



# Preservation Hotline #6

South Carolina Department of  
Archives & History  
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**State Historic  
Preservation Office**  
<http://shpo.sc.gov/>

## Frequently Asked Questions About Cemetery Preservation

Cemeteries are an important feature of South Carolina's diverse heritage. In addition to marking the final resting place of our ancestors, they yield information about our state's social, religious, artistic, and cultural heritage. They also contain genealogical information that cannot be found anywhere else. The following are frequently asked questions about historic cemeteries.

**Q. What is the best way to start a cemetery restoration project?**

**A.** The first step is to educate yourself or your group about the preservation of historic cemeteries. The next step is to research and document the cemetery. You should study and map all plots in the yard and document each headstone and foot stone with photographs and a written record. Then you should develop a well thought out plan and set priorities. The following sources will help you educate yourself, research and document your cemetery, and develop a master plan:

**Let Us Forget: Preserving Historic Cemeteries.** South Carolina Educational Television Network for the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1997. (26 minute videotape) Available on loan from public libraries in South Carolina.

McGahee, Susan H., and Edmonds, Mary W. **South Carolina's Historic Cemeteries: A Preservation Handbook.** South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1997 (laws and bibliography updated 2007). The text is available on Archives and History's website at <http://www.shpo.sc.gov/cemeteryinfo.htm>

Strangstad, Lynette. **Preservation of Historic Burial Grounds.** National Trust for Historic Preservation, Revised 2003. (23-page booklet) Call 202-588-6296 or visit the on-line bookstore at [www.preservationbooks.org/](http://www.preservationbooks.org/)

Strangstad, Lynette. **A Graveyard Preservation Primer.** (144 pages) Call 413-772-0836 or visit [www.gravestonestudies.org/store/books/preservation\\_information.htm](http://www.gravestonestudies.org/store/books/preservation_information.htm)

Trinkley, Michael. **Grave Matters: The Preservation of African-American Cemeteries.** Columbia, SC: Chicora Foundation, 1995. (Booklet) To order a copy, call 803-787-6910 or visit Chicora Foundation on-line at <http://chicora.org>

**Q. What funds are available for restoring and maintaining historic cemeteries?**

**A.** Most cemetery projects are funded locally from non-public sources and rely on volunteers for maintenance. No state agency has the authority or means to maintain cemeteries. SC Code 6-1-35 authorizes (but does not require) a municipality or county to preserve or protect any cemetery within its jurisdiction that has been abandoned or is not being maintained.

**Q. How should I clean gravestones?**

**A.** Use the gentlest means possible to clean historic gravestones. Abrasive cleaning may permanently damage the stone. A nylon or tampico scrub brush and a garden hose or spray bottle with water will often clean stones satisfactorily. If more cleaning is needed, dissolve a non-ionic detergent in water. Thoroughly soak the stone with clear water, spray it with the non-ionic solution, then scrub it with a soft brush. Finally, rinse the stone with clean water. You can find non-ionic detergents (for example, Photo-Flo) at photographic suppliers. For marble stones a solution of plain household ammonia and water diluted 1:4 can be used. In particular, **avoid** using:

- ◆ muriatic acid or other chemicals
- ◆ household bleach
- ◆ sandblasting

These remedies may give short-term satisfaction from a cleaner-looking stone, but they will damage the surface of the stone and speed the natural weathering process. In the long run the stone will suffer. In one day, a harsh cleaner can cause as much surface erosion as fifty years of normal weathering. Household bleaches like Clorox and Purex can damage even polished granite.

**Q. How do I repair gravestones?**

**A.** This is not really a do-it-yourself job. The materials used to mark early graves — slate, marble, sandstone, and soapstone — each have unique physical properties. Only people who are highly skilled and experienced with the specific material should do restoration work. In particular, when repairing gravestones, do **not**:

- ◆ set stones in concrete — concrete expands and contracts at a rate that is different from most materials historic gravestones are made from; it also contains salts and other chemicals that can damage the stone.
- ◆ use commonly available epoxies and sealants. These “home remedies” are likely to be incompatible with the gravestone materials.

***Q. Is there a state law that protects historic cemeteries?***

**A.** There are several state laws that protect burial sites. SC Code 16-17-600, as amended, relates to the “Destruction or desecration of human remains or repositories thereof.” It provides for penalties of up to \$5,000 in fines and imprisonment for not more than ten years for the vandalism or desecration of burials or grave markers. There are also penalties for the destruction or injury of fencing, plants, shrubs, or flowers.

27-43-10 through 27-43-30 relate to the removal and relocation of abandoned cemeteries. The law requires a notification process before an abandoned cemetery is moved, relocating the graves to a suitable place, and protecting grave markers through the move.

27-43-40 defines an abandoned cemetery for the purposes of the law.

27-43-310 grants family members and descendants limited access to graves on private property. It requires owners of cemeteries on private property to provide reasonable access to family members and descendants of those buried in the cemetery. Those wanting access to the cemetery must submit a written request to the property owner.

Visit your local county library to read these laws, or, if you have internet access, read them on-line. The internet address for the S.C. Code of Laws is [www.scstatehouse.net/code/statmast.htm](http://www.scstatehouse.net/code/statmast.htm). Once you are at that web site, follow the instructions to locate and read the laws referenced in this fact sheet.

***Q. How can I discourage vandalism?***

**A.** If you discover signs of vandalism, contact the local law enforcement authorities immediately. Prosecute offenders who are caught and publicize the arrests. There are several other ways to discourage vandalism:

- ◆ Ask the local law enforcement agencies to put your cemetery on their patrol routes.
- ◆ Ask the neighbors to watch for suspicious activity in the area and to report to the police or sheriff if they see any.
- ◆ Arrange for people to visit and monitor the cemetery routinely.
- ◆ Maintain the cemetery. Vandals are often attracted to property that appears neglected.
- ◆ Protection devices like fences, lights, and alarms can help. Make sure they are in working order.

For more information about historic cemetery preservation, visit the Department of Archives and History website at [www.shpo.sc.gov/cempres](http://www.shpo.sc.gov/cempres).