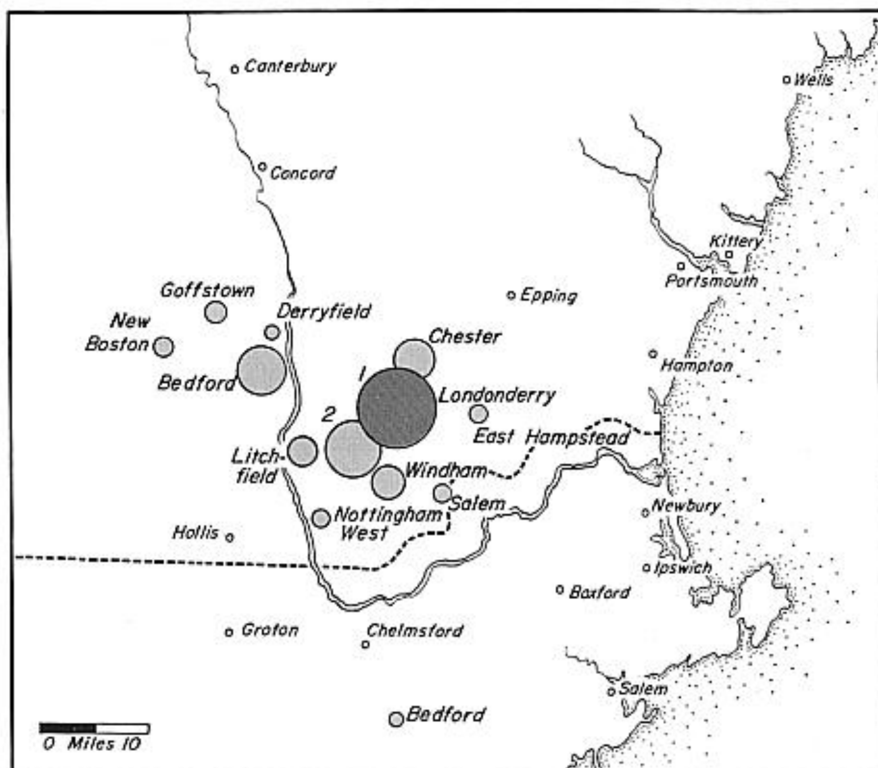
JOHN WHITE, HAVERHILL, MASS., 1668
Courtesy Dr. Allan I. Ludwig.




MAP: DISTRIBUTION OF JOHN WIGHT'S GRAVESTONES IN THE LOWER MERRIMACK RIVER VALLEY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE. THIS CUTTER PLACED THE MAJORITY OF HIS STONES IN THE TWO PRESBYTERIAN PARISHES IN LONDONDERRY AS WELL AS IN NEARBY CHESTER. THE REMAINDER TEND TO FOLLOW A WESTERLY DRIFT INTO TOWNS FOUNDED BY FIRST- AND SECOND-GENERATION SCOTCH-IRISH WHO FORMERLY LIVED IN LONDONDERRY: WINDHAM, BEDFORD, GOFFSTOWN, NEW BOSTON, PETERBOROUGH, LITCHFIELD, AND DERRYFIELD. THIS MAP REPRESENTS THE LOCATION OF ABOUT TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY STONES

# John Wight: The Hieroglyph Carver of Londonderry

*By* PETER BENES

NEW ENGLANDERS of the colonial period rarely mentioned the symbols carved on their gravestones. Stonecutters' daybooks and diaries recorded deliveries and payments, but did not discuss designs. Historians, essayists, and ministers (whose estates were often depleted by expensive, richly carved grave markers) entirely avoided the subject. Because seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century carvings seldom needed explanation, this reticence is not unusual. The messages conveyed by skulls, skeletons, and crossed bones were as clear as the rhymed warnings that accompanied them were blunt. As the eighteenth century progressed, however, the region's stonecutters developed a body of indigenous symbolic artwork which assumed the outward form of traditional death-related ideograms but which illustrated New Englanders' innermost thoughts about salvation and damnation, and about the anticipated rewards of justified spirits. This artwork was readily understood by fourth- and fifth-generation New Englanders schooled in the conventional ecclesiology of mid-eighteenth-century Congregationalism. But it sometimes baffles the modern imagination. What, for example, was the meaning of hearts, birds, or stars superimposed on skulls; of hearts or diamonds superimposed on coffins; of a heart-shaped hourglass? What was the meaning of a face held in the beaks of two or four birds? Why did some skulls scowl; why did other skulls smile?

The answer to some of these questions is provided by the carvings of a New Hampshire gravestone maker named John Wight[1] who was neither a New Englander by birth nor a Congregationalist by persuasion. A Scotch-Irish immigrant, this engraver lived and worked in Londonderry, and was patronized almost exclusively by first- and second-generation Scotch-Irish like himself. The demands on his trade were narrow both in commercial and artistic terms, and he developed a body of highly individualistic decorative artwork whose meaning was even more obscure than that of most eighteenth-century New England stonecutters. But he had an engaging habit of engraving ditties and rhymes on his stones, and a careful reading of these in part reveals the intended meaning of his symbols.

Little of what is known of John Wight sets him apart from his neighbors in Londonderry. Like many, he was descended from seventeenth-century Scot Covenantors — Presbyterian dissenters from the Church of England—who in 1612 left Argyleshire, Scotland, to found the towns of Antrim and Londonderry in Ulster County, Ireland. Persecuted by the Church of England in the eighteenth century, John Wight emigrated to New England in August, 1718,[2] and with two hundred and fifty other Scotch-Irish founded Londonderry in an uninhabited area of southern New Hampshire previously called Nutfield. He was then sixteen years of age,

and he was accompanied by an older member of his family, his father or perhaps his brother. A self-taught stone worker, John Wight supplemented his income as a farmer by engraving headstones and table slabs. He was active in the trade for over forty-four years—twice the normal work-span of gravestone makers—and in this period he made about two hundred and fifty burial markers, each of which may have taken him a week or more to quarry, shape, and letter. The distribution of these markers follows the gradual westerly movement of Scotch-Irish into the frontier country of New Hampshire. Wight placed most of his stones in Londonderry's first parish, in Londonderry's second or west parish, and in nearby Chester, Windham, and Litchfield. He also placed many stones in towns located northwest of Londonderry on the Merrimack River—Derryfield, Nottingham West, New Boston, Goffstown, and Bedford—where Scotch-Irish families were a majority of the inhabitants or were heavily represented.[3]

Of the total number of grave markers made by John Wight, about one-third are undecorated. These usually have early dates (1733-1749), though some have dates later than this. On those stones he did decorate, John Wight carved designs used by no other gravestone maker in New England either before him or after. These designs consisted of a row of symbols arranged like hieroglyphics across the top of the stone, and as a rule, they were executed by means of simple one-dimensional line cuts. He quarried a granite-like stone that was difficult to carve and to letter, and rarely used the textured carving style that characterized the work of leading Boston and Charlestown cutters who made their stones from high-grade slates. The symbols he selected sometimes reflected the purpose to which the stone was intended. For example, he engraved a large coffin beside two smaller ones on a stone prepared for a mother and two children; he engraved five coffins of decreasing size on a stone prepared for a family of five. He carved two geometric stars on a stone prepared for a husband and wife, and he carved a star between two hearts on the stone of an infant child.

His most frequent symbol groupings did not reflect the stone's intended use in this sense. Rather they were pictorial variations on what seems to have been a repeating theme. In these variations, an elaborately geometrical star always appeared in the center, and was flanked on one side by time or mortality symbols, and on the other side by a heart or diamond symbol. A common arrangement was a coffin-star-heart. Other arrangements included shovel-coffin-star-heart, crossed bones-star-heart, hourglass-star-heart, and coffin-star-diamond. In some instances the symbols flanking the star were identical (coffin-star-coffin), or were related in meaning (hourglass-star-crossed bones, coffin-star-hourglass). But most were opposite in meaning as in the earlier examples. By themselves, the constituent symbols in all these arrangements had a conventional explanation. The coffin and shovel represented death; the hourglass indicated the lapse of time; the star portrayed a redeemed spirit or an angel;[4] the diamond represented indestructibility; the heart represented love or immortality.[5] Taken together, however, the symbols acted out the drama of death and resurrection by means of a metaphysical play at cards in which hearts and diamonds were trumps and took the time and death suits. That this was the engraver's intended meaning is suggested by the ditties he carved below the in-

scription which often repeat the same two or three key phrases. Examples:

> My dust now dead it shall arise
> And loudly sound Jehova's praise.
>
> My body really shall arise
> To celebrate Jehova's praise.
>
> My body turned into dust
> My dust it shall arise
> In resurrection of the just
> To sound Jehova's praise.
>
> Our bodys turned are to dust
> Our dust it shall arise
> God by his power shall raise the just
> To celebrate his praise.

Both the rhymed ditties and the carved hieroglyphics made use of the same set of contrasting or opposing ideas. The coffin, hourglass, crossed bones, and shovel symbols represented "dust"; the heart and diamond symbols suggested the departed spirit was "just"; the elaborately geometric star revealed the desired consequence, namely, an angel celebrating "Jehova's praise." The carvings were thus a covert expression of hope: the spirit "really" was going to arise. And the more elaborate the star, the more "loudly" it was going to sound God's praise.

Besides placing symbols side by side, John Wight also placed smaller symbols within the larger ones. He superimposed lilies, diamonds, hearts, and thistle-blossoms on the coffins; he placed triangles, lilies or diamonds on the hearts. The purpose of these smaller symbols may have been simply decorative. More likely they were additional grace-marks by which John Wight further "trumped" the death and time symbols. The weaker position of the death and time symbols had distinct religious implications. Eighteenth-century gravestone readers knew that only elected spirits were destined to overcome death and be redeemed. The numerous hearts and diamonds on Wight's gravestones in effect took the edge off the logic of election and damnation and suggested to his readers that immortality and redemption were more accessible than was commonly believed, and by inference, within reach of those individuals who had earned them. Translated from the somewhat clumsy language of gravestone symbols, Wight's artwork suggests that in the conflict between traditional Calvinists and their antinomian critics, New Hampshire's eighteenth-century Presbyterians took the view that predestination could be influenced by good deeds. This matches the ecclesiological and political position Presbyterians occupied to the left of Massachusetts' or Connecticut's more conservative Congregationalists on whose gravestones time and death symbols were usually dominant. And it explains why on none of Wight's markers is engraved a winged skull,[6] a traditional English ghost symbol which in the eighteenth century was the unofficial iconographic hallmark of New England Congregationalism. It also parallels the experience of the one other area of New England where gravestone makers freely engraved grace marks. Stonecutters in Plymouth County inserted hearts and flowers into skulls' mouths as a sign distinguishing redeemed spirits from damned spirits. They frequently superimposed flowers, diamonds and triangles on their designs in much the same way as John Wight had done in Londonderry. By no coincidence, the separatist-derived churches in Plymouth County shared with New Hampshire's Presbyterians a position to the left of center, having their ideological roots both in the Plymouth Colony and in the emancipated colony of Rhode Island.

John Wight was only one of a num-

ber of early New England stonecutters who expressed religious themes under the guise of conventional death- and time-related gravestone symbolism. Despite their iconoclastic upbringing, New Englanders were deeply preoccupied with the visual imagery of saints, heaven, and resurrection. (The poems of Edward Taylor bear eloquent testimony to this.) Because gravestone artwork provided a rare opportunity to portray this imagery, symbols such as diamonds, triangles, hearts, trees, thistles, and flowers became the ingredients of a folk heraldry that illustrated religious concepts through picture ideas rather than through conventional Christian symbols. A heart-shaped skull (or a skull with a heart-mouth) was an ideogram of an early New England "saint"; a coffin marked with a heart or diamond represented the temporary resting place of a "justified" spirit. These picture ideas allowed stonecutters to circumvent the Bible's injunction against "graven images" and to display in public burying grounds what was banned in public meetinghouses and in private homes. And because this artwork was resisted by traditionalists, it tended to develop rapidly in areas of New England (such as Plymouth County, Massachusetts, or southern and central New Hampshire) where Puritanism assumed moderate forms; and more slowly in areas (such as Boston or Cape Cod) where Puritanism was strongly entrenched.

John Wight died in Londonderry on December 3, 1775, in the seventy-second year of his age. He was survived by his second wife Elizabeth[7] to whom he left an estate valued just under £40, mostly in livestock and farming utensils.[8] None of his children is known to have followed him in the stonecutting trade, and after that date hieroglyphic carvings are no longer found in New Hampshire burying grounds. By this point in New England's history, traditional or Puritan-derived gravestone decorations were no longer in fashion in Londonderry (or anywhere else in New England). Only a handful of the Scotch-Irish immigrants who accompanied John Wight to the New World in 1719 were still alive. Those of the second and third generations were by comparison sophisticated, wealthy New Englanders who inherited Scot names but who had lost the zealous Calvinism of the first generation as well as the desire to perpetuate in their household or parish culture an identity separate from the region's other English-speaking inhabitants. By 1780 two other immigrant Scotsmen (William Park and his son John Park of Groton, Massachusetts) were supplying virtually all the gravestones in southern New Hampshire, including those placed in the predominantly Presbyterian parishes of Londonderry, Windham, and Bedford. The military-featured angels that replaced Wight's hieroglyphics were not only an assertion of wealth and social prestige, but an unprecedented display of confidence about the next world. In 1750, the "resurrection of the just" and the celebration of "Jehova's praise" were discreetly hoped for in Londonderry; in 1780 these were taken for granted.

## NOTES

[1] John Wight of Londonderry is identified as the cutter of the hieroglyph-decorated stones discussed in this article on the basis of a payment of 12 shillings made to him in 1771 by Thomas Hall of Goffstown for a pair of gravestones of this description (Rockingham County Probate Records, 21:49). Two deeds documents name John Wight as a "Stone Cutter" (New Hampshire State Archives, *Deeds*, 63:170, 69:376).

[2] John Wight added his signature to that of Joseph Wight and 308 others on a petition dated March, 1718, requesting Massachusetts Governor Samuel Shute for permission to settle in New England. See *History of Londonderry*, p. 318.

[3] Londonderry's first or east parish is the present town of Derry; the west parish is the present town of Londonderry; Derryfield is the present city of Manchester; Nottingham West is the present town of Hudson.

[4] Stars and suns appear frequently on early New England gravestones, either alone or in pairs on either side of a skull or a face. They represented the dwelling place of angels (heaven), and by extension angels themselves. Some stars were animated (star-faces, sun-faces); others were ornately geometrical like those carved by John Wight. Edward Taylor offers a literary allusion to use of this symbolism when he describes angels as "you Holy angells, Morning stars, bright sparks": (*Meditation* 44, Second Series, "The Word was Made Flesh").

[5] The use of a heart to represent immortality was characteristic of the literal-minded New England imagination. Like a throbbing heartbeat or pulse, the symbol was a sign of life, and where a heart was superimposed on a skull or on a coffin was a sign that the departed spirit had been selected to receive grace.

[6] John Wight sometimes engraved a smiling winged face. (See Fig. 18.) This design was not related to the winged skull, however, despite the fact that many eighteenth-century cutters mixed skull and face characteristics in the same design.

[7] According to a gravestone standing in Londonderry's first parish burying ground (now located in the East Village of Derry, N. H.), John Wight's first wife was named Agnes. A daughter named Isobel was born of this marriage in 1739, but no other genealogical information concerning this cutter has been uncovered. John Wight himself is buried in this same yard under a stone made by his assistant who (unlike Wight) used upper and lower case lettering. After Wight's death this cutter inscribed the remainder of Wight's gravestone blanks and retired from the trade.

[8] Rockingham County Probate records, 1777. John Wight's inventory was filed under the spelling "White".

## ILLUSTRATIONS

*Figs. 1 through 5:* John Wight's most common hieroglyph was a coffin-star-heart. The stars were sometimes circular (*Figs. 4 and 5*); more often the circle was part of a box-like, geometrical, pattern (*Figs. 1, 2 and 3*). Sometimes the heart was shown upside down (*Fig. 3*). The designs illustrated here are dated between 1760 and 1775.

*Figs. 6 through 10:* Variations on the coffin-star-heart arrangement. Illustrated here are a heart-star-hourglass (*Fig. 6*), star-star-coffin (*Fig. 7*), crossed bones-star-heart (*Fig. 8*), shovel-coffin-star-heart (*Fig. 9*), and shovel-coffin-star-diamond (*Fig. 10*). Like the coffin-star-heart arrangement, these oppose a time or death symbol against an indestructibility or resurrection symbol. Not illustrated here are the less common arrangements in which John Wight carved two death- or time-related symbols such as a coffin-star-coffin.

*Figs. 11 through 16:* John Wight's grace marks. Each of the coffin-star-heart hieroglyphs shown here contain two smaller symbols reinforcing the redemptive aspect of Wight's designs. The markings in the heart symbols of *Figs. 12 and 16* probably represent lilies. The triangle mark in *Fig. 15* probably represents a jewel, that is a variation of the diamond mark. Hearts, triangles, and flowers and diamond marks are found occasionally on eighteenth-century gravestones in the Connecticut Valley; they are common on stones in Plymouth County, Massachusetts.

*Fig. 17:* Coffin-coffin-coffin arrangement carved by John Wight on a stone prepared for a mother and two children.

*Cover photograph:* Gravestone of Lieutenant Joseph Snow, Ford burying ground, Nottingham West. In addition to engraving the usual coffin-star-heart arrangement, John Wight added a flower (probably a lily) on the coffin and a diamond within the heart.

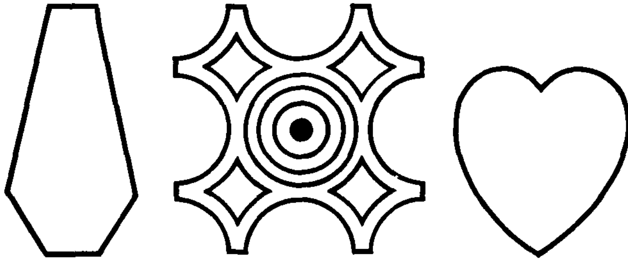


FIG. I

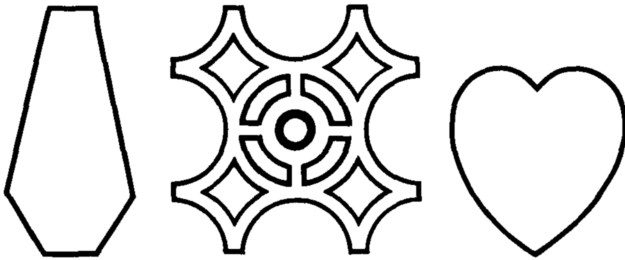


FIG. 2

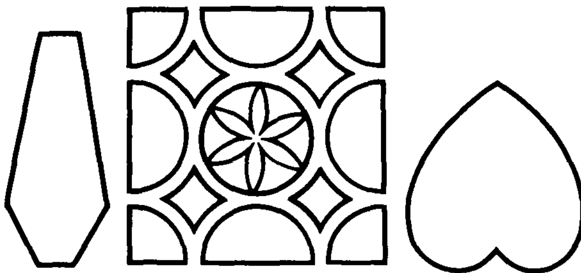


FIG. 3

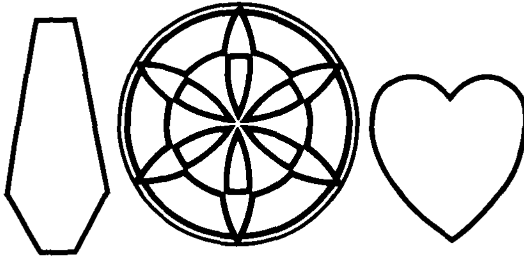


FIG. 4

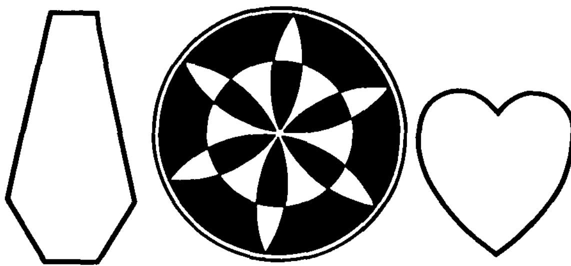


FIG. 5

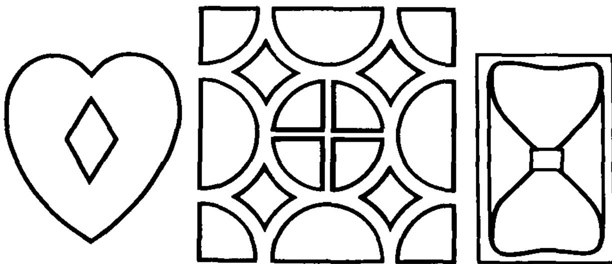


FIG. 6

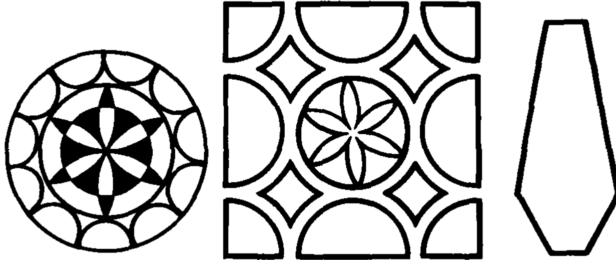


FIG. 7

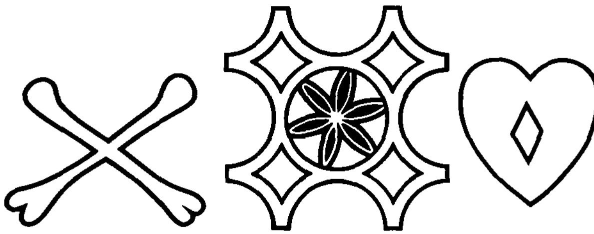


FIG. 8

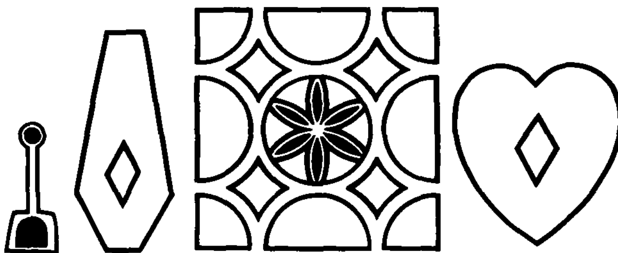


FIG. 9

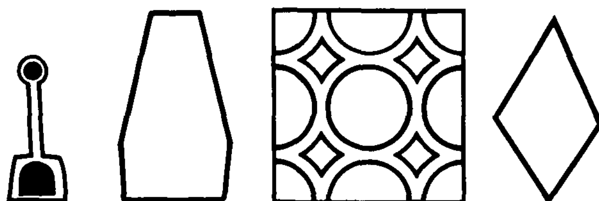


FIG. 10

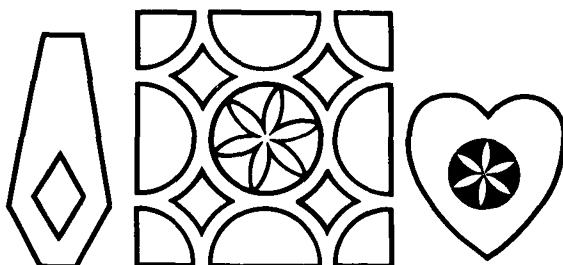


FIG. 11

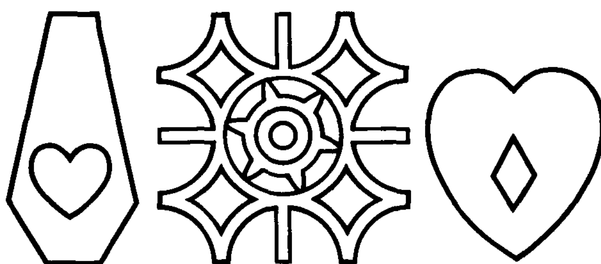


FIG. 12

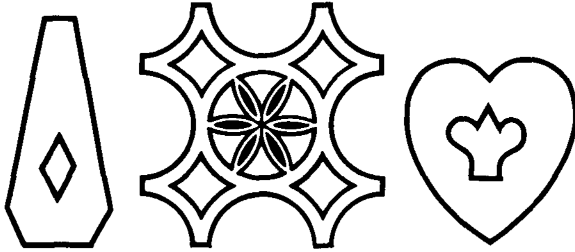


FIG. 13

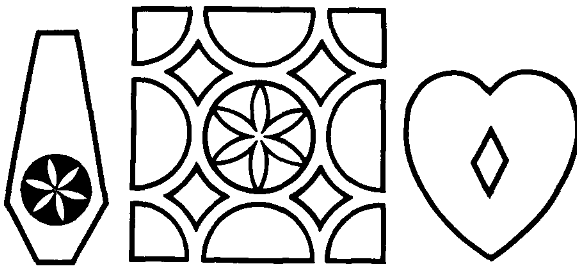


FIG. 14

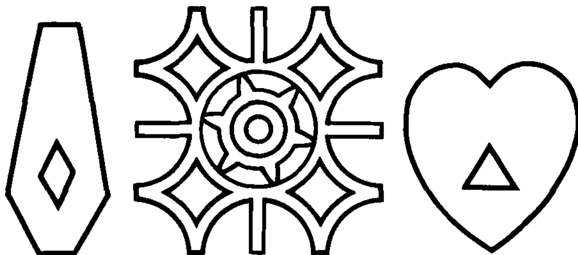


FIG. 15

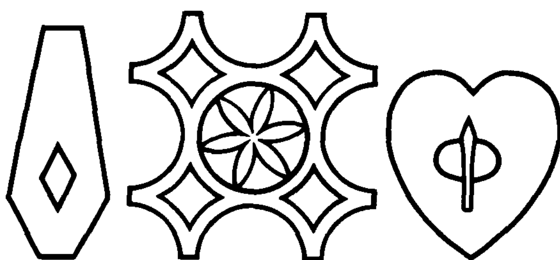


FIG. 16

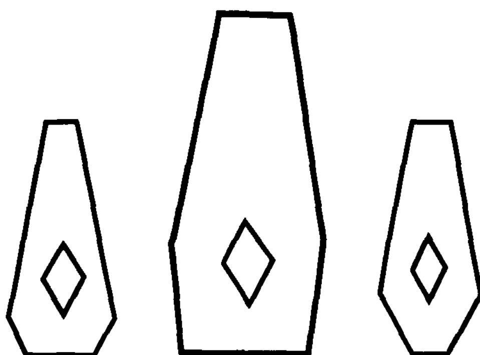


FIG. 17

FIG. 18