



“The Mirror”

THE CEMETERY VISIT

Research, Resources, Rules and Reasonable Precautions

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The Cemetery Researcher's Tool Kit:

A five gallon bucket w/canvas tool caddy containing: gloves sunglasses, bug spray, rubber bands for cuffs, mirror or tin foil-covered reflective panel, ball cap, galoshes, kneeling pad, clipboard & cemetery recording sheets, pens & pencils, large & small chalk (to highlight engraving), nylon soft-bristle brush & plastic putty knife (for algae-covered tombstones), brass soft-bristle brush (for hard metal signs only), clippers (for overgrown weeds), whisk-broom (for clippings), spray bottle w/distilled water (no detergent), large sheets of fabric interfacing & oversize crayons (for rubbings), moist towelettes & dry towels for hands, portable UV black light (for enhancing old engravings), GPS unit (for identifying map coordinates), video camcorder (recording all tombstones in the area), digital or film camera (with color & B&W film), pocket audio tape recorder & extra batteries for all electronic items.

Internet Cemetery Resources

<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/genealogy/cemeteryrecords/> (WI State Historical Society Online records)

<http://www.interment.net/us/> (Online US Cemetery Database)

<http://www.Islandnet.com/ocfa/> (Ontario Canada Cemetery Listings)

<http://we.got.net/docent/cem/uscem.htm> (US Cemetery List)

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~wirock/Cems/cemindex.html> (Rock Co., WI Cemeteries)

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~cemetery/wisconsin/rock.htm> (Rock Co. Tombstone Transcription Project)

<http://www.findagrave.com/> or <http://www.gravehunter.net/> (Celebrity Grave Locators)

<http://alsirat.com/silence/> (US Cemetery Culture: City of the Silent, "The Web's most extensive cemetery site")

<http://www.totentanz.de/cemetery.htm> (World Cemeteries - formerly "World Wide Index of Cemeteries on the Net")

<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~staryjo/sepulchr.htm> (The Sepulcher, with many links)

<http://www.darklinks.com/dcemetry.html> (Dark Side of the Web - Cemeteries, Funeral Homes, and Death)

http://dir.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Death_and_Dying/Cemeteries/ (Yahoo's Cemeteries Page)

<http://www.sadnews.net/wo/cEU.htm> (European Cemetery Listings)

Click on any of the links above to view the resource.

Cemetery Book Resources

Your Guide to Cemetery Research by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack

United States Cemetery Address Book : All States, More Than 25,000 Cemeteries by Elizabeth Gorrell Kot & James D. Kot

A Graveyard Preservation Primer by Lynette Strangstad

Soul in the Stone: Cemetery Art from America's Heartland by John Gary Brown, John G. Brown

Suggestions for a Successful Cemetery Visit.

Many abandoned family cemeteries which are situated within cornfields. Visit such cemeteries in spring before the corn is taller than you are (or in fall after harvest)! May is a wonderful month . . . for ticks. Wear long pants and long sleeves – and bring 4 rubber bands to seal cuffs. Leave “Fido-the-tick-magnet” at home. Wear “sensible” shoes and gloves to help ward off critters such as snakes, biting flies and mosquitoes.

Don't go alone to cemeteries. Remember that many old cemeteries had wells for the convenience of those decorating graves with real plants and flowers on Memorial Day. People have been known to fall into them.

Whether public or private, there may be existing records (sexton or caretaker's records). These records can include burial registers, plat maps and plot records. These records can vary greatly between locations and time periods (or may not exist). Sometimes, a cemetery sign points you to its caretaker or contact area funeral directors or churches. Check with the area library or historical/genealogical society for tips on possible record locations or burial indexes.

Call or write the sexton or cemetery administrator in advance to request copies of burial information on individuals you hope to find and/or anyone with the same surname. Allow time for a response. Visit the cemetery while the office is open so someone will be available to answer questions. Don't expect a sexton to be your personal guide.

In your letter, also ask for a copy of the lot card. You may find that the names on the card do not match those carved on the headstone, or that there are burials in the plot that were not put on the headstone. The card should also give the owner of the plot, who may be someone who is not buried there. Dates are not always carved in the headstones, but the date of death and age should be on the lot card. Maps of the cemetery are usually available. Ask them to mark the location of your plot and get an explanation of how plots are designated (lawn, block, plot, and space letter or number). This also helps if you get lost.

While visiting (or corresponding) with the sexton, inquire about rules for tombstone rubbings (charcoal or wax crayon on paper or fabric). An arrest for criminal damage to property is a poor start to an otherwise routine cemetery visit.

Distant relatives often bring flowers on Memorial Day. Bring a card laminated with your name and contact information on it, and a note for other relatives to please contact you. Leave it at the grave a week or two before Memorial Day. You may receive a letter from a relative who lives within a short driving distance from the cemetery.

Photographers: Use 35mm film and photograph in both color (for your family scrapbook) and black & white (for greater contrast with hard to read tombstones). High resolution digital cameras (3.2 Megapixel or more) do a good job and the software that comes with the camera allows a lot of tweaking for contrast, sharpness and cropping. ALWAYS - write the headstone inscription on a burial information sheet for each individual in case the photo is unfocused or your camera batteries give-out. Bring extra batteries for anything that may need them. Time your visit; tombstones photograph best with tangential light from a high or side angle. Bring a mirror or roll of reflective foil to redirect light for a better photographic result.

Include a camcorder if you have one – especially to far away cemeteries. Repeated viewings often find something new. Take video of those graves with your family names, but also all surrounding plots – daughters marry, and their names change. You will often find these connections later.

If you have a hard time reading the headstones, try using a spray bottle of water and a camera. As you spray the headstone with water on a hot day, it takes longer for the indentations of the letters to dry than the rest of the stone and you can often read and photograph the inscription briefly.

If you have access to borrow or even purchase a small GPS receiver (Global Positioning Satellite), you can go to the cemetery and record the coordinates accurate to within a few feet. In the future anyone with these coordinates will be able to find the cemetery – even a specific grave, no matter how overgrown it may be or even if landmarks have been removed from or added to the area. GPS receivers are getting more and more affordable (under \$100). GPS coordinates for a location never change, so this is excellent documentation.

Don't forget one of the great hazards of visiting cemeteries: gnats by the thousands. The cure is simple: start taking vitamin B1 about a week before the visit. It acts in the body to create a natural insect repellent. Bring Deep Woods Off – just in case the gnats aren't impressed by your thiamine enriched perspiration.

Allow plenty of daylight time. Nothing is more frustrating than locating unexpected family members in a cemetery and not having time to locate and photograph all the headstones, especially if you've traveled a long distance.

Write down names, dates and inscriptions exactly as they appear on the stone. It is very easy to make assumptions in the excitement of the moment, and it will be very beneficial to have an accurate record as you move forward (or backward as the case may be) with your research. Be sure to sketch any symbols that you are unfamiliar with so that you can look them up later. These symbols or emblems may be valuable clues to membership in an organization which may have records about your ancestor. Inspect the back of the stones as they can also contain important information.

Make a note of the relationship between tombstones as well. Family members will often be buried together in the same plot. Nearby graves may belong to parents. Small unmarked stones may indicate children that died in their infancy. Neighbors and relatives may also be buried in adjoining sections.

Use a cassette recorder or even a video camera as you move read off names, dates and inscriptions and make note of important information, such as when you start a new row. It also provides you with a backup for later transcriptions. Use hand-held clippers to clear brush from the stone and then use a nylon (never wire) bristle brush and plain water to clean the stone from bottom to top, rinsing well as you go. If stone is fragile **DON'T TRY TO CLEAN IT!**

Tombstone Recording Form

Surname		
Given / Middle Names		
Birth Date / Place		
Death Date / Place		
Inscription on Stone		
Sketch of Symbols		
Name of Cemetery:		
City / Town / Village /Twp		
County / District		
State/Province		
Date Found / Visited		
Remarks: Tombstone Description GPS Reading Section, Plot & Lot Photo / Video Taken Sexton Consulted Personal Card Left Neighboring Family Plots Neighboring Surnames		