Developing A Virtual Cemetery Project

As genealogists we understand how important it is to preserve all types of records for our ancestors. Visiting cemeteries of our ancestors has always been popular among researchers. Seeing an ancestor's name on a tombstone and details of their life helps us to connect with them and the past. With the advances in technology and inexpensive nature of digital cameras, it is advantageous for researchers to photograph the tombstones of their ancestors instead of taking rubbings.

The Warren County Genealogical Society (WCGS) has always had an interest in cemeteries. Chester & Betty Dunn, Evelyn Preest, Helen Hutt and others spent countless hours in the early 1980's visiting most of the cemeteries in our county and transcribing the tombstones. Much of the tombstone information we had prior to our virtual cemetery project came from their sacrifice and hard work. The results of their efforts were published in the 1980's by the Warren County Genealogical Society in 11 volumes of cemetery books recording nearly 48,000 Warren County burials.

In 2004, Russ Karr of Arizona contacted WCGS asking if someone would photograph the tombstones of his ancestors buried in the Dicks Creek cemetery. When this cemetery was visited, more than 75% of the tombstones were damaged or broken. Since the Dicks Creek cemetery is a small cemetery and has one of the highest concentrations of Revolutionary War veterans in the county, it was decided to photograph all of the tombstones instead of just the ones for Mr. Karr. This was the start of the WCGS virtual cemetery project. Arne Trelvik and Dana Palmer agreed to be co-chairs for our cemetery committee and this project. The Warren County government provided WCGS with space on their server for our website at www.co.warren.oh.us/genealogy/index.htm with many indexes including some of our cemetery indexes. Knowing how popular and useful the US Gen Web pages are to researchers we decided to seek that avenue to load our cemetery photographs. Arne Trelvik agreed to serve as the County Coordinator for the Warren County, Ohio Gen Web site. The Virtual Cemetery project was added to this site at www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ohwarren/cemetery/burial.htm. Currently there are over 32,000 photographs from our cemeteries online at this site. WCGS plans on updating our cemetery books with new names and details as gathered by our volunteers. These will be released once a township is completed or in the case of the larger active cemeteries, once the large cemetery is complete.

There are a lot of steps to being successful in this project. A brief outline will be listed here. If there are any counties out there that would like help with implementing a project like this in their county, please contact us and we'll help you get started: wcgs@co.warren.oh.us

Step 1: Identify all Cemeteries in the County

If you are just starting out this will take some time to complete. Start with the information provided in the OGS Cemetery book. Create a list of all of the cemeteries with their variant names arranged by township and type this into an Excel file. It can be organized by township and then alphabetically within the township. The cemetery is listed on a single line with its variant names, indicating if it is in our published volumes, its status (active, inactive, abandoned or extinct), the photographer's name, the status of the photography (complete, in progress or awaiting assignment), and the completion date

(month/ season and year). Tracking the completion date is helpful for active cemeteries that will need to be revisited later. We also track if there are interment records and whether or not we have copied them.

We also have a Microsoft Word document with more extensive cemetery details that is organized by township and then alphabetically by the primary cemetery name. Some of the information included is the cemetery location, its general and tombstone condition, who maintains it and how often, GPS coordinates, property account information from our county auditor, and details on the cemetery history.

After you have identified and organized your work, make contact with the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) department in your county. They are the ones that create and update the maps for your county. Ask them to provide you with a large map divided by townships with the cemeteries marked. These types of maps are extremely useful when you are trying to find the cemetery and make sure its location is recorded correctly. Make sure they know that once you find the cemetery you will provide them with any corrections. This is less work for them and they will probably be more willing to help you. The County Engineer's office also should have information on the cemeteries. Sometimes they work together tracking them. Check both places.

For cemeteries with questionable locations you will need to assign people that will spend time tracking it down. This might include looking for an old deed in the recorder's office, details on a map in the map room, or interviewing neighbors near where you believe the cemetery might be located. It is also helpful to talk with the township people who maintain cemeteries within the township. Provide them with a picture of the area and have them mark where the cemetery is located. They usually know where most of them are. Sometimes it is helpful to contact someone within a specific township who is knowledgeable about the area or a specific cemetery. Maybe someone from your own society knows the area and could provide you with information. Interview them or ask them to take you to the cemetery. Once you know where the cemetery is located it can be assigned to a volunteer for photographing. Post comments to the message board for your county with information about your cemetery project. You might get people to contact you and provide details about where the abandoned cemeteries can be found. This has happened to us quite a few times.

Step 2: Obtain Copies of Transcriptions or Interment Records

Obtain copies of any known tombstone transcription such as from reading done by the DAR or other individuals with interest in a specific cemetery. Your society should have some previous tombstone readings. Sometimes these transcriptions are stored at historical societies. Remember that these readings only list those with cemeteries found at the time of the reading. Those individuals whose stones have been removed or destroyed or those that have fallen and are covered with earth might not be listed even though they are buried in that cemetery.

Interment records provide a listing of all individuals buried in a cemetery whether or not they had a tombstone. Not all cemeteries have interment records. You should find interment records for cemeteries with active burials. For these active cemeteries ask permission to copy their interment records. If they agree, make a copy for your shelves and a duplicate copy for them. Volunteers type each deceased persons' name into an Excel database along with their interment number and other data. When the indexing is complete it is sorted alphabetically by last name then by given name. A copy of the index is stored on computers, with printed copies made for the genealogical society shelves and for the cemetery that loaned the records. The goal is to not only index those in the cemetery, but provide a

duplicate copy, so that if something should ever happen to destroy the cemetery records (such as a flood or tornado), a duplicate copy still exists. Inactive cemeteries maintained by the townships might have interment records. These are usually stored with records kept by the township. Abandoned cemeteries on private land rarely have interment records. Owners with cemeteries on their private land may have information or know the history of those buried in the cemetery on their land. It helps to interview the owners and ask lots of questions. Many times they are somehow related to those buried in the cemetery. For example, for our project, the owners of a Quaker cemetery in Turtlecreek Township had an old Bible record that had details on those buried within the cemetery on their land. WCGS has added thousands of names to our cemetery database by transcribing interment records.

Step 3: Find & Train Volunteers

One of the harder aspects of this project is to find people willing to take time to travel and photograph a cemetery. WCGS uses our newsletter, e-news and summer workshop classes to get volunteers for our cemetery project. Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops who need service hours are great volunteers. Eagle projects are a great way to clean up and photograph neglected or abandoned cemeteries. Lots of people who wouldn't normally agree to volunteer time working in a cemetery will help a friend earn their Eagle Scout award.

Once a volunteer has agreed to help, they need to be trained. We train our volunteers by explaining what we want done, ask them to accompany someone who is already working on a cemetery, or by attending our cemetery clinics. As long as they have access to a digital camera and time to spare, they can help with the project.

Detailed directions and a map are usually provided to the volunteer for the specific cemetery they have been assigned. If a transcription exists for the cemetery assigned, we provide them with a copy before they start. This helps them find all the tombstones and indicate those with missing tombstones. We ask the volunteer to contact the cemetery owner prior to taking any photographs. Most owners are agreeable and enthusiastic for our project, but others do no want visitors and will restrict access to the cemetery. While at the cemetery, volunteers take GPS coordinates in the center of the cemetery. It works best to hold the unit for a period of time in the center before reading, to get a more accurate result. Many times GPS devices aren't accurate enough to do this, unless it's a big cemetery. We prefer close up pictures of each side of the tombstone because the words appear more legible. Photos of the view of the cemetery are helpful because they provide an idea of the layout for the cemetery. Sometimes cemeteries are laid out in visible rows or we know someone is buried in this cemetery due to prior tombstone readings. In these cases if it is legal, we ask the volunteer to probe the ground to find stones that might be buried. If they find a tombstone from probing, they unearth and photograph it, but leave it where they found it. Sometimes we ask our volunteers use 3x5 cards and write what appears on the tombstone exactly. This is helpful if the words are hard to read off the photograph.

When a cemetery is completed, the volunteer brings in either a CD / DVD or a flash drive with the photos. If they have found out any additional details on the cemetery such as its history or conditions we ask that they write up a brief report. If the location and directions we provided are incorrect, then the photographer marks the correct location on a map and provides an address. Volunteers are asked to

provide enough details or notes so we can preserve the relative location of the gravestones in relation to the others in the cemetery. Sometimes platted maps are submitted with the photos and cards.

Once the volunteer completes a cemetery if they are still interested, they volunteer to work on another cemetery. If they are unable to complete a cemetery, we ask them to provide us with what they have completed and show us what still remains. This helps avoid duplication of work.

Step 4: Provide GIS department with updated information

Once all the cemeteries in a township are completed, we provide Randy Fuson, our contact as Warren County's GIS department with updated cemetery information. The cemetery's name and all variations are included as well as GPS coordinates, its status and property account and parcel ID information. A map of each specific cemetery for that township is included for those hard to find or those with incorrect details in the GIS system. Randy provides us with a map for that township once he has made the changes. This greatly benefits both our society and the county.

Step 5: Load photographs and indexes to website

Arne Trelvik maintains the virtual cemetery project and updates the indexes on the WCGS cemetery pages. This takes a lot of time. An Excel spreadsheet is created for each cemetery with a transcription of what appears on the tombstones. Many times our volunteers type this up, but if not Arne creates it. This is a very timely process so volunteers who like data entry can help a lot. The pictures and transcriptions are loaded once a cemetery is complete unless someone contacts Arne directly with a photograph for one of their ancestors in a specific cemetery.

Step 6: Republish Cemetery Books

Our final goal is to republish cemetery books for those with Warren County burials. Large cemeteries have their own volume. Smaller cemeteries are organized by township and compiled in a specific volume designated by that township. This volume will not be republished until all the cemeteries in that township have been identified, found and photographed. Extinct cemeteries with no visible remnants will be noted and details provided. To complete the book, interment records and the pictures from the virtual cemetery project are compared. This list will eventually be compared with our obituaries and the will and estate index. Those that specify burial in a specific cemetery will be compared with our documented interment and virtual cemetery database. Sources for each entry will be noted.

This large virtual cemetery project can be completed. It will take time and lots of volunteers, but will be a great asset to future generations who long to see a tombstone of their ancestors.

Stone Cleaning

When attempting to clean stones, always use the least invasive techniques and move to more involved procedures. The following techniques are listed in order of progression from least invasive to most. All techniques are safe; however, <u>some techniques should only be used on particular kinds of stones</u>. For information on stone cleaning techniques appropriate for specific stone types, mixture proportions, and tips on stone cleaning, see *A Graveyard Preservation Primer* by Lynette Strangstad.

Some tools useful in stone cleaning include:
- Wet or dry, soft nylon brushes, craft sticks, and rubber scrapers
    - *Available at Wal-Mart, K-Mart, Lowe's, etc.*
- Ammonia mixture
    - *Clear ammonia available at Wal-Mart, K-Mart, Lowe's, etc.*
    - *See the Association for Gravestone Studies for information on how to create the mixture*
- Additional tried and true methods …
- Orvus soap mixture
    - *Orvus soap available at farm animal supply stores*
    - *See the Association for Gravestone Studies for information on how to create the mixture*
- PhotoFlo mixture
    - *PhotoFlo available from camera stores*
    - *See the Association for Gravestone Studies for information on how to create the mixture*
- Poultice
    - *For information on how to create, make, and apply poulticem see the Saving Graves website at http://www.savinggraves.org/education/bookshelf/cleaning.htm*

- Water
- Plastic buckets (to hold the water)

The Association for Gravestone Studies also offers some useful and appropriate cleaning techniques at its website, http://www.gravestonestudies.org . Click on "Preservation" then "More Information: FAQ" at the bottom of the page, then "Review and Evaluation of Selected Brand Name Materials for Cleaning Gravestones" and "Tools and Materials for Gravestone Cleaning Projects."

The Cleaning Process
From John R. Dennis,
Dallas Museum of Art Conservation Lab

Before cleaning any stone assess its condition. If the surface easily crumbles or falls away or there are other conditions that indicate how brittle or fragile the stone is, do not clean it. Cleaning fragile stones may permamently damge the surface.

How to clean a tombstone
- ❑ Use a non-ionic soap (such as Orvus)
- ❑ Pre-wet the stone thoroughly with clean water and keep the stone wet during the entire washing process.
- ❑ Thoroughly wash the <u>wet</u> stone using a natural bristled brush.
- ❑ Be thorough. Wash all surfaces and rinse thoroughly with lots of clean water.
- ❑ Lichens and algae can be removed by first thoroughly soaking the stone and then using a wooden scraper to gently remove the biological growth. This may need to be repeated several times.
- ❑ Not all stains can be removed. Don't expect the stones to appear new after cleaning.
- ❑ Do not clean marble, limestone or sandstone more than once every 18 months. Every cleaning removes some of the face of the stone. Occassional rinsing with clean water to remove bird droppings is okay.
- ❑ Keep a simple treatment record of the cleaning, including the date of cleaning, materials used and any change in condition since last cleaning (such as missing parts, grafitti and other damage). These records should be kept at a central location where the condition of the stones can be monitored over time.

Individual Gravemarker Survey Form

Name of Cemetery: _____   County _____

Location Ref. No.: _____   Photo Date: _____

Name of Recorder: _____   Date of Recording: _____

Name: _____
            Last   **First**   **Middle**

Birth Date: _____   Death Date: _____   Marriage Date: _____

Marker Type	❑ Tablet / Head	❑ Tablet on base	❑ Footstone	❑ Obelisk
	❑ Modern Flat	❑ Military	❑ Grave Depression	❑ Table
	❑ Crypt	❑ Other	_____	

Material	❑ Marble	❑ Limestone	❑ Granite	❑ Fieldstone
	❑ Wood	❑ Sandstone	❑ Concrete	❑ Combination
	❑ Metal	❑ Other	_____	

Orientation   ❑ N   ❑ S   ❑ E   ❑ W   ❑ NE   ❑ SE   ❑ NW   ❑ SW

Dimensions   Height: _____   Width: _____   Depth: _____

Carved Surfaces	❑ Front	❑ Back	❑ Top
	❑ Side	❑ End	❑ Other: _____

Condition of Carving	❑ Mint	❑ Clear but worn	❑ Mostly Readable
	❑ Traces	❑ Illegible	❑ Underground

Motif	❑ Willow	❑ Urn	❑ Lamb	❑ Fraternal
	❑ Floral	❑ Dove	❑ Open Book	
	❑ Clasped Hands	❑ Grieving Widow	❑ Finger toward Heaven	❑ Other

Description of Design: _____

_____

Carver's Signature:

_____

Cemetery Restoration Clinic

Overall Condition:

❏ Sound	❏ Lying on Ground	❏ Sunken	❏ Voids
❏ Tilted	❏ Cracked	❏ Chipped	❏ Broken in ___ Pieces
❏ Biological Activity	❏ Erosion	❏ Blistering / Flaking / Scaling	❏ Graffiti
❏ Soiled	❏ Stained	❏ Delaminating	❏ Other

Causes:

❏ Settling	❏ Weathering	❏ Vandalism	❏ Other

Previous Repair:

❏ Cement	❏ Adhesive	❏ Iron straps / pins	❏ Other

Work Performed : _____

_____

_____

_____

Removed from Yard: Yes / No   Date Removed: _____   _____

Reset in Yard: Date Reset: _____

By Whom: _____

Inscription: ❏ Inscribed   ❏ Raised   ❏ Other _____

Record Inscription:

	Photo

Warren County Genealogical Society