

**A Grave Interest:  
Searching for Clues in the Cemetery©  
with Joy Neighbors**

<http://www.AGraveInterest.blogspot.com>

Cemeteries contain a wealth of genealogical information - everything from family history and records to art including architecture, sculpture, stained glass and intricate carvings. Walk the graveyard, learn the history of the region and what times were like when your ancestor lived. Plan your trip, decide what records to search for, set appointments, and know where to look. Follow these steps and your cemetery trip will provide clues about your ancestors, and their lives.

**Ten Steps for Maximum Cemetery Research**

- 1) Set realistic goals. Decide what you want to accomplish on the trip. Goals help you stay on task regardless of fascinating finds along the way.
- 2) Plan your outing. Know which cemetery you'll be visiting, who's in charge at each location, who to ask questions, and what questions to ask. Be sure it's a workable plan you can change if the need arises.
- 3) Schedule those appointments. Call or email everyone you want to speak with and set up workable times. This might include the cemetery sexton, courthouse personnel, genealogical societies, library, and university archives.
- 4) Pack a cemetery bag. This will come in handy to document the stone, reading difficult lettering, tending the grave, or if you plan to spend the day.
- 5) Mind your safety. Take a buddy along. If going solo, carry a charged cell phone. Be aware of what's going on around you. If you're followed or see vandalism occur, get to safety before reporting.
- 6) Learn the lay of the land. Make a trip through the cemetery to get a feel for your surroundings. Take a camera and start photographing at the entrance. Stop at the office for maps, historical handouts, and books.

7) Watch your step. Look out for broken stones, leaning monuments and sunken graves – all can create an accident situation. Be aware that snakes, bees, raccoons and other critters make the cemetery their home.

8) Be skeptical of what you see. Just because it's written in stone doesn't make it true. Flag concerns and do more research when you get home.

9) Be respectful. Reroute or wait if a funeral is going on. Avoid doing anything that could damage a stone. Remember the Tombstone Tourist's Golden Rule: Take only photos – Leave only footprints.

10) Have fun! Cemeteries are outdoor museums. Photograph what interests you. Soak up the ambience, read the stones and let your mind wander concerning those buried here. Remember, your ancestor knew them.

### **Types of Cemeteries and Who's in Charge**

- A cemetery superintendent, sexton, or the mayor's office will be in charge of state, city or county cemeteries.
- A county board or township trustee maintains rural, township, or county graveyards.
- The family or current landowner controls family and private burial grounds.
- The church office or clergy oversees church or religiously affiliated graveyards.
- Military cemeteries come under the jurisdiction of the National Cemetery Administration. Contact <http://www.Cem.VA.gov>
- Organizational and fraternal burial grounds are maintained by the organization's local, regional or national office.

## **Cemetery Records May Include**

- Cause of death • Age at death • Full name including maiden • Address of deceased • Location of death • Attending physician • Birth, marriage and death dates • Relationships • Death certificate • Obituary • Cemetery of burial • Plot owner • Cost of plot • Location of plot • Cost of burial • Grave type • Grave orders • Funeral home • Undertaker • Memorial card • Officiating clergy • Stone carver • Military service • Fraternal groups • Occupation • Religion •

## **Cemetery Records Crash Course**

Burial records have been kept since the mid-1800s, and churches have kept them much longer. Search for the information listed above in these records. While some findings can be repetitive, others may prove to be one-of-a-kind gems of knowledge.

- Sexton's Records/Registry of Burials/Records of Interment (interchangeable names) – These contain the chronological records of burials and the reports that pertain to where the graves are located.
- Cemetery Deeds – Deeds are issued when real estate is sold. Cemetery deeds list the plot where the deceased is buried. The cemetery along with the city or county recorder's office should have a copy.
- Plot Records and Plat Maps – Plot records contain information about the physical grave lot including the location, grave number and visual description of the site. Plat maps show the layout of all the graves in the cemetery. Plat books include the burial section name, location number, burial row number, and grave or plot number.
- Burial Permits – These permits are government documents that allow the remains to be buried. A burial permit is issued to the funeral home by the cemetery.
- Burial Records – These records may include burial transit permits, grave opening and closing orders, and orders to disinter remains including the reason for doing so.

## **Other Death Records**

These records are found at local, county, or state offices.

- Death Certificates – This is legal proof of an individual's death. It's completed by a medical professional and kept by local or county, and state departments. Death certificates were not kept until the late 1800's in some places, early 1900s in others.
- Probate Records – These records are created as the person's estate is settled. This includes the will and information on the deceased's estate.
- Obituaries – This is a public announcement of a person's death published in local and regional newspapers. Today many obits can be found online. If not, check the newspaper's archives, or access at local libraries and universities.

## **Questionable Circumstances of Death Records**

- Autopsies occur to determine the cause of death. An autopsy consists of external and internal examinations of the body looking for traumatic injuries and signs of disease. Physical evidence is collected including hair samples and nail clippings, along with organs, tissues and bodily fluids.
- A Coroner's Report is created when a death is not due to natural circumstances. It summarizes details from the autopsy, and can include several records like the pathology report, toxicology report, necrology report, police report, court testimony, and the jury report.
- An inquest is held to determine how, when, where and why a death occurred.

## **Learn More with Joy Neighbors**

*The Family Tree Cemetery Field Guide: How to Find, Record and Preserve Your Ancestors' Graves* by Joy Neighbors. (ShopFamilyTree.com to order, or see Joy for a signed copy of her book.)