

## OHIO GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY CEMETERY COMMITTEE: A Short History

The Ohio Genealogical Society has had an interest in Ohio's cemeteries from the time of its founding in 1959. The Society's first publication, in 1960, was entitled *Marlow-Patterson Cemetery, Richland County, Ohio*. Many other works followed in this line.

The volume, *Ohio Cemeteries*, published in 1978 by the Ohio Genealogical Society, was begun under the direction of the late David J. Massa, M.D. The project had actually started in 1971 as a cemetery check list for the State of Ohio with information recorded on 3 x 5 cards. Successive committee chairmen were Mary Jane Henney and William R.M. Houston, M.D. The book was typed by Margaret Doner, proofread by Cary Belle Latimer, and edited by Maxine Hartmann Smith. The 414-page treatise was offered to the public as the Society's part in the celebration of Ohio's 175<sup>th</sup> birthday. This book was reprinted several times as sales demanded but was not revised.

Although after the book was completed, the cemetery committee was not listed officially in the minutes of the OGS Board of Trustees, the subject was always a topic for discussion. In 1986, a session on "Cemetery Logistics" was held at the "First-Ever" OGS Chapter Leadership Seminar held at Mountview Baptist Church in Columbus, Ohio. In the OGS minutes for 22 Nov 1986, it was noted that the Mercer County Chapter had urged OGS to take steps to establish a program to involve chapters in all counties in concern with assisting officials in bringing about effort to support cemetery improvements and conditions, upkeep, etc. Mary Jane Henney was the OGS spokesperson and recommended that someone head the cemetery project in each county, not one person overall for the state. She refers to an active Muskingum County Chapter cemetery group and they soon brought us a publication. The minutes are not clear as to a date when the cemetery committee again became active, but it appears officially again in the committee list beginning in September 1988.

The OGS State Cemetery Committee, under the direction of Teresa Klaiber and Sharon Irby, published a *Guide to Cemetery Preservation* in 1987. This booklet included sections on Ohio's major cemetery laws, guidance through volunteer programs and funding, publicity, tombstone repair, guidelines for copying inscriptions, and publishing. Also included were sample letters inviting groups to "Adopt-a-Cemetery" and encouraging Eagle Scouts to take on cemetery preservation as a project in their local area.

In 1990, the Ohio Genealogical Society found it necessary to publish the *Ohio Cemeteries Addendum* to be used in conjunction with the previous book. This 168-page work contained additions and corrections found since 1978. Spurred on by Diane Van Skiver Gagel, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, the project was led by Teresa L.M. Klaiber, C.G.R.S., the chair of the Society's cemetery committee, and she compiled and edited the book. The proofreader was Mary Jane Henney who had played a major role in the first publication.

In 1996, the Ohio Genealogical Society released a booklet called *Ohio Cemetery Laws*, by Cemetery Committee Chair, Lolita Guthrie. Although never published, this reference tool guided the user to legal information on cemeteries from the Ohio Township Handbook, Page's Ohio Revised Code Annotated, and Ohio Real Estate Laws

& Rules Annotated. The author also included samples of decisions in real cases on cemetery issues that had been brought to the attention of the Wood County Prosecuting Attorney.

With the 200<sup>th</sup> birthday of Ohio, the Ohio Genealogical Society published *Ohio Cemeteries: 1803 - 2003* as a tribute to the many pioneers who were buried beneath these graves. The project was led by Lolita Thayer Guthrie, cemetery committee chair. She reached out to the Ohio Township Association and the public at large to try to locate lost and forgotten cemeteries that had been missed in our earlier editions. We also added such things as Ohio Division of Real Estate numbers for each active cemetery and the latitude and longitude if a reading had been taken. Not a family historian initially, our editor, K. Roger Troutman, was discovered in a cemetery gathering mosses from old tombstones. With this hobby, we found that he had already entered our earlier *Ohio Cemeteries* book into a database, and he kindly consented to assist us with the additions and corrections, not knowing that he would eventually spend eight hours a day for weeks on end on his laptop computer at the OGS Library in his capacity as editor. With over 1000 pages, *Ohio Cemeteries: 1803 - 2003* contains information on over 14,500 cemeteries and burial sites throughout Ohio. It is certainly an appropriate tribute to Ohio's bicentennial celebration.

Our newest book does not include inscriptions from cemetery tombstones. The effort to publish the actual content of each marker in Ohio is being led by our 95 county chapters. Many of OGS's 6000 members nationwide also belong to the local groups and spend countless hours reading cemeteries for publication in book form and on the Internet. Hundreds of these volunteers assisted in our statewide effort to locate and document these cemetery sites.

Several OGS chapters have published material on cemeteries in the State of Ohio. Of general interest is the *Adopt-a-Cemetery* notebook, a project of the Wood County Chapter OGS, completed in 1989. This program takes its name from a community project in Staten Island, New York. It was meant to be a handbook for township trustees, cemetery sextons, county officials, municipal and church cemetery boards, as well as others interested in the preservation of our cemeteries – genealogists included. There are sections on the Adopt-a-Cemetery project in Wood County, laws, preservation, assists, a Wood County directory, and updates.

In 1997, the Colorado Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society, now disbanded, published *Cemetery Locations in the State of Ohio from the U.S. Geological Survey Digital Mapping File*. This list, obtained from the U.S. Geological Survey, is in the public domain, and was taken from their mapping database. The cemetery locations are provided in decimal degrees of latitude and longitude.

As OGS moves into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many members are contributing tombstone photographs and transcriptions information to Findagrave.com and similar websites. For example, Roger Spencer and Rebecca Stephens have privately published 40 volumes of cemetery tombstone image books for Darke County, Ohio, 2001 to date. The Warren County Ohio Virtual Cemetery Project is another example, going online in 2004 now with over 71,000 burials recorded by the Warren County Chapter. OGS has also moved into the digital age and has placed the *Ohio Cemeteries 1803-2003* database on the OGS web site through the efforts of the original editor, Roger Troutman, and Publications Committee chair, Eric Johnson. A simple list of Ohio cemeteries in each county and

township is free to all users with the book details in electronic form available to OGS members.

Vicki Vigil of Cleveland took charge of the OGS Cemetery Committee as Lolita Guthrie retired from her long period of service, and Vicki was succeed by Dot Martin of Detroit MI in 2012. The group continues to advocate for Ohio's cemeteries and meet the original mission of the Society to preserve and disseminate the genealogical information contained on tombstones and in burial records.

Of future concern to genealogists, Native Americans, historians, archaeologists, and township/municipal officials, will be a concerted effort to preserve burial sites in Ohio and put forth constructive legislation to ensure the preservation, maintenance, and utilization of these sites, keeping the goals of each field in mind with respect to the rights of the others. All of us have different agendas but we see the lack of preservation and any uniform legislation on cemeteries in Ohio as a common problem to be addressed in the coming years.