

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 Replacement

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Memorialization of the deceased is a sensitive issue, with rights, interests and wishes that sometimes conflict. The right to choose a marker or monument resides with surviving family members, subject to rules and restrictions imposed by the existing cemetery authority. Size, style, spacing and suitability restrictions are behind the statement often found on cemetery deeds asserting “the cemetery authority retains the right of memorialization.”

Historic cemeteries present a challenge. Family interest may no longer exist. The cemetery authority may no longer exist, or ownership may be obscure. Restoration and preservation efforts need some guidelines. In an effort to provide structure, direction and guidelines to those undertaking restoration projects in historic cemeteries, the following priorities, in descending order of preference, are proposed concerning the historic artifacts marking burial sites:

1. Restore, reset and preserve on site the historic monument or marker.
2. Preserve the remaining pieces on site, and supplement with a simple plaque or marker.
3. Replace with a duplicate monument or marker.
4. Replace with a monument or marker consistent with those of the historic era.
5. Replace with simple flat marker.

Preserve, Reset and Restore on site the historic monument or marker.

Our historic cemeteries hold more artifacts than our museums, and those artifacts should be preserved. Monuments and markers are resources that chronicle human history, as well as the development of the artistry of memorialization. Style, shape, material, and ornamentation are as typical of an historic era as are the clothing fashions that change from age to age.

Preservation is the best care approach for historic cemeteries. Post instructions for proper cleaning of markers. Level tilting markers. Keep landscaping, plantings, etc. from damaging markers. The restoration of historic monuments will involve reassembly of the sections with a durable, compatible adhesive; leveling or pouring the foundation; and resetting the monument. This process should be professionally done, but may include volunteer participation. Monuments weigh hundreds to thousands of pounds, and the potential for serious injury is as real for the restorer as for visitors. Smaller monuments and markers may be leveled and reset by volunteers under the supervision of someone with training or a working knowledge of monument restoration. To preserve the historic ambiance of the cemetery, monuments and markers should be reset in their original location, rather than being moved to straighten the rows.



Preserve the remaining pieces on site, and supplement with a simple plaque or marker.

Time, natural forces or vandalism may have partially destroyed monuments or markers. If the parts remaining cannot be reassembled, they should be preserved on site in a way that poses no danger, and a simple plaque or marker with the personal information for the deceased should be placed on the site with the remaining parts of the original memorial. Broken pieces that can be reassembled should be, and the remaining pieces should be preserved on site in a way that does not interfere with maintenance, and poses no temptation to those who might use them as missiles for further vandalism. Again, professional restoration or supervision is advised.

Replace with a historically compatible monument or marker.

Monument companies are marketing vintage style monuments in similar styles and stone choices. Broken monuments that cannot be reconstructed can be replaced. Using similar stone types and similar ornamentation should be the goal. This can be a way to retain the historic ambiance, and avoid the temptation factor of an attractive nuisance as mentioned above.

Replace with a simple marker.

In situations where the marker or monument is illegible, has been shattered, or only the base remains, the grave may be marked with a simple flat marker, if the records are available that give personal data for the person interred in that space. Style and setting of the marker should not detract from the historic ambiance of the cemetery.

Miscellaneous guidelines.

Wooden markers should be preserved on site, and augmented with a simple marker. Old concrete and metal temporary markers should be replaced with simple stone markers.

Summary

Historic cemeteries are museums, research resources, heritage sites, as well as places of memory and meditation. Preservation, restoration, repair and maintenance are the goals of those who care for and about these sites, with safety and security as the underlying purposes. The best intentions, lacking knowledge, can destroy the very historic nature of these cemeteries and their artifacts. Preservation is preferable to replacement.

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.

