

Mount Albion Cemetery's unique monuments

OVERLOOKED ORLEANS: 'White bronze' monuments gave the deceased a standout marker at area cemeteries

By **MATT BALLARD**
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ALBION — During tours of Mount Albion Cemetery, it is nearly impossible to visit a section of the cemetery that is void of at least one zinc marker. The "stones" themselves are a rather unique feature given their short-lived history, but the variety of sizes, shapes, and iconography provide visitors with a unique look into the beautiful art of cemetery monuments. This particular stone, belonging to Amos and Rosamond Whaley Grinnell, stands near the front of the cemetery on Hawthorn Path and displays a stunning urn draped in a cloth that symbolizes the veil that separates Heaven and earth.

The Monumental Bronze Company of Bridgeport, Conn., commenced the manufacture of these memorials in 1875. In addition to the company's headquarters, subsidiaries opened in Des Moines, Detroit, and Chicago where the final stage of the manufacturing process was completed. All casting was performed in Connecticut.

It is important to note the use of the term "bronze" to describe these unique monuments. Although zinc was used to cast the memorials, the company understood the nature of marketing and thus affixed the name "white bronze" to the product in an effort to move more merchandise. The company boasted the use of 99 percent pure zinc that was rust, frost, and moisture resistant while preventing the growth of moss and requiring minimal cleaning. An artist in Bridgeport would fashion a wax model of the ordered monument and then use that model to produce a plaster mold. Molten zinc was then poured into these molds and allowed to set. On these larger stones,

each side was crafted separately then fused together using zinc, which was stronger than soldering the joints.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of these monuments is the method in which they were sold. There were no showrooms or local dealers who provided samples of completed works. Instead, individuals received a visit from a salesman and sifted through the pages of the company catalog to select a monument style that appealed to them. If a potential customer wanted to see a physical example of a marker, they were encouraged to visit the local cemetery to look at examples. To place an order a customer would request an "order blank" through the mail, which provided space for illustrating the location of inscriptions and bas-relief emblems.

The white bronze monuments were marketed as more durable than their stone counterparts were and far more customizable. After installation, the markers developed their unique blue-gray appearance thanks to a sandblasting process that allowed for the formation of a layer of zinc oxide. On this particular monument are four tablets, one on each side, containing inscriptions and emblems. Visible in this photograph are tablets that show an ear of corn, representing the bounty of God, and the golden sheaf of wheat with sickle, representing the divine harvest. Each of these panels was attached with decorative screws that allowed the individual to remove and replace them upon the death of a loved one. In doing so, the monument always appeared complete and never displayed unfinished inscriptions.

Although the company marketed these monuments as superior to tra-



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The Mount Albion Cemetery will be the subject of a tour next Saturday led by county Historian Matt Ballard.

ditional stone memorials, the public failed to fully accept the product. Many failed to believe the claim that white bronze would outlast marble and granite and preferred the traditional appearance of stone. Perhaps it was the lack of the personal touch from a local businessman that limited the sale of these markers? Regardless of the reasons, production of white bronze

monuments ended around 1912. Today we see that the claims made by the company held true, in many cases, holding their inscriptions far better than stone monuments. This particular memorial stands a large and beautiful example of the work produced by the Monumental Bronze Company.

On Saturday, I will conduct two tours of Mount Albion Cemetery as

part of the Orleans County Heritage Festival. The first tour, starting at 10 a.m., will take visitors to a number of stops located on the eastern end of the cemetery. The second tour, starting at 1 p.m., will take visitors around the western end of the cemetery. Each tour will last approximately 90 minutes and visit many sites not included in the August tours.