



PRESERVATION HOTLINE #6

South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, South Carolina Department of Archives and History

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Frequently Asked Questions About Cemetery Preservation

Cemeteries are an important feature of South Carolina's diverse heritage. In addition to marking the final resting place of our ancestors, they yield information about our state's social, religious, artistic, and cultural heritage. They also contain genealogical information that cannot be found anywhere else. Deterioration from natural forces such as weathering and uncontrolled vegetation and insensitive development can threaten historic cemeteries. The involvement of individuals and organizations with an interest and commitment to saving local history and culture is critical to protecting and preserving these sites. The following are frequently asked questions about historic cemeteries.

What is the best way to start a cemetery restoration project? The first step is to educate yourself or your group about the preservation of historic cemeteries. The next step is to research and document the cemetery. Study and map all plots in the graveyard and document each headstone and footstone with photographs and a written record. Then develop a well thought out plan and set priorities. The following sources will help you educate yourself, research and document your cemetery, and develop a master plan:

McGahee, Susan H., and Edmonds, Mary W. *South Carolina's Historic Cemeteries: A Preservation Handbook*. South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1997, updated 2007. Available at <https://scdah.sc.gov/historic-preservation/technical-assistance/cemeteries>.

Strangstad, Lynette. *A Graveyard Preservation Primer 2nd edition* (220 pages). Available for order from the Association for Gravestone Studies, at <https://www.gravestonestudies.org/agpublications/graveyard-primer>.

Striegel, Mary F., Gale, Frances, Church, Jason, and Dietrich-Smith, Debbie. *Preservation Brief 48: Preserving Grave Markers in Historic Cemeteries*. National Park Service, 2016. Available at <https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/48-preserving-grave-markers.htm>.

Trinkley, Michael. *Grave Matters: The Preservation of African-American Cemeteries*, (1996), *Recording Historic Cemeteries: A Guide for Historical Societies and Genealogists*, (1998), and *Cemetery Disaster Planning* (2013) Columbia, SC: Chicora Foundation. Copies are available online at <http://chicora.org/cemetery-publications.html>.

What funds are available for restoring and maintaining historic cemeteries? Most cemetery projects are funded locally from non-public sources and rely on volunteers for maintenance. No state agency has the legal authority or means to maintain cemeteries. SC Code 6-1-35 authorizes (but does not require) a municipality or county to preserve or protect any cemetery within its jurisdiction that has been abandoned or is not being maintained.

How should I clean gravestones? Use the gentlest means possible to clean historic gravestones. Abrasive cleaning may permanently damage the stone. A nylon or tampico scrub brush and a garden hose or spray bottle with water will often clean stones satisfactorily. If more cleaning is needed, dissolve a non-ionic detergent in water. Thoroughly soak

the stone with clear water, spray it with the non-ionic solution, then scrub it with a soft brush. Finally, rinse the stone with clean water. For marble stones a solution of plain household ammonia and water diluted 1:4 can be used. In particular, avoid using household bleach, muriatic acid or other chemicals or sandblasting. These remedies may give short-term satisfaction from a cleaner looking stone, but they will damage the surface of the stone and speed the natural weathering process. In the long run the stone will suffer. In one day, a harsh cleaner can cause as much surface erosion as fifty years of normal weathering. Household bleaches can damage even polished granite.

How do I repair gravestones? This is not really a do-it-yourself job. Materials used to mark early graves - slate, marble, sandstone, and soapstone – each have unique physical properties. Only people who are highly skilled and experienced with the specific material should do restoration work. In particular, when repairing gravestones, do not:

- ◆ set stones in concrete - concrete expands and contracts at a rate that is different from most materials historic gravestones are made from; it also contains salts and other chemicals that can damage the stone.
- ◆ use commonly available epoxies and sealants. These are likely to be incompatible with the gravestone materials.

Is there a state law that protects historic cemeteries? There are numerous state laws governing cemeteries. The following are of particular interest for historic cemeteries. State laws make it a felony to destroy or desecrate burial grounds and establish a legal framework for moving abandoned cemeteries when necessary. The responsibility for enforcing state cemetery laws belongs to the county sheriff or local police department. Because local authorities may not be familiar with cemetery statutes, be prepared to inform them of relevant laws.

SC Code 16-17-600. Destruction or desecration of human remains or repositories thereof including Native American remains or burial mounds. It provides penalties for the vandalism or desecration of burials or grave markers, and the destruction or injury of fencing, plants, shrubs, or flowers.

SC Code 27-43-10 through 27-43-40. Removal and relocation of abandoned cemeteries, including a notification process before an abandoned cemetery is moved, covers relocating the graves to a suitable place, and protecting grave markers.

SC Code 27-43-310. Grants family members and descendants limited access to graves on private property. It requires owners of cemeteries on private property to provide reasonable access to family members and descendants of those buried in the cemetery. Those wanting access to the cemetery must submit a written request to the property owner.

How can I discourage vandalism? If you discover signs of vandalism, contact the local law enforcement authorities immediately. Prosecute offenders who are caught and publicize the arrests. Here are ways to discourage vandalism:

- ◆ Ask local law enforcement agencies to put your cemetery on their patrol routes. Ask their advice when planning any security measures.
- ◆ Ask neighbors to watch for suspicious activity in the area and to report to the police or sheriff if they see any.
- ◆ Arrange for people to visit and monitor the cemetery routinely.
- ◆ Maintain the cemetery. Vandals are often attracted to property that appears neglected.
- ◆ Protection devices like fences, lights, and alarms may help. Make sure they are in working order. Fences should keep livestock out and deter vandals, while allowing people to see in. High, solid fences can hide illegal activities.
- ◆ Consider posting rules and regulations to show that the cemetery is maintained.

For more information and links to historic cemetery preservation, visit <https://scdah.sc.gov/historic-preservation/technical-assistance/cemeteries>.

Questions? SC Department of Archives & History / 8301 Parklane Road / Columbia, SC 29223 / 803-896-6168

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