



# TIPS FOR PHOTOGRAPHING GRAVESTONES

## DOCUMENTING WITHOUT DAMAGE

by Maureen Taylor

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There is so much misinformation available on the right way to document a gravestone marker that it is a wonder that any of them are still standing. These monuments to our ancestors are permanent reminders of a loved one when properly cared for. Unfortunately, a lot of damage is innocently done in the name of preservation. For instance, the common practice of creating a rubbing is actually harmful and in some states is illegal. Many school groups studying local history make rubbings of gravestone markers to use in the classroom. However, rubbings are abrasive and damage the surface of the stone by eventually wearing away the carving or loosening bits of soft stone. Even the most careful and gentle rubbing causes decay.

Photography offers an alternative. With the right equipment, bright sunlight and a little patience you can use images of headstones for educational purposes or add them to a family photo archive. Taking a picture is an ideal way to document the information on the stone without causing deterioration. Once you have taken these pictures, why not add them to the online Find **A Grave** to create a memorial to your ancestors? You will be able to share your discoveries with other researchers. You can also transfer the gravestone images into a Family Tree Maker scrapbook for those individuals thus adding depth to your genealogical data.

### BASIC REQUIREMENTS

#### Patience

Photographing gravestones takes planning. You may have to wait several days for the right combination of factors such as light and weather in order to take the best possible images. Rushing the process will only result in poor quality photos.

#### Light

Bright sunlight is necessary to highlight the stone's features. Ideally midday sun that hits the stone at a 30-degree angle is best. Other types of sunlight emphasize imperfections in the stone and can make the carving look flat. The stone's location influences when that might be available. For instance, gravestones in New England often face west and are best photographed at midday, while stones that face north should be photographed in the late

afternoon. Those facing south are well-lit all day in midsummer but not during the rest of the year.

You can improve the quality of light by reflecting it with a mirror to highlight the stone and carving. A plastic full-length mirror works well. Ideally, the stone should not be taller than the mirror. If you are only focusing on a section then a small mirror can be used. Since you will need to position the mirror it would be helpful to have either a partner or a tripod with you. If the sunlight is too strong you can create some shading by either standing in front of the direct sunlight or by using a large dark cloth or cardboard as a shield. If the stone is located in the shadows, you may be able to use two mirrors to help you reflect light. Keep in mind that you still need a sunny day.

## EQUIPMENT

### **Type of Camera**

The Association For Gravestone Studies recommends using a 35 mm SLR that is outfitted with either a 50-55mm lens or a wide angle 35mm lens for crowded areas. Smaller lenses will distort the straight lines in the image. If you intend to digitize the pictures, you might want to use a digital camera. It will reduce the number of steps involved in digitizing the image and save you the expense of film processing.

### **Film**

If you are utilizing a 35 mm SLR, either black and white or color film can be used. Black and white Tri-x film is a good choice. Filters can be helpful when shooting black and white images. An orange filter increases the contrast while a polarizing filter can reduce glare. Exposure times of 1/250th or 1/500th are suggested. Color film with an ASA of 200 shot at 1/250th of a second should yield a good result.

### **Technique**

Since you are creating a record of the cemetery in addition to photographing a single stone you should take several images of the same marker. For example:

- One showing the whole cemetery.
- Shoot an image that includes the closest stones and provides context.
  - Photograph the whole gravestone so that inscription and carving are visible.
- Make sure to take at least one picture where the inscription fills the camera frame.

Unless you are extremely lucky, most of the stones you want to photograph will not be straight due to ground settling. In the case of leaning stones, tilting the camera should eliminate the slant.

### **Background**

As you focus the camera you may notice distracting background elements such as telephone poles, trees and other monuments. Since you want your picture to be essentially about the stones you are photographing, you need to eliminate those articles. You can use a background cloth or cardboard as a backdrop, but make sure that whatever you use is free of imperfections or they will be more distracting than the original problems. If you are going to photograph a large number of cemetery monuments you may want to invest in a piece of Formica mounted on 1/4 inch plywood. Be sure to have a handhold cut into the side for easy

carrying. Any store that manufactures kitchen counters should be able to provide what you need. A neutral shade other than gray enhances the appearance of the stone.

## OTHER WAYS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

### Cleaning the Stone

Cleaning a cemetery stone is a controversial topic. The first rule of conservation and preservation is to cause no damage. Unfortunately, by using household cleaners, chalk and shaving cream to enhance the lettering you may injure the surface in ways that are not readily apparent. Caution should be used before you destroy what you set out to preserve.

Over the centuries several different types of stones have been used to create gravestones. Some of the stones are quite porous and fragile, while others are resistant to damage. Be careful when attempting to improve the readability of the inscription. Types of stone:

- Prior to the Nineteenth century: Sandstone or slate
- Nineteenth Century: Marble and gray granite
- Late nineteenth century to the present: Polished granite or marble

There are a few things that you **can** do that will not cause injury.

- A soft brush or natural sponge and water will help you remove surface soil. Gentle brushing should remove surface dirt and bird droppings. Power washing should not be used; water should flow over the stone or be delicately sprayed onto the surface. Never use hard objects or stiff brushes to clean the stone. Removing lichens with sharp objects may inadvertently destroy the surface.
- Not all cemeteries are regularly maintained. By trimming tall weeds around the base of the stone and cutting the grass you may discover epitaphs hidden under the overgrowth.

### Documentation

Local historians and genealogists have transcribed inscription information for generations. Many of these handwritten and typewritten efforts are now being entered into databases, some of which are available online. What is innovative is the use of photography to create a photographic record of both the inscription and the carvings. By using a pictorial representation of the headstone as part of the database, you are able to see what actually appears on the stone including both the epitaph and the artistic carving. It is a record of what the cemetery marker looked like at a particular time before further damage occurs or the stone disappears.

If you live near or know about a cemetery in your area, why not assist with the preservation efforts by photographing each stone in it for future reference? A local historical society or cemetery association will appreciate your efforts. Be sure to check with them before embarking on the project so that there is no duplication of effort.

A basic record sheet on a cemetery should include the following:

- Location
- Map of the cemetery with the stones numbered
- When photographed (time, date, and frame number)
- Transcription of the epitaph

For a discussion of what should be included in a basic record sheet consult **this paper** by B.W. Hutchinson. Database software is available from the Association For Gravestone Studies and is

being used by cemetery projects across the United States. If you want to learn more about photographing cemetery markers or are curious about the history of gravestone carving you can contact the following organizations:

**The Association For Gravestone Studies**

278 Main St., Suite 207  
Greenfield, MA 01301  
(413) 772-0836

They sell a basic information kit through their gift shop and publish an annual journal on gravestone history called *Markers*. Membership is open to all interested individuals. The AGS holds an annual conference with workshops, lectures, and tours. For more information and registration forms consult their Web site. The society also maintains a lending library for members.

**Connecticut Gravestone Network:** Founded in 1995, their mission is to educate individuals about the history and preservation of cemetery art. Their Web site includes a list of do's and don'ts.

**Find A Grave:** Share your discoveries with others by adding your gravestone photographs to this online database of images and information.

## REFERENCES

- Cornish, Michael, "Photographing Gravestones," Association for Gravestone Studies, 1990.
- Farber, Daniel and Jessie Lie, "Making Photographic Records of Gravestones," Association for Gravestone Studies, 1986.
- Walther, Tracy C., "Cleaning Masonry Burial Monuments," Association for Gravestone Studies, 1990.

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