

Written In Stone

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Why All This Commotion?

This week, I'm featuring an article written by fellow cemetery sleuths: Debbie & Jeff Nicoll, and edited by me. It's a great piece on how to document a cemetery, in addition to some cleaning tips. Many of you have been asking about methods used to 'read' a cemetery, plus marker cleaning techniques, etc. Watch for news about an upcoming Cemetery Workshop to be held December 9th; and anyone who would like to learn more is encouraged to attend.

Why all this commotion about cemetery research/preservation/restoration?

Ask anyone involved knee deep in their own family genealogy if cemetery research is important to them and you will hear a jubilant "well, of course". Ask this same person if cemetery preservation and restoration is important as well....you might hear a story about great-great-great "so and so" buried at a cemetery that has been neglected and almost forgotten for years. Headstones are broken, missing and many are hard to read.

Cemeteries are a window to our past. It's the one place that you can go and be closest to your ancestors. While doing research it's always exciting to find that one elusive ancestor in a historical document or publication, but when you walk up to that tombstone and see that name carved in the stone, it is hard to put into words the feelings you experience. Here lies the proof that your ancestor once lived. What do you do next?

After locating the cemetery and the tombstone, copy the inscription on the tombstone either by writing the information, taking pictures or tracing tombstone information for your records. A few other items to add to your notes:

- Who's buried around your ancestor? They could be relatives.
What is the location of the grave from the entrance?
- You'll want to be able to find it again or tell others how to get there.
- Is there a map of the cemetery, giving sections and plot numbers? If so, mark the location on the map, assuming it's a photocopy, and keep it in your files.
- What kind of artwork is carved on the stone? These symbols have different meanings and weren't chosen randomly.

Always respect the gravesites. Remember, tombstones are historical artifacts. Just because it is stone does not mean it is durable. Chemicals (Clorox and other forms) can eat away at the stone causing it to crumble. It is better to err on the side of caution when it comes to cleaning markers. Water is the best substance to use, and a little more elbow work! Most of the headstones are old, and they're not supposed to look like new! So, a little age and grime is to be expected!

Pictures sometimes can be a challenge. An overcast day, early morning or late afternoon, is usually the best time for shooting pictures of tombstones because shadows are the number one problem. Helpful hints are using the reflection of a mirror to help light up the stone for a better photograph, but you will need an assistant to hold the mirror and reflect it onto the stone while you take the photograph. Sometimes the simplest solution is wetting the stone with plain water which may bring out the inscription.

The most important thing one can do is WRITE everything down. Never rely on equipment – cameras fail at the most inappropriate times. If you have taken the time to travel to the cemetery, then ensure you go home with the information available. And last but not least, document, document, document! Check to see if the cemetery is registered on the ACPA website at <http://www.alabama-cemetery-preservation.com> and click on Cemetery Register.