

Stopping the Hands of Time: Nine Tips for Cemetery Preservation

By Mary Striegel

When I was a child, I spent many a Sunday afternoon with my grandmother having a picnic in Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky. We would spread our blanket on an open area, then peacefully enjoy the surroundings. After our meal, we would search for the prettiest tombstone or the oldest tombstone. We would seek to find someone famous. We would visit my great-uncle's grave. Sometimes I would bring pencil and paper along and draw my favorite sculpture.

I have come to learn professionally what my grandmother must have known all along. Cemeteries are places of learning that tie the young and old together to who we are and where we have come from. From cemeteries we can learn about the lives of people who make up a community. We can learn about landscapes and plants. We can enjoy artwork and architecture.

I recently had an opportunity to participate in the Restoration and Renovation Conference in New Orleans. During this time, I took part in a workshop and three sessions related to cemetery preservation. Here are nine tips for cemetery preservation that I learned.

1. Create a master plan. When preservation of a cemetery comes into public focus, there is a sense that restoration work must be immediate. When cemetery preservation efforts are rushed, serious consequences may result. A wise first step in preserving an historic cemetery is the development of a Master Plan. Good plans include an integrated approach for gravesite documentation, treatment, and maintenance.

It will include plans for landscape issues and establish a list of priorities.

2. Document the cemetery. Create a field survey sheet for the documentation of each grave site. If possible store information in a computer database. Enlist others to assist in this documentation. It is important to provide volunteers with training on identification of monument types and ways to note condition prior to field surveys so that the information is consistent. Make sure that accurate inscriptions from tombstones are recorded. Try to identify the material from which the grave marker is constructed.

3. Assess the condition of gravesites. Inspect individual tombs on a regular basis for structural defects. Are the grave markers broken? Note the conditions of the tomb and its surrounding environment. Is standing water present that can aid in plant growth, or accelerate deterioration of masonry joints? Is vegetation growing on surfaces? What is the condition of the landscape around the tomb? Keep this information on your field survey forms.

4. Evaluate the landscape. Assess landscape elements including the trees, shrubs, and plants, but the pathways, roads, benches and lighting of the cemetery. Think long-term about the landscape. Will trees cause damage in the future? Are they healthy? Consider how the cemetery is currently used and determine circulation of people and/or cars within its boundaries. Consider security issues and the need for fences. Remember that landscape

Restoration Resources

There are many good resources for more information about cemetery preservation, including books, non-profit organizations, and Internet sites. For more information, check out the following:

Graveyard Preservation Primer

A Graveyard Preservation Primer by Lynn Strangstad. This book covers the entire spectrum and includes surveying a cemetery to determine what most needs to be repaired or restored, preparing a plan for a restoration project, documenting data from and about the stones, cleaning, repairing and resetting stones.

AGS

The Association for Gravestone Studies was founded in 1977 for the purpose of furthering study and preservation of gravestones. (413) 772-0836. www.gravestonestudies.org.

SOC

Save Our Cemeteries, Inc. is a non-profit organization established in 1974 to preserve, protect, and promote historic cemeteries of New Orleans. (504) 525-3377. www.saveourcemeteries.org.

St. Louis Cemetery #1

Learn more about preservation efforts at St. Louis Cemetery #1, New Orleans through the website:

www.noladeadspace.org

This project is a joint effort by the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation Office of Cultural Development and Tourism, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, Save Our Cemeteries, Inc., The Archdiocese of New Orleans, The Graduate School of Fine Arts University of Pennsylvania, The School of Architecture Tulane University, and others.

Chicora Foundation

The Chicora Foundation, Inc. is located in Columbia, South Carolina and specializes in cemetery history and preservation. (813) 787-6910. www.chicora.org.

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aesthetics have changed over the years. Don't try to apply your personal aesthetic to an historic cemetery.

5. Prioritize the work. Consider the needs of the particular cemetery and create a list of projects based on those needs. Is the cemetery secure? Has it been documented? Are all the graves identified? Are there tombs at risk of collapse? Is historical research needed? Keep in mind the need for both short-term and long-term efforts. Assess the resources you currently have available.

6. Consider treatments. Conservation of stone monuments, sculpture and ironwork is usually the last effort that should be undertaken. Know the strengths and limitations of people assisting in the preservation effort. Cleaning stones should be done with the gentlest means possible. Begin with water and a soft brush. Do not use household bleach or abrasive techniques. The repair of tombstones and monuments requires previous experience with historical materials and treatments. Only skilled conservators should undertake restoration of tablets and sculpture.

7. Examine maintenance issues. Regularly scheduled maintenance for the monuments and grounds of the cemetery is an excellent way to practice preventative preservation. Maintain the landscaping next to tombs. Keep in mind that caution must be used when operating power equipment near masonry or ironwork. Training for maintenance and ground crews will minimize damage to markers.

8. Seek professional assistance. Conservation treatments are frequently time consuming and expensive. Contract with people

who have experience with historical materials and who respect the original fabric of the tombs. Ask contractors for details about their previous work. Can they provide a written plan for their proposed work that includes materials to be used in the treatments? Are they members of professional organizations such as the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC)? Are they insured?

9. Involve the community. Seek volunteers within the community. Use the cemetery as an educational and historical resource. Consider involving elementary schools, high schools, and colleges in projects. Cemeteries can be places to learn about science, math, art, ethnography, and history (See www.angelfire.com/ky2/cemetery or www.history.org/history/teaching/graveyard2.htm for examples). Involve the community in fund-raising efforts, such as annual cemetery tours.

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