

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.

Protecting Your Organization's Paper Records

January 2010

Importance of Cemetery Records

Keeping accurate cemetery records and preserving the historic records is very important. Since Oregon's vital statistics records begin in the early 1900s, the information on the markers and in the cemetery's record books may be one of the few resources to gain knowledge about an individual.

During the 20 years Commissioner Judy Juntunen worked as the librarian at the Benton County Historical Museum, she searched for missing cemetery records and heard sad stories about what happened to records for some historic cemeteries. Three cemeteries had records destroyed by fire. Another cemetery was next to a church in rural Benton County. Its records were kept in the church, when the church closed; the records were left in the church, and thrown away when they were water damaged. All these missing records may contain the only information available about people buried in the cemetery including names and dates of birth and death.

Make a Copy

The Commission recommends that cemetery records be copied and the copy be kept in a separate location that is known to more than one person. It is not unusual for cemetery organizations to have only one repository for their records. The obvious drawback is that if anything happens to the individual or the organization, the records can be lost. That's what happened when the Oakridge Church closed. The cemetery records were given to an individual, and no one knows what happened to them from that point. Having a second copy of your records in another location ensures that they won't be lost to disposal, fire, flood, or other disaster.

If your cemetery organization does not have the ability to store records in two safe locations, find a partner who can. Your organization may decide to use the copy, and let the partner preserve the originals. Possible repositories for records are genealogy societies, historical societies, libraries, museums, local mortuaries or funeral homes. In choosing a partner be sure to consider any current partnerships you may already have; how long the organization has been in existence; how accessible the records will be to your organization; can the repository you've chosen safely take care of your records; will you be expected to pay a fee for their services; and are you giving them to your partner as a loan or donation. When you do choose a partner, draw up a written agreement and make sure all these issues are adequately addressed.

Records Retention, Organization and Storage

In July 2007, Kuri Gill, the Oregon Commission for Historic Cemeteries Program Coordinator organized a workshop, "Cemetery Records—Gathering, Archiving, and Accessing." An outline for the workshop is on the OCHC website, and topics from that outline are also included in this paper. The workshop emphasis was on the records directly related to the cemetery, but if your cemetery is still active, you have an additional challenge.



An historic cemetery that is still active and operating as a business or is connected with a non-profit, church, or other support group should maintain the business and organization records. You need to comply with Oregon State Law, and the best way to make sure you are doing that is to contact the Oregon Mortuary and Cemetery Board. Their staff will explain what records are required to be maintained for an operating cemetery. They can help you understand how to comply with Oregon law, and their staff is an excellent resource. For more information about the OMCB, go to their website – <http://www.oregon.gov/MortCem/>

Records to Retain

Property Records

Deeds, Maps, Plots, Dedication as a cemetery, Records of transfer, Tracking of owners
Inventory & Condition Records – physical features (markers, monuments, structures, fences, etc.)
Periodic Inventories, Condition reports, Records of repair and removal, Photos

Burial Records

Plat map – locations of burials, Cemetery surveys, Other burial records of people known and/or suspected to be interred, History, biographical information, photos, genealogical information about individuals

History of the Cemetery

Any information, records regarding land claim, land donation, formation, photos, family history, etc.

Contacts

Associated groups (Friends organizations, churches, associations, fraternal organizations, etc.),
Descendants, Business affiliations or supporters

Other

Any information that does not fit neatly into one of the subjects already mentioned.

Organizing and Storing Records

Records often are many different sizes, so you may need to consider several options for organizing and storing your records. Always remember that your records may be the only records in existence for your cemetery. Acid free folders and paper are often available at many office and craft supply stores. If you are storing 8 ½ x 11 paper in plastic sleeves, make sure the sleeves are acid free. Other types of archival products can be purchased from one of the following companies. (Sometimes it is possible to do a combination order with your local museum.)

www.universityproducts.com/

www.hollingermetaledge.com/

www.gaylord.com/

www.lightimpressionsdirect.com/ -- especially good resource for photo supplies

Organizing Tips...

Your records need to be sensibly organized not only for you, but for those who follow behind you. After all, information is only useful if you can find it.

DO...

+ Sort your records into logical subjects



- + Use archival supplies
- + Create Subject Folders
- + Relate it to your specific situation
- + Make a Table of Contents and an index (This helps as a finding aid and also to see if any records are missing.)
- + Use permanent ink on folders (There is even archival ink!)
- + Do use dividers, folders, and plastic paper clips

DON'T...

- + Don't use stickers (The glue will eventually fail and stickers will fall off.)
- + Don't use metal paper clips or staples. (They will rust.)

Storing and Using Records

Limit Handling

- + If it is something you use regularly make one working copy
- + Wear 100% cotton gloves when you work with old originals

Use Acid Free Everything

- + Make copies onto acid free paper – If you have many records to copy of varying sizes, this can be expensive. However, it is important. Set aside money in your budget, and prioritize your copying, and make copies as your budget allows.
- + Interleaf photos, original documents, etc. with acid free sheets
- + Store in acid free folders and boxes

Keep Records Away from Light

- + Sunlight is deadly for everything
- + Incandescent light is best – heat is the problem so keep any heat source far from the records and have good ventilation
- + Fluorescent light has UV so it should have filters

Keep Records in Stable Conditions

- + We can seldom provide the ideal conditions for the records, so keep in mind that rapid and big changes in temperature and humidity are detrimental.
- + Encapsulate – put the item in a folder, then in a box, then in a trunk, then in a closet
- + Keep away from outside, bathroom and kitchen walls
- + Keep away from heating and cooling sources

Digital Records

Scanning records into a digital format is a good idea. If you have digital records, be sure to regularly update the software and media so the records aren't lost in an old format. This is a good way for libraries and historical societies to help you retain records without using valuable space. Always keep multiple copies in different locations.

For More Information or Help

Advice and help is available from Kuri Gill, Program Coordinator for OCHC, and the OCHC Commissioners. Please contact Kuri for more information.

