

Cemeteries and the National Register

*The National Register of Historic Places is a federal program of the National Park Service (NPS) facilitated by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). It is entirely separate from historic designations put in place by local governments and from the state historical marker program. The below information provides basic guidance only. **If you are interested in having the SHPO evaluate a cemetery for eligibility, please submit a Preliminary Information Form (PIF).***

For additional information, please contact Virginia Harness at vharness@scdah.sc.gov or 803-896-6179.

What makes a cemetery eligible for the National Register?

Not all cemeteries are eligible for listing in the National Register. Eligible cemeteries have broad historic or artistic/architectural importance within the local community, state, or nation. Eligible cemeteries typically represent a community at large (such as a municipal cemetery), provide important information on a period or group of people not well represented by other resources (such as a cemetery for early settlers or enslaved people), or have outstanding funerary art.

Are family or church/synagogue cemeteries eligible for listing?

Burial grounds important to a specific family or congregation, but not necessarily to the wider community, usually do not qualify for listing. These types of cemeteries are more likely to be listed as part of a larger property with other resources, such as a church complex or farmstead. Some family or church/synagogue cemeteries may be individually eligible if they have outstanding funerary art and/or represent an important aspect of local history that other resources cannot.

Do military burials make a cemetery eligible for listing?

The presence of military burials alone does not qualify a property for listing. Military cemeteries, or cemeteries with one or more dedicated military sections, may be eligible as historically important burial places for soldiers.

Do burials of historically significant people make a cemetery eligible for listing?

Almost never. Birthplaces and graves of important people are only eligible if there is no other extant resource associated with them and the person is of outstanding and unique importance. Likewise, a cemetery with multiple burials of important people may qualify for associations with those individuals only if the group is considered to be of transcendent importance (an extraordinarily high bar to clear).

Does National Register listing/eligibility provide protection or funding for cemeteries?

National Register listing is largely honorific and provides very limited protections and benefits. The program encourages, but does not guarantee, preservation of historic resources. Listing/eligibility may provide access to grants, though many preservation grant programs exclude work on cemeteries. The SHPO does not have funds for maintenance of historic cemeteries or legal authority to acquire cemeteries or enforce state laws protecting cemeteries.