

Directions in Graveyard Preservation: A Look Back and Some Suggestions to Start the New Millennium

by Lynette Strangstad

In discussing planning with people, I often tell them regarding a particular graveyard that if we don't know what's gone before or what we have now, we cannot even pretend to direct the future of a given site.

So perhaps it is a good time to look at the field of burial ground preservation and to see where we've been and to consider where we want to go.

Past

When I was little, we were taught that when we visited family graves we were always to walk around a grave, in aisles or roads and never to walk on the grave itself. We went to great effort to take "giant steps" between graves when we had to cross them. We held Memorial Day family picnics – family reunions, really – in which we visited the graves and talked about old times I was too young to remember. It seemed interesting but a little odd to me to be discussing people that didn't really exist for me, even though I knew they mattered a great deal to my mother and father and aunts and uncles.

I grew up, as I am sure many of you did, caring for family graves, learning respect for the dead, and gaining a sense of history from our dead.

Much of that is lost these days, as families become more and more mobile, moving from one part of the country to another. The result is not only fewer visits to the family grave plot, but a disassociation of children from cemeteries in general – *these* graves do not belong to anyone *they* know – and perhaps this leads to an increase in vandalism and general acts of disrespect.

At the very least, it contributes to a lack of feeling connected. Lacking this opportunity to learn to respect the past and to understand the dead as "ours," children have also lost an opportunity to learn to respect what has gone before, and so have lost an opportunity to learn to respect life.

By bringing back children – and adults, alike – to cemetery preservation, we reconnect with the sense of respect and history which can be learned in cemeteries much as, years ago, we learned it simply by belonging to our families. Perhaps cemetery preservation is the new tradition which supplants the earlier one.

My experience in cemeteries tells me that, historically, every forty years or so, there's a new revival of interest in cemeteries, at least in "fixing the stones" and often in "fixing up the cemetery." It was during these efforts that the greatest change took place.

Forty and fifty years ago, the people who "fixed" the stones and tended their family plots had never heard, for the most part, of Harriet Merrifield Forbes and her early work in appreciating, cataloging, and photographing gravemarkers.

But by thirty years ago, when Peter Benes examined stonecutters and their art, gravestone rubbing was growing in popularity, at least in New England, and historic preservation was a new

field which centered on the restoration of the grand houses of famous historical figures. A few years later, AGS was born.

Partly as a result, perhaps, in the Sixties and Seventies, people began “restoring” their old cemeteries. These restorations were often cemetery-wide in scale (rather than families tending to individual plots) and were often initiated by municipalities or nonprofit groups such as the DAR.

Their focus was on beautifying the site and they tended to follow the trend of the day regarding houses; while they couldn’t remove later sections of the cemetery (popular in house restoration), they could – and did – remove “unsightly” features: an old gnarled tree, perhaps, or plot corner markers or copings, maybe an ironwork fence that needed repair, and often footstones. . . And walks and roads were paved for easier access.

I have a file in my office of “how-not-to” books, one in which “an old derelict cemetery” was turned into an “inviting city park” by: a) removing the stones; b) adding paths and roads and trees and shrubs; c) making paths and walkways and benches out of the old stones. Little of the earlier site remained, including respect for the dead who lay beneath it.

All these changes made sites prettier and more accessible to the public, but it also took away some of the reason the public wanted to visit the site in the first place: it decreased the historic value of the site and added to the loss of what we today identify as significant historic fabric.

By the early 1980s we still talked of restoring cemeteries but, again taking a cue from the historic preservation and stone conservation fields, we began to talk in terms of cemetery preservation. Many of the techniques used could be directly attributed to the influence of historic preservation on historic building stones. We learned to repair stones with blind dowels and adhesive, as gravestone repair was adapted from building stone repair. . .

In the 80s, slowly the message was getting out about preserving even broken markers. But it took a while longer for the general public to grasp the significance of vegetation. One day late in that decade, I received a phone call. The group wanted me to visit their site. Trying to grasp the scope of the project, as I always do, I asked questions: how many markers? how many acres? how early? what stone materials? what vegetation?

The answer to the question was, “You don’t have to worry about the vegetation. We just scraped the entire site clean.” So much for what we might have learned from *that* resource.

At another site, we were researching a largely unchanged African-American churchyard and were excited to find a wealth of vegetation, along with grave goods and more common markers. We brought in an ethnobotanist to catalogue the rich variety of plants at the site. . . We held a dinner to report on our progress. When we arrived. . . [we discovered] the caretaker, upon learning there was to be an important dinner, “cleaned up” the site, removing grave goods, and overgrown but very early plantings. . .

Present

It is the early 1990s. The National Trust for Historic Preservation acknowledged cemeteries with a Task Force on Cemetery Protection and Management and also a booklet on Preserving Historic Cemeteries. The National Park Service issues guidelines on cemetery preservation, as it already had done for other types of sites.

By the mid – 90s cemeteries have become cultural resources; the concepts of “historic landscape” and later, “cultural landscape,” gain popularity; we increasingly view sites as parts of larger entities; other sites become part of the view scape of cemeteries just as cemeteries are part of the view scape of other sites, and sites are recognized as being fundamentally interlocked. Any site is bigger than itself.

Planning was and is probably a harder “sell” than trying to teach people about specific concerns in a cemetery. Dollars are always hard to come by and people want to see immediate results.

Still, with increasing interest and public acknowledgement by preservation groups, archaeologists and cultural resource firms begin to offer planning services. On the conservation/technical side, monument dealers’ magazines lead dealers and individuals to enter the field of gravestone conservation.

And, of course, the field is seen as a potentially lucrative business by some individuals who know nothing about historic preservation, and a few think it would be a great opportunity to make a lot of money without the need for any special skills or education.

How have technical resources changed in the last few years? --unfortunately, not as much as we might like. We are still largely in the infancy of stone conservation, and while we have adhesives not available in the ‘60s, we are still using methods largely available in the ‘80s. Some experimental work is being done using glass or aluminum or carbon rods, composites are being improved, and some consolidants are being used experimentally. We’re still waiting for the ideal biocide, and we still have pretty much the same problems regarding longevity and repair of difficult breaks or vulnerable stones that we had twenty years ago. And it is still skilled, labor-intensive work, so it is still expensive.

Future

So where do we go from here? Where should our focus lie in the next ten-twenty years?

Some of you may expect me to say that in the next decade what we really need is to develop better conservation methods and train more super-professionals and that’s what is important. Well, hopefully, conservation scientists will find major breakthroughs in solving our conservation problems.

But I hope that the rest of us will concentrate on public education. Public education could have prevented some of the disasters I’ve told you about. And it can lead more and more good professionals into the field.

- It can be instrumental in colleges offering courses in historic cemetery preservation
- It can be influential in planning – or getting funding for that old cemetery at the top of

the hill.

- It can force politicians, both local and state, to examine legal issues, funding, and care.
- It can teach school children – and their parents – the importance and the pleasures of old cemeteries, and it just might be the most important tool for cemetery preservation we can develop in the next decade.

Public education can take many forms:

- For one community it might be school children learning how to do historical research; in another it might be a 5K run, or a Victorian ice cream social, or perhaps an elegant *soiree*.
- It might be that, on Halloween, instead of talking about ghosts in the cemetery, one community might have an evening discussion about All Hallow's Eve, and the next day maybe a living history tour with actors representing historical figures buried there.
- And maybe one or two of those historical figures might not even be someone known to be buried there, but is, instead the stonemason who built the intricate tomb he's standing next to. And he can explain how the style was chosen and the difficulties he encountered.
- A woman who is mourning her spouse and is at his graveside might talk about the flowers she chose, where she got them, why she chose them. Someone might even talk about a "cemetery restoration" they took part in a hundred years ago!
- It can also mean adopting a stone as part of a fundraising effort.
- Or talking to the newspaper or your legislator regarding a family site to which the descendants are denied access or maybe one in the middle of a proposed development.

Fortunately, public education is something we can all take part in: our job is to become knowledgeable about cemeteries in general, or one cemetery in particular, if that is our bent, and working within our community, our state, to help others realize the significance of these historic sites, the need for funding and care, and the appropriate means of caring for them.

Does that sound like what you're already doing? Of course it is. Everyone here tonight is in some way an ambassador for our cemeteries, which have no voice without us. Each of us is contributing to that larger body of information regarding cemeteries. I can hardly emphasize enough how much each of us is needed in this effort.

To all of you, I say only, "Keep up the good work!"

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