

The Willow and the Tombstone

The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
Sing all a green willow.
Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,
Sing willow, willow, willow.
The fresh streams ran by her, and murmured her moans,
Sing willow, willow, willow.
Her salt tears fell from her, and softened the stones,
Sing willow, willow, willow.

Desdemona's 'Willow Song', **Othello, Act 4, Scene 3**

During a recent visit to several cemeteries around Milton, Delaware, I found the grave site of my great-great grandparents, John Carpenter (1813-1896) and Jensie (Bryan) Carpenter (1825-1882) in the Goshen Cemetery. Most of the older ancestor tombstones I've come across so far have been unadorned and quite plain. These, however, were decorated with a carving of a weeping willow tree. I didn't think much more about it until I visited the Cokesbury Cemetery a few miles down the road from Goshen, where I found another willow-themed headstone. This led me to wondering about the history and symbolism involved.



Weeping Willow Motif

The use of the willow symbol became quite popular in the early 19th century, reflecting a growing interest in greek art and architecture precipitated by the publication of [The Antiquities of Athens and Other Monuments of Greece](#), published by James Stuart and Nicholas Revett in 1762. Sometimes the tombstone willow was combined with a grecian urn although it was often just a solitary tree, as was the case with my ancestors. A [google image search](#) for willow tree motif on tombstones turns of dozens of examples of the different variations.

The willow is a symbol of deep mourning. The most obvious association is with the 'weeping' of the tree. A weeping willow needs a great deal of water to survive. The tears that would be shed over the loss of an individual would be sufficient to support the growth of a willow tree. In Greek mythology, the Greek poet Orpheus carried willow branches on his excursion to the underworld in search for his lost love, Eurydice. His quest ended tragically, associating the willow with grief, sorrow and loss. According to Apollonius Rhodius, a Greek epic poet, the Greek witch Circe planted a riverside cemetery with willow trees at Colchis to honor the goddess Helice.

John and Jensie

So my family history search has once again led me to a diversion. My great-great grandparents lived their lives around Milton in Broadkiln (or Broadkill) Hundred of Sussex County, Delaware. They raised at least eight children (6 boys and two girls). John Burton Carpenter was identified as a farmer in census records. His death record shows that he died at the age of 82 in Rehoboth, Delaware. His cause of death was 'old age' and his occupation was 'gentleman'. A nice way to go and a nice way to be remembered.