



PRESERVATION HOTLINE #7

South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, South Carolina Department of Archives and History

scdah.sc.gov

Grave Concerns: Protecting and Repairing Historic Cemeteries

Historic cemeteries in South Carolina are often threatened by damage, whether from acts of vandalism or from natural disasters like thunderstorms or hurricanes. Immediate response is often necessary after cemeteries and stones have been damaged, but long-term planning is often the best means to make sure historic burial grounds are protected for future generations. After a natural or man-made disaster, there are several appropriate steps to take in the care and cleanup of historic cemeteries.

Record the Damage

- ◆ Map all features that have been damaged. Using a cemetery map, mark the stones, tombs, markers, fences, walls, paths, and vegetation that have been damaged. If no map is available, a hand-drawn sketch identifying the location of each feature will serve this purpose.
- ◆ Record the present condition of each affected feature. Sketch the location of the affected stone and describe the damage. Be precise! Take photographs in addition to the written record, if possible. A good record will include information about the location, the damage, the materials, the condition, and the size of the site and its components. It will also note previous repairs, record inscriptions, identify motifs and design elements of the various features, and indicate where fragments are stored.

Begin the Cleanup Process

- ◆ Use care. Historic markers are fragile. If there are broken markers, do not step on the fragments. If trees and limbs have fallen on markers, carefully cut limbs away in small sections, carrying them away as you work. Do not let the limbs fall on the stones beneath them.
- ◆ Photograph the broken markers both before and after the removal of trees and limbs.
- ◆ Carefully remove pieces of the broken stones, only after double-checking your documentation. Once you have moved a stone, it will be impossible to remember which direction it faced, its precise location, or the details of its construction.
- ◆ Do not discard fragments. Fragments that seem insignificant can be vital to later restoration efforts.

Plan for Repairs

Before you begin repair of markers, you need to understand proper conservation methods. Improper repairs can inflict irreparable damage on both markers and the site itself. A selected list of resources (next page) can help you plan appropriate conservation treatments for damaged cemeteries.

Plan for the Long-term

Once you have identified, recorded and temporarily secured the damaged markers and other features, begin planning for the long-term management and care of the cemetery. A well-prepared master preservation plan will provide much needed information in the event of damage to the cemetery, as well as detailed information for its day-to-day maintenance. A good plan places the site in its cultural and historical context, identifies management considerations, recommends conservation treatments, and develops a maintenance schedule. Use the following checklist when preparing a plan:

- ◆ maps
- ◆ detailed surveys of all major features
- ◆ chain of ownership
- ◆ historical and cultural evaluation
- ◆ conditions assessment
- ◆ recommended approaches to preserving landscape features
- ◆ recommended conservation treatments
- ◆ management considerations like visitor traffic and safety, lighting, security, and funding
- ◆ maintenance planning

For more information

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). Available at <https://scdah.sc.gov/historic-preservation/technical-assistance/cemeteries>.

Strangstad, Lynette. *A Graveyard Preservation Primer 2nd edition* (220 pages). Available for order from the Association for Gravestone Studies, at <https://www.gravestonestudies.org/agspublications/graveyard-primer>.

Striegel, Mary F., Gale, Frances, Church, Jason, and Dietrich-Smith, Debbie. *Preservation Brief 48: Preserving Grave Markers in Historic Cemeteries*. National Park Service, 2016. Available at <https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/48-preserving-grave-markers.htm>.

Trinkley, Michael. *Grave Matters: The Preservation of African-American Cemeteries*, (1996), *Recording Historic Cemeteries: A Guide for Historical Societies and Genealogists*, (1998), and *Cemetery Disaster Planning* (2013) Columbia, SC: Chicora Foundation. Copies are available online at <http://chicora.org/cemetery-publications.html>.

The following websites also contain information on the study and preservation of cemeteries:

The Association for Gravestone Studies www.gravestonestudies.org

Chicora Foundation <https://www.chicora.org/cemetery-preservation.html>

SC Department of Archives & History <https://scdah.sc.gov/historic-preservation/technical-assistance/cemeteries>

Questions? SC Department of Archives & History / 8301 Parklane Road / Columbia, SC 29223 / 803-896-6168

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