

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.

Irrigation and Mowing in Historic Cemeteries

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Policies and opinions vary widely throughout Oregon regarding the advisability of irrigation and mowing in historic cemeteries. This paper addresses some of the primary issues to consider in establishing irrigation and mowing policies.

Historical Background

Most historic cemeteries in the West were influenced by the Rural Cemetery movement of the 1830's when preferences shifted from locating burials in churchyards, to locating them in a rural setting just outside of town, usually on a hill. Boot Hill, for instance, was the name of several well-known cemeteries in the West. Flat land with better soils was often reserved for crops and settlements. Many early rural cemeteries have since been surrounded by the growth of the adjacent town.

In the 1800's, when most of our historic cemeteries were established, cemeteries were not irrigated. In much of the arid West, what water was available was reserved for people, stock, and agriculture. Even where water was abundant, pumping and distributing the water was usually very difficult. Since the most efficient lawn mowers of the day were probably sheep or goats, rural cemeteries were mowed or trimmed only occasionally. Most grave markers were upright, sometimes quite tall, with inscriptions near the top – recognizing that grass and other vegetation might often be knee-high.

The modern lawn cemetery movement began in 1906 with the establishment of Forest Lawn Cemetery in Hollywood, California. The advent of better irrigation and mowing capabilities made carpets of green lawn more popular and attainable. Upright grave markers were usually banned in favor of flat markers that could accommodate large mowers. In Oregon, "Historic Cemeteries" are defined as those containing at least one burial that occurred before February 14, 1909, the fiftieth anniversary of Oregon statehood. That means that very few Oregon Historic Cemeteries began as lawn cemeteries. Nonetheless, the popularity of a green carpet of lawn has meant that many historic cemeteries have tried to adopt the look of a lawn cemetery with the addition of non-native grass seeds, herbicides, fertilizers, and irrigation.

Issues with Irrigation in Historic Cemeteries

- **Water Rights**
If you are outside of a municipal water system, irrigation will require a water source (either a well or a stream), and the rights to use that water for the purpose you intend.
- **Installation**
Adding irrigation to a historic cemetery usually means extensive digging to install pipes, valves, sprinklers, and hose bibs. Digging in an old cemetery is never without hazards. Buried monuments,



pieces of monuments, tree roots, curbing, fencing, and other artifacts can all be obstacles. Unrecorded human remains are commonly discovered. If any part of the cemetery is also an archeologic site a certified archeologist will need to oversee the work.

- **Water Damage to Monuments**

Even when irrigation is already installed there are still hazards. Ground water from wells usually contains a variety of minerals, most commonly calcium and iron. Aerial spraying of ground water is likely to leave mineral deposits that will stain any monument the water strikes. These deposits can usually be cleaned off of granite monuments, but for the marble, which makes up most of our monuments before 1910, the stains are likely to be permanent. Attempts to remove these stains from fragile historic marble can easily erode or degrade the stone. Drip irrigation, which does not expose the monuments to staining, is not very practical for large areas of lawn.

- **Water Damage to Plants**

Many plants that have acclimated over time to a specific set of conditions and climate can be damaged by irrigation, especially when water is applied outside the normal rainy season. Native grasses and trees, as well as heritage plantings of flowers and shrubs, may fail to thrive when artificial irrigation is added.

- **Costs**

For most historic cemeteries the cost of irrigation is also a factor.

In addition to the cost of installation, there will be on-going costs for maintenance and replacement of equipment, the cost of the water itself, and/or the cost of the power to pump the water.

- **General Environmental Concerns**

Water scarcity, erosion, invasive species, etc. are important considerations for the irrigation discussion.



Issues with Mowing in Historic Cemeteries

The problems with irrigation don't end there. Irrigation usually leads to more grass and weed growth which leads to more mowing and trimming. Mowers and string trimmers probably cause more damage to historic cemeteries than vandalism or falling trees. It is a rare historic cemetery that does not show some signs of monument collisions with mower blades, chips from flying debris, or base wear from string trimmers.

Every time power equipment is used in a cemetery the monuments are exposed to accidental high-velocity damage that is almost always permanent and irreparable. Because of this, many historic cemeteries have adopted limited mowing policies – mowing only a few times a year, such as in the spring when growth is heaviest, the end of summer, and in advance of significant holidays or events.



Appreciating our Distinctions

Many people still think that anything other than a lush green, well-trimmed lawn is a sign of neglect, when indeed a more natural look may actually indicate better care for older cemeteries. Part of the challenge in limiting irrigation and mowing in historic cemeteries is letting visitors, family members, and the public know about the special needs of these places and of the artifacts that they contain. Strategies might include:

- Making your maintenance policies clear in your written materials at the time of plot sales
- Posting maintenance policies at the cemetery
- Discussing maintenance policies and the reasons for them on your website
- Posting seasonal notices about what to look for with each passing season



We can all help by encouraging appreciation of the natural cycles, the beauty of the changing seasons, and the unique environments that are always on display in Oregon's historic cemeteries. From the arid lands of Eastern Oregon, to the soggy vegetation of the Coast, to the wet/dry cycles of the Willamette Valley, every historic cemetery has a unique combination of history, climate, soil, and vegetation. These distinctions deserve to be respected, protected, and celebrated.

Summary

Since historic cemeteries were established before the advent of modern mowing and irrigation, many monuments are vulnerable to damage from these practices. Avoiding irrigation and limiting exposure to high-powered mowing equipment protects the monuments and respects the unique climate and environment of Oregon's historic cemeteries.

For more information or help

Advice and help is available from Kuri Gill, Program Coordinator for OCHC and the OCHC Commissioners. Contact them at Kuri.Gill@oregon.gov or 503-986-0685.

