sschroer@muskingum.edu

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**Abstract:** This qualitative case study highlights the work of university students who participated in a service learning component of a sociological research methods course. Their complete documentation and analysis of all 477 gravestones in the abandoned Crooked Creek cemetery provide a cultural snapshot of life in the Western frontier in the 1800s. In contrast to existing literature on the analysis of gender indicators on gravestones, this study finds significant evidence that gender was related to social identity and that indicators of master status exist for both women and men. Furthermore, the significant role of women in the development of a pioneer village is represented in the epitaphs chosen by a woman's surviving family members. The findings attempt to dispel assumptions that the use of terms such as "wife" and "mother" on gravestones of the period exemplified the lower status of women in relation to men. Implications for genealogical research include rethinking the way researchers consider the role of wife and mother to write more historically situated narratives of family and community histories.

**Keywords:** gender; genealogy; master status; frontier women; cemetery study; service learning; rural cemetery; cemetery preservation

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## 1. Introduction

A cemetery can hold a vast amount of knowledge about a family, genealogy, changing religious and social beliefs, a family's occupational background, and their significance to a community. The sociological studies of cemeteries have been significant in establishing relationships between individuals and their societies. This article describes a case study conducted in a service learning course by sociology students at a small liberal arts university in rural Ohio. It is the study of gender as a master status engraved on gravestone in the Crooked Creek cemetery.

The goals of the study were twofold. First, the service provided to the community was of utmost value in that no prior documentation of this abandoned cemetery existed. In fact, no census or vital records exist for this area and period. Therefore, the records produced by the students and their professor became a valuable resource, which they gave to the genealogical society and the local community library. Research such as this is imperative for historic preservation and the documentation of lives and lineage (Layder 1998).

Second, and perhaps less central to the focus of this article, the research was conducted by sociology students as a service learning component of a research methods course. The research allowed students to practice research methods in an applied setting rather than simply studying the work of others. This portion of the research explores their findings on the gender patterns associated with age and master status as indicated on gravestones in a cemetery that dates to the 19th century.

The Crooked Creek cemetery is situated within a secluded forest located half a mile south of New Concord, Ohio, along State Route 60, and only a quarter mile from the National Road (Hwy 40). The cemetery was the original site of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. Founded in 1806 by Abraham Craig, a native of Ulster (Northern Ireland), the congregation built a structure of logs in 1812 and later a brick building in the center of the newest section of the present cemetery at Crooked Creek. In the mid 1800s the church served more than 500 people, making it the largest Associate Reformed Church of its time (Fisk 1989).

Crooked Creek became a distant and isolated area as the village of New Concord developed following the opening of the National Road in 1828, Muskingum College in 1837, and the arrival of the B & O Railroad in 1854. In 1859, the Crooked Creek Associate Reformed church and the College Hall Seceders (Associate Presbyterians) joined congregations and together built a new church located in the Village of New Concord (Brown 2008). This left the original site of the Crooked Creek Associate Reformed church abandoned. While the cemetery continued to be used through the year 1900, no records were kept on burials or the sale of plots. In all, the cemetery served the community for 100 years. At this time, there are no church buildings left standing in the Crooked Creek cemetery.

## 2. Research Methods

The Crooked Creek cemetery was systematically studied by two separate teams of students, one year apart. Each team began by numbering rows and stones in a grid-like fashion. Students were assigned rows and a form was created to ensure consistent data collection. Data from each stone included the location of each case (row and stone number of each person commemorated); first name; last name; middle initial; date of death (in days, months and years); age at death (in days, months and years); titles and master status, and; gender. Gender was assigned based on the first name of each case, a familial status such as daughter/son or wife/husband, or overt indicators written in the epitaph. First names were considered male or female based on their common use during the life span of each case. Finally, poems, verses and all other comments inscribed on each stone were recorded for preservation.

When information could not be deciphered or was not included on the stone, its space was left blank on the data collection form. Due to weathering, vandalism and the original material used for the stone, not all information remained readable on every stone. However, multiple reading techniques were used to read and document all information on every stone, when possible. Estimated birth dates were calculated for everyone (case) based on the age and death date when that information was available.

Additional information was recorded for providing a useful complete document of all burials in the cemetery for the genealogical society of Muskingum County. This included the symbols and carvings on each stone, epitaphs, the type of stone material, and indications of military service.

The documentation produced by the first team was improved upon by team two, one year later, through the reclamation of buried stones. This was accomplished by carefully probing the soil with wooden skewers in rows where there appeared to be gaps between stones. If a stone was detected, researchers outlined the circumference using a wooden skewer or a plastic knife. Then the sod was carefully pulled away and the gravestone was uncovered. Forty additional cases were recovered using this technique, increasing the total number of recorded cases from 437 to 477. Finally, all data was entered into SPSS (statistical calculation program) for frequency analysis.

The primary limitation of this case study is that while it is descriptive and includes all readable stones in the cemetery, the findings cannot be generalized to the population of New Concord, Ohio. No cemetery study can represent the whole population. After all, a cemetery is not a census of historical populations. Furthermore, two additional cemeteries served New Concord during the 19th century, and only community members who complied with the doctrine of the affiliated church were interred in each cemetery. It is also recognized that in a rural, frontier village, community members were sometimes buried on their family properties either by choice or due to financial constraints.

### 3. Findings

Unlike previous studies by Foster and Hummel (1995), and Abel et al. (2008) and Abel (2008), many conclusions we sought to analyze revealed no significant findings. For example, the analyses of season of deaths revealed that out of 322 cases, spring was the most frequent season of death with 91 burials. However, winter produced 83, and the summer months claimed 78. This difference is not significant. Fall recorded the fewest burials at 68, but once again, the difference of 10 deaths between two seasons in a cemetery that represents 100 years of burials is not significant. Likewise, no common month of conception emerged with any statistical significance; however, gendered patterns emerged from the data and appeared to be significant. The following findings highlight those patterns that were most significant.

#### 3.1. Age in Years with Master Status

On 40% of the stones in the Crooked Creek cemetery, individuals were identified with a gendered master status. A master status is a label such as wife, consort, daughter, son, or husband, which is important in shaping one's social identity. It can also be a title associated with one's profession, given that the profession becomes part of the way one identifies or is recognized by the community. Titles such as reverend or doctor would be examples of a professional master status in a 19th-century rural community. The master statuses of wife, consort or daughter were different in that they recognize those who were not able to build a professional identity for themselves. Furthermore, they may identify the possession or association by ownership of a woman (Abel 2008; Collier 2003).

The cross tabulation between the age of an individual in years and their master status revealed that women were given a master status of wife as early as 19 years old, while men who were recognized as husband are not represented in the same age range. The first occurrence of husband as a master status does not appear in the data prior to age 53. It appears that husband was not regarded as a master status until after a man's most productive years. Overall, there were only 12 burials that identified a male as a husband. Further review of the data revealed that in five of the 12 cases, these men predeceased their wives, in which cases the wives may have chosen this status for inscription on the stone. However, the remaining seven men outlived their wives (often more than one wife); therefore, no conclusion can be made regarding who chose to apply the term husband as a master status.

It can be argued that the term husband is not at all a master status. The standard citizen in a 19th-century, rural community in Ohio would have been white and male. This identity is assumed as a standard and therefore does not need to be stated. Men gained social status through achievements and as assumed leaders and figureheads in the family, not through marriage. Therefore, they had little to gain by seeking recognition through their relationships to women. This may explain why very few men were identified as husbands. Men who interred an adult male relative would not recognize the deceased's marital status as a significant accomplishment.

Of the 202 females buried at Crooked Creek, 72% have a master status that defines them as a wife (consort) or daughter. Of the 190 males, only 28% of them are labeled with a master status of husband or son. According to Abel, in patriarchal societies women are labeled with a master status of wife to identify them as the property of a male in the community (Abel 2008). In this sense, an epitaph that identifies a woman as the property of a male is doing so to reinforce his social status and has little to do with hers, aside from recognizing that in terms of social norms she was respectably associated with a male.

The master status of wife or daughter may be considered an indicator of inequality; however, it can also be viewed as an indicator of the tremendous loss the death of these women represented to the community. Women, memorialized with the master status of wife or mother of were also being remembered for the very important role they would have played in the development of the frontier (Vovelle 1980). Their prescribed reproductive status, while very different from that of men in terms of prestige, was central to stabilizing communities on the frontier and to furthering the development

of the Union. Such status was consistent with the social norms of the period in that the women were necessary and valued to produce the next generation.

Previous studies have considered such labels an indicator of inequality and use cemetery data to reinforce the theory that women were the victims of unequal commemoration. This study suggests that women and daughters were held in high esteem for the substantive role they were expected to play in the perpetuation and development of a community or perhaps a nation. One example directly from a stone clearly indicated the tremendous loss experienced by one couple. The marble stone remains in good condition and is elaborately carved. It reads: "Mary M. died April 15th, 1867, aged 10 years, 11 months and 22 days. Also, two infant daughters. Children of J.A. & L McClure".

Buried within the Crooked Creek cemetery there are six male and 15 female infants under the age of one year. It is assumed that each of these infants was valued and that the loss felt by the surviving family is evidenced by the child's public commemoration on a gravestone. However, attitudes toward the loss of a male child appear to be different from that of a female child. All six male infants were identified by the master status son of followed by the parent's identity. Only 11 of the 15 infant females were given the status daughter of and a familial association. The remaining four simply stated infant girl.

Having lost a daughter, it appears, did not carry the same social significance to a surviving family perhaps because a daughter would have never carried on a family name. Therefore, to identify her lineage was less important given that she died having never reached her reproductive potential. Having a son was something families were extremely proud of because a son would have perpetuated a family's name, as well as being expected to run a family's farm or business, thereby contributing to the formal economy, stability and growth of the community. In many cases, the loss of a son meant the loss of hope for future lineage. The master status, son of, expressed patriarchal familial pride, as well as emotional grief. This may explain why all infant males under the age of one were given the master status son of.

### 3.2. Age In Years by Gender

Additional significant findings occurred in the analysis of the age distribution of individuals buried at Crooked Creek and the gender patterns that coincide. A quartered distribution of the 321 recorded ages at death reveals that 25% of those buried in the cemetery were age seven and under. The second quarter was represented by those ages eight to 35, the third quarter included those ages 36 to 68, and the final quarter included those ages 69 to 98. Fully one half of all those buried in the cemetery passed away prior to their 36th birthday.

The age ranges created for a secondary analysis were based on anticipated or common life experiences rather than quarters, equal increments or categories used in previous cemetery studies. The justification for these ranges is rooted in life course development theories (Thomas 2000). Infancy included those two years and under; childhood, age 2–12; adolescents, 12–18; young adult, 18–35 (primary mating and child bearing years); adult, 35–55; and 55 and above as the elder years.

Gender appears to be most significant in the burials of infants and those in the young adult, adult, and elder category. The child bearing years of young adulthood appear to have a significant impact on burial numbers of women. In Crooked Creek, there are twice as many females as males present in the young adult category. Since this age range represents child bearing years, this most likely accounts for the higher frequency of women's burials. It should be noted that of the 321 ages at death that were readable overall, 178 were women and 143 were men. This accounts for some gender discrepancies in the frequencies.

When the data is divided by gender it becomes clear that more females than males were buried in the cemetery. This is inconsistent with research conducted by Drevenstedt et al. who claim that male infants typically die at higher rates due to biological factors such as higher birth weights and more difficult deliveries (Drevenstedt et al. 2008). The findings from the Crooked Creek cemetery must recognize that there may simply have been more females born and who subsequently died during this time, which could lead to a higher representation of female infants buried in the cemetery.

In the age range labeled elderly, there are more men than women. While overall there are more females buried in Crooked Creek and more females whose age at death could be calculated, it appears that this finding reinforces those of Foster and Hummel, as well as Abel, Kruger, and Abel and Dethlefsen, in that prior to the 20th century women died at earlier ages than men (Foster and Hummel 1995; Abel et al. 2008; Abel 2008; Dethlefsen 1969).

#### 4. Conclusions

The study of the Crooked Creek cemetery revealed findings that are inconsistent with many previous studies and assumptions about the life course of men and women in the 19th century. For example, the results of this study are not able to support claims of seasonal mortality and conception patterns.

This study does report significant gender patterns associated with age and master status. However, it is important to analyze gender as a negotiated identity that continues after death. Those who interred loved ones made choices about how to display their feelings. They also made choices about characteristics they valued and those less important. Gender was an important master status in the eyes of the surviving family members; however, the choice of engraving gender on the stone is informative about the society of the deceased (Stratton 2016).

The reality of gendered lives in New Concord, Ohio, in the 19th century is that gender mattered. There is no evidence that one gender mattered more than the other. In fact, indicators of gender in the results of this case study tell us little about gendered expectations in lived experiences of the time. We should not assume that gender divided men and women, nor should we assume that gender created a social class hierarchy.

Master status is carved on the stones of women in far higher rates than on men's stones. The master status of wife, however, many not have been an indicator of patriarchy. According to Vovelle, as a community develops, there is a shift from the devaluing of women and children in the 17th and 18th centuries to the recognition of the loss their lives represented in the communities of the 19th century (Vovelle 1980). Certainly, this appears to be supported by findings in this study relating to the two most frequent categories of age at death. Women of child bearing years (ages 18–35) and children are the two groups commemorated in highest numbers in Crooked Creek. Their loss most likely had a significant impact on this frontier community and the survivors' perception of its stability.

Because the analysis of gender must also be conducted in the terms of the period being studied, not in terms of present day standards, it appears that master status was significant because it represented what each person meant to the future of the community and the loss experienced by that community. This is indicated by those who paid for stones and carefully chose appropriate and symbolic epitaphs to place on those stones. Women and infants symbolized the hope for the future as much as the men who forged this new community.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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