

History of the Chatham County Cemetery Survey

From 1989 through 2001, under the direction of the late Will Heiser, CCHA volunteers identified cemeteries from published maps and then called on the citizens of Chatham County to help identify others. Calls poured in and the volunteers visited hundreds of sites to record information about each cemetery and all of the individual gravestones located there. By late 2001, more than 550 gravesites had been reported and a majority of them had been visited. All told, volunteers recorded information from more than 27,000 inscribed grave markers.



This information as well as information about the location and condition of each cemetery was entered into the CCHA's Cemetery Survey database, which serves as the county's official record of gravesites.



Wanting the cemetery information that had been collected made available to the public, even though realizing that the cemetery survey would always be a work in progress, the CCHA published the two-volume *Gravesites of Chatham County North Carolina* in 2002. More recently, the gravesite data have been made available on the Internet through a site called CemeteryCensus.com, hosted by Allen Dew. This site makes searching the Chatham County data by name or by cemetery very easy, and unlike the *Gravesites* volumes, it is updated regularly. It also includes photos, when available.

In 2006, a small group of volunteers renewed the effort to find and document Chatham's unvisited gravesites. These volunteers continue to research cemetery reports, contact property owners, and search for remote sites--time-consuming and sometimes difficult tasks. Most of the easily-identified and accessible sites, like church graveyards, have now been inventoried. The reported sites that have not yet been visited are often remote and their locations uncertain; in many cases they were reported by individuals now deceased. Yet reports of new or unvisited sites continue to come in and the community has been generous in helping to locate these old gravesites.

As of December 2016, the Chatham County Cemetery Survey contained nearly 600 cemeteries and more than 33,000 inscribed markers. Cemetery location data gathered by the project are shared with the county mapping office, and the information is displayed on the county's GIS website.

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