



Gravestones, Coffins, and Unmarked Cemeteries:

Techniques to Identify and Locate

J. Mark Lowe, FUGA
marklowe@kytnresearch.com

Studying dead people-- that is how many people describe genealogists. Although their humor might not imply true research skills, their comment might describe us correctly. Many of us start our genealogy hobbies with a trip to a family cemetery.

As a young man, I often visited cemeteries in the countryside with my father, as he introduced me to my dead relatives. There did seem to be a tie to these individuals whom I had never met with their simple markers or ornately carved monuments. When I began my research as a family historian, I went back to those graveyards that I had visited, this time trying to learn more about those ancestors. Over the years, I have learned that much can be learned about individuals and their families by searching in the graveyard. I have a cousin whom we tease about crawling around on the ground, trying to talk to those elusive ancestors, begging for information that we cannot find. I do not think we can resolve all of our research difficulties, but we may be missing some very big clues.

How do I begin?

Look Around

Listen Carefully

Let Records Lead You

Sometimes our visit to a cemetery may not be at a time of our choosing -- i.e., death of a relative or friend. If the cemetery is well kept, a visit anytime of the year can be accomplished, but for the small and remote cemeteries, late September through April is the preferred visiting time. Warmer weather may be comfortable, but ticks, chiggers and snakes seem to prefer those months as well. Some old graveyards are overtaken with briars and vines by late April, and will overwhelm even the most adventurous genealogist. It might be wise to begin your searching in a church cemetery, small municipal or well-maintained family cemetery. You will need to collect items for your Cemetery Tool Kit.

Cemetery Tool Kit

First-Aid Kit - including Sunscreen, Insect Repellent, Poison Ivy Barrier

Although we hope that you do not have a need for these items, it seems as if every time I go into a cemetery, I encounter at least one obstacle that wants to scratch, cut, smack, hit or itch me. It is always wise to be prepared (even in a well-manicured cemetery).

Gloves: A good pair of garden or leather gloves can prevent contact with some thorns and noxious plants. They also can prevent blisters if you are knocking down briars with an axe handle.

Ruler/ 100' Tape Measure: To transcribe and describe this cemetery, you need a measuring device.

Cornstarch, Flour, Chalk: To be used only on structurally sound stones, but are difficult to read with sunlight. A minimal amount should be used and nothing should be used which will harm the gravestone.

Soft Brush: I prefer a paintbrush with a hole in the handle. I can tie the brush to my Tool Kit bag so it will not be left in the woods.

Probe: This will be used to discover pieces of covered grave markers. I have several probes depending on the conditions. The easiest is a small metal rod about 36" long with a reflector on one end (driveway marker) which makes it easy to locate.

Axe Handle for knocking away brush/vines/etc. / Clippers: Someone suggested an old axe handle would work wonders at knocking away briars and growth in a wooded area. It can also serve as a prop, a lever to pry buried stones, and a measuring stick.

Tape Recorder/ Paper & Pencil: If collecting information in a cemetery, you will need some way to record the information and summarize the results later. If you use a tape recorder, be sure to spell surnames and any questionable words, so that you can be sure of your notes later.

Transcription of stones and cemetery description if possible: If the cemetery has previously been recorded, study the earlier work. Look for descriptions or notes about others that might be buried here without markers. Notice the earliest recorded burials and when the cemetery might have been established - by whom & why?

Camera/Phone w Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) :

Unbreakable Mirror: These baby-proof mirrors are great at reflecting sunlight on the face of a gravestone to improve its readability.

Topographic Map / Local Road Map: You've got to find the cemetery to get there, and sometimes getting home can be a problem. Many cemeteries are also located on topo maps.

I keep my supplies in a nylon duffle bag, so I am ready to hit the cemetery running.

If you are not familiar with the area, I suggest you stop at the local crossroads store first. Ask the "locals" about the cemetery. You will be surprised at the information you can glean and referrals to people who know more about the families buried there. You might also purchase a sandwich, drink, chips and cookies. Hunger discourages graveyard hunters almost as often as briars and rain. Hopefully you have brought along a jacket and change of clothes (just in case) and have dressed to meet the climatic conditions you will encounter. (Layers are appropriate for most cases, as you can adjust to the temperature)

What will I find?

If you are looking for a specific grave, go to that stone, becoming aware of other graves in the general area. Families were usually buried in rows or plots often fenced. (Remember that the remnants of wooden structures from the 18th and early 19th century are likely decomposed) You might see evidence of an organized plot. If you are not familiar with the individuals buried adjacent to the graves of interest, record the information from these stones and do some basic research on them.

As you look at the stones, do you see any symbols? Symbols often supply information about membership in an organization about an individual's profession. My father was a fireman and he always wore a Maltese cross pin. His grave marker displays a Maltese Fire Cross. Others fraternal symbols in this area include: Masonic compass or beehive; IOOF - Odd Fellows - Three links; Eastern Star; Anvil/Hammer; Cross ; Star of David; Praying Hands; Military Symbols.

Many of the words that are used on a stone tell us more than appears at first glance. We must remember that our language has changed over the years and the attitudes towards death and dying might be different as well. You should record all epitaphs related to your grave of interest. Are there any foreign words? Does the epitaph infer a long illness or sudden death? Does it contain humor or a bible verse? Does it tell about the person's profession? Does it indicate a relationship with another person? Where is that person buried? Why?

**Consort - The wife of a still living man; Relict - The wife of a deceased man (His widow);
Mother, Father, Brother, Sister; Born in(location); Died after many days...**

Suggested Reading List

A Graveyard Preservation Primer, Lynette Strangstad. Alta Mira Press, 1995. (AASLH Series).

The Last Great Necessity, Cemeteries in American History, David Charles Sloane. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1991, reprint 1995.

The Association for Gravestone Studies www.gravestonestudies.org/ They have 18 Field Guides available for purchase: #1 Analyzing Cemetery Data; #2 Cemeteries Listed in the National Register (includes how to order copies of nomination forms); #3 Guide to Forming a Cemetery Friends Organization; #4 Cleaning Masonry Burial Monuments; #5 Gravestone Rubbing for Beginners; #6 Basic Guide to Carver Research; #7 Making Photographic Records of Gravestones; #8 Symbolism in the Carving on Gravestones; #9 Model Legislation; #10 Making Replicas; #11 Reading Weathered Marble Gravestones; #12 The Care of Old Cemeteries and Gravestones; #13 A Technique for the Experienced Rubber; #14 How to Create a Base; #15 Recommendations for the Care of Gravestones; #16 What do you do When you Find a "Lost" Gravestone?; #17 Recording Cemetery Data; #18 Discussion and Research Topics (for educators)

Helpful Web Sites for Locating Graveyards and Burial Locations

geonames.usgs.gov/ - USGS GNIS - Geographic Names Information System

www.joycetice.com/flaghold/flag035.htm A Pictorial Catalog of Commemorative Flagholders & Plaques of Organizations & Military by Joyce M. Tice

bloggingadeadhorse-dmt.blogspot.com/2009/02/last-words-glossary-of-cemetery-terms.html - Glossary of Cemetery Terms

www.interment.net/history/history.htm - History of Cemetery Records Online

www.npi.org/ - National Preservation Institute

www.gravestonestudies.org/ - Association for Gravestone Studies

Follow their External Resources Link for a wide variety of assistance

www.findagrave.com/ - Find a Grave - Find some individual graves

www.billiongraves.com – Billion Graves

gravelocator.cem.va.gov/ Veterans' Graves Locator

www.suvcwdb.org Sons of Union Veterans' Gravesite Database

www.usgw-tombstones.org/ US GenWeb Tombstone Transcription Project

Knights Templar (U.S.) - <http://www.knightstemplar.org/>

National Fraternal Congress of America - <http://www.nfcnet.org/scripts/home.cfm>

Phoenixmasonry Museum - <http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/>

The Improved Order of Red Men - <http://www.redmen.org/>

Website of Non-Masonic Fraternal Organizations - <http://bessel.org/fratorgs.htm>

Woodmen of the World - <http://www.woodmen.com/>

http://www.usgennet.org/usa/topic/misc/AmericanFactsTrivia/Societies/fraternal_societies.htm

Select Bibliography

Axelrod, Alan, *The International Encyclopedia of Secret Societies and Fraternal Orders*, Facts on File, 1997

Carnes, M. C., *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

Clawson, M. A., *Constructing Brotherhood : Class, Gender, and Fraternalism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Dumenil, L., *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Ferguson, Charles W. *Fifty Million Brothers: A Panorama of American Lodges and Clubs*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc, 1937.

Gale Research Company , *Encyclopedia of Associations*. Vol. 1. 32nd edition,. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1997.

Jones, B. E., *Freemasons' Guide and Compendium*. London: Harrap, 1956.

Heckethorn, Charles, *The Secret Societies of all ages and Countries* [in two volumes], London : George Redway. 1897.

Mackey, Albert G., *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*,. Richmond, Virginia : Macoy Publishing. 1966.

Preuss, Arthur. *A Dictionary of Secret and Other Societies*. St. Louis, Mo.: B. Herder Book Co, 1924.

Ross, Theo A., *Odd Fellowship: Its History and Manual*, New York: M.W. Hazen Co., 1888.

Schmidt, A. J. and N. Babchuk., *Fraternal Organizations*. Westport, Conn.,: Greenwood Press, 1980.

Stevens, Albert C., *Cyclopedia of Fraternities*, New York: E. B. Treat and Company, 1907.

Whalen, William J., *Handbook of Secret Organizations*, Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1966.

—, *Christianity and American Freemasonry*, 3rd edition, Ft. Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 1998.