

Volunteers and Professionals and the Cemetery Preservation Project

In many instances, a large part of cemetery preservation work can be accomplished using the volunteer base within a community. Scouting groups, churches, genealogical groups, historical societies, and descendants of people buried in the cemetery are but a few of the resources that are available to the organizer of a historic cemetery conservation project. The success of the volunteer rests in the organizer's hands. The organizer can ensure a successful and continued volunteer base by educating the volunteers so they know what they are doing, why it is being done and what the consequences are if recommended methods and materials are not used.

The project organizer must also make safety of the volunteers the first and foremost consideration. Cemetery project recruits need to be informed of a number of concerns prior to entering the cemetery. Most importantly is that the work in a cemetery can be very hard and at times dangerous. Stones weigh a great deal and can cause serious damage to untrained workers in an instant.

Before actual work begins, the project organizer should make every effort to provide a training opportunity for all volunteers and staff who plan to work in the cemetery. Training times, which can be as short as one hour or as long as one day, should be set and training materials provided. The importance of this aspect of the project cannot be underestimated. Training is the best way to minimize the possibility of anyone getting injured, and it will prevent damage to the cemetery caused by well-intentioned volunteers because they will see how the work is to be performed as well as learn details specific to the site.

Once volunteers are recruited and trained, the organizer should coordinate the times specific groups are to be in the cemetery. Other responsibilities are to develop task lists, establish timetables, and arrange for the delivery of supplies so that all time is used efficiently. Additionally, news coverage can be arranged if desired. Fifty people in a cemetery can do a great deal of work in a short period of time but without coordination and supervision, much of the volunteers' time will be wasted. As a result, volunteers may not return to continue with the project.

Listed below are some general guidelines for volunteers.

Guidelines for Volunteers

- A volunteer should never go into a cemetery alone to perform work. There is always the possibility of a falling tree limb or grave marker, as well as other unforeseen accidents. Always err on the side of safety.
- Take a first aid kit when working in the cemetery. Also be sure to have a cell phone in case an emergency occurs. There are a great many insects and other types of wildlife in cemeteries; take necessary precautions to avoid being bitten. Wear long pants, long sleeve shirts, sturdy shoes and gloves when working in cemeteries. Be sure to bring insect repellent and anti-bee sting medication in your first aid kit.
- Inform the proper legal authorities that you are planning to be in the cemetery and tell them what you are doing.
- It is not at all uncommon to come across broken glass or pieces of rusty metal in the ground as you uncover broken stones. **BE CAREFUL!** If any injury breaks the skin, consult a doctor if you have not had a tetanus shot in the last five years.

- Be aware of plants in the cemetery that are toxic or cause allergic reactions. Plants like poison ivy and poison oak are common in the Southeast and especially like to grow on fences and trees. Before going into the cemetery to work, study what they look like so you can identify and avoid them. Wear protective clothing; use extra caution if removing this type of plant is part of the cemetery project work.
- Although some cemeteries are shaded, sun exposure is a consideration. When working in the cemetery, be sure to use a good sunscreen. Avoid working in the hottest part of the day and have plenty of drinking water available.
- Pay attention to the areas traversed. A sunken grave, wet stones or vegetation in the path could cause a fall.
- Always use the proper lifting technique when working with stones. Utilize a tripod with a heavy-duty chain, winch and straps for lifting heavy stones and, if possible, wear steel-toed boots. Never attempt to lift any, except the very smallest, stones alone.

Before any volunteers are allowed to work in the cemetery they should be given written, specific cemetery rules, as a basic set of directions to guide their efforts. These rules may be the general policies of the cemetery or may be specific enough to cover unique work situations to be performed within the cemetery. Remember that cemetery rules should not conflict with any local, state or federal regulations, so become informed regarding applicable regulations.

Suggested Cemetery Rules

- Establish open and closing hours for the cemetery.
- A statement that would indicate that cemetery management is not responsible for injury to visitors.
- Promote "cemetery etiquette" by prohibiting actions such as running across plots and leaning, climbing or jumping on stones.
- Dogs or other types of pets should be prohibited, or at the least, allowed in only on a leash.
- Gravestone rubbings should be prohibited.
- Alcoholic beverages should be prohibited.
- Children must be under adult supervision at all times.
- Cleaning of stones should only be done with the permission of the owner and only with proper techniques and materials.
- Skates, bikes and skateboards should be prohibited.
- Littering should be prohibited.
- Cuttings of plants should be prohibited.
- Removal of stones or any other cemetery item should be prohibited.

Professional Help

Depending on the size of the cemetery and the scope of the project, you may need to hire a professional conservator. Though a historic preservation consultant may be the initial professional used to assist in the planning, other experts may have to be employed. Professionals that might be considered are horticulturalists, archaeologists, landscape historians, cemetery or tombstone conservators, and monument dealers. Check with the State Historic Preservation Office for assistance in determining the type of expert needed for the project you have in mind. When hiring a professional, it is important to clearly communicate your concerns before the work begins to ensure it is of the best quality. Be certain all project specifications are written into the agreement signed by both parties. Establish good, ongoing communication throughout the process so changes in the scope of the project can be addressed. Keep in mind it is possible that no one conservator is able to address all your conservation needs, so it may be necessary to consult with others about different parts of the project. Below are some considerations for selecting a conservator.

Guidelines for Hiring a Professional

- Inquire about qualifications, types of insurance, and membership in professional conservator groups. Ask about the size of their firm, length of time in business, employee training and experience and supervision of employees
- Ask about experience with similar cemetery conservation projects and request references. Consider personally viewing older repairs done by the conservators, rather than more recent ones, to ensure their work has successfully survived and maintained integrity over time.
- Specify that the conservator provide documentation of the work being done. Ask for before and after photographs. You must be certain that all products are identified in all work orders and that MSDS (Material Safety Data Sheets) are supplied for all products used.
- Develop a written timeframe for the project. Identify circumstances and obligations if the project takes longer than identified.
- Identify and clarify any concerns the conservator might have such as overnight site security, or questions about utilities and permits.
- Ask if the conservator is willing to train others involved in the project, such as cemetery staff or volunteers. Are they willing to return for routine maintenance? What sort of actions will be taken in the event of a repair failure?
- Be sure the conservator agrees to follow OSHA regulations and to use appropriate safety equipment to minimize the risk of accident or injury.
- Specify that because of the fragile nature of the landscape, preserving old plants, structures, and markers is a priority, possibly requiring extraordinary buffering techniques to be used.