

INTRO GUIDE TO CEMETERY CLEANING

from the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation

1. Identify the cemetery to be cleaned and get permission to clean it.

What is the official name of the cemetery you want to clean? Has it already been transcribed? Can you find photos and other information for it on tngenweb.org, findagrave.com, or another source? Who owns it? Be sure to tell let the owner know what day/time you are planning on coming to the cemetery, and for what purpose. For Tennessee laws on historic graveyards, see <https://www.tngenweb.org/law/cemetery-law.html>.

2. Evaluate the size and condition of the cemetery and decide what tombstones you are going to clean.

Look through the entire cemetery. Chances are, unless it is very small or you have a huge group of volunteers, you will not be able to clean every grave marker. You may want to concentrate on one certain portion of the cemetery to clean, whether it's a specific family plot, the historic core of the cemetery, veterans' tombstones, or whatever portion you deem to be in most need of attention. Avoid markers that are broken, tipping, flaking, wobbling, or otherwise unstable. Decide how many markers you want to clean, and what the date and time of the cleaning will be.

3. Record the cemetery and the tombstones – before and after.

Before you touch anything in the cemetery, take photographs—both of wide shots of the whole cemetery or large portions of it as well as shots of the individual grave markers you will be cleaning. These will be your “before” pictures, which will help document the positive change you'll be making in the cemetery. You also want to record, as much as possible, the description and status of the cemetery. Use a professional form for this, such as the CHP's Rapid Cemetery Assessment Form.

4. Organize enough volunteers & supplies, especially water.

Advertise the cleaning day and gather workers. Choose a day that will be neither too hot, nor within 24 hours of freezing temperatures. When you know how many people will be attending, make sure you have enough supplies so that everyone can be doing something. Make sure to tell them what to bring, and then make sure you have the proper equipment that you, as organizer, will be bringing. See the supply checklist below. The hardest supply to secure is usually water. If in an

urban area, check with the town's fire department or parks department to see if you can borrow a pre-filled water buffalo.

5. Make sure everyone is clear what s/he is tasked to do during cleaning.

If most of your workers are first-timers to cemetery cleaning, start with a demonstration of the proper steps to take. Then make sure workers are each tasked with specific actions, whether that means that each person gets a particular tombstone or set of markers, or that people work in small groups.

6. Pre-water phase: remove loose dirt and debris first.

Much good work can be accomplished before applying any water or solution. You might want to start by having everyone walk through the cemetery picking up trash, fallen branches, etc. Cut back vegetation that is obscuring the markers, but preserve original plantings as they are part of the cemetery landscape. Don't pull off a vine or tree that is already embedded in a marker, in order not to further damage the marker, but do cut it at the root so it can eventually wither away. Using only your hands, brush off dirt or leaves from the markers.

7. Water phase: apply a generous amount of water to the tombstone, constantly, throughout the process.

You can make a difference just by cleaning with water. Always start cleaning a marker by pouring a generous amount of water onto it via a spray bottle, gentle pour from a bucket, or (best option) a pump sprayer. Use a clean brush to gently scrub off dirt, lichen, bird waste, etc. Keep the marker wet throughout the cleaning process.

8. Solution phase: apply tombstone-specific biological solution with natural-bristle brush.

Much of what stains old grave markers is biological growth, which gets deep into the pores of the stones. Use a solution that is specially formulated for biological growth. We use D/2, which you can purchase online by the gallon. Wet the stone thoroughly, and then spray on a generous amount of solution using a spray bottle. Scrub gently with a natural-bristle peanut brush in a circular motion, starting from the bottom of the stone and moving up so as to avoid streaks. Keep the stone wet throughout the process.

9. Rinse and let sit phase: rinse tombstone thoroughly and let the solution do its work.

Rinse the solution off the stone thoroughly, and then do the same process again. End by rinsing thoroughly and completely. (Be sure to rinse and allow to dry all the cleaning supplies as well.) You may also wish to spray on one final thin layer of solution, and then walk away without rinsing it off, as long as the solution isn't streaking down the marker. Let the marker sit. You may not notice an improvement in the appearance of the marker in the space of an hour or two, but you will after a week or two. The D/2 will continue to work long after application.

10. Follow-up the cleaning by revisiting the cemetery and noting tombstone appearance.

If possible, go back and revisit the cemetery a couple weeks after the cleaning. The solution has been working its way through the pores of the stone the entire time since the cleaning, leaving an appearance of less biological growth on the tombstones. This return visit is the best time to take "after" photos. After a thorough cleaning with solution, a marker will not need to be cleaned with solution again for at least five years.

DON'T	DO
Clean, handle, or otherwise touch any marker that is not stable.	Specifically select markers that are solid, stable, and significantly in need of cleaning. Contact a professional to address stones in need of repair.
Use chemical cleaners or bleach. Also, don't use herbicides or pesticides near markers.	Use only cleaning solutions that specify that they are safe for use on tombstones, such as D-2.
Apply any kind of filler on the stone in order to read the inscriptions better. No shaving cream, no flour, no chalk, etc.	Take advantage of the foam created when scrubbing with D/2 and wipe it across tombstone inscriptions. This is a safe and easy way to read the inscriptions better.
Use any tools that will harm markers, such as wire brushes, plastic-bristle brushes, or anything that can scrape the stone.	Use natural bristle brushes with peanut-shaped bodies, like those used for brushing horses.
Run lawnmowers close to markers. Don't even get too close with a weedeater.	Use a nylon whip on a weedeater, or simply use hand clippers to keep down the grass around the marker.
Sandblast or pressure wash anything in a cemetery!	Use buckets, spray bottles, and pump sprayers to apply water and solution.
Clean markers within 24 hours of freezing temperatures, or during very hot, sunny weather.	Reschedule cleaning workshops when the weather isn't cooperating, even if it means turning down help. Do what's best for the tombstones, and not necessarily your event.
Clean with solution more than once every few years.	Keep good records on which markers were cleaned and when.

SUPPLIES

WHAT WILL WE NEED?	HOW MUCH/MANY?
2- to 5-gallon buckets with carrying handles	1 2-gallon bucket per person or 1 5-gallon bucket for every 2-3 people
D/2 biological cleaning solution	1 gallon for small family cemetery; ~1 quart for every 2-3 people
Nitrile gloves	1 pair per worker
Eye protector glasses	1 pair for each person whose eyes are not already covered by glasses or sunglasses
Garden hose with nozzle	1, though these aren't always necessary, depending on existing equipment at site
2- to 5-gallon pump sprayers	1 2-gallon sprayer per person or 1 5-gallon sprayer for every 2-3 people
Bamboo skewers	1-2 per person
Spray bottles	1 for every 2 people (these will contain the D/2)
Natural-bristle peanut brushes	1 per person (possibly 1 for every 2 people, but that might get tricky)
Detail brushes	1 for every 3-5 people
First aid kit	1