

# How Can You Explore a Story beyond the Graveyard?

You can often get valuable information from gravestones. Generally, however, you must expand your search to understand the stories of the people.

We chose an individual at Crown Hill Cemetery for limited study—Corliss Randle Ruckle—because of his extraordinary gravestone (pictured at right).

The monument gives basic information: his name, the year of his death (1889) on the top step, and, we assume, the year of his birth (1877) on the bottom step. Beyond that, what assumptions can be made about him and his life? Is the boy an image of Corliss?



Crown Hill Cemetery

3 Corliss Ruckle  
born  
died in City Dec 4th 1889. 8y  
4 diphtheria  
8 no lot 24 Dec 12 M 8  
Thursday Dec 5th 10.00 a.m.  
Kneels will pay (4)  
no time with grave  
Aud. 111 City Clerk 6

To find out more, we contacted the Crown Hill Cemetery office to see what official documents were available. The officials provided copies of the burial permit (right) and the cemetery record of Corliss' burial (above). What new information is provided? What information is given that disagrees with the gravestone?

**BURIAL PERMIT.**  
INDIANAPOLIS BOARD OF HEALTH,  
ROOM 2, SUPERIOR COURT HOUSE,  
INDIANAPOLIS, Dec 4 1889.  
The proper DEATH CERTIFICATE having been filed  
in this office, permission is hereby granted  
to W. R. Ruckle  
to bury the body of  
Corliss Ruckle  
Aged 12 years 11 months 12 days  
Residence 107 N. Illinois St.  
Cause of Death Diphtheria  
Date of Death Dec 4/89  
J. H. Woodburn M. D.  
DEPART FROM OFFICE OF REGISTRAR AUGUST 27, 1884.

The mother's membership in St. Paul's Episcopal Church, indicated in the father's biography, led us to that church, which still exists. Church officials copied Corliss' entry in the Parish Register (below). How does this record help us? Birth certificates were not required by the state then, so one is not available to clarify the age question.

328		329	
Burials.		Burials.	
Date of Burial	Name of Deceased	Age	Place of Burial
Monday, 5/13/1889	Corliss R. Ruckle.	11y. x	Crown Hill.
Monday, 12/7/1882	Ruth's Lillie Love.	10 wks. B.	Crown Hill.

Causes of Death: Diphtheria, Inflammation of bowels.

Number Names: Joseph J. Jankovics, Joseph Jankovics.

A researcher is not always lucky, but we made a good choice. To find more about Corliss and his family, we checked the Indiana Biographical Index at the Indiana State Library. We found a Colonel Nicholas Randle Ruckle, a respected Civil War soldier and Indianapolis businessman. The biographical summary (below) contains the evidence that convinced us—this is Corliss' father! What items convince you?

Based on the biographical information, we explored other resources, such as the Indiana State Archives, the Indiana Historical Society Library, and the Scottish Rite Cathedral. Although we located much about Colonel Ruckle, we found very little about Corliss.

Nicholas Randle Ruckle, who resided at 2011 North Illinois Street, Indianapolis, Indiana was born in Baltimore, Maryland, May 8, 1838. His family moved to Indianapolis in 1852.

Not quite fifteen, he became an apprentice at the Indianapolis Journal. For the next several years he worked for the newspaper, until 1861 when the Civil War began. Ruckle was one of the first from Indiana to volunteer. He was assigned to the 11th Volunteer Infantry and eventually became captain. By the close of the war he had joined the 148th Indiana Volunteer Infantry and was made a colonel.

On February 24, 1876 he married Jennie C. (Moore) Reed. Mrs. Ruckle was a member of the Saint Paul's Episcopal Church. Colonel Ruckle and his wife had one child, Corliss Randle Ruckle. He died at age twelve.

Col. Ruckle served the community as sheriff and president of the Metropolitan Police Commissioners. He was a prominent, well-respected businessman. As a member of the Masons, he received and held the highest honors and positions within the fraternity. He died in 1900 and was buried in Crown Hill.

Adapted from Commemorative Biographical Record . . . (Chicago: J.H. Beers & Co., 1908), pp.182-83.

One other point that we pursued in our research was the cause of Corliss' death—diphtheria. A State Board of Health report in the Indiana State Library provided some information (right). According to the same report, there were 439 deaths from diphtheria that year: 168 between age 1 and 5, 172 between age 5 and 10. Is diphtheria still a threat?

The excerpt gives contemporary information on the causes of diphtheria. How does this compare to our knowledge today? When was the germ theory of disease generally accepted?

**DIED.**  
RUCKLE—Corliss Randle Ruckle, only son of Nicholas R. and Jennie C. Ruckle, Wednesday, Dec. 4, 1889, of diphtheria. Funeral from the residence of the parents, Thursday, Dec. 6, at 10 a. m. Services at the grave by Rev. J. J. Jankovics.

Our limited search produced an obituary for Corliss (above). It was printed from a microfilm of the Indianapolis Journal, December 5, 1889 at the Indiana State Library.

Perhaps, a wider search could find more about Corliss and his life. Most people, however, are survived by few traces of their lives beyond official records. Our knowledge of the past will always be incomplete and based only on the evidence which has survived over time.

1. The gaseous emanations of filth, organic matter in process of putrefaction, is the very breath of life to diphtheria. . . . Excrement, sodden soil and polluted drinking water make it happy.
2. Diphtheria is contagious and infectious. . . .
3. . . . Diphtheria is an outlaw, and repeats itself as often as it gets a chance. . . .
6. . . . The mortality of diphtheria averages about forty per cent., the same as that of small-pox.
7. Diphtheria, which is now the most continually murderous contagious disease afflicting the civilized portions of mankind, can not be eradicated till communities and people eliminate filth. . . .

From Ninth Annual Report of the State Board of Health of Indiana . . . (Indianapolis: Wm. B. Burford, 1891), pp. 101-2.