

How to Clean a Historic Cemetery

Before Any Work Begins

Research, Permission, Ownership

- Research existing information on the cemetery (County property records, NC Office of State Archaeology, CCHA records on CemeteryCensus.com, FindAGrave).
- Preservation and documentation of the cemetery should be the primary goals of the cleanup effort. What kind of cleanup tasks facilitate preservation of your site?
- Determine ownership of the cemetery property and any property you must cross to access the site and obtain permission to do work.

Determine Boundaries

- Mark visible graves with flags and look for linear patterns.
- Look for possible unmarked graves indicated by depressions.
- Once you've reached the perimeter of the visible burial area, it's a good idea to tape or rope the area to mark it from damage, development activities, etc.
- Look for perimeter walls or boundary-markers that might have existed – typically piles of stone, brick, or a line of planted trees, shrubs.
- Look for potential burials outside the obvious perimeter and add a buffer to the area.

Document

- Document the condition of the site before and after cleanup with photographs.
- Maps of the location of grave markers are very helpful, as are photographs of individual markers to save all inscriptions.
- Share documentation with the Chatham County Historical Association, which makes the documentation available on CemeteryCensus.com, works with Chatham County to map cemetery locations, and shares documentation with the State Cemetery Project.
- If the immediate area is to be disturbed, enlist a professional for a complete survey of burials and boundary determination.

Safe Cleaning Practices

Do No Harm Principle

- Work inside a historic cemetery should be done with special care to avoid causing damage to, or significant change to, the original setting.
- Safety of the human cleaners also should be considered. Unstable markers can injure or kill, and many sites also pose other risks of injury.
- Clean headstones only if dirt or biological matter must be removed to preserve the marker or to read the inscription for documentation. Only water or architectural quality chemicals and soft-bristled brushes should be used—no scrubbing! **If in doubt, don't clean!**

Landscaping

- **Take special care to maintain the original historic landscape features.** Trees, decorative shrubbery, boxwood, yuccas, periwinkle, etc. are integral elements to the burial site and contribute to the historic significance. NC cemetery law prohibits the removal of historic plantings.
- **Remove fallen/dead trees or limbs** that pose risk to grave markers, if possible.
- **Cut back weeds/overgrowth** (hand-held tools/equipment only, no chemicals)

Grave Markers

- **Resist the urge to clean markers just to make them more attractive. Cleaning can contribute to the erosion of stones and** should only be done when dirt or biological matter has built up — causing damage to the stone or making it unreadable – and when the marker is stable enough to withstand the procedure. If a stone requires cleaning, **you should only use water and a soft bristled brush** or an approved biological cleaner such as D2 Biological Solution. (Note that it can take a lot of water to safely clean a marker, and access to sufficient water is often unavailable.) **Some grave markers should not be cleaned by any method.**
- **Do not clean markers that are broken, cracking, leaning, or wobbly.**
- **If you find a broken stone on the ground, DO NOT RELOCATE IT.** Leave it in place, document it and its location with photographs and notes, and, if possible, hire a professional to repair it.

Long-Term Care

Cemetery cleanups are not “one and done.” Make a plan for on-going, regular maintenance that will contribute to the preservation of the site.

Do Nots

- Do not use chemicals on the grave markers or the landscaping, including herbicides like RoundUp. **NONE OF THESE SHOULD BE USED ON STONES:** soap, bleach, toothpaste, vinegar, Wet & Forget, hydrogen peroxide, household cleaners, etc.
- Do not use high-pressure equipment to clean markers, i.e., pressure washing.
- Do not use wire or stiff bristles on grave markers. No scrubbing!
- Do not use motorized equipment with wheels inside the cemetery (no lawn mowers, tractors, forklifts, etc.). Hand-held equipment like string trimmers should be used with care, as they can damage grave markers.

Links to Additional Resources

National Park Service article on cleaning grave markers: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/cemetery-preservation-course-cleaning-grave-markers.htm>

National Park Service article on Cemetery Preservation:
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/cemetery-preservation-course.htm>

National Center for Preservation Technology & Training Cemetery Conservation Resources:
<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/ncptt/cemetery-conservation.htm>