

Preserving Wood in Historic Cemeteries

Preserving wood, particularly wooden markers, is a difficult task in cemeteries. In fact, beyond cut flowers, wood is often the most ephemeral item in a cemetery. Wood wants to decay. And there is only one way to slow wood decay in a cemetery and that is to protect the wood.

People are more open to coating wood to slow its decay in a cemetery if it is a railing or sign or bench, but humans want to see natural wood for a wooden grave marker. To make matters worse, people want to see the wooden marker sunk into the earth. Nothing hastens the decay of wood like ground contact and moisture.



Since wood decays so easily, most cemeteries write their rules and regulations to ban wooden markers outright. That is why stone and metal dominate cemeteries. In fact, wooden markers were usually thought of as temporary until a stone or metal marker could replace it. Even in the picturesque cemeteries of the Old West filled with wooden markers, the idea was that the markers were temporary and would eventually be replaced with stone. (Instead, the citizens were temporary and left behind the wooden markers that can survive a surprisingly long time in the absence of moisture.) That is why pioneer cemeteries in Oregon that are recorded as “full” have so many empty spaces above ground – they had temporary markers of wood (or metal) that slowly rotted away leaving behind a blank but occupied lot.

There is little to be done to conserve an already decaying wooden marker save removing it from exposure. It’s a sad fact that the desire to save a wooden marker usually comes when it is barely readable. However, solace can be found in the preservation concept that the wood is ephemeral and that the marker can be recreated today to be identical to the original marker. Sourcing the wood is the most difficult aspect but finding

someone to carve the wood to match the font and character of the original is not difficult in Oregon.



Recreating Wood Monuments

Jacksonville Cemetery, in relatively dry Southern Oregon, has recreated several of their wooden markers in wood. They’ve done an accurate recreation of the original wooden marker in shape, information, and font; however, they have mounted the new wooden marker on a post to separate the wood from the ground. A naturally rot-resistant wood like cedar or redwood does a good job of shedding water if it is vertical, but if



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it is touching the ground, no wood beyond petrified wood will resist rot.

Jacksonville Cemetery recreated their wood markers using a thick plank of old-growth cedar and then mounted the plank to a “sacrificial” post. They then repeated the information on the wooden marker within an enclosed metal marker on the same post. It’s a clever way to show what the original marker looked like, in the same format, but also slowing down the marker’s eventual decay by mounting it to a post. Even the relatively recently recreated marker has eroded to the point that the carved letters are almost in relief rather than incised.



The recreated wooden marker is mounted to a pressure-treated post. Pressure treating helps resist rot but it is not a cure all. An old-grown cedar post placed in the ground will likely do equally as well if packed in with gravel within a well-drained soil.

Whatever wood is used for the post, the post should never be encased in concrete or foam – packed gravel works best to allow water to drain away from the wood.

Repairing Wood Monuments

CASE STUDY: WOODEN OBELISK REPAIR IN WILLAMETTE VALLEY

Lena Crosby’s wooden obelisk in Brookside Cemetery, Dayton, is a rare original wooden marker that is mostly intact and dates between 1900 and 1909.



Under a raking light, the ornate carving can still be discerned.

The high-quality wood and shape of the maker have helped the marker survive approximately 120 years in the wet Willamette Valley.

One corner of the marker had opened up noticeably, so Historic Preservation Northwest took the marker to their shop for examination in 2019.



The corner was found to have been repaired over the years with 45 finish nails. A finish nailer coupled with water-based glue and clamping was the answer to repairing the fragile wood corner.

The shape and material are important contributors to the survival of the obelisk but so is an early alteration to the monument. It originally had a wooden base of some sort but early on the base was replaced with



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a concrete pedestal that the obelisk fits over and holds the obelisk about six inches off the ground. We believe the old wooden base was used as the form work for the concrete pedestal and for awhile was used to hide the concrete. In fact, it's arguable that the concrete was there from the very beginning hidden behind a wood skirt. Whatever the case, the wood was kept away from direct contact with the soil and helped in the obelisk's preservation.



Preserving Wood Markers

Unlike stone and metal, sunlight accelerates the process of wood decay by breaking down the cellular structure of the wood through ultraviolet rays. And, of course, unlike stone and metal, fire accelerates the decaying process considerably.

Wood is especially vulnerable to fungi, algae, and other microorganisms

when its moisture content is above 25%. Infestation by wood-eating insects can exacerbate the decay.

Wood is the frailest of monument materials in a cemetery, so string trimmers and lawnmowers should not be allowed anywhere near them. No herbicides either. Only hand-trimming of grass and other plants should be allowed near a wooden marker. And all plants should be kept away from the wooden marker to discourage moisture retention by the wood.

Chemical wood preservatives are generally not recommended for wooden monuments. Preservatives tend to darken the wood and are irreversible. In addition, many are toxic, tend to leach out of the wood, and must periodically be reapplied. One preservative that might be considered for a desiccated wooden grave marker is boiled linseed oil. It will darken the wood but will lessen sun and water damage; however, it too is irreversible and should be thoroughly tested before full application.

Since early wooden grave markers are so rare in Oregon's historic cemeteries, if you have one or are considering working on one, consider finding a copy of *Wooden Artifacts in Cemeteries: A Reference Manual* before you start any treatment so that you can make a fully informed decision.

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