

Washington State Cemetery Association

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~wapsgs/>

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Cleaning Headstones

by Andi MacDonald

When we want to know more about genealogical methods, we learn from professionals. We attend seminars, conferences, classes, and visit repositories to speak with the experts there. Why, then, do we accept anyone and everyone's methods for cleaning funerary objects or for reading them more easily? We shouldn't.

Who are the experts?

There are only a few honest sources of expert information when dealing with cemetery preservation (headstones, footstones, curbing, vaults, etc). It should be noted that each and every one of the sources listed would be the first to tell you they do not know everything about the subject. Experts, those that are true experts, will tell you they always learn something new. Those who don't always learn something new, limit themselves and their ability to be masters at a subject.

The first 'expert' would be the Association for Grave-stone Studies (AGS). If AGS doesn't approve, don't do it. Contact AGS for specific information on stone preservation. They have a wide variety of materials available for purchase, and quite a bit of information at their web site under FAQ's.

Then there are cemetery preservationists who specialize in doing hands-on work and in teaching others to do the work through lectures, classes, conferences, literature, etc. While there are many, here are those who head my list (contact information at end): Lyn Strangstad through her book, "A Graveyard Preservation Primer;" Jim and Minxie Fannin through their organization, Fannin-Lehner Preservation Consultants; and CR Jones, Preservation Consultant. Again, there are many other individuals/groups that are qualified, but these head my list of experts



Left: Marble headstone covered in dirt, grime, and black moss. Right: Headstone after cleaning with water, then non-ionic detergent, then household ammonia, and finally to destroy biological growth, with calcium hypochlorite.

on cemetery preservation. If you are considering having a class and want the best teacher, contact the individuals listed or contact your own state's cemetery preservation organization to ask whom they might recommend.

What to consider before deciding to clean a stone

The very first issue when considering cleaning a headstone is to determine what the stone is. Is it granite? Marble? Limestone? Slate? Sandstone? Or it is possibly another type such as concrete or wood? Each headstone (or headboard, if wood) is cleaned differently; that's why one person's methods may not work on the stone you are going to clean.

Other things to consider before cleaning are, who owns the headstone, is it sound (does it sound hollow when you rap your knuckles on it), is there plenty of water to complete the job, and how long ago it was cleaned. If you don't own the headstone, don't consider cleaning it—always get permission from the owner and realize that if it breaks, you may have to pay to have it fixed, or provide a new one. If you rap your knuckles on the stone and it sounds hollow, stay away! Too often these stones are hollow inside and mere water pressure could break it depending on its state. Also, if the stone is delaminating or flaking, don't clean it. If there is no water at the site and you would be hard pressed to bring in enough to rinse

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the stone, don't put water or anything else on it, including native materials such as dirt, grass, weeds, flowers, etc. If it was cleaned within 10 years, wait until a ten-year period has expired.

To quote Jeanne Robinson of the Oregon Historical Cemeteries Association, a cemetery preservationist who really cares, "Everything you take off (except particles of stone) will return. The dirt, algae, mildew, and biological growth are the result of climactic conditions, and they cause far less damage to the stone than the cleaning you are contemplating. When you're done and gone, they'll be back."

Types of Stone

In Washington state, there are three types of stone commonly used for headstones. They are granite, marble, and sandstone.

In our older cemeteries, marble was commonly used with a sandstone basestone. Marble is white when clean, and if dirty, can be black, covered in moss (see photos on page 1), and sometimes it appears as though it is sandstone. I've been fooled a few times. When marble 'sugars,' it is actually damaged. If a marble stone is sugaring, leave it alone. Cleaning a sugaring marble stone causes the surface to appear melted. Only a professional stone conservator should clean a sugaring marble headstone. While marble is typically white, it does also come in gray and pink. The gray marble stones can be confused with sandstone, the difference is in the grain. Generally, gray marble has streaks of white similar to a lightning flash in the sky.

Around the turn of the 20th century (1900), granite was most popular, especially polished granite. This is the best type of stone to encounter for cleaning as it usually cleans right up with water and a gentle brushing. I've never seen a polished stone need more than that and a buffing with a cotton cloth. Granite comes in a wide variety of colors including gray and pink. The way to tell if it is granite is that up close each color is like a tiny flat crystal, with a wide variety of shades throughout. Granite, when highly polished, is similar to a plate of glass—smooth and shiny.

Sandstone is the worst type of stone to clean. Not only is it easily damaged, it also likes to harbor biological growth. Moss and lichen gets their roots deep inside the little grains of sandstone and are very difficult to remove without also removing pieces of sandstone. Sandstone was commonly used, especially for 'tree trunk' stones. Sandstone actually appears as a sandcastle, all the grains compacted with a bit of water holding it all together in a shape.

Basic cleaning of all types of stones

If you have decided that a stone is fit for cleaning, these are the basic steps to follow.

Tools

- Water and lots of it
- Assorted sizes of soft bristle white nylon brushes (some people say natural bristle is okay). I use all white nylon toothbrushes, toilet brushes, tile brushes, fingernail brushes, etc. I stick with white because it has no dye to stain the stone, and if the handle rubs against the stone, it won't leave a large colored mark.
- For polished granite: a cotton lint-free rag for drying and polishing

Directions

1. Wet the stone thoroughly, starting at the bottom. If you start at the top, dirt may run down the stone and leave streaks that will never come out. A stone is like a sponge—it does soak up water. Soak it well.
2. Using a soft nylon bristle brush, start gently scrubbing at the bottom of the stone and work your way to the top. You may need more than one size of brush to reach inside carvings and some carvings may never be completely cleaned. Rinse occasionally and be sure the stone does not dry out while doing this.
3. Rinse thoroughly and let the stone dry. Look it over to see if it needs further cleaning. You may need to clean it again or pay special attention to carvings. If you need to clean just a small place, do wet the entire stone to prevent any staining from dirty water running down the stone.
4. If you are cleaning a polished granite stone, use the cotton, lint-free towel to dry it off and polish it. If you leave it to dry on its own, water spots form just like on a highly polished car.
5. Wait for the stone to dry before deciding whether or not to pursue further cleaning. Stones will lighten up tremendously as they dry.

Using a non-ionic detergent

If you have decided that a stone absolutely needs to be cleaned further, the next step is cleaning with a non-ionic detergent. Non-ionic detergents are safe on all stones. The only part of a granite stone that may need further cleaning are those areas not polished.

Tools

- Water and lots of it
- Assorted sizes of soft bristle white nylon brushes (some people say natural bristle is okay). I use all white nylon toothbrushes, toilet brushes, tile brushes, fingernail brushes, etc. I stick with white because it has no dye to stain the stone, and if the handle rubs against the stone, it won't leave a large colored mark.
- For polished granite: a cotton lint-free rag for drying and polishing
- Non-ionic detergent mixed 1/4 ounce with five (5) gallons of water. Note: I was trained to use only Orvus, a horse-cleaning product found at seed and feed stores, or Photo-Flo, a photograph cleaning product found at camera supply shops and some 1 hour photo stores. (For any other product, as long as it is non-ionic and pH balanced as these are, there shouldn't be a problem.)

Directions

1. Wet the stone thoroughly, starting at the bottom. If you start at the top, dirt may run down the stone and leave streaks that will never come out. A stone is like a sponge—it does soak up water. Soak it well.
2. Dip your brush into the bucket of non-ionic detergent and start gently scrubbing at the bottom of the stone and work your way to the top. You may need more than one size of brush to reach inside carvings. Rinse occasionally and be sure the stone does not dry out during the cleaning process.
3. Rinse thoroughly and let the stone dry. Look it over to see if it needs further cleaning. You may need to clean it again or pay special attention to carvings. If you need to clean just a small place, do wet the entire stone to prevent any staining from dirty water running down the stone.
4. If you are cleaning the unpolished areas of a polished granite stone, use the cotton, lint-free towel to dry the stone off and polish it. If you leave it to dry on its own, water spots form just like on a highly polished car.
5. Wait for the stone to dry before deciding whether or not to pursue further cleaning. Stones will lighten up as they dry.

Marble only

When additional cleaning is needed for marble ONLY, some good old household ammonia can be used. (Warning—never mistakenly use household vinegar as it will dissolve marble before your very eyes!) Household ammonia can be mixed 1 cup to 1 gallon of water and used following the same directions as for non-ionic detergent, above. When done cleaning with household ammonia, use hydriion test strips to be sure the surface of the stone is pH balanced. Extra rinsing may be required.

Biological growth

If there is black or carpet moss growing on a stone, it is very difficult to get rid of completely using the above cleaning methods. The tiny little tendrils grow into the pores of the stone and will live there and re-grow unless they are destroyed. If there is no biological growth on a stone, there is no need to use this product.

After you have used the above cleaning methods to completely remove dirt and grime, a solution of calcium hypochlorite and water may be used to destroy all the root systems. Some people say household bleach is okay, but it is NOT. Why? Sodium hypochlorite is standard household bleach. Sodium is detrimental to a stone and should never be used in any form on a stone. Calcium hypochlorite is also a bleach, but without the sodium.

Calcium hypochlorite (CH) is best known as “Shock,” “HTH,” or “Sock-It,” which is used in swimming pools. It can be bought in season at Wal-Mart or other large similar stores in small plastic pouches for only a few dollars. One package will last a very long time.

CH comes in a granular form, which must be mixed with warm water. It is best made into a thick paste using

hot water and placed in a jar with a good seal. Take it in this manner to the cemetery to be mixed with the cool water you’ll have there. Mix two (2) ounces of dry CH and 1 gallon of water. Do avoid breathing the chemical as it is caustic to your lungs.

Use the directions above under “Using a non-ionic detergent” for applying this product. In addition to the brushes, a wooden shishkabob skewer or toothpick can be used to get into tiny crevices to lift out carpet moss pieces. Be sure to rinse well, especially where wood was used on the stone.

When done using this product you MUST use hydriion test strips to test the surface of the stone. Be sure it is pH balanced in various places before you let it dry.

Conclusion

I’ve read articles recently that tell people to use a little water and clean only around the carving with a brush. This will cause streaking down the stone. Always wet the entire stone and brush the entire stone. An alternative would be to use a dampened sponge to lightly wet the area without any scrubbing. By lightly going over the face of the stone with the flat side of the sponge, the carving will remain dry and stand out for you.

Also being promoted is the use of chalk. Bill Spurlock of Saving Graves recently did some research by contacting Crayola, maker of sidewalk chalk. He also used some on a blackboard. The end result can be found at the Saving Graves web site. Suffice it to say that chalk is NOT a good product to use as it scratches the surface of the stone. Stone has a skin. If the surface is scratched, water can seep in and this, during freeze/thaw, can harm a stone from the inside out. Don’t use any product that can harm the surface of a stone.

Another thing being passed around is to use dirt or grass or weeds, or any other natural product found at the site. Dirt falls under the same category as chalk—it scratches the surface. Weeds, grass, and other natural products, especially when wet, turn to acidic mush. The product, being acidic, will harm the skin of the stone. Rain alone will not wash off all the particles that get into the pores of the stone.

Rubbings are something that a lot of people enjoy doing. A lot of cemeteries are banning this practice altogether so be sure to ask the owners if it is okay. If you must do rubbings, at least do them properly. Use artist’s tape instead of masking or packing or any other tape. Artist’s tape leaves very little residue. Use soft charcoal and a good, thin paper. Rub gently. Every time a rubbing is made, it can damage a stone. For instance, around carvings, the edges are knocked down just a bit, which means the skin is being attacked. So, take it easy. Stay away from hard crayons, or methods that require hard rubbing to get good results. I promote photography over rubbing and use photography myself. I have made rubbings and appreciate them, but a photograph is easier to maintain and easier on the stone. Lyn Strangstad’s book, “A Graveyard Preservation Primer,” discusses pho-

tography and how to achieve the best photos.

If you are interested in learning more about cemetery preservation, please contact the Association for Gravestone Studies, or one of the others mentioned here. We all want the same thing—to ensure these stones are here for many generations to come.

CONTACT INFORMATION

The Association for Gravestone Studies
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Greenfield, Massachusetts
01301
413 772-0836
info@gravestonestudies.org

OHCA
P. O. Box 802
Boring, OR 97009-0802
ohca@oregoncemeteries.com

WSCA
P. O. Box 103
Port Orchard, WA 98366
(360) 871-5694
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Fannin-Lehner
271 Lexington Rd
Concord, MA 01742-3722
(978) 369-6703

American Battle Monuments Commission

The American Battle Monuments Commission administers, operates and maintains twenty-four permanent American burial grounds, and twenty-seven separate memorials, monuments and markers on foreign soil. In addition, there are five memorials in the United States with one additional planned (The World War II Memorial).

In these cemeteries, there are 124,913 Americans. Over 30,000 are from WWI, more than 93,000 are from WWII, and 750 from the Mexican War. Additionally, 5,857 American veterans and others are interred at the Mexico City National Cemetery and the Corozal American Cemetery.

Commemorated individually by name on stone tablets are 94,120 American servicemen and women who were Missing in Action or buried at sea in their regions during the World Wars and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. In addition, the names of 37,275 Americans who lost their lives during the Korean War and in the Demilitarized Zone after the war are located in a computer database at the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington DC.

The Commission can assist you in your planned visit to any of their installations; can arrange for the placement of floral decorations at an individual's grave or memorialization site; and can give you information about and photographs of the headstone or marker of any individual buried or memorialized at our cemeteries or memorials. To see the floral price list:

You can request photographs (without charge) of one's headstone or marker located at our World War I and II overseas cemeteries; order flowers to be placed at a headstone or marker; or a free copy of the Honor Roll certificate for a deceased during the Korean War by writing:

Colonel Anthony N. Corea
Director of Operations and Finance
American Battle Monuments Commission
Courthouse Plaza II, Suite 500
2300 Clarendon Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22201
Telephone (703) 696-6897

Military Burials

Are you looking for the burial site of a United States veteran? If so, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Cemetery Administration might be able to help. They provide a service to family members and close friends of the deceased and will research their records for up to ten specific names per request. Due to time constraints, however, they cannot search for large groups based on surnames, units, wars, or residence.

No form is needed and there are no fees. When requesting a burial location search, you need only provide the following information on each individual:

- Full name (including any alternate spellings)
- Date and place of birth
- Date and place of death
- State from which the individual entered active duty
- Military service branch

Most requests take approximately four weeks for a reply. Be sure to include your return mailing address, phone number or Internet e-mail address with your request and send it to:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
National Cemetery Administration (402B)
Burial Location Request
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

The Veterans Administration's National Cemetery Administration can be found at <http://www.cem.va.gov/index.htm>.

State Mental Hospital Cemeteries

By Laurel Lemke, Western State Hospital Ombudsman

The Grave Concerns Association and patients at Western State Hospital have been working on the Western State Hospital Cemetery since February 2000. Members of the community, patients and staff volunteers work with the support of the local parks and WSH administration.

Over the past 16 months, virtually all the buried concrete markers have been uncovered by patients, including those under a growth of laurel. The City of Lakewood and Pierce County Parks Department have designated “zootax” funds for a split rail fencing around the perimeter where there currently is no hedge.

A team of eight leisure horticulture patients separated cuttings from the current privet hedges and over 1000 starts were planted in the WSH greenhouse to be planted next year to fill out the hedge. Sources for other support to do more landscaping and to plan and install a historical display are being sought.

The cemetery has long been used as a play area for dogs and their owners. When owners found out the area was actually a cemetery, they voluntarily moved their play group to another part of the park.

Eastern State Hospital uncovered markers in one of their two hillside cemeteries in August with the

support of community groups including a local bank. Under the direction of Patti Stimson, volunteer coordinator and president of Friends of Eastern State, the work was done on three hot August

and drainage was provided. A parking lot was established, sign erected, rosebushes planted and an arch established for wisteria (which has been subsequently damaged). The perimeter was

established and the field is planted with wild flowers which are mowed each fall. Dona Van Vorst, former Northern State and Portal staff, had collected the names of the burials. No names or individual markers are at the site.

The national association of mental health commissioners met last summer and wrote a statement of support for the ongoing care of cemeteries and their willingness to work with community groups.

For those who are interested in more information on mental hospital cemeteries, contact Larry Fricks at

Lfricks@dmh.dhr.state.ga.us for a copy of “The Georgia Story: How to Successfully Restore a State Hospital Cemetery.” He wrote the manual in 2000 under a federal grant through the National Empowerment Center.

WHO TO CONTACT
Western State Hospital Cemetery Laurel Lemke, WSH Ombudsman 9601 Steilacoom Blvd SW, Drawer E Lakewood WA 98498 (253) 761-7575 or 1-800-558-4737 lemkela@dshs.wa.gov
Eastern State Hospital Cemetery Medical Records W850 Maple St, Box A Medical Lake, WA (509) 299-3121
Northern State Hospital Cemetery

days. Work is being done (by DOC work release) on an appropriate sign, utilizing the old farm gate. There was a rededication on October 8, 2001.

Northern State Hospital’s cemetery received state funding in the early 1990’s (the only state hospital to receive funding at that time). The cemetery, which is adjacent to the abandoned dairy farm, was cleared out (e.g. trees, weeds, and blackberries removed). Soil was moved in to level the field

Laurel Lemke is the Western State Hospital Ombudsman and President of the Grave Concerns Association overseeing the WSH Cemetery. She can be reached at Drawer E, Western State Hospital, 9601 Steilacoom Blvd. S.W., Lakewood WA 98498, (253) 761-7575.

Cleveland High School and Comet Lodge Cemetery

On September 26th, work began with Cleveland High School (Seattle) students to work on oral interviews with Comet Lodge Cemetery as the topic. The program is being funded by a King County Cultural Education grant.

Our first day together was at the cemetery in the rain to discuss the background of the cemetery. It was also so the students would develop a respect for the cemetery. By the time they left, the students had developed a relationship with several headstones, seeing photos of the individuals they commemorated.

In class the following day, students listened with rapt attention as Andi MacDonald, WSCA president, explained in further detail the cemetery and its history, the grant program, and what the class can expect this trimester.

A diary of the program is being maintained online at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~wapsgs/WSCA/cleveland>. There are links on the page that connect to photos of students at work on various days, student papers, and topics (only thumbnails are currently available for legal reasons).

During the first trimester, which ends November 30th, Andi will work with 10th, 11th, & 12th graders in Faith Beatty's Language Arts class during first period.

The first trimester is split into three sections:

1st section--Intro/discuss topics

Make a trip to the cemetery to meet Tim O'Brien, Georgetown Historian, to give the students an overview/history of the cemetery and some of the area pioneers. Discuss topics and resource materials for each. Students will claim three topics and receive resource materials/listings, then meet with partner to discuss research. White papers will be discussed with samples provided.

2nd section--Research and white papers written

Students will conduct research and develop a minimum of 3 (but no more than 5) white papers using resource listing provided for their thesis.

3rd section -- develop oral interview questions

Students will use their white papers to develop

oral interview questions

During the second trimester, Andi will work with Ms Beatty's second period Drama as Lit class. The goal of the class will be to use oral interview questions developed by first trimester class, then contact individuals to interview them based on the questions

to be asked and make arrangements for interview. Students will then conduct oral interviews of those individuals.

Jack Straw Productions was asked to participate in the program and gladly accepted. Jack Straw Productions is based in the University of Washington area and does work with students around the Seattle area, teaching them the ins and outs of audio recording, working in radio, and interviewing



Students from Cleveland High School tour Comet Lodge Cemetery as part of the curriculum.

techniques.

Jack Straw Productions will be providing audio equipment to students for using during their oral interviews. They will also be working directly with students to teach them the skills they need to conduct the interviews. Much of the work by Jack Straw is an in-kind donation.

For more information on Jack Straw, visit <http://www.sonarchy.org/>.

As a benefit to teachers working with the program, a renowned Seattle Historical Museum oral historian and teacher will be teaching the teachers how to teach the students oral interview skills.

During the third trimester, Andi will work with Ms Beatty's 11th grade Language Arts Honors students to transcribe the oral interviews conducted in the second trimester. Students will then edit the oral interviews for publication as a booklet.

At the end of the school year, students working on the project will be invited to a special party just for them.

It's WSCA's hope that the Comet Lodge Cemetery rededication ceremony will be held concurrently. We'll keep you informed.

For more information on this project, contact Andi at (360) 871-5694 or andimac@oz.net.

Cemetery Preservation Alliance

California Historic Cemetery Alliance

Web Site: <http://www.califhistcemeteries.org/>

Email: chca@inreach.com

Contact: CHCA

P. O. Box 255345

Sacramento, CA 95865-5345

Oregon Historic Cemeteries Association

Web Site: <http://www.oregoncemeteries.com>

Email: ohca@oregoncemeteries.org

Contact: OHCA

P. O. Box 802

Boring, OR 97009-0802

Oregon Pioneer Cemetery Commission

Web Site: none

Email: Mirra.Meyer@state.or.us

Contact: OPCC

1115 Commercial St. NE, Ste 2

Salem, OR 97301-1012

Washington State Cemetery Association

Web Site: <http://www.rootsweb.com/~wapsgs>

Email: andimac@oz.net

Contact: WSCA

P. O. Box 103

Port Orchard, WA 98366-5764

Old Cemeteries Society of Victoria

Web Site: <http://www.oldcem.bc.ca>

Email: oldcem@pinc.com

Contact: OCSV

Box 50004, #15-1594 Fairfield Rd.

Victoria, BC, V8S 1G1

Canada

The Law

RCW 68.36, Abandoned Lots, deals with a previously purchased plot that has sat unused for more than five years. Washington state law provides for these lots to be legally "repossessed" and sold again. Many feel the law is unfair to the purchaser and do not use it unless absolutely necessary. However, if you know that a person who purchased a lot from your cemetery is now deceased and buried elsewhere, you may use the law to gain control of the plot for use by another. Be sure to also read **RCW 68.32, Title and Rights to Cemetery Plots**. Read these and other Washington state cemetery laws at <http://www.wa.gov/dol/main/wacs.htm#68RCW>.

RCW 68.36.010

Sale of abandoned space

Presumption of abandonment.

The ownership of or right in or to unoccupied cemetery space in this state shall, upon abandonment, be subject to forfeiture and sale by the person, association, corporation or municipality having ownership or management of the cemetery containing such unoccupied cemetery space, for the purpose of providing for *perpetual care. The continued failure by an owner to maintain or care for an unoccupied cemetery lot, unoccupied part of lot, unoccupied lots or parts of lots for a period of five years shall create and establish a presumption that the same has been abandoned. [1943 c 247 § 78; Rem. Supp. 1943 § 3778-78.]

RCW 68.36.080

Sale after one year.

One year after the entry of the order adjudging such lot, part of lot, lots or parts of lots to have been abandoned, the owner or manager of the cemetery in which the same is located shall have the power to sell the same, in whole or in part, at public or private sale, and convey by deed good, clear and sufficient title thereto. [1943 c 247 § 85; Rem. Supp. 1943 § 3778-85.]

MEMBER



Contact Us

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wacemeteries-subscribe@listbot.com

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Mission Statement

The mission of the Washington State Cemetery Association (WSCA) is to research, protect, restore, and preserve old and abandoned cemeteries in Washington state, to maintain their history, and to provide education and awareness of old and abandoned cemeteries and their care to the public.

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~wapsgs/>

Washington State Cemetery Association

Membership Form

Name

Address

City, State, Zip

Home phone

email address

Membership Type Individual: \$12.00 per year

Student: \$6.00 per year

Cemetery(ies) you are interested in and their location:

Mail completed application and check or money order to
Treasurer
Washington State Cemetery Association
PO Box 103
Port Orchard WA 98366