

Cemeteries 101: An Overview of Tools and Techniques for Basic Cemetery Rehabilitation

by Joanna Wilson

Cemeteries are often considered to be places of rest and contemplation, their serene settings serving as peaceful environments for quiet reflection. For many people, however, an unkempt cemetery has the opposite effect. The sight of rampant weed growth, browned and brittle flowers, and human litter brings out the urge to tidy and restore. The presence of vandalism in the form of overturned or broken stones only reinforces this response. As a result, many previously neglected historic cemeteries have been restored and are maintained by both individuals and groups of like-minded preservationists.

In order for such projects to be successful, however, a certain degree of preparation is necessary. Activities undertaken with the best intentions but without adequate planning can often have disastrous consequences for the cemetery and, occasionally, the restorer. As with any undertaking, it is best to research the techniques you wish to use and develop a solid plan before setting foot in your cemetery of choice. Keep in mind that restoration does not necessarily mean returning a cemetery to its original condition. Tilting headstones and eroding inscriptions are part of the character achieved through time, and should not be seen as items to be "fixed."

For your first activity it may be best to select a small cemetery so that you are not overwhelmed by your own project. Make certain that you have the landowner's permission to access the cemetery. Talk to friends and family about forming a "restoration team," or approach a church or community group with the same idea. Once you've selected a cemetery and formed your "team," the following tips may help you to plan your project. For the purposes of this article, only basic restoration techniques will be discussed.

Safety should be your first concern in planning your activities. Make sure that everyone involved is both capable of physical labor and familiar with any potentially dangerous tools. Bring a cooler with plenty of water, and pack sunscreen, first aid and snakebite kits, insect repellent, and flashlights in your vehicle. A brimmed hat, sturdy boots, pants, long-sleeved shirts, and work gloves are items that all team members should have. Finally, be aware that neglected cemeteries, like any overgrown area, are likely to harbor hazards such as stinging insects, snakes, hidden depressions, old barbed-wire fencing and other dangerous items. Team members must exercise caution at all times.

Once you have selected a cemetery, found a team, and dealt with safety issues, it is time to plan your project. In many cases, simply removing overgrowth can drastically improve the appearance of a historic cemetery. Keep in mind, however, that clearing a cemetery is not like mowing a lawn. Older cemeteries contain stones and markers of all shapes and sizes, some of which may have fallen and none of which are located in nice straight lines. As well, be aware that many of the plants you may find growing on and around gravesites were placed there purposefully. These may include vinca vine, periwinkle, ivy, lilies, yucca, cedars, and willow, and such plants should be left in place. Take some time to research local cemeteries and become familiar with local burial customs.

When organizing your team, be sure to discuss the need for careful clearing as metal tools can easily scratch, gouge, or even break older and more fragile stones. If you wish to clear a cemetery, plan to work exclusively with hand tools until you are certain that all stones have been located. For a project such as this you may need the following items: pinflags or flagging tape for marking stone locations, machetes, hand clippers, a small bow saw, rakes with plastic or bamboo tines, and garbage bags. Before tackling your project, take photographs of the cemetery in its current condition. These will serve as a reference for future projects. Once this is done it is time to determine the locations of all headstones and other grave markers. Beginning with a known or presumed boundary, work your way carefully and methodically through the cemetery. Mark the location of anything that might be a grave marker with pinflags, flagging tape or other highly visible material. DO NOT use spray paint or whitewash, as these cannot be removed from stone. When you are finished, photograph the cemetery again from various angles for your records.

Once all markers and potential markers have been identified the process of clearing the cemetery may begin. Starting at your original boundary, work slowly from stone to stone, removing your pinflags or tape as you go. Weeds and grass growing immediately adjacent to a stone or marker should be pulled by hand to avoid nicking the stone with metal blades. Plants such as mosses, lichens, and ivies may be attached to stones, and should not be removed as the process can easily cause the stone itself to flake away. Once the immediate growth is cleared, surrounding growth may be removed with scissors or hand clippers. Be sure to clear a wide swath around each stone before utilizing any swing blade or machete. String trimmers may be used to clear large areas if no stones or markers are in evidence. Mowers are not recommended as they tend to fling small objects that may harm grave markers. Saplings and small-diameter trees may be removed using the bow saw, and should be cut as close to the ground surface as possible. Do not uproot trees, and avoid removing trees that do not immediately threaten the stability of grave markers. Grass clippings, weeds and other debris can be raked up and bagged as the project progresses. Finally, dust all stones and markers with a soft-bristled brush to remove any clippings and prevent moisture retention and possible staining.

As your project draws to a close, take a final series of photographs to document the work that you have done. Do not become discouraged if your project cannot be completed in a day, or if the results are not as spectacular as you had imagined. Cemetery restoration is truly a labor of love and, as with any worthwhile endeavor, takes both time and patience. It also requires maintenance, so ask your team members to help develop a long-term maintenance plan. This may be as simple as visiting your cemetery once a month to pick up trash, cut weeds, and monitor the condition of headstones and markers. Such visitation offers you the opportunity to observe your work in all seasons and invite new people to join in your activities, and may serve as a deterrent to vandalism. For advice regarding local cemeteries and to reach people with similar interests, contact your local genealogical or historical society. The internet can also be an excellent source of information regarding cemetery preservation. Two helpful and comprehensive sites are www.rootsweb.com and www.gravestonestudies.org, both of which have forums for questions and discussion.