

THE WEST VIRGINIA CEMETERY SURVEY

What is it?

The West Virginia Cemetery Survey is a program designed to help genealogists, archivists, and other interested persons to locate, record, and preserve information about cemeteries within our state.

Initiated in 1995 by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), the Survey is designed to assist in the collection of many kinds of data from many types of cemeteries. From small family plots to larger church and municipal burial grounds, cemeteries hold a wealth of information about the people who settled West Virginia and made it what it is today.

One goal of the Survey is to locate cemeteries. As many of the older and smaller burial grounds have been neglected or forgotten over time, this is not always an easy task. Some cemeteries may be found on tax or topographic maps, while the locations of others may only be known by descendants or local residents. Cemetery surveyors are asked to plot the cemetery on a map, and that information is later transferred to master maps kept in the State Historic Preservation Office.

Another goal is to record information about the cemetery and those buried there. The Survey form is designed to include information about the terrain and boundaries of the cemetery, ease of access, and degree of care that the cemetery has received. It also allows for a detailed account of headstone information, such as surnames, dates, decorative styles, and material types. Photographs and sketches of the cemetery layout or interesting headstone decorations are a valuable resource. Information about local contacts and published references to the cemetery or to people buried within completes the record.

Perhaps the most important purpose of the Survey is to preserve information. Cemeteries are all too easily neglected and forgotten, their contours hidden by weeds and overgrowth. Headstones may erode until their inscriptions are unreadable. They may be broken from their bases, removed, and even vandalized. Each time a cemetery is lost in this manner, the irreplaceable information that it contains is also lost. The West Virginia Cemetery Survey is an attempt to gather this data and maintain it in a manner that renders it accessible for research. All of the material gathered in the course of a survey is kept on file, and placed in a computer database.



Who Protects Cemeteries in West Virginia?

A variety of legislation protects human burial sites in West Virginia. Protective agencies range from local sheriffs to divisions of the state government. Specific legislation follows:

W.Va. Code §29-1-8a provides protection for human burials and burial sites of historic significance, including unmarked graves, grave artifacts and grave markers. Cemeteries must have archaeological or historical importance to fall under the protection of this law. Penalties are assessed for excavating, removing or otherwise desecrating such burials without the permission of an ad hoc committee convened at need by the State Historic Preservation Office. Both misdemeanor and felony charges may result, and conviction carries fines up to \$5000 and/or prison terms.

W.Va. Code §37-13-1 through -7 guide the removal, transfer and disposition of human remains found in gravesites on privately-owned land. The circuit court of the county in which the graves are located has jurisdiction over any proposed disturbance, provided that the graves in question are determined to have no archaeological or historical significance. Petitions must be made to and through the court system.

W.Va. Code §16-5-21 through -22 provide guidelines for interment and disinterment. It requires that permits for such actions be obtained from the county circuit court prior to any activity unless authorized to do so by court order. Such permits are required by law to be filed by the local registrar and be open at all times to official inspection. Records must also be kept by the person or persons in charge of interment and of the cemetery or burial ground.

W.Va. Code §61-8-14 provides penalties for the disinterment or displacement of a dead body, and damage to cemetery or graveyard properties. Disinterment or displacement of a dead human body or parts thereof is a felony crime, and is punishable by imprisonment of not less than two or more than five years. Desecration of or damage to a cemetery, graveyard, or cemetery structure is a misdemeanor, conviction of which may result in fines of not more than \$2000, or imprisonment of not more than one year, or both.

W.Va. Code §35-5-1 through -6 and 5A-1 through -8 regulate the governance of cemeteries, including the appointment of trustees, establishment of endowments for perpetual care, etc.



How Can I Get Involved?

The West Virginia Cemetery Survey is dependent upon the involvement of interested persons with a knowledge of local history and an interest in its preservation. Historic and genealogical societies, community groups, Boy and Girl Scout Troops, and other organizations are invited to participate in the survey process. If you know of a cemetery in your area that you believe should become a part of the Survey, contact the Division of Culture and History by telephone or mail. A Survey form will be sent to you at your request. If possible, include in your request the name of the town nearest the cemetery, so that we may send a copy of the topographic map to you as well. Please address your requests to:

West Virginia Cemetery Survey
State Historic Preservation Office
The Cultural Center
1900 Kanawha Blvd., East
Charleston, WV 25305-0300
(304) 558-0220 Ext. 719

Thank you for your interest in the Cemetery Survey, and for helping us to preserve the history of the State of West Virginia.



Cemetery Preservation “Do”s and “Don’t”s

DO:

- *Photograph headstones and map cemeteries.
- *Research and document names and dates.
- *Work with church groups, Boy and Girl Scout Troops, and others to clean up cemeteries.
- *Call local monument companies - they may know of stone conservators in your area.
- *Carefully mow grass, remove garbage, etc. Be sure to use hand clippers around stones to avoid damage.

DON'T:

- *Enter a cemetery without permission.
- *Use wire brushes, acids or cleansers on headstones.
- *Attempt to remove lichens, mosses or other growths.
- *Attempt to glue or otherwise restore broken stones.
- *Move or remove stones.
- *Make rubbings of old inscriptions (this may stain or break the stone).

Preservation References

Strangstad, Lynette

1988 A Graveyard Preservation Primer. American Association for State and Local History.

Association for Gravestone Studies

278 Main Street, Suite 207

Greenfield, MA 01301

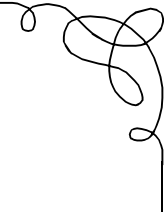
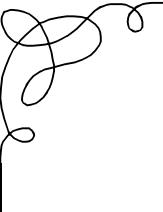
Website Address: www.berkshire.net/ags/

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The Process Of Recording
And Preserving
West Virginia Cemeteries
And How You Can Help



Published by
The State Historic Preservation Office
and
The Division of Culture and History
Charleston, WV



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