



NYSFHC Session Syllabus

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Gravestone Conservation for the Genealogist

Christopher White

<http://www.AlbanyGraveDigger.com>

AlbanyGraveDigger@gmail.com

Introduction

Conservation of gravestones is a relatively new process. The organization leading the way in this venture is the [Association for Gravestone Studies](#) (AGS). Cemeteries today are being seen as outdoor museums with the intricate carvings and sculptures that are found in many graveyards. We conserve gravestones out of respect and honor for those who have passed before us; to preserve damaged and fragile gravestones for future generations; and because sometimes a gravestone is the only or last vestige of an individual's life.

Education

Gaining knowledge on the proper methods and techniques is key. Do no harm to yourself and to the gravestone is the conservator's mantra. The conservator needs to know his or her limitations. By far the best book on gravestone conservation is the Stragstad book; see Resources. However gravestone conservation is a hands-on learning process. Although the Internet is an excellent avenue for learning, workshops and seminars are the best choices for learning and developing your new skills in conservation. Beware: all methods found on the Internet are not always correct!

Types of Gravestones

Gravestones are made of various materials. Each has its own characteristics and problems associated with longevity, damage, and repair.

Problems with Gravestones

You cannot read a particular gravestone. Why? Sometimes the stone is simply dirty. Many times biological growth such as moss, lichens, mold, and mildew are growing on the stone. This growth must be removed the proper way with the appropriate chemicals otherwise it will grow back. The effects of acid rain also aids in the deterioration of gravestones.

Close inspection of gravestones and the topography of the surrounding area will usually determine why a gravestone is in its present condition as to why a stone has fallen or is broken, leaning, de-laminating, spalling, or sugaring?

Conservation

This is where you put your education to practice. Do you know the proper methods to complete your task? Can you handle the task at hand or do you need to hire a professional? Do not forget your equipment and materials.

Have you secured the proper permissions for attempting this work from the "family" or the cemetery office. Bring your personal items such as your camera, cell phone, drinks, and food.

Reading/Transcribing

Learn the proper methods for reading and transcribing gravestones. Sometimes simply wetting a gravestone with water will allow the inscription to come forth. Methods such as chalking and using shaving cream are now frowned upon because of the possibility of staining the gravestone.

Symbolism

Knowing the symbolic meanings and icons that are on gravestones can aid your research. Learning that your ancestor was in a particular military or fraternal organization can greatly further your research.

Photography

Using additional equipment such as a photographer's collapsible reflector or a tripod can greatly enhance the quality of your photographs whether you are using a DSLR camera or your cell phone. The time of day and positioning of the sun can determine the quality of your photos. Do not forget to take many before and after pictures of your work.

Resources:

Reading:

Keister, Douglas. Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography. New York: MJF Books, 2004.

Neighbors, Joy. The Family Tree Cemetery Field Guide: How to Find, record, & Preserve Your Ancestors' Graves. Cincinnati: Family Tree Books, 2017.

Strangstad, Lynette. A Graveyard Preservation Primer. New York: Altamira Press, 2013.

Conservation:

- Association For Gravestone Studies. <http://www.gravestonestudies.org/>
- Cemetery Conservators for United Standards. <https://cemeteryconservatorsunitedstandards.org/>
- Chicora Foundation. <http://www.chicora.org/cemetery-preservation.html>
- Connecticut Gravestone Network. <http://www.ctgravestones.org/>
- GravestonePreservation.info. Gravestone conservation. <http://www.gravestonepreservation.info/>
- Heritage Council of Ireland. Guidance for the Care, Conservation and Recording of Historic Graveyards. https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/guidance_care_conservation_recording_historic_graveyards_2011_7mb.pdf
- Historic Preservation Commission of the City of Cape Girardeau, Missouri. https://www.cityofcapegirardeau.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_5730343/File/Departments/Development/Historic%20Preservation%20Master%20Plan/Cemetary-Preservation-Manual.pdf
- Indiana Pioneer Cemeteries Restoration Project. <http://sites.rootsweb.com/~inpcrp/repairtoolbox.html/>
- Michigan Historic Cemetery Preservation Manual. https://www.michigan.gov/documents/hal_mhc_shpo_Cemetery_Guide_105082_7.pdf
- National Center for Preservation Technology and Training. Cemetery Conservation. <http://www.ncptt.nps.gov/articles/cemetery-conservation/>
- Prince George's County, Maryland. Cemetery Preservation Manual. <http://mncppcapps.org/planning/publications/PDFs/232/Cemetery%20Preservation%20Manual.pdf>
- Rhode Island Historical Cemetery. Gravestone Conservation <http://rihistoriccemeteries.org/PDF/gravestoneconservation.pdf/>
- Saskatchewan Genealogical Society. Saskatchewan Historic Cemetery Preservation Guide. <http://www.saskgenealogy.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Saskatchewan-Historic-Cemetery-26-11-14.pdf>

Records:

- American Battle Monuments Commission. ABMC Burials and Memorials. <http://www.abmc.gov/database-search/>
- BillionGraves. Gravestone photo database. <http://www.billiongraves.com/>
- Brooklyn Genealogy Information Page. Cemetery Record locator. <http://bklyn-genealogy-info.stevemorse.org/Cemetery/index.html>
- Find A Grave. Gravestone photo database. <http://www.findagrave.com/>
- Interment.net. Burial records. <http://www.interment.net/>
- Jewish Genealogical Society. JGSNY Burial Society Database Project. <http://www.jgsny.org/searchable-databases/burial-society-databases/>
- New York Cemetery Records. <http://www.newyorkcemeteryrecords.com/>
- New York Gravestones. Gravestone photo database. <http://www.newyorkgravestones.org/>
- Northern New York Tombstone Transcription Project. Cemetery locator. <http://www.nnytombstoneproject.net/>
- NYC OpenData. DOC Hart Island Burial Records. <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/City-Government/DOC-Hart-Island-Burial-Records/c39u-es35>
- Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness. New York Cemetery Records Research Guide. <http://www.raogk.org/cemetery-records/newyork/>
- Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War. National Grave Registration Project. <http://suvcw.org/graves/graves.htm>
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. National Gravesite Locator. <https://gravelocator.cem.va.gov/>

Photography:

- <https://familyhistoryfoundation.com/2019/04/28/how-to-photograph-cemetery-headstones-right-way/>
- http://www.stonepics.com/newfoundland_cemeteries/method.htm
- <https://photographylife.com/exploring-the-beauty-of-cemeteries>
- https://www.genealogy.com/articles/research/64_gravestones.html