

Guide to Cemetery Surveying

1. Consider carefully the scope of your cemetery survey project.

The scope of a cemetery survey project can vary according to your established goals and/or your organizational resources. For instance, your project could be to record the locations of all the cemeteries in the entire county, or you could be interested in just recording the information about one specific cemetery. Either is beneficial, especially when taking into consideration what you can realistically achieve. You can always do more later and add to previously gathered information.

Consider the following when planning the scope of your cemetery survey:

- For a county-wide cemetery location survey, the main tasks are finding all the cemeteries in the county, making a record of the locations, and marking them on a map.
- For a survey of an individual cemetery, tasks include:
 - Determining its boundaries accurately, including unmarked graves; mapping within the cemetery boundaries the layout of graves and plots.
 - Recording grave marker inscriptions and keying them to a map of the cemetery's layout.
 - Photographing all grave markers, monuments, and other features of the cemetery, referencing their locations on the cemetery map.
 - Recording the condition of grave markers, monuments, fencing, and other features.
 - Recording the condition of the landscape (erosion problems, plant overgrowth), and other observable problems, such as vandalism.

2. Determine the underlying purpose of your cemetery survey project.

In other words, ask yourself specifically what is the end use of the information you are gathering. Focusing on your goal can help you select your best method of gathering and recording information. Look for examples of work already done or check with local government officials for ideas.

Some uses for cemetery information are:

- Publication in a book
- Posting on a website accessible by the public
- Put into a database accessible by the public
- Put into a Geographic Information System (GIS) layer for the county/city planning department
- Donation to the local historical or genealogical organization, library, or the Georgia Archives

Some information gathering methods include:

- Recording data in the field on paper with later transcription to a computer
- Recording data directly to a hand-held or laptop computers
- Storage as paper files or electronically

3. Find out if a previous cemetery survey project has been done.

Building on a previous survey may save you the time and effort of avoiding duplication. It could also alter a portion of your survey project from the gathering of new data to the verification of previously gathered information. Check with the local library, or historical or genealogical society for cemetery surveys; records may also be found at the Georgia Archives or possibly on Internet sites.

4. Plan how landowner permission will be obtained.

Laws in Georgia addressing access to cemeteries on private land reserves the owner the right to refuse entry to anyone other than a descendant of people buried in the cemetery. Even descendants are not given outright authority under any law to come onto private property, but must negotiate terms of access with the landowner. Consequently, before actually engaging in the fieldwork for your cemetery survey, you need to contact all the landowners of known cemeteries and also those who own land where cemeteries potentially exist to request permission to come onto the property. The permission process should include canvassing property owners before the surveying starts to explain the project and what will be done. This should include how long and how often the surveyors will be on the property, organization contact information, working out the terms of access, and providing owners with liability waivers, etc. To minimize misunderstanding and provide a consistent message, the project leader should prepare a project description sheet and a permission form, with space to write in any access restrictions, and should be provided this for the owner in the process of gaining permission. Project description sheets should be left with the landowner. Signed permission forms should be filed for later use, and a copy should be made for the team who surveys the property. A courtesy notification to the property owner should also occur on the date(s) of fieldwork.

5. Requirements for a county-wide cemetery location survey.

Surveying large areas to locate cemeteries requires developing or using existing standardized data entry forms, manpower resources and organizational skills, time, and perseverance. A county-wide cemetery location survey starts with a county map and archival research. The map will be used to mark the locations of all known cemeteries, potential cemetery locations, such as country churches, and areas that may need ground-level reconnaissance because no information is available. Archival research includes examining obituaries, county records, church records, and any other readily available sources for information regarding deaths and burials that might lead to the identification of cemetery locations and potential locations. With this information in hand, the county can be divided into manageable sections, each assigned to a separate group of volunteers. Each group's task would be to survey their section, verifying known information and recording newly discovered cemeteries. To complete a county-wide cemetery location survey, plan from the start to be sure *all* cemeteries in the county are located, which means understanding and accepting that it will take time and dedication. It's a task well worth the effort, but be prepared for lots of legwork, talking to community members, and generating publicity to solicit information.

Other suggestions:

- Select someone to direct the overall project. This person could also be the "trouble shooter" for volunteers to call on if they encounter a problem while out in the field.
- Train volunteers in your data collection method and the form(s) to be used, to ensure consistency.
- Appoint a person to receive all gathered data and store it, as well as someone to enter written data into an electronic database if one will be used.
- Decide at what point you will publish what you have, and then how future updates will be handled.

6. Requirements for an individual cemetery survey.

Surveying an individual cemetery also requires developing or using existing standardized data entry forms, manpower resources and organizational skills, time, and perseverance.

An individual cemetery survey starts with a good map of the cemetery showing its boundaries, roadways, plots, and as much other information about its organization and physical features as possible. With this information in hand, the cemetery can then be divided into sections for volunteers to survey and record information about each plot, grave marker, and other features.

When planning an individual cemetery survey:

- Survey each cemetery in a consistent manner, such as starting in the southwest corner and moving eastward in rows to the north. Doing so reduces the chances of overlooking parts of the cemetery. As a section is completed, the cemetery map should be colored in to mark the progress of the project.
- Use standardized forms or data collection format, train volunteers in their correct use, and be sure they have copies to use during fieldwork. The forms or data collection format should be developed based on what you've determined as the end use purpose of the information.
- Make sketches of sections and plots as necessary showing graves in each row, showing how family plots align, and to provide additional information. An informal pencil sketch will work fine and can be scanned into an electronic file for storage on a computer.
- Gather information in a manner that allows for relationship as well as alphabetically analysis. Family plots should be identified when possible as well as noting how graves, markers, and plots align, which may also provide clues to relationships.
- Train volunteers to recognize stone types, various monument types, and common tombstone iconography.

7. Requirements for recording information

Accuracy in recording information is a paramount objective in a cemetery survey project. To ensure accuracy volunteers should be trained to:

- Record the entire inscription on every stone.
- Record exactly what you see. Make **no changes or assumptions** regarding missing or misspelled text.
- Not assume because two people are on the same stone they are husband and wife. Report that they share the same stone but avoid making up what the relationship is, if not clearly stated in the inscription.
- Record the name of the stonemason or carver, which may be found on the lower portion of a marker near or right below the ground surface.
- Remember that everyone makes errors while recording text on headstones, so it is imperative to have someone else double check the work.
- Use appropriate methods to read hard-to-read markers. Weathered stones can be hard to read because their inscriptions might be eroded. Using a mirror to reflect sunlight or light from a flashlight, raking across the stone, to highlight the inscription can often make it readable. **Do not** put shaving cream, chalk or other material on a stone for the purpose of reading the inscription. These materials don't wash off completely and residue left can harm the stone and accelerate its deterioration.

8. Use Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment.

It is a great idea to record GPS coordinates for the location of the cemetery, even if it is just a general middle point in the graveyard. If the goal is to provide the county government with information for land use planning, check with them first to see what exact information they need and in what format. Errors can easily occur with GPS readings, so be sure you know your equipment and your unit of measure. Is it all degrees, degrees and minutes, or degrees, minutes and seconds? Carefully record the unit of measure you use so the cemetery can be located again in the future by anyone using your information.

9. Make your cemetery survey project information available.

Once data has been collected in the field it needs to be stored in an appropriate database and computer system. The database or other information format also needs to be easily accessible by the intended users of the information. Additionally, control and management of the database/computer system needs to be arranged so that it can be maintained/amended in the future and by whomever. Working out these matters can also provide opportunities for additional volunteers who prefer this task to data collecting fieldwork. Once the information is in an accessible form, interested parties need to know it's available. Inform all interested parties and provide the survey information to local governments, historical societies,

etc. Publicizing the project in local newspapers could have the added benefit of generating information about other unknown cemeteries.

10. Additional information sources:

- Example of county cemetery recording projects online: www.friendsofcems.org
- Examples of recording forms, monument types, and a guide on identifying stones on HPD's website: www.gashpo.org
- Iconography: *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*, written and photographed by Douglas Keister, Gibbs Smith publisher, 2004.

