

Good Grief: Consorts in the Cemetery

Decades ago, my wife and I were browsing through the Old Goshen Cemetery in Belmont, North Carolina. The cemetery is owned and maintained by the Goshen Presbyterian Church.

While browsing through the inner graveyard – which contains about 230 readable markers (the earliest death date being 1828) – we noticed a marker memorializing “Ann R., consort of Richard Rankin.” Ann was born in 1796 and died in 1866.

This kinship term, consort, provides an interesting item for dialectology – an academic branch of linguistics that studies regional and social dialects. The word ya’ll provides a typical regional dialect term; hear that word and you think “Southern United States.” The word ice-box exemplifies a typical social dialect – only we “old folks” still use that word; youngsters prefer the term refrigerator.

The term consort on gravemarkers has both regional and social connotations. Most English language speakers associate the word consort with regional British English, not American usage. Nonetheless, a consort has been memorialized in North Carolina.

The social connotations of the word are diametrically opposed. A quick perusal of reliable dictionaries indicates that, in current usage, the basic meaning of the word consort is spouse. A secondary, older and outdated, meaning is mistress – the meaning that amused my wife and me – and most people with whom we have shared this story.

Our initial amusement at Richard Rankin’s memorial to his mistress, however, was misplaced, for we found four similar markers elsewhere in the Goshen Cemetery.

Elizabeth Moore, consort of Alexander Moore (died 1838)

Elvira Hall, consort of Rev. Jas. D. Hall (died 1847)

Francis Fite, consort of David Fite (died 1847)

Mary L. Liddell, consort of John G. Liddell (died 1852)

Information gleaned from these gravemarkers clearly indicates that consort in these five cases might be a dialect variation of wife. (1) The age of the women at death (84, 70, 64, 58, and 46) would confirm the status of wife or spouse, not mistress. (2) A preacher, Rev. Jas. D. Hall had a consort. (3) A 32-year-old man, Peter Fite, is buried in a grave next to Francis (consort of David) – and on Peter’s gravemarker is inscribed “Peter, son of David and Francis, Fite.” (4) Mary Liddell is listed not only as the consort of John G. Liddell but also as the daughter of Major John Neagle. (5) Elvira Hall is listed as Mrs. Elvira Hall. (6) Elvira Hall has an epitaph at the bottom of her gravemarker, which would hardly be found on that of a mistress: “The Memory of the Just is Blessed.”

After this initial study, however, I have received other data from linguistic colleagues. They have provided me with photographic documentation of another dozen consorts – most of them in the Central Texas (Austin) area.

These records are in both Presbyterian and Methodist cemeteries. The most revealing has been that of “Thomas Brown, Consort of Elizabeth Brown.” Consort here indicates a husband; so we can forget the “wife-only” denotation and revert to the dictionary definition of spouse. Thomas was a Methodist; so was Elizabeth.

Back to the dialect usage of the word consort on gravemarkers: all of the consorts are memorialized in either Methodist or Presbyterian cemeteries. We can, thus, affirm a regional British background and a social dialect definition of spouse, with a time frame that lasted only until the mid-nineteenth century.

Interested in another dialect term for spouse? Try relict. I’ve only found two. Both are in Presbyterian cemeteries near Austin.

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