

Several years ago, on a busy summer day, a customer stepped up to the counter at Village Craftsmen with an unusual question. "Can you tell me the significance of the coins on the tombstones across the lane?" the customer asked.

As most of our readers are aware, Village Craftsmen is located on historic Howard Street, a one-lane, unpaved road on Ocracoke Island. A number of family cemeteries lie beside the lane, and some of the graves date to the early 1800s. Visitors to the island often walk through the cemeteries to read the epitaphs in order to glean a bit of island history.

I had no idea what he was referring to. "What coins?" I said.

The customer proceeded to explain that some of the tombstones had pennies, nickels, dimes and/or quarters placed on them. I walked across Howard Street to investigate. My parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great grandparents, as well as other more distant relatives, are buried there, but it had been several weeks since I had visited the cemeteries. Sure enough, several markers had a few coins resting on them. I told the customer that I didn't know the answer to his question, but I assured him that placing coins on tombstones was not a traditional local custom.



Solomon Howard (1807-1853)

Over the next several years I noticed more and more coins laid on local tombstones and monuments. One visit to the British Cemetery revealed many dollars-worth of coins (and even a few one- and five-dollar bills) placed on the markers. A neighbor and I gathered the money in a basket (it totaled more than \$200) and passed it on to a representative of the annual British Cemetery Memorial committee.

For millennia, humans have decorated graves with flowers, shells, stones, feathers, candles, and other items. In some cultures, coins, bowls of food, bottles of alcohol, cigarettes and other gifts are placed on graves, or even inside caskets as ways to honor the dead, to bring good luck to the deceased, or to ease the departed into the afterlife.

The modern practice of leaving coins on tombstones apparently has its origin with the military. According to posts shared on social media, different coins convey different

messages.

- Penny - A penny left at a gravesite means you visited there. It is simply a way to honor a departed service member.
- Nickel - A nickel indicates you trained with the deceased.
- Dime - A dime left on a tombstone means you served with the deceased person in his or her unit, company, ship, etc.
- Quarter - A quarter indicates you were with the deceased when he or she died.

There is speculation that the ritual of placing coins on gravestones dates back to Benjamin Franklin (d. 1790) who famously said, "a penny saved, is a penny earned." According to the Christ Church Preservation Trust in Philadelphia, tens of thousands of coins are thrown onto Benjamin Franklin's marker each year. The practice has been blamed for causing a significant crack on his marble ledger tablet.

Of course, there is no official protocol for leaving coins on tombstones, and the practice has clearly extended beyond honoring just military members. In recent years family members in some locations have begun honoring their loved ones by placing coins on graves. For many years Ocracoke islanders have decorated graves with flowers and shells, but, as mentioned, placing coins on tombstones is not a time-honored Ocracoke Island tradition. As this custom grows, surely different people will have different understandings of the symbolism.

Most of the people buried on Howard Street did not serve in the military. Even those who did (including members of the US Life Saving Service and US Coast Guard) may not have military markers. And most, if not all, of the coins seem to have been left by island visitors, not by local family members. Perhaps visitors to Ocracoke simply wish to honor the many generations of sturdy islanders who have lived on this beautiful barrier island and endured storms, hurricanes, shipwrecks, and isolation from the mainland.



Edgar Howard (1904-1990)

As mentioned, the coins left at the British Cemetery are periodically collected and used to fund the annual memorial ceremony. Coins on Howard Street family cemeteries are used to help clean and maintain the graves.