

# Stones and Bones

A Genealogical Guide to Investigating Cemeteries



## Introduction

Facts about a person's death provide vital pieces of genealogical information. Knowing where someone is buried may give a clue as to where the person lived or raise more questions if they were not buried near their residence. The person may be buried on a piece of land they owned at the time of their death, or, they may have been buried miles away from their home to be placed with relatives. Finding the final resting place of dead relatives often paves the way to finding previously unknown relatives.

Cemeteries are important places to visit when doing genealogical research. Unfortunately, sometimes it can be very challenging to extract information from cemeteries, especially older ones. The following information is designed to help locate people who died prior to the 1920s (records kept after that were much improved and more plentiful) although it can certainly be applied to modern day quests.

## Information

The best case scenario the genealogist faces is knowing the name of the cemetery a person is buried in, knowing the location of the cemetery and even knowing the location of the particular grave. The worst case is simply knowing the person is dead. Most times, the information you will have is somewhere in the middle of the two cases. Use all the information at your disposal. If you don't know where someone is buried, the following can all help narrow the search for the person's final resting place:

- last known place of residence (and year)
- date of death
- final resting place of spouse, children, parents, siblings and spouse's parents
- religious affiliation

Every piece of information can help narrow the search. Instead of attempting to walk through 50 cemeteries, because they are in the county where you think the person died, try to narrow the search to 3 or 4 good possibilities. You can always expand your search area later.

## Not a Clue?

Start with family members, the older the better. Grandma just might know where her grandmother is buried. Personal visits are best, but a phone call or letter will also work.

There are many books available on how to conduct family interviews. By talking to your relatives you may get more information than you bargained for!

If none of your family members can offer any information on the person you seek, there are a number of records that may help you find where that person is buried. Many record searches can and should be done via correspondence to save time. As with any other historical record, be aware the information you gather may not be accurate. The name of a cemetery may have

changed, the cemetery may have been known by two different names or the name may have been recorded inaccurately in the record.

On her death certificate, my ggg grandmother's place of burial is listed as the Stratz cemetery. In her obituary, the cemetery was listed as the Kratz. When finally located, the name of the cemetery was the Kratzer cemetery!

An obituary is a good place to start if you know a date of death. Frequently, the obituary will list where the person was buried. Unfortunately, not every person had an obituary and you will be limited by when newspapers became available in the area you are searching.

The next place to look is on a death certificate. Again, you will be limited by needing a death date. Also, death certificates were not commonly issued until the mid-late 1800's. Check with the particular county to see when death certificates started to be issued there.

Estate records can contain valuable clues. See if a coffin, headstone, cemetery plot and/or burial clothing was purchased and is listed in the probate records and, if so, where were the items purchased?

Don't forget, coffins were frequently made by a local cabinet/furniture maker.

Funeral home (mortuary) records will almost always have the place of interment listed. If you are lucky enough to find funeral home records, pay particular note to who paid for funeral. That person is almost always a relative of the deceased. Try to get copies of all the records. You may not know what funeral home (if any) handled the arrangements. Start with the oldest establishment in the area (look in the phone book for clues such as, "Serving you for 4 generations", "Fifty Years of Tradition", etc.). If they weren't in business during the time frame you are interested in, ask who buried people in the area before their firm. Also, ask about cemeteries in the area in use during your time frame.

If you don't have a death date, a public library in the area where the person lived is a good place to start. In the 1960s, many cemeteries had the information from the legible headstones transcribed by civic-minded citizens and groups such as the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). Such a listing may exist for the cemetery where your relative was buried.

If the relative was a member of a particular religion, try to determine where they went to church. Find the church and look for an affiliated cemetery. If the church no longer exists, contact the nearest church of the same denomination and ask the whereabouts of the old records.

Don't overlook the obvious. Cemeteries also keep records. Contact the sexton (person who takes care of cemetery property) or cemetery office. If the cemetery isn't affiliated with a church, check with the county or township trustee for records.

## Locating Cemeteries

If you know the name of the cemetery but not the location, a good place to look is the American Blue Book of Funeral Directors at the public library.

With or without a cemetery name, do not think in terms of county or state boundaries! Boundaries may have changed over time and are only marked on maps, not etched in the ground where people could see them. Start with an obvious location (the last known residence of the person) but be prepared to expand the search, especially if the person lived on a current-day county or state border.

Buy a county highway map, usually around \$3, from the county surveyor's office. Cemeteries are usually marked with a cross in brackets [ † ] or in a box. Also take note of the location of churches. Many churches have/had cemeteries associated with them and the cemeteries may not be shown (especially the older ones). Ask the county surveyor if aerial maps are available. Use them to locate overgrown areas. If the photos were taken during winter, individual headstones may be visible! Cemeteries are sometime easier to see from above.

Also, try to get a map from the period when your relative died. County history books, old atlases and plat books are especially valuable because an old, small or family-owned cemetery may not show up on current maps. Some old cemetery locations are not always correct on "new" maps.

Determine when the family/person purchased land (land records are usually kept in the county recorder's office) and plot that land on the county map. The relative may have been buried in a family burying ground located on their own land or the land of a nearby relative. Also note the date the land was purchased. If your relative died in 1870 but the family didn't buy land until 1875, chances are the relative isn't buried on that land. Determining when a cemetery was recorded (started) may help to eliminate that cemetery from your search if it isn't old enough. Locate the cemeteries closest to where the person lived and work your way out.

Contact the current owner of the land once owned by the person. Inquire if he knows of any cemeteries on his land or in the surrounding area.

Even with directions, finding older cemeteries may still present difficulties. Look for telltale signs such as overgrown weeds and trees in the middle or corner of a plowed field, a hill, a wooded area, a fenced area (or signs a fence may have existed) and, of course, headstones.



## Visiting

You may now actually be ready to visit a cemetery. As with any trip, packing correctly for the occasion can make the difference between a successful trip and a disaster (or at least an under-productive trip). Here is a list of items you will find useful:

- Copies (not originals!) of your records with a summary of the “target” information. This includes cemetery records/listings, obituaries, death certificates, and funeral home/mortuary records. Summaries of the information can be useful but having the full record with you may help you piece things together or recognize errors. If the record is not easily replaced, and most aren't, make sure a duplicate of your record stays at home.
- Vegetable (soft!) brush. Used for cleaning stones.
- Water. Used for cleaning stones
- Sidewalk chalk. Used to bring out the writing on a stone.
- Tape measure
- Graph paper. Used to plot the cemetery
- Pencil.
- Clipboard.
- Compass. Used to determine direction for the plot and relative position of the stones. Technophiles may want to use a global positioning system (GPS).
- Camera (with spare battery and film). Used to document the cemetery and photograph every stone of interest.
- Corrugated cardboard about 2 feet by 1 foot. Used to create shadows on a stone to make writing stand out for better photos.
- Aluminum Foil. Used (covering the cardboard) to direct more light on the stone for better photos.
- Plastic sandwich bag. Used to enclose a note. If a grave may have been visited recently (dead flowers or trimmed grass are good signs) and you would like to find out who visited (maybe a long lost cousin!), write a note explaining your family research and give your name and a way to be contacted. Seal the note in the plastic bag and attach the bag to the headstone with a rubber band.
- Rubber bands (large). Used to attach the bag to the headstone.
- Bug spray
- Boots
- Rain gear

The previously mentioned equipment will be useful in all cemeteries, old or new. Older, unused cemeteries sometimes require additional equipment such as:

- Machete. Used to cut a path to the cemetery and remove overgrown grass from around stones. (Manual grass trimmers can remove overgrown grass but aren't too useful in blazing a trail.)
- Probe. A metal rod about 1-1 1/2 feet long and about as thick as a pencil (1/4" rebar works well). Used to locate buried stones.
- Trowel. Used to clear away dirt from buried stones
- Gloves

You may also wish to consider a first aid kit and even a picnic lunch.

Cemeteries used to be popular spots for picnics. Why not spend a few minutes with great-great-grandmother since you have gone to the effort to find her?

Be prepared to go through fields and pastures, across creeks and over or under fences. Late fall or early spring are usually g8j 3fields 14.16-43 cnkempt cemeteries (less vegetation to contend with - finding stones hidden by waist high grass during the summer is much easier when the grass is dead). If you wants 14.16-43 on private property, ALWAYS GET THE OWNER'S PERMISSION. Most owners are willing to allow visits 14a cemetery and they may be able to give you information about the cemetery, surrounding land and even the relative.

Remember, you are in a cemetery and all burying grounds deserve respect. Even if your relative isn't there, other people's relatives are. Leave the cemetery in better condition than you found it.

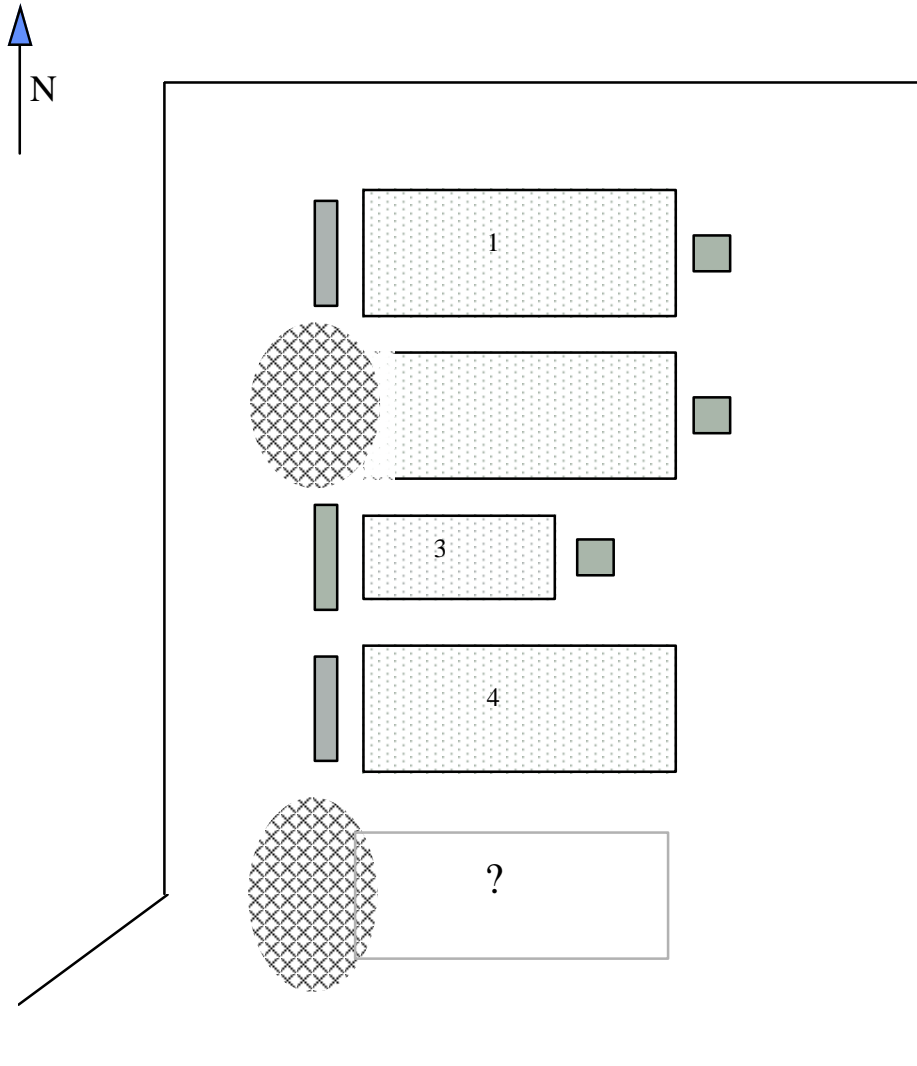
## Stones

Congratulations! You have located the cemetery. The trouble is, it hasn't seen a human being (dead or alive) in 20 y16-s. It hasn't been maintained and is overgrown with the headstones broken or missing.

If you do not find a headstone for your person, one of three things may have happened, 1) the person isn't buried in this cemetery, 2) their headstone is missing or unreadable, or 3) their grave was never marked. Before giving up hope, look for rubbish/trash piles on or near the cemetery. Some brush piles may contain broken or stacked headstones. Another g8j 3places 14.16-43 for stray headstones is in nearby ravines or streams. The headstones may have slid down the ravine dues 14erosion or they may have been "relocated" there by vandals or a landowner. Finding the headstone will at least let you know your relative was buried in the cemetery and may yield valuable information.

A headstone may exist but not be visible. Look for depressions in the ground (indicating a grave), remnants of headstones (still in the ground) that have been broken off or the base of a headstone. Many Christian burials are aligned with the head to the West and the headstones in line north to south.

# WHAT CAN YOU TELL?



From the stones present, there are 4 known graves.  
One grave is that of an infant or child because it is smaller.  
The area enclosed by the fence is large enough to contain  
one more grave - look for a depressed area.  
These people are probably all related.

(Probe for stones in the  area of grave 2 and ?).

As a note of interest, to the Christians, the burial of bodies with their faces to the East is the outcome of the belief not only of resurrection of the body, but also that the final summons to Judgment shall come from the East. However, orientation of the body in this manner probably has its roots in the rites of early sun-worshippers.

Gently probe (to a depth of about 8”) the ground around a suspected grave beginning with the north end. If a headstone is present, it will be within a few feet of the grave. If you hit something solid, move a few inches in all directions and reprobe. Two “hits” is worth digging (one hit may just indicate a rock). This is not an archaeological dig. You should only be removing the top few inches of soil.

If broken headstones exist, or if the headstones have obviously been moved, you may have a jigsaw puzzle to piece together. To determine where a broken off headstone belongs, compare the piece still in the ground or concrete base to the broken piece(s) of headstone to see if they match (in width, thickness and type of stone).

Toestones (or footstones) are much smaller than headstones and were sometimes placed at the (foot) end of a grave. If a toestone is present, you can determine if the grave was used for an adult or infant or child by its distance from the headstone. Many toestones have the initials of the buried, which will help to determine who is buried in the plot (especially if the headstone is missing).

### Recordkeeping

Make a good record of what you found at the cemetery. Photograph the headstone, the headstone in relation to a landmark (such as the entrance to the cemetery, a road or other permanent structure) and, if the cemetery is small, photograph the whole cemetery (in sections if necessary). If you find a grouping of stones you are interested in, photograph each individual stone and also the group showing where the stones are in relation to each other. Remember, film is cheap! Keep good notes and don't forget to label and date the backs of the photos.

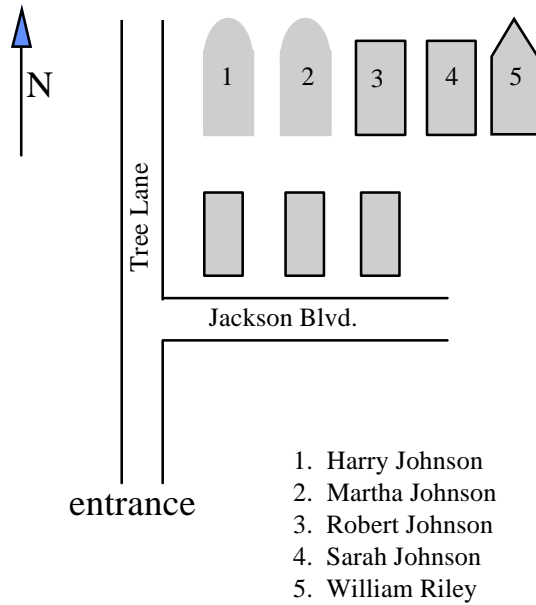
If a fence is or was present it may indicate the size of the cemetery. The size can give a general indication of the quantity of graves it may have contained (with or without headstones).

In reading headstones, make note of all pieces of headstones. Many times you can determine whom the stone belonged to by supplemental data such as the death date or the age of the person when they died. Even a part of a name can be useful.

Draw the cemetery (or section) to scale on graph paper. Again, this isn't an archaeological dig but you want an accurate representation. Indicate trees, fences, roads, etc. Modern cemeteries can sometimes cover acres. Large cemeteries will usually have maps available at the cemetery office. In the case of a large cemetery, accurate descriptions (such as Crestview Cemetery, block 5, section A, 4th row north of Peaceful Way, 6th stone east of Resting Road) will be adequate. Also, mark the location of the grave on the map and date all drawings.

# RECORDING THE CEMETERY

**Park Cemetery**  
Lee County, Indiana  
(3 miles north of Franklin City on Hwy 23)



Include landmarks such as roads.  
Draw shapes of stones for easy identification.  
Include stone numbers on photos.

Pay particular attention to the layout of the graves. Burials are usually in family groups so take the time to note names on stones surrounding those in which you are interested.

Copy the inscriptions on the headstones exactly as they appear, do not “translate” or make assumptions. Interpreting the inscriptions can be done later.

Example: Quaker’s did not use names for days and months. Dates on Quaker stones and in Quaker records will be written 8<sup>th</sup> da 7<sup>th</sup> mo 1747 or 7<sup>th</sup> mo 8<sup>th</sup> da 1747. If you entered 8 July 1747 in your notes, the date would be wrong. The Gregorian calendar was first used in 1752. Before 1752, the 1<sup>st</sup> month was March. The correct date, translated into today’s terms, would be 8 September 1747. For more detailed information on Quaker dates, see “Our Quaker Ancestors – Finding Them in Quaker Records” by Ellen Thomas Berry and David Allen Berry.

If you have trouble reading some of the stones (and you will), don’t forget you have equipment with you that may help. Gently clean the stone using a soft brush and water as best you can and take a photo. Use the cardboard to cast shadows or cover the cardboard with the foil and use it to direct more light to the stone. If the stone has carved letters as opposed to raised letters, next, use the side of the chalk and rub it across the letters. The chalk will adhere to the stone coloring it and the carved letters will stand out (and the chalk will not damage the stone). Take a photo before and after applying the chalk.

You can always let your fingers do the walking. Trace the indentations with your fingers. Sometimes what your eyes can’t see, your fingers can.

### Conclusion

Although visiting cemeteries will provide only one piece of the genealogy puzzle, it can frequently be the most rewarding. There is nothing quite like the feeling of finding the resting place of a relative who contributed some of their genes to make you the person you are today. Good Hunting!