

## Tips for Photographing Gravestones and Cemeteries

1. Be prepared. Overgrown sites may require a hike through briars and bugs. A hat and gloves can come in handy. Don't forget the digital camera and extra batteries. Make a supply list: Drinking water, sunscreen, bug spray, paper towels or rags, a notebook, and a clipboard with an attached pencil are useful, as are clippers to remove brush obscuring markers, a soft brush to brush away debris.

2. Start with one or several views of the entire cemetery or graveyard.

3. Frame each gravemarker to include the entire marker with a little of the surrounding area included for perspective. If you think it may be difficult to see and read the inscription on the marker, or if there are particularly interesting carvings, then take some additional close-ups of the inscription or carvings. Digital cameras eliminate the costs of taking several shots—so take advantage of this feature. (See examples at right.)

4. Vertical markers are best photographed by kneeling to face the stone. Flat markers are best photographed from above.

5. Include pictures of family surname markers where each burial has foot markers. Sometimes, only the first and middle names are on the foot markers which have a family name marker to identify the plot.

6. Give some attention to the background. The area behind the stone can enhance the photograph or detract from it. Avoid distracting background or filling most of the frame with the stone.

7. Photographs of gravestones are best made when the sunlight falls across the face of the stone at an angle. Avoid getting your own shadow or reflection in the photo. In Chatham County, like most of the southeast, gravestones most often face east, so mornings offer the best lighting. Of course, some stones will not follow this east-facing rule, and others will be shaded by trees or buildings and will never get optimal lighting.





8. Many sources suggest that a way to eliminate the photographer's dependence on the position of the sun is to use a mirror to alter the angle at which the reflected light strikes the stone. We have also successfully used a sheet of foil placed over a piece of cardboard for this purpose. These techniques allow you to experiment to find the best lighting to highlight the carving and inscription on the stone. It takes two people to do this effectively--one to hold the mirror/foil in place and the other to take the photographs.

9. It is a good idea to take along some clippers for cutting grass or brush that might obscure the stone. In old, overgrown graveyards, you might find stones totally obscured by huge boxwood bushes or other plants. Some of these plants are historically interesting artifacts that date to the time the graves were put into use. These should not be disturbed. Make photographs by doing the best you can in these instances, or make notes if it is not possible to photograph some stones.

10. To clean or not to clean? The first rule in deciding whether and how to clean a stone is to **do no harm**. We suggest that you attempt to clean a stone only if the inscription cannot be read because a heavy growth of lichens obscures the carving. It is probably better to leave lichen on the stone, although it is sometimes possible to safely remove it from a sound stone with water and a wooden or soft plastic scraper (such as a popsicle stick or plastic table knife). If a stone shows any sign of crumbling or flaking, do not attempt to clean it. Just photograph it as it is. Loose dirt can be removed with a soft brush and water. A stiff bristle brush will damage the stone and should not be used.

Ready to send us some photos?

See [Instructions for sending digital photos to CCHA](#).