



**ALABAMA
HISTORICAL
COMMISSION**
The State Historic Preservation Office

468 S. Perry Street
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Voice: (334)242-3184
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www.preserveala.org

CEMETERY CARE

The purpose of cleaning is to remove harmful substances, not to make the grave markers look brand new. Grave markers are historic artifacts and should retain their historic character after cleaning.

For more detailed information about caring for cemeteries, please refer to the AHC's [cemetery handbook](#).

- Determine the condition of the grave markers before attempting to clean. Are there obvious cracks in the stone? Is it leaning? Are there signs of sugaring of the stone? If so, leave it alone. Any pressure on the stone could cause it to break or further erode the outer layer.
- Determine why the markers need to be cleaned. Is it covered in atmospheric pollutants and dirt, biological growth such as pollen, fungi, moss, or algae that are harming the stone? In many cases, these pollutants and growth have penetrated deep into the pores of the grave markers and simply cannot be removed. Before washing the stone, try brushing or scraping off the biological growth with Popsicle sticks, Q-tips, plastic paint scrapers, or any other material that is softer than the stone.
- It is important to soak the stone for as long as possible. 24 hours is the recommended time, but often that is not practical, especially if the cemetery has no water available on site. A good time to clean is after a heavy soaking rain.
- Clean stones using the **Gentlest Means Possible**. Most dirt can be removed by using water and a soft bristle brush (nylon, plastic, natural, toothbrushes, etc.). If the cemetery has no available water, you will need to bring water with you. Begin cleaning at the bottom of the marker and work up. Once clean, rinse the stone thoroughly with clean water.
- A diluted solution (2:1) of water and Kodak's Photo Flo can also be used to clean grave markers. Photo Flo is available at photographic supply stores. If the grave marker has algae, mold, fungi, lichens, or any other type of biological growth, it is safe to use "D2," available from www.cathedralstone.com.
- Do not use acids, bleach, household detergents or pressure washers to clean the grave markers, because these methods will only increase the speed of deterioration.

Repairing Grave Markers

Repairing historic grave markers is complicated work. Most repairs will require a professional who is experienced in repairing historic masonry. Below are general guidelines for repair.

- Preservation in place is a viable preservation alternative. It is acceptable to leave the grave markers alone until the appropriate repair method is identified.
- Repair grave markers utilizing **like materials** only. Use materials that are softer than the original stone. Introducing harder materials to "glue" pieces of stone together could cause the repair to fail, and could cause secondary breaks.



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- Concrete should not be used to repair historic masonry, to fill joints, or to adhere pieces of stone.
- **Never** place broken pieces of stone into wet concrete.
- Adhesives of any sort (*Bondo*, *Liquid Nails*) should be avoided because these items create a moisture barrier that contribute to breakage and deterioration of stonework.
- Lime mortar is recommended for repairing historic masonry. For more information: www.virginalimeworks.com, www.usheritage.com, or www.traditionalandsustainable.com.
- Walls/Fences: More times than not, unmarked graves lay outside walled or fenced areas. The locations of all burials should be identified before any new fencing is constructed. Constructing rock walls or fencing should be based on photographic evidence, whenever possible.

Removing Vegetation in Cemeteries

- All methods of removing vegetation should be fully documented and photographs made before, during, and after the removal process.
- Flag all marked and unmarked graves before removing any vegetation. Continue to flag graves as they are discovered while removing vegetation.
- Heavy equipment should not be brought in to the cemetery.
- Take care to only remove vegetation that is causing harm or is unsightly. Trees, shrubs, plants, flowers, decorations, or other real or personal property were often used as memorials to the dead and should not be removed. Historic plantings should be pruned, not removed. It is important to retain the character-defining elements that make a cemetery historic.
- Hand cutting weeds adjacent to the grave markers is highly recommended. Bumping into grave markers with a lawnmower can easily topple and break them; weed-eater string can permanently scratch and damage the markers as well. Do not alter the location of any gravestone, rock, brick, fieldstone, etc., while mowing as these may be the only articles marking graves.
- Do not spray any commercial herbicides near or directly on grave markers. The chemicals and sodium compounds in these products could cause damage to the grave stones.
- Do not burn debris near the cemetery as ash and soot can permanently discolor grave markers.

For further reading about cleaning and repair of historic grave markers:

- *A Gravestone Preservation Primer* by Lynette Strangstad
- NPS Preservation Brief #1: Cleaning Historic Masonry available from the AHC or at www.cr.nps.gov
- NPS Preservation Brief #2: Repointing Mortar Joints in Historic Masonry Buildings, available from the AHC or www.cr.nps.gov
- NPS Preservation Brief #27: Cast Iron Maintenance and Repair, available from the AHC or www.cr.nps.gov
- "The Conservation and Cleaning of Historic Gravestones" by Peter Sandbeck, available from the AHC
- The Association for Gravestone Studies (AGS) www.gravestonestudies.org