

# GENTREK – Cemetery Research

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Why visit a cemetery if you already have a birth and death date for your ancestor?

Because you don't know what you will find.

Nearby gravestones may lead you to other family members. Smaller grave markers may be for children who died in infancy for whom no other records exist. Flowers left on a grave may lead you to living descendants. Note: you may not be the only one researching these people. Leave a card with your address and email on it. You can have plastic ones made that withstand humid weather conditions.

## Let's cover the following topics

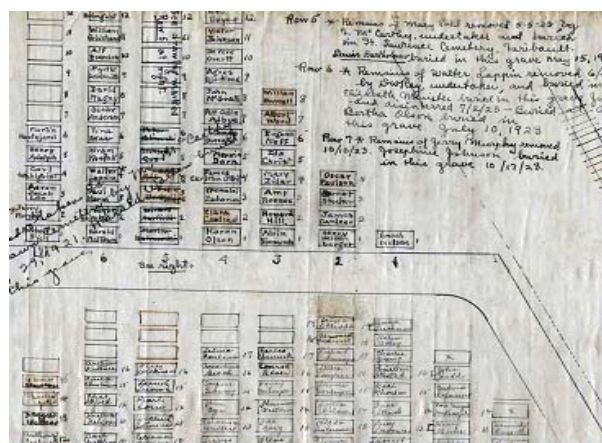
- ✓ How to Prepare for Your Cemetery Research
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## How to Prepare for Your Cemetery Research

List whom you are looking for and their death dates by location. I've created a utility to do this, if your software cannot. Email me for details.

Determine where your ancestor is buried. Death records often contain this information, as do obituaries. Published cemetery surveys (books or online) may list your ancestors. And do not overlook family members—they may know of family burial locations or may be able to track down a mass or prayer card or a mention in the family Bible.

Funeral homes and morticians can greatly assist you in locating cemetery records. Funeral records may yet exist containing a wealth of information, including the burial location. Funeral directors have knowledge of most cemeteries in their area, and sometimes they are able to help you contact family members. If a funeral home is no longer in business (yes, even morticians and their businesses die), then check with other area funeral homes for where the old records are stored.



The Internet is a valuable source for cemetery records. Many sites offer links to online cemetery records or you can use your favorite search engines to search for a specific cemetery. Special geographic place name search engines can also help to locate a cemetery, though the information available on the Internet varies from place to place. The US Geographic Names Information Server, for example, allows you to narrow down your search by selecting cemetery as the feature type. I'll list more Internet Cemetery resources with the bibliography.

Once you have the cemetery, write or call the cemetery or caretaker. The sexton may even have burial registers, plat maps or plot records available for visitors.

### ***How to Plan***

Spring and fall are the best weather conditions for outdoor activities. Follow the weather forecasts and keep an umbrella at hand for umbrellas block harsh sunlight as well as rain.

Use a backpack or tote bag for camera, recorder, fresh batteries, film, tapes, notebook, pen or pencil, bottled water, labels, etc.

Wear clothing to protect you from insects, overexposure to the sun, and poison ivy or poison oak, etc. A walking stick can be used to poke around and prevent snake or scorpion bites. Have a first aid kit handy, regardless. I always carry a lunch and snacks to save time and further expense.

Another good piece of equipment is a pair of binoculars. It can save countless steps and make it easier to locate graves.

Speaking of saving steps, LuAnn Folkers, of Des Moines, Iowa, and her husband do cemetery research together. They often head off in separate directions "when looking for graves in a cemetery, and it always seems like the one who finds a grave is never the one who has the clipboard, notebooks, etc., and the person that does have them is usually on the other side of the cemetery."

To remedy that, they purchased a pair of small walkie-talkies that have a two-mile range. "Now we can confer with each other without losing our place in the cemetery, or one can sit in the car with the books and the laptop computer and the other can dictate the findings. It also gives great peace of mind in knowing that help is at hand should one of us twist an ankle." If two or more of you go, this is a handy idea. I think cell phones are even better — then you could dial 911, too!

Look for CSA Iron Crosses usually found at the foot of the grave and GAR markers which are usually smaller and may be found by the headstone or footstone. GCH Jayne CW mentions that the "best time to look for military graves is just after Memorial Day. Most VFW's and American Legions put flags on the graves."

## ***How to Locate Your Ancestor's Gravesite in the Cemetery***

Large cemeteries often provide printed listings of grave locations and cemetery maps. Many published cemeteries are listed in rows; others in alphabetical order.

Cemeteries are usually divided off in Sections, Rows, and Plots. Old rural cemeteries either started burial by the road and main entrance, or at the very back of the cemetery and come forward. Find the original main entrance to orient your search. Most of the old cemeteries buried in somewhat chronological order in rows. Your ancestor's date of death could be a strong clue for location.

Look for large family stones with several family members spanning many years. Check other names on gravestones for possible relatives or collateral families. Small unmarked stones may indicate children that died in their infancy. Make a note of the physical relationship between gravestones as well.

Once you find your ancestor's gravestone, write its location in your notes. Also record how the cemetery is laid out: north, south, east or west.

If your ancestor doesn't have a gravestone, look for spouse, child or relative close by; or look about 6 feet from where the headstone should be for a "foot stone." Gravestones are at the head of the grave. Foot stones at the foot of the grave. A foot stone is usually about 2 inches by 4 inches and may have the ancestor's initials engraved on the top.

## ***How to Read Information on the Gravestone***

After finding the grave, make a written notation in your handy notebook. Note name, death date, years, months, days lived and motto if one, and decorations. Write down names, dates and inscriptions exactly as they appear on the stone. It is too easy to make assumptions in the excitement of the moment, and you will want an accurate record to continue your research. Some stones will have both husband and wife on same stone; some have separate, adjacent stones.

Note if the lettering is cursive or block lettering. You might want to gently run your fingers over the letters to help interpret a worn stone. Do not to miss the back of the stones as they, too, can contain important information.

Sketch any symbols that you are unfamiliar with in order to look them up later. In another presentation or on ShoeString Genealogy I will give you a list of gravestone symbols and their meanings. These symbols or emblems may be valuable clues to membership in organizations which may have information about your ancestor.

## ***What to Record from the Gravestone***

Write all gravestone data in your notebook. Make notation of description, height, width, thickness dimensions, and physical condition. You can even draw a simplified map of stone locations if there are several together, noting driveways, fences, trees, etc. Consider using a cassette recorder or even a video camera as you move around the cemetery. You can read off names, dates and inscriptions easily and make note of locational information, such as when you start a new row. This provides a backup for any of your written transcriptions.

## ***Cemetery Photography Tips***

Pictures are worth a thousand words (and are much better for gravestones than chalk or shaving cream!). You might use hand clippers to clear brush away from the stone and then use a nylon (never wire) bristled brush and plain water to clean the stone from bottom to top, rinsing well as you go. A bright sunny day and a mirror to help reflect the sunlight on the stone can really help to bring out the carved lettering.

The best time to photograph is between 10:30 am and 2:30 pm. The shadows on the letters are more pronounced with the sun at an angle. Depending if stone faces east or west, will determine the best time to photograph. Some old rural cemeteries have stones that face every direction and angle, alas.

Have your camera loaded with film before you leave for the cemetery and make sure it is working properly. I recommend 400 ASA (speed) film for gravestone photography. If the stone is hidden in deep shadows, use the flash. Carry a back up roll of film in your cemetery backpack or tote bag.

Take a photo of your ancestor's stone straight on with little background included. Then take the same photo with more background showing. If husband and wife are buried together, try to get both stones into the same photo, as well as separate photos.

Photograph the cemetery entrance and take a general photo of the cemetery. If several family members are buried close, get an over all panoramic of the stones.

Avoid getting your shadow in the photo (tacky). Avoid taking a photo looking directly into the sun (washed out).

If birds have perched on a stone, take a soft rag and water to gently remove residue before taking a photo. Many researchers stand way too far away from a stone when taking a photo. Then they can't even read the letters with a microscope. Get a good well-defined, detailed, close-up photo.

If you have traveled several hundred miles to visit the cemetery, get your photos developed as soon as you leave the cemetery. Use a 1-hour process available in the local town, if possible, for it is worth the cost after driving that far.

Using sticky labels, write the name of the deceased, dates, *etc.*, then place the label on the back of the photo ASAP. Do not write on the back of the photo with a ball point pen.

• Many cameras have a handy UV (Ultra Violet) filter. Try using the UV filter and just look through the view finder to "read" the name and dates. Sometimes this little trick makes the letters clearer and easier to read. When you return home, place your photos and negatives in a "cemetery album" so as not to lose them.

### ***Gravestone Preservation and Care***

• **NEVER EVER RUB, SCRUB, or SCRATCH** the headstones with anything. This will ruin the letters and surface, causing rapid deterioration. **NEVER** spray or use a cleaning solution on the stone for it, too, could cause permanent damage.

• Some folks try and repair stones with home made concrete mixture causing possible further damage. Contact a local gravestone company for information.

### ***How to Make a Rubbing from the Gravestone***

• Personally I don't care for this practice, but some folks like to make one. Please be careful not to damage the stone. There are tombstone rubbing kits available for purchase that have texture sensitive papers like rice paper and a large thick dark crayon. When you use the kit you have to keep the paper in place with tape and fight the wind. Some folks have used brown (or white) craft or butcher paper to make rubbings.

• Many people have "special methods" for cleaning old gravestones. **Don't do it!**

• You may need some weed cutters to cut away weeds or briars.

• Do not try to pull out a stone that has partially sunken because of time. There might be a hair line fracture and the stone could break in half. If a piece of the stone is already broken off, lying by the remainder, prop it up against the remainder so the sexton can see it. Make a note in your notebook.

• Sometimes you can find a sunken stone with a knitting needle or coat hanger wire. When using this technique you have to be careful so as not to split or fracture a sunken stone, especially if it is a soft limestone.

• If your ancestor's stone is timeworn, you might consider having a new one engraved and place slightly in front of existing stone and leaving the original stone in place.

## ***Wrapping it up***

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Double check to make sure you haven't left anything in the cemetery such as a camera, film, purse, umbrella, bag, wrappers, *etc.* Be neat: put everything in your vehicle and take inventory.

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When you return home, make sure you have labels on the back of photos with data. Describe your trip and the location of the cemetery using your word processor. Place your photos and negatives in your "Cemetery Album" ASAP, to prevent loss.

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Always verify information found on the headstones. Just because it's "engraved in stone" doesn't mean that it is accurate. Often dates are written wrong or names are misspelled. Verify, verify, verify. Enjoy your cemetery research; gather your ancestors' information; and do leave gravestones in as good as or better than the condition in which you found them.

## ***Bibliography and Links***

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Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo, *Your Guide to Cemetery Research*,  
Published by F & W Publications, Incorporated  
ISBN: 1558705899  
Street price: under \$15.00

### **Cemetery Junction**

Directory of cemeteries linked to transcriptions entered by volunteers on a wide variety of sites around the Internet. The focus is on the United States and Australia.

### **Cemetery Photos**

Helps people obtain photos of headstones in areas that they can't get to themselves. The site currently lists over 6000 volunteers covering 20 Countries.

### **Find a Grave**

Growing, searchable database of cemeteries and gravesites.

### **Interment.net**

Over 3 million cemetery records in nearly 8 thousand cemeteries submitted by volunteers around the world. Also includes photographs, history, maps of cemeteries and driving directions.

### **Nationwide Military Gravesite Locator**

Search most of the 120 Department of Veterans Affairs' national cemeteries for burial locations.

### **US Cemetery Records**

US cemetery transcription listings listed by state. Browse these listings for particular cemeteries in each state that have interments found online.

## USGenWeb Tombstone Transcription Project

Volunteers transcribing and recording cemeteries in their local areas to share with others online.

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## Virtual Cemetery

Collection of tombstone photos and fully searchable archive of transcriptions contributed by volunteer visitors at Genealogy.com.

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## Free Genealogy Lookups

Cemetery lookups from volunteers.

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Start planning your next cemetery trip and how you can improve your work based on what you learned.

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