



<http://www.hedstorm.net/HAUNT/instructions/tombstones/>

KEEBA'S TOMBSTONES

Most of my tombstones are made from extruded foam insulation, which is primarily used to insulate homes and in pouring foundations. You can find it at most lumberyards and builders supply stores. Watch building sites. After pouring foundations, builders normally tear the foam off in large chunks and throw it away. It comes in various thicknesses: I use 2 inch for most work, and 1/2 inch for layering or odds and ends. The 2 inch foam usually comes in 4' x 8' sheets with two perforations, so it can be "snapped" into three long sections. If you can, have your lumber person cut the foam against the perforation twice (you should get three 32 inch wide sections), then you can snap three sections from that. You can make nine 16" x 32" or six 32" x 24" stones from a sheet.



Stacks of blue foam as they are found in nature.

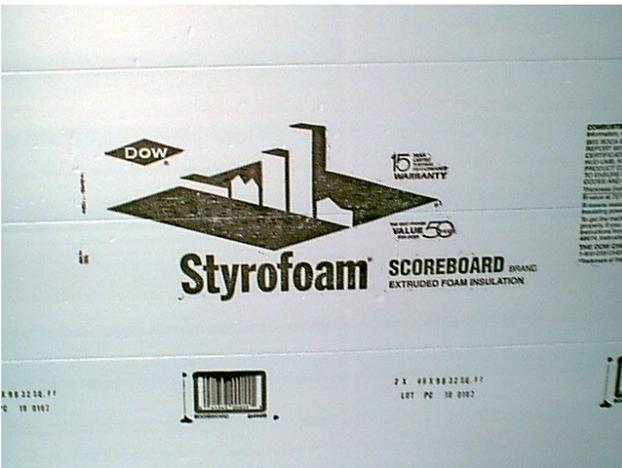
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A single sheet 4' x 8'



This is Mitch, my lumber guy, who knows what I do with it, never rolls his eyes and always calls me "Hey woman!" I suspect he doesn't remember my name.



A closeup of the backside. Note the perforations.

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Mitch cuts against the perforations into three 32" sections that I can later snap into 2-3 pieces, depending on the size I want.

CREATING YOUR DESIGN

The first thing you will want to do, obviously, is decide the style of cemetery you want. Are you going for a dark and gothic look, or a lighter humorous theme? Old West or early East Coast? Search the web for sites that have pictures of actual gravestones, or better yet, take your camera to an old cemetery. Memorial Day is a great day for this. Take a picnic. Old cemeteries are some of the most beautiful places in the world and can make for an enjoyable day with your loved one.



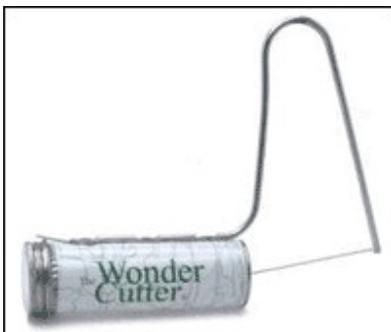
After you have decided on your style, the next step is to design and draw out the basic shapes of the stones you want I have created a few templates from actual photos of old stones and have posted them for you to download and print out if you like, but I have also used everything from trash can lids to garden hoses to create shapes. Be creative. Also search the web for other tombstone making sites, there are hundreds out there and mine is by no means the best.

DRILLING

With a 12" long 1/4" drill bit, drill two holes up from the bottom. This is where you will insert the metal posts that hold them in the ground. I do this first, as there's nothing more disappointing than spending a lot of time creating a really nice looking stone--only to accidentally drill through the front of it.



CUTTING THE SHAPE



Cut out the shape. I've used a hacksaw blade with a cloth or duct tape wrapped around one end will work. A "Wonder Cutter", available at most craft stores for under \$10.00, is even nicer.

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I make alot of tombstones, so I invested in a Hot Wire Foam Cutter from [Woodland Scenics](#) (model number ST1435 \$34.98). Yes, they also have nichrome replacement wire (ST1436 \$1.98). It runs on electricity, has a wider cutting wire and a thumb control on/off switch



ENGRAVING

You can create your epitaphs on your computer--I use fonts like [Olde English](#) , [Caslon Antique](#) , [Caslon Antique Italic](#) , or [Abaddon](#) . Simply enlarge the epitaph, print it out and trace the lettering or design on your tombstone. You can try carbon paper if you want--personally it's never worked well enough to seem worthwhile to me. I just use a ballpoint pen and press hard. It leaves enough of an imprint to work from. Afterwards I go over the imprint with a pen. I have heard of some who tape the epitaph onto the stone and actually woodburn through the paper, but I have never had much success with that. When I tried it, the paper smouldered a little bit after lifting the burning tool which melted the foam more than I wanted and ruined smaller lettering. Myself, I consider the time tracing the design onto the stone to be worth it.

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There are many ways of creating the design on your tombstone and it all depends on your own sense of style. The easiest way would be to cut the design or epitaph from thinner foam and simply glue into place.



As with most of your prop making, a [Dremel tool](#) can be your best friend. The [Dremel Router Attachment](#) makes a beautifully flat recessed area and is more than worth the effort! I use the actual [Dremel router bits](#), as opposed to other cutting and grinding bits.



One warning--it also makes a lot of foam dust. You will want to wear eye protection, old clothes, even something over your hair. You may also want to keep a vacuum handy.

One of my favorite techniques, and the one I am most known for I suppose, is to use a woodburning tool to "engrave" tombstones.

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I use the smallest tip possible, a "pen tip", as the foam melts very quickly. For raised lettering, recess the background using a flat tip or a pen tip, if you prefer the look. If you need a precise corner or you are trying to engrave very small lettering, go over the lettering first with an Xacto knife. The cut slows the heat from travelling further.



The trick is to let the woodburner cool a bit when you attempt smaller letters and designs. ***A great way to control the heat of your burning tool is to use a lamp dimmer.*** I use a swag lamp dimmer I purchased at Lowes for about \$10.00. You can lower the temperature of your burner and do much smaller lettering and designs.

Please do this in a ventilated area!

The fumes are outrageous! Ask any haunter who has met me, I have the short term memory of a soap dish.



SANDING & WARPING An important step in creating a beautiful faux stone, and the one that seems to me to be skipped the most, is sanding. I have seen some beautifully designed tombstones that just seemed to miss the mark only because the edges looked too sharp and clean. Sanding does not take much time and adds so much to the overall look. I use a foam sanding block I picked up from Walmart for about a dollar. Don't forget to sand down the edges of designs or layers you may have added. Nicks and chips from the foam make the stone look all the older so I generally leave them in and paint appropriately.

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CREATING TEXTURES

Now this is one of those things that may seem a bit "over the top" to some people, but a wise man once said to me "anything worth doing is worth over-doing. I cannot help but agree. I love finding new ways of creating weatherworn looks for my stones and it seems each year I come across a new or better way. Two of my favorite techniques are Dry Warping and Wet Warping.



Dry Warping

To dry warp your stone, simply run a lighter, candle or butane torch VERY quickly over the whole tombstone to "warp" it. Try to run the flame over the tombstone at a steep angle, instead of directly at it. You are not trying to melt the foam as much as you are gently distorting the surface.

This is my butane torch from Walmart. I love my butane torch from Walmart. It stands on its own and has an electronic ignition. It's also good for lighting incense and charcoal tablets.

I love my butane torch from Walmart.

Wet Warping

I have to admit, I discovered the Wet Warping technique quite by accident when I tried to continue working on tombstones after a quick summer rainstorm. I have used the technique ever since. Before you warp your stone, try wetting it down with a garden hose first. Run your lighter or butane torch over it quickly. Wet areas warp more slowly than dry areas. The effect varies depending on several factors.



Sanding or routing foam opens the foam cells, creating tiny open "cups" that fill with water, so it takes longer to warp that area. If the foam is lying flat, the water beads up and creates more spotting. Angled or standing, it will create a more streaked effect. The amount of time between wetting and warping will also create different effects. Try waiting 60-90 seconds after wetting the foam. Try warping immediately after wetting. This is an excellent way to texture stones cheaply. You can paint and age

directly over this and skip effect sprays if you want.

You'll have to experiment. Below are a few examples. Click on them for a larger view.

This is also a great excuse to play with your garden hose on a hot summer day. Play with your garden hoses, my friends. Life is short.



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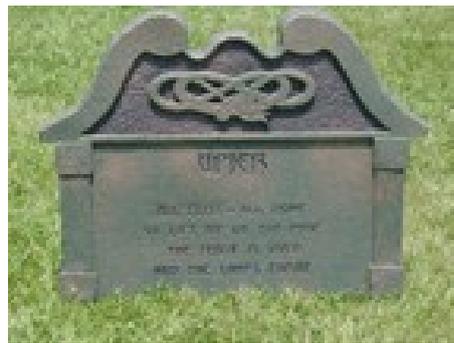
DECORATIONS and ODDS & ENDS



I have been through more brands of glue since I started making tombstones and just when I think I've found something that works perfectly, the product changes or becomes impossible to find. I've been experimenting for awhile, and listening to advice from others and have settled on a wonderful spray glue by 3M called Super 77. Works perfectly for gluing together layers of foam. Spray the foam, put together and weigh down for awhile.

Look in the adhesive department of your Lowes, Home Depot or Walmart. Easy to find.
Marvelous!

I've used various things as decoration on my tombstones. Christmas ornaments, garden sculptures and cannibalized dolls work great. A few other ideas:



This is the piece of clipart I used to create the design on this stone. Enlarge, trace onto 1/4" foam, cut out with an Xacto knife. Defining lines within the pattern can be cut out with an Xacto knife by angling the blade and cutting at an angle, then repeating in the opposite angle (think V notch)

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All sorts of stuff can be created with Crayola Model Magic and various "molds". I've used everything--jello molds, plaster molds, candy molds, soap molds. Sprinkle the mold with talcum powder first. Roll the Crayola Model Magic into a ball and lightly cover in talcum powder as well. Press into the mold, leaving a bit extra to work with, then remove from the mold and let air dry. This is what I call "futzy" work, meaning you'll probably mess up 3 or 4 before you get one you like.

Trim with an Xacto knife. With larger pieces you made hollow, you might want to consider filling in with Great Stuff foam or something that will help prevent it from collapsing in time.



Foam caulk back (the stuff the use to temporarily caulk windows for the winter) works well for column work on the sides.



NEW! NEW! NEW!

I found a new product at TransWorld this year--something I couldn't resist--called "Tombliques". Made by a company called The Eccentric Gryphon, these are resin add-ons for your tombstone making.

Check them out at

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PAINTING

Okay kiddies, listen closely. This is the only hard and true fact of making foam tombstones that I know of: **aerosol paint will melt bare foam**. Always base paint the tombstone first with a latex paint. Make sure it's totally covered, even a pinhole in the basecoat will let in the propellant and your foam will disintegrate. From experience I can tell you this usually occurs in the worst spot--the epitaph. I have lost entire phrases. Go over all engraving carefully and touch up any bare spots. Base painting your stone in a similar shade to the granite spray will save money as you can use less to cover the stone, however contrasting colours can make for interesting effects. As always, do not be afraid to experiment.



A quick side tip:

Hammer a nail into the drip trough of your paint can. Excess paint will drain back into the can and the lid won't stick so badly.

There are so many ways to finish your tombstone, I will only cover the few I use myself. There are probably a hundred more ways I do not even know about. Please don't take my word for anything, experiment! Your finished tombstone should reflect your style and the style of your haunt. There is no one perfect way. You may wish to combine several of the following techniques.

If you like the look of marble, Krylon has a wonderful effect paint called Webbing Spray. It is basically a paint that sprays like fine Silly String. Try base painting your stone in gloss black. Stand a few feet away from the dry stone and let the strings of paint float over it. Use a light touch. You can find Webbing Spray at most craft stores.



Bob Poniatowski sent me a tip for an inexpensive way to finish base painted tombstones. Carefully pry the plug from a can of black or grey spraypaint. The larger opening allows more of the paint to spray through, creating a nice speckled effect. Use this technique directly on your base painted stone, or combine it with other techniques.



Another nifty tip posted to the list by Jawbone: set up your carved and base painted stone outside. Spray the tombstone with your garden hose making sure to completely wet it. Spraypaint a small section of the wet tombstone with black or grey spray paint and hose it off immediately. Do not use a hard spray, just shower it, letting the paint run down in rivulets. The spraypaint will stick to some areas more readily than others and run down, creating a dark and creepy aged effect. Experiment, you'll see what I mean. It's only scary the first time. Try combining this method with the wet warping technique.

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If you have a little extra cash to spare, Plasti-Kote makes a product called Fleck Stone, a faux granite finish effect spray. This spraypaint comes out in different subtly coloured "specks". It comes in different colours, mostly greys, beige, brown, some blue or green. It is a little on the expensive side, \$7 - \$10 a can, but if you plan to keep your stones for a long time, I find it is well worth the extra money invested.

After your basepaint is completely dry, simply spray on a light coat of Granite Spray. If you need a heavier cover use a second coat after the first is dry, as opposed to spraying heavily once. Once the granite spray is dry, seal it with a clear topcoat. Plasti-Kote makes an exterior clear top coat designed specifically for the granite spray. It's fairly inexpensive, tough and one can will seal quite a few tombstones.

I love using the garden hose painting technique over this.

ACCENTING EPITAPHS

Most old tombstones do not have recessed areas of designs and epitaphs painted of course, but it is at this time we have to balance the idea of realism with the theatrical. You want your designs to be seen, your epitaphs to be readable, even under the most subdued night lighting. My favorite way to do this is to fill in these areas with a watered down black or grey acrylic paint, just dark enough to look like natural dirt inside lettering and recessed areas. An eyedropper, a small brush and some paper towels (for the occasional "oops") is really all you need. After dry, another quick coat of a sealer is a good idea.

Look at the difference between a water painted stone without accent and with:

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Recently I began experimenting with lighter colours on my stones and by combining techniques. I base paint in flat white and cover with one of the lighter shades of granite spray--Alabaster, Soapstone and Sante Fe Sand are my latest favorites. I then accent the designs and lettering with an appropriately darker shade of acrylic paint and seal. After the topcoat sealer is completely dry I use the garden hose method, using several shades of light to medium grey spraypaint. The total effect is spectacular.

After everything is done, you can also age your stones with a light misting of a darker spraypaint. Stand a few steps away and let the paint drift over the stones lightly and build up as you wish. To draw your eye to epitaphs, try misting the darker spraypaint around the edges of the stone, leaving the epitaph area somewhat lighter. This should give somewhat of a "spotlight" appearance. To accent add on pieces, such as a skull or an urn, try spraying from below the piece to create a weathered look or from above the piece for that creepy "flashlight-under-the-chin-lets-tell-ghost stories" look. Oooh, spooky. On green granite tombstones, I like to mist with a metallic copper spraypaint.

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There are no hard and fast rules when it comes to creating a beautiful faux cemetery (other than that spraypaint/bare foam thing). It's all a matter of your own personal style. Mistakes? No such thing. I tell everyone that I do not believe there is such a thing as a "ruined tombstone". A pinhole in the basepaint, spraypaint ate your epitaph? Route out the area, cut the lettering from thin foam and glue in. Kitty sharpened his claws on the stone? Use the edge of your sanding block to create long gashes or cracks in that area. Spouse backed over the foam with the car and left tire marks? I can think of half a dozen humorous epitaphs to put on that piece of foam! Tombstone completely broken in half? Paint the broken edges appropriately and lay the stone in your cemetery with a tree limb across it.

Keep in mind that these are all just suggestions. Some things I learned in theatre tech years ago, there may be new and better ways to do things. Some I made up as I went along, some I fell upon by accident, some I swiped from others. I am no genius, I have just made a lot of fake tombstones. The point is, it is just foam. Anything can be fixed, reworked or made better. So use your imagination, remember to base paint thoroughly.

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