

Best Practices for Cemetery Cleaning in Six Easy Steps



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With the growing trend of “oddly satisfying” videos showing headstone cleaning, Ohioans are flocking to their local cemeteries to try out these methods for themselves. While our cemeteries need some beautifying care and respect, it is always important to make sure that methods used are appropriate. Even though most markers are made of stone, they are porous and surprisingly quite fragile. Many enthusiasts are inadvertently damaging those very stones they are trying to help.

STEP ONE:

Ask for Permission

The first step for any cemetery cleaning project is to get permission. This permission can only be granted by the cemetery administrator or a direct descendant of the deceased whose stone will be cleaned. Headstones are private property passed down to the direct heirs of the deceased, meaning any damage could result in a lawsuit. On the other hand, cemetery administrators must maintain the site to prevent disintegration to unsightliness. Unfortunately, most cemetery administrations do not have the funds to properly care for all the stones. Many administrators are happy for the additional help. In most cases, a simple phone call or email conversation will suffice.

STEP TWO:

Inspect the Stones

Before beginning, it is important to make sure that the gravestones are sound and not likely to fall or break. This includes inspecting to ensure the stone is stable, secure, level, and all sections are securely attached. This is for your safety as well as that of the stone. I also recommend working with a partner so that if a stone does fall, you are able to get help. You should also check the stones for any existing damage. Sugaring and delamination are the two main modes of material failure and will appear as a powdery surface or layers missing from the surface of the stone. Stress cracks are also common. Wet the stone and observe the drying pattern. If there are wet streaks on the stone, it is likely a stress crack. Cleaning damaged parts of the stone should be avoided, as even the gentlest measures can lead

(continued on page 6)

to further damage. Note if a stone is hot to the touch and use warm water or cool the stone before beginning as drastic temperature changes can lead to cracking. Additionally, do not clean a stone if there is a chance of freezing temperatures as the water inside the porous stone will expand and crack the stone.

STEP THREE:

Document Each Stone

I also recommend taking a photo of the stone before starting, during the cleaning, and after completion. This is a great way to show the progress, as well as document when and how the stone was cleaned as a reference for future cleanings. Every time a stone is cleaned, minute particles are removed from the surface, and overcleaning can be more harmful than not cleaning at all. Most stones should not be cleaned more often than every 18 months to every three years. Any issues affecting the stone should also be documented to observe their change over time and determine if remediation or restoration is necessary.

STEP FOUR:

Remove Plant Growth

If there are plants attached to the stone, cut them at the base and let the plant die. Once the plant has died, wet the area and stone surface, then gently remove the plant. Pulling plants from stones can cause damage, especially if the plant has found stress cracks in which to imbed.

STEP FIVE:

Cleaning

Soak the stone with water to fully saturate any growth. This should be done by hand or with a low-pressure garden sprayer. Never use a pressure washer, as this will always cause chipping and damage the stone. Then, use a soft plastic scraper or wooden spatula to remove loose material from the surface. Removing big particles first keeps them from being rubbed back into the stone, potentially causing damage. Rinse the stone. From here, you can choose from several products for the next step. Often, water is enough, but a cleaning agent can be used as well. I personally prefer D/2 but check

with Cemetery Conservators for United Standards (cemeteryconservatorsunitedstandards.org/) to see if your preferred solution is approved for headstone use and be sure to test the cleaner on a small section of the rear of the stone. While the stone is wet with water, spray your cleaning agent and use a natural fiber brush, such as Tampico, to gently brush the stone in a circular motion to remove dirt and biological growth. Always keep the brush and stone wet and rinse thoroughly. If the stone is not fully cleaned after one application, the cleaning agent may be applied to particularly grimy areas again.

STEP SIX:

Wait

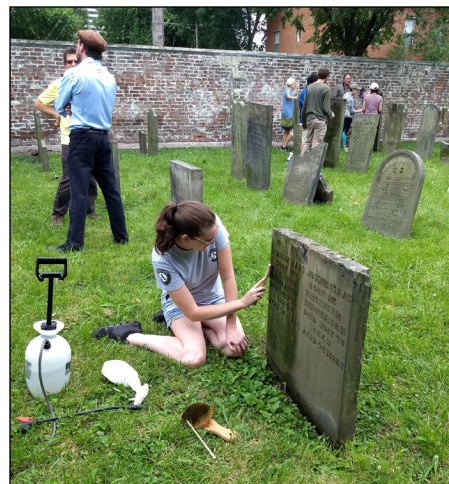
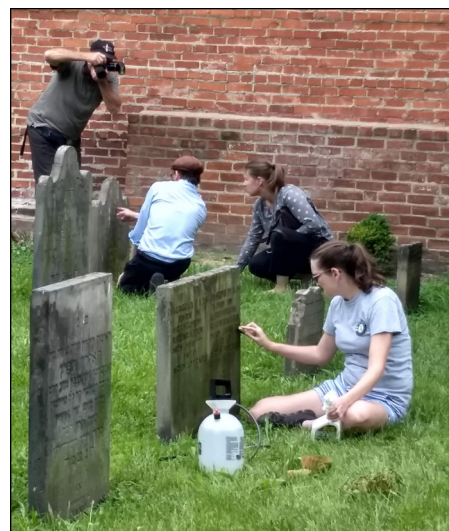
D/2 will continue to work for weeks after application. If the stone does not appear clean after 1-2 applications, have faith that the product will continue to work into the pores of the stone and kill any remaining biological growth. It is also normal for parts of the stone to change colors, typically turning a deep red or orange. This is the D/2 working and the stone color will return in a few days. I like to return to the cemetery around one month after cleaning to take follow up photos and see the full effects of the cleaning.

ALTERNATIVE METHOD:

No Scrub/ No Rinse

If you are not sure if a stone should be cleaned or if you simply do not have that much time to devote to cleaning, Step 5 can be replaced with the No Scrub/ No Rinse method. Simply spray D/2 to coat the entire surface of a dry stone, then allow it to air dry. Results will develop within a month.

Anything beyond basic cleaning, including headstone repairs, resetting, or infill should be referred to qualified professionals. Please feel free to reach out with any questions or to be referred to a qualified local professional: carrierhodus@gmail.com.



All images are from the Ohio History Service Corps Summer Training Day at Chestnut Street Cemetery in Cincinnati, one of the Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati. The Ohio History Service Corps would like to thank the Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati for hosting us for this training.