The History Behind the Art of Headstone Rubbing

Headstone rubbing is an ancient art where you can make a copy of the beautifully engraved etchings or worded information on a headstone by carefully preparing the stone, covering it with a sheet of paper, and delicately rubbing over it with a crayon or other soft coloring utensil. These rubbings are popular in public cemeteries everywhere and are a great way to discover ancestors deep in your family tree, honoring a historical figure, or celebrating masterfully carved headstones. Below are the proper steps to performing a memorable rubbing.

Step One - Find an Interesting Stone!

Explore the Fairmount grounds. There are thousands of elegant headstones from which to choose. Find one that interests you! Try to a headstone with distinctly carved lines that don’t run too deep. Make sure the stone doesn’t have too many signs of wear and can stand up to a gentle cleaning and rubbing. Stones with large cracks, chipping, or other deterioration should be disregarded.

Step Two - Cleaning the Stone

Once you have located one, use your spray bottle and a soft brush to gently clean away any dirt or residue that can disrupt your rubbing. Then gently dry the face of the stone with a soft towel.

If you are unsure of the durability of a stone or you cannot located a particular stone that you know is resting within Fairmount, you can ask any of our grounds’ staff in the Administration and Mortuary building, located at the Quebec entrance to the grounds. They will be happy to help locate and inspect the stone with you to verify it’s in good enough condition to withstand a rubbing and that no one is violating the wishes of the deceased or their family.

Step Three - Rub Away!

Once your stone is ready, wrap a large, clean piece of paper over the stone and adhere it in place using masking tape that’s easy to completely remove after. Then gently rub a sturdy a dark colored crayon over the paper. Start from the outside edges and work in. This way, you can establish the border of the headstone’s design and then focus on the details inside.

Step Four - Share your work and you’re done!

Once you have you rubbing shaded in as dark as you’d like, remove your paper, and be sure to clean up any and all pieces of tape, paper, and trash. Then share your work with us at @FairmountDenver on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram!

Please be respectful and refrain from climbing on the monuments and markers.

Materials Needed

- Crayon/s
- Large sheet of paper (or rice paper)
- Masking tape
- Soft brush
- Rag or soft towel
- Spray bottle with plain water