

# Acquiring Higher Quality Yet Affordable Gravestones

Patrick Tisdale (updated 11/24/2021)

## Repurposed “surplus” military headstones

It was not uncommon for working-class families or friends to purchase and 'repurpose' a finished marble or bluestone memorial originally marking a veteran's grave in a military cemetery as an affordable, more appealing, and durable alternative to wood, sandstone, or cast concrete memorials for a loved one. This option came about when US military cemeteries chose to replace large numbers of headstones of various designs and materials originally placed at veteran graves by families and friends with a “standard” grave marker (like those seen today in Arlington and other national cemeteries). The original headstones were sold as bulk stone material to monument carvers and builders.

The memorial for Julia Johnson (1863-1812), located reclined near the Doughty obelisk, is an example of a reworked military headstone. Her marker was once the headstone for the Arlington Cemetery grave of Chief Engineer J.D. Robie, United States Navy. His burial stone was replaced at some point with a new military standard headstone, and the orphan stone acquired and prepared for reuse by a stonemason. The limited funding favoring the decision to reuse a discarded stone also influenced the new design. Julia's inscription details and shaping of the crown top show less stone carving finesse than found on more expensive expertly carved memorials.

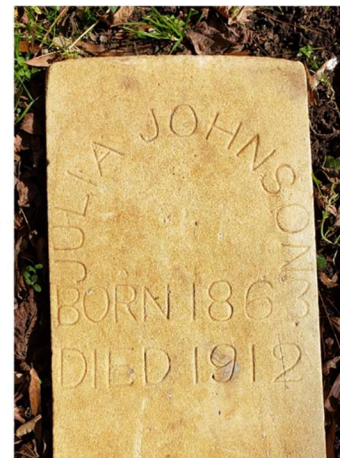
In the transformation the surplus headstone is inverted 'top becomes bottom', turned over, and the new inscription carved on the new 'top' of the stone blank (When installed upright, the veteran's details are hidden in the ground).



Original inscription and crown at top of veteran gravestone



Stone inverted (veteran details to be buried)



Stone turned over – Julia's details and crown carved on new 'top' of stone

### **Adapted use of marble tops crafted for dressers and vanities**

Marble slabs originally fabricated for use as dresser and vanity tops were frequently adapted to use as grave markers. These headstone exist in upright or reposed position in various places on the burial grounds.

A marble top adapted to headstone use can be identified by the lack of a carved edge on one side of the monument stone (this flat edge would have been the intended back, facing the mirror or wall, on the dresser or vanity top). The thin stone of a marble top made it very difficult to carve details about the deceased. Instead, information about the deceased would be painted on the marble face, or on some occasions, a metal plaque affixed to the marble.

A rare example of an intricately carved adapted marble top graves stone can be found at the gravesite of John Turner, deceased January 18, 1917 (image below). The top and right side of the gravestone have a carved edge, while the left side has the flat cut associated with the back edge of a dresser top. This gravestone has no monument base. In other grave markers, the thin marble slab is embedded in a concrete base. The thin thickness of these slabs resulted in many such grave markers being broken, with pieces scattered on the burial ground.

