



# Careful Research in Cemeteries



The etymology of the word *cemetery* tells us that it comes from the Greek word *koimeterion*, which means *sleeping chamber*. When we see that *cemetery* came into common use only in the 19th century, gradually replacing such terms as *burial ground* and *grave yard*, we can reasonably suppose that a corresponding change in social attitudes toward death was taking place. This article does not explore that history, but it might be useful to keep it in mind when visiting a cemetery to do historical research of one kind or another.

This is an elementary, introductory article, intended to suggest resources and issues in the use of a cemetery for the purpose of historical research. About that activity, a word of caution is in order: It might actually be somewhat tactless, or worse, to say “*use* of a cemetery.” We can use cemeteries for a number of legitimate reasons, (see box) but the fact remains that we are *using* them. Since cemeteries are such valued places in communities, a special burden is placed on those who use them for anything but their intended primary purpose. The doing of research in cemeteries cannot be done, in short, without exercising extraordinary care every step of the way.

It is also important to ask permission first before entering a cemetery to do any kind of research. It is not only the courteous thing to do, it is prudent. Section 306.13 of Minnesota Statutes provides that cemetery employees may be entitled to police powers:

The trustees of any cemetery association may appoint such superintendents, security guards, gardeners, and agents as they may deem advisable, and, upon taking and subscribing an oath similar to that required from constables, every such appointee shall have all the rights and powers of a police officer within and adjacent to the cemetery grounds.

Research in cemeteries includes the study of grave markers and tombstones. (The former is a general term for the objects that mark a burial site that is below the surface of the ground, which may or may

not be made of stone. “Tombstones,” strictly speaking, refer to above-the-ground burial places, where bodies are entombed. \*) Experts advise paying attention to the content, style, and design of the inscriptions, the material used, and the general orientation of the marker relative to its surroundings.

You will find a useful general presentation of the factors that one should consider in Veronica Taylor’s “Caring for Your Local Cemetery,” Number 9, 1988, in the Illinois Preservation Series, published by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. (Old State Capitol, Springfield, IL 62701) She discusses how to plot the physical features of a cemetery, interpreting the type of stone used for the grave markers, types of

Tim Talbott, Curator of History at the Early American Museum in Mahomet, Illinois, spells out some of the reasons for doing research in cemeteries in “‘Unearth’ the Past in Cemeteries,” which is #5 in a series of “How to...” pamphlets published by the Association of Illinois Museums and Historical Societies. Talbott states,

Aside from the obvious genealogical information found on gravestones, cemeteries offer a vast array of other clues about the past. Information about attitudes towards death and religious beliefs, social customs, prevailing architectural and decorative tastes, technological developments, the work of stone carvers, settlement patterns, occupations, fraternal membership, military service and even epidemics and life expectancy are revealed not only in the gravemarkers, but also in the physical layout and design of the cemetery grounds. It is not unusual for cemeteries to also be havens for wildlife, native prairie grasses, and forbs. The opportunities for research and discovery abound in local cemeteries.

weathering, techniques of repairing and maintenance, and even how to promote a cemetery conservation project.

For a more thorough, more technical treatment of these issues, see A. K. Zielinski, *Conservation of Cemeteries: The Treatment, Repair and Maintenance of Cemetery Objects and Their Environment*, a Special Publication of Roberts Seymour & Associates Ltd.; Toronto: RestorTech Press, 1988. Zielinski discusses the historical context for research in cemeteries, how to develop a comprehensive conservation plan, and technical aspects of monumental stone. He presents several illustrative case studies, and offers “Five Commandments of Cemetery Conservation.” Briefly stated, these are:

1. Adopt a Minimum Intervention Approach. That is, “Less is always more.” Resist the urge to “improve” the site; tidying up is not



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conservation. “Do not rearrange markers. Do not recarve inscriptions.”

2. Ensure new solutions do not introduce new problems. This can arise, for example, in resetting stones on new, more solid foundations, which is an especially tricky business, calling for expert assistance.

3. Invest in maintenance. “A conscientiously applied maintenance program is the best insurance available against future budget demands on the community.”

4. Invest in planning and documentation. “Stay away from ad hoc repair.” That is, individual acts of repair should be done within a comprehensive plan.

5. Invest in education. Secure support by engaging community members. For example, keep them informed about the project through workshops on the various key issues.

marker, *photography* is probably the best way. Mary-ellen Jones, of the Manuscripts Division of the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, wrote “Photographing Tombstones: equipment and techniques,” AASLH Technical Leaflet #92, in 1977. Though many of its suggestions for particular kinds of equipment are now out of date, the leaflet addresses basic principles and questions of methodology in useful ways.

The booklet, “Tracing Your Ancestors,” from the MHS Reference Library, gives interesting specific techniques for cemetery research.

When checking gravestones in a small cemetery, you will notice that the graves are laid out in rows, with an occasional aisle. If you want to be certain you check each stone, follow this procedure:

1. Determine which way the aisles run, and how it will be easiest to check the cemetery.
2. Take four sharpened sticks with bright ribbons attached, and lay out the markers shown on the map: A and B.

3. When you have examined the stones within the area marked by sticks A and B, move sticks A to positions C, and continue until the entire cemetery is checked.

4. Draw a rough map of the cemetery, and put numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.) showing the locations of gravestones you recorded. Number the inscriptions to correspond with the map.

SHPQ, Minnesota Historical Society



The gateway to the cemetery is on the former site of the Pleasant View Church (187–1955) in Rock County.

## Tips for gathering information

When *copying* the inscription on a grave marker, copy it exactly, in every regard, including errors. *Rubbings* capture the entire inscription, are fun to do, and can become works of art in their own right. They can be difficult to do correctly and without damaging fragile markers. For obtaining information from the

\* This distinction is from Loren H. Horton’s pamphlet, “Cemeteries: Research Tools for the Past,” No. 2 in “The Idea Series, Practical Guides for the Historian.” (Iowa City: DCL, 1989)

involved. The State Archaeologist’s Office (SAO) and the Indian Affairs Council (MIAC) have devised explicit procedures for handling accidental uncovering of human remains.

These issues are also covered in state law, specifically in *Minnesota Statutes 1986*, Chapter 307, “Private Cemeteries.” In particular, see section 307.8, “Damages, Illegal Molestation of Human Remains; Burials; Cemeteries; Penalty.” Subdivision 1 of that section is explicit and comprehensive:

It is a declaration and statement of legislative intent that all human burials and human skeletal remains shall be accorded equal treatment and respect for human dignity without reference to



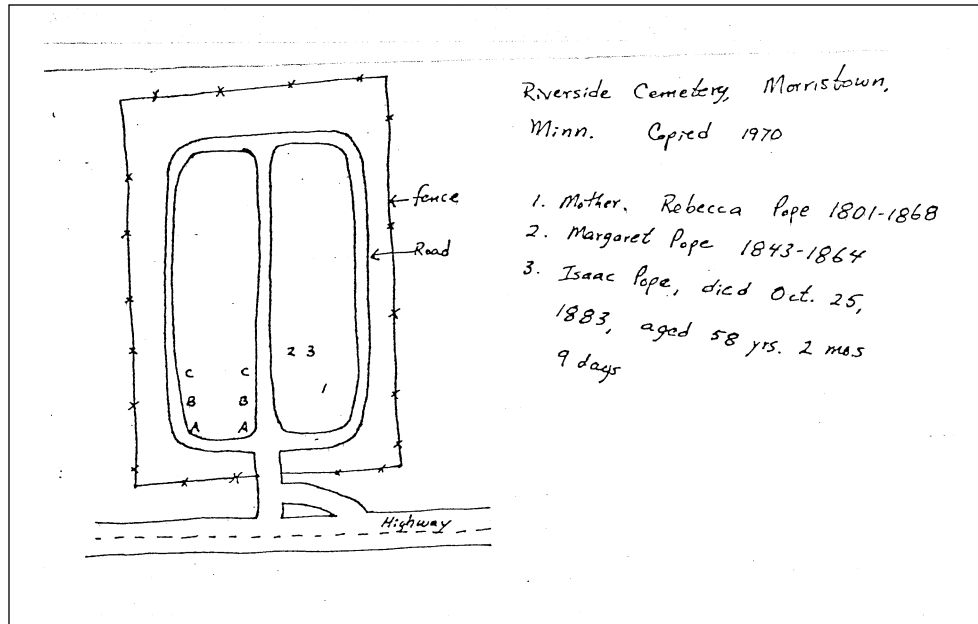
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their ethnic origins, cultural backgrounds, or religious affiliations. The provisions of this section shall apply to all human burials or human skeletal remains found on or in all public or private lands or waters in Minnesota.”

The remaining nine subdivisions spell out penalties, conditions, accountability, staffing and organization of enforcement. Basically, it is a felony to willfully disturb a burial ground. The State Archaeologist’s office can provide further information on these matters.

*This is a copy of a chart made during actual cemetery research in Morristown, Minnesota, in 1970.*



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### For further reading:

National Register Bulletin #41  
 Guidelines for Evaluating and Registering  
 Cemeteries and Burial Sites  
 U.S. Department of the Interior  
 National Park Service  
 Cultural Resources

American Institute for Conservation  
 1400 16th St., NW, Suite 340  
 Washington, D.C. 20036  
 (202) 232-6636

Association for Gravestone Studies (AGS)  
 30 Elm Street  
 Worcester, MA 01609  
 (508) 831-7753

Schlereth, Thomas J.  
*Material Culture Studies in America*  
 Nashville: American Association for State and Local  
 History

Strangstad, Lynnette  
*A Graveyard Preservation Primer*  
 Nashville: American Association for State and Local  
 History, 1988