

Oregon Commission on Historic Cemeteries

Position Paper

The Oregon Commission on Historic Cemeteries has created several position papers to convey their opinion of best practices on various topics related to historic cemeteries.

Marker Cleaning

January 2010

When one recalls visiting old cemeteries you immediately think about the various types and styles of grave markers. While many are quite simple, others are large, ornate and a work of art. They all provide us with a history of an area and an era through the wonderful inscriptions and symbols that can be found on them. The grave markers along with curbing, steps, urns, iron fencing and other original details are what help to define our historic cemeteries and encourage people to care for and protect them.

Some people might look at an old marker and think that just because it appears to be dirty, it should be cleaned and made to look like it did when it was first placed at the grave site. Doing so could not only take away from the overall charm and ambiance of the cemetery, but could prove to be harmful to the stone itself. Like any other project, cleaning of cemetery markers should have a defined purpose, and should be taken on only after careful evaluation of each marker designated to be cleaned.

Some possible reasons to consider cleaning a marker:

1. The marker has organic growth on it such as lichen, moss, algae or fungus, which can be harmful to the stone and cause damage.
2. The marker has plant growth on it, which can cause damage to the stone as well as affect the stability of the marker.
3. A marker that is caked in dirt or has dirt spatters on it.
4. The information is illegible due to dirt.

Evaluation of the marker to be cleaned:

1. Why is cleaning necessary?
2. Is the marker stable and secure on its base or in the ground?
3. What kind of material is the marker made of?
4. Has the marker had previous restoration or repairs made to it?
5. What is the general condition of the stone?
 - If it is chipping, scaling, flaking or there are other forms of deterioration, do not attempt to clean the marker.
 - If you “hear a hollow sound” when you gently tap the surface with your knuckle, avoid cleaning the marker.
 - If you have any doubts or questions, seek professional assistance.

Conditions to *avoid* when cleaning markers:

1. Dry, hot and sunny weather.
2. Weather where freezing temperatures could be expected.



3. Windy days as it tends to dry the stone too quickly during the cleaning process.
4. Lack of sufficient clean water for the entire project.

Cleaning techniques and tools to *avoid*:

1. Do not use a pressure washer.
2. Do not use any acids or acid based solutions.
3. Do not use any kind of abrasives, scouring pads or adhesive tape.
4. Do not use a sand blaster.
5. Do not use any metal tools or wire brushes.
6. Do not use bleach or any other form of household cleaners.

Some recommended cleaning techniques and tools:

1. High quality, soft natural bristle brushes in various sizes.
2. Soft tooth brushes.
3. Wooden craft sticks or wooden skewers.
4. Plastic scrapers in various sizes.
5. Clean cosmetic sponges.
6. Protective eyeglasses and rubber gloves.
7. Clean white rags.
8. Cotton swabs and toothpicks (natural finish).
9. Compressed Air (60psi max) or small broom.
10. Plastic buckets and plastic watering cans (spray top removed).
11. Pump sprayer.
12. Knee pads.

Things to remember:

These old grave markers are far more fragile and dangerous than most people think and therefore, cleaning should only be attempted when absolutely necessary, and should start in the least aggressive manner. Remember, your goal is to preserve the marker and prolong its life.

Start your cleaning project when you have the time to devote to it, as it takes both time and patience.

Begin by completely saturating the stone with clean water and then, working from bottom to top in a random orbit motion, gently scrub the stone keeping the stone wet at all times. Do not use a dry brush on the stone. Dip brush frequently to reduce friction. In most cases just plenty of clean water and gentle scrubbing will work miracles. You may have to repeat the process a couple of times. It is very important that you be sure to completely rinse off the stone after each cleaning attempt, and before the stone is allowed to dry.

When using a bucket and brush method to clean the stone, be sure to change your water frequently to avoid putting too much polluted water back on the stone. Additionally, take some time and clean off your brushes. A pump sprayer works very well and not only uses less water but, gives you more control of where you want the water to go. You can then use a bucket with clean water to rinse off your brushes as you work.

If you find that using just water and gentle scrubbing is not giving you the desired results, there are a few safe



non-ionic cleaners that are available such as: Photo-Flo, Vulpex, Orvus or Triton X. It is important that when using these products you do not allow the cleansers to dry on the marker and that you rinse frequently. Before using any of these products or any other form of a mild detergent, the stone must be thoroughly soaked with water.

The longer the better as you want to avoid the stone absorbing the detergent and making it impossible to rinse it off the stone. Saturating the stone with water first will help to keep the cleaners on the surface of the marker and not allow it to be absorbed into the stone. If possible, try testing the product on an area of the marker that is least visible.

To remove organic growth such as lichen, moss, algae and fungus you may want to try the architectural antimicrobial product D-2. Initially the product has proven to be safe and very effective but, like any other new product, the long term effects are unknown. Again, we suggest starting in the least aggressive manner, keeping the stone wet, working with a natural bristle brush and to rinse the stone thoroughly.

Summary

The cleaning of markers should only be done as necessary (no more than once every five years) and with the understanding and intention that cleaning will help preserve and extend the life of the marker. Always follow the least aggressive and gentlest means possible when cleaning a stone. Allow plenty of time for the project, it takes time and patience, and you don't want stop halfway. If you have concerns or questions seek help and guidance before continuing.

For more information or help

Please refer to Heritage Bulletin #3 for details on how to clean cemetery markers. Advice and help is available from Kuri Gill, Program Coordinator for OCHC, and the OCHC Commissioners. Please contact Kuri for more information.

