

Creating a Cemetery Preservation Society in Your County **Bonnie & Larry Knox**

Today, many of Ohio's counties have historic cemeteries whose very existence is being threatened. It is during times like these that we begin to realize the need for an organized effort to save them. A concerned and ambitious individual can certainly make a mark, but a group of people working together can accomplish much more. A cemetery preservation group must have a strong desire to do something. It must also be willing to act, it must be knowledgeable enough to see to the upholding of the laws of Ohio and it must be persistent enough to continue until all the cemeteries are safe. Those who would destroy and desecrate our historic burial grounds *will* back down in the face of a knowledgeable and righteous opponent who says, "You can't do that!"

A cemetery preservation society can be started anywhere you find people who care. The recruitment of members can most easily be done at public gatherings such as Genealogy and Historical Society meetings where like-minds are found. Ads placed in the local newspaper, announcing your concerns and the time and place of a public meeting will always catch the attention of other concerned persons. A common cause in saving cemeteries will be the bonding force necessary for your group to be successful.

During initial gatherings, create a loosely structured society where one or two individuals "preside" over the meeting. Stay informal enough to allow each and every one of the attendees to express his or her views and concerns. If possible, seat all the attendees in a circle so everyone can see each other and easily exchange ideas. The taking of turns at speaking can simply progress by rotation around the circle.

As personal talents begin to emerge, encourage those people to do what they do best. Some persons like to read and record tombstone inscriptions. Deed research on the cemeteries may appeal to someone else. Others may find a sense of accomplishment in cleaning out brush and re-setting tombstones.

Set goals for your group and make them known to the public. For example:

1. Search out all the old and nearly forgotten private family cemeteries and record their exact location. Write up easily understandable directions so others can find the cemetery.
2. Map out the stones in each cemetery and then record the inscriptions on them. Photograph the old and possibly threatened tombstones in those cemeteries.
3. Organize your recordings and photos so they can be readily accessed. Knowing that your group has photographs and a list of names can be a strong deterrent to those who would try to make a cemetery disappear.
4. Become familiar with the Ohio Revised Code as it pertains to cemetery ownership and desecration. Knowledge of the ORC sections; 517.21, 2909.05 and 2927.22 can help you save those threatened cemeteries.

Make your goals known to the public. Invite a newspaper reporter to a meeting or whenever any newsworthy event happens such as the cleaning out of a cemetery. Be sure to let the local newspaper know what has been done. That will be a great opportunity to state and illustrate your intended goals. Offer cemetery related information such as updated readings or new findings for articles in flyers and reports in your local Historical Society and Genealogical Society newsletters. They will be glad to share space in their medium and they may also offer their support in your cause.

Seek support from outside groups. Once they hear about what your society is doing and they understand your goals, their help is usually there for the asking. Write to these organizations and you will be surprised at the response you receive! Open the line of communications with the following county/municipal offices:

The Sheriff's Department,
Township Trustees,
Veterans Administration Office,
Daughters of the American Revolution,
Sons of the American Revolution,
Granges,
Boy Scout Council & Troops, and
Local churches

It is a good thing to know that the Boy Scout Explorers offer a merit badge for cleaning out a cemetery. Some of your more active churches have groups of wonderful people who will jump at the opportunity to do the same. Often the church and the Explorers team up and produce fantastic results! Seek out and communicate with other cemetery preservation and stone restoration groups. You not only can share stories, you can lend advice and gain valuable information from others on how to handle specific situations that may affect your cemeteries in the future.

Cemetery Preservation all across Ohio is our ultimate goal. That can only be achieved by our efforts at the county level. Success will be realized by volunteering our time, expending considerable effort and donating some of our hard-earned money to the cause. Lawyers who care and are historically minded are available to help us. Seek them out. Expect some of your largest opponents to be the very people in local government whom you expect to help. Publicity and public opinion will work to your benefit. Self-serving landowners probably won't surprise you and your newly learned knowledge of cemetery law can give you the edge in stopping them and in saving another cemetery.

Finally, we must all keep in mind that the Number One Threat to our Historic Cemeteries is *Apathy!* It is not politics nor self-serving persons nor malicious individuals. The destroyers, the desecrators and the land-grabbers only act when they think that no one is watching and that no one cares!

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Wayne County Cemetery Preservation Society
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