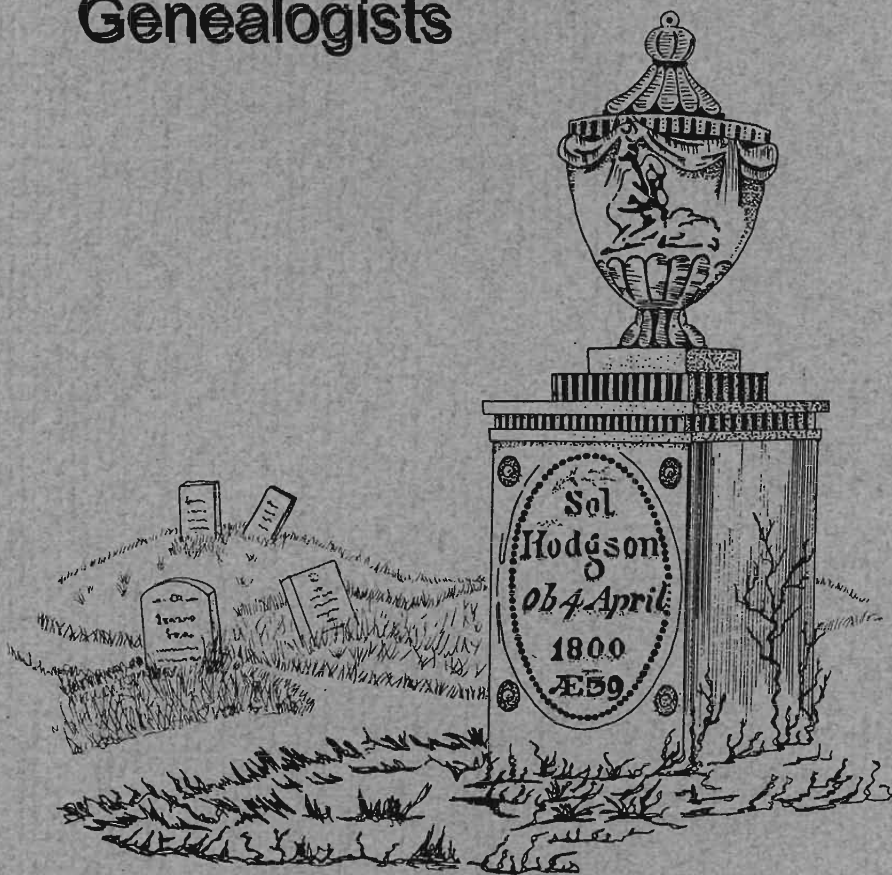


# Recording Historic Cemeteries: A Guide for Historical Societies and Genealogists



Chicora Foundation, Inc.

1998

## ***What is Chicora Foundation?***

Chicora began as a small, not-for-profit, public foundation 15 years ago, with the lofty mission of preserving the archaeological, historical, and cultural resources of the Carolinas.

Today that means a wealth of innovative programs. All are focused on the realization that museums, libraries, and archives must maximize the benefits of limited preservation and conservation funding. We work with your team to provide practical, cost-effective solutions to your complex problems.

Chicora Foundation is a leader in offering a wide range of preservation services, including on-site consultations, workshops and seminars, and telephone consultations. Our areas of expertise include the care and handling of collections, preservation assessments, preservation planning, integrated pest management, environmental monitoring and controls, fire safety, and disaster planning.

Our cemetery work includes identification and mapping of historic cemeteries, preservation planning, and conservation treatments of stones and some types of ironwork.

While our telephone consultations are free, more in-depth consulting is offered on a for-fee basis. For more information on our services and the associated costs, call us at 803/787-6910.

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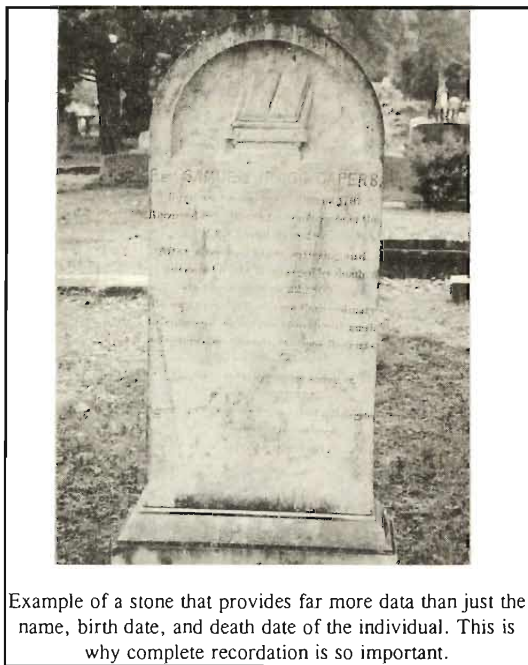
ISBN 1-58317-047-2      \$4.00

## Why Record?

Cemeteries and graveyards are facing increasing threats yearly. In addition to the natural weathering and deterioration of markers, it seems likely that pollution — from industry and from automobiles — is causing some forms of deterioration to increase at a much faster rate. Some suggest that over the next decade we may see damage that is greater than that observed over the past 200 years. And some are estimating that the loss of stones to deterioration may be as high as 30 stones per thousand on a yearly basis.

In addition, the theft of cemetery statuary, stones, and ironwork is becoming a big business. Cemeteries across the region have been hit to supply the craze called "cemetery chic." Abandoned cemeteries, or those with declining congregations, are particularly at risk since they receive less use, and often less care. Many caretakers are not well versed in preservation issues, so that broken or partially obliterated stones are hauled away, leaving graves unmarked and resulting in the loss of valuable historical and genealogical information. Add to this vandalism and development, and cemeteries are being attacked from all sides.

Considering all these threats, we need to carefully and completely record their information. This will at least ensure that the information these graveyards contain is preserved, even if the actual stone, or the cemetery itself, is lost.



Genealogists have been quick to recognize the importance of cemeteries, often devoting considerable time and effort to their recordation. This work, however, is not always done with the consistency that the situation deserves. For example, far too often only names and dates are recorded, ignoring the other verbiage on the stone, as well as the stone artwork itself. This, of course, tells only half the memorial's story and leaves unrecorded information that may be of exceptional information in our study of the past.

Too often these cemeteries are also poorly identified, using local and

frequently transitory landmarks, so that years later it is impossible to retrace the original steps and relocate the graveyard. Rarely are cemeteries mapped and this means exceptional information on the spatial arrangement of burials, the organization of kin groupings, the segregation of different social and religious classes, and the growth of the cemetery itself, is left undocumented.

There also remain many cemeteries completely unrecorded. Often these graveyards are known only to a few elderly local residents and perhaps a few hunters who use the overgrown stones as local landmarks. Unknown, and seemingly uncared for, or about, these graveyards can easily fall victim to development and destruction.

Even cemeteries which are still functioning may not have very good records. Sometimes record keeping post-dates the earliest use of the cemetery. Or the early records may have been lost or destroyed. Sometimes these records are simply incomplete. Stones may provide considerable genealogical information that would not be recorded in the "official" cemetery records. For example, while cemetery records typically include only the name of the individual buried and the birth and death dates, a family monument may have all four sides covered with family information.

What is at stake is a valuable source of historical information with a very peculiar intrinsic value all its own. As one author has noted, this heritage is "threatened by ignorance, lack of interest and time, and official policy."<sup>1</sup>

### *Getting Permission and Appropriate Behavior*

Although recordation should not result in any alteration of the cemetery, you should still seek permission of the owner, if for no other reason than simple courtesy. This is no less important when the owner is a cemetery association or religious organization. Most are very happy to grant permission once they discover that your goal is to preserve history.

Remember that cemeteries are also sacred ground and must be left as found, whether neat and tidy or overgrown with brambles and unkempt. At times, such as with many African-American cemeteries, the uncared for appearance is simply the way such cemeteries are meant to be and changing that appearance changes the very nature of the sacred space. Of course, there are some cemeteries so overgrown that it is impossible to even see the stones. In such circumstances you may be better delaying your work to the winter, when the vegetation is down, or you may wish to seek permission to do some essential cleaning in order to record the stones.

Be careful, however, that you don't change the landscape simply to make recordation easier. In particular, be sure you don't destroy plantings associated with graves. In fact, the advice of a botanist, landscape architect, or cemetery preservationist

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, Jeremy. 1976. *How To Record Graveyards*. London: Council for British Archaeology and The Trust for British Archaeology, page 5.





This African-American cemetery illustrates the wooded condition of these cemeteries that is so typical.

should always be sought before any major “clean-up” of a cemetery. Also, *never* use commercial herbicides or broad-spectrum weed killers. Not only can these damage stones and masonry, but they will result in a noticeable decline of wild plants with, over time, a prolific rejuvenation of weeds.

Also, be aware that some cemeteries are still in use and your recordation should never interfere. Be respectful of cemetery processions. Also, learn about different religious customs to ensure that you don't accidentally interfere. For example, the small stones placed on grave markers in Jewish cemeteries symbolize prayers of remembrance and should not be removed. The Chinese often visit tombs to burn incense and conduct ritual services. And of course you should *never* remove items from graves — no matter how mundane or obviously discarded they may seem to you.

While you should always dress appropriately for both the work and the weather, do realize that your appearance should also be respectful of the cemetery and those who may be visiting the graves of family or relatives. You may be stopped and asked what you are doing. The British Columbia (Canada) Genealogical Society suggests an answer they have found effective and that almost always meets with immediate approval: “We are recording the stones of British Columbia pioneers, before they wear away.” This simple, easy to understand, and non-threatening response is perfect. Although you may need to change it to meet different needs, you should focus on a very simple, respectful, one-sentence explanation that focuses on your goal to help preserve the past for future generations.

## *Necessary Supplies*

Although you have no doubt seen those who go to cemeteries with no more than good intentions, a pad of paper, and a pencil, far more is necessary if the job is to be well done and to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the past.

All recording should use “archival” paper, even if the information is to be eventually published. Your notes are very valuable and you should ensure that they will be available to other researchers 100 years from now. “Archival” paper is acid-free and

contains an alkaline buffer to help ensure the permanence of the paper.<sup>2</sup> Also, if you can, avoid loose paper forms. Even with a clipboard they will be constantly fluttering and blowing around. You may not realize you have lost a sheet until you are back home.

If the weather may turn bad, you may also want to carry a notebook that has a type of paper in it which can be written on even if wet.<sup>3</sup>

Both types of paper take pencil lead well and that is usually the easiest type of writing instrument to use. Use something between a 2 and 2½ lead — soft enough to be easily legible, but not so soft as to smear. Mechanical pencils keep their points better than wooden pencils, but regardless, make sure you have extras, along with extra erasers.

**Never** use a felt-tip pen since even a little perspiration will cause the ink to smear and run. Although a little more stable, avoid ball point pens for the same reason. If you must use a pen, select one that has pH neutral ink, won't fade, and is water-proof.<sup>4</sup>

Having taken the trouble to make sure your notes will survive, you should also take the effort to make sure they have a secure future. Even if your efforts are to be part of a larger volume, your notes should be donated to some archives in your area that is capable of caring for them. Some libraries have local history rooms. Or perhaps there is a state historical society that would be excited to have your notes. Whatever you do, don't just toss them in a desk drawer to be thrown out later.

Onion skin paper and charcoal (both available in local art supply stores) may be very useful for taking quick rubbings when stones are eroded or when the language is one you can't translate. Be very careful, however, not to damage the stone or leave residue behind — it is often impossible to remove. Also, be careful that the stone can actually withstand the stress and strain of the process. Sometimes there will be small cracks and rubbing can actually break the monument.

A small garden spade may be useful for removing a little soil when the bottom line or two is covered up. Be careful, however, to avoid damaging the stone. Recently, plastic spades have come on the market. These are excellent since they are much less

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<sup>2</sup> One source of acid-free journals and notebooks is University Products (800/628-1912). Their journals and wirebound notebooks come in both 5½ by 8½ and 8½ by 11½ inch sizes.

<sup>3</sup> Forestry Suppliers (800/647-5368) carries a brand called "Rite-in-the-Rain"™, which also happens to be acid free. These notebooks vary in size from 3 by 5 inches up to 8½ by 11 inches.

<sup>4</sup> These can usually be found in art supply or large office supply stores. Otherwise, they are also available from suppliers like University Products (800/628-1912).

likely to scrape or chip stone. Always replace the soil as soon as you are finished recording the stone.

You may want to carry a probe to find buried (toppled) stones or locate foot stones now covered over. There are now fiberglass probes that are very durable, light weight, and are less likely to damage the stone.<sup>5</sup> You should plan ahead and determine if you will be uncovering these buried markers for recordation. Typically such excavations should be left to archaeologists, since there may be other remains incorporated in the soil which can tell us about the cemetery and its use. In addition, a great deal of damage can be done to stones if they are carelessly uncovered. Often it is enough to simply note their existence.



Example of a stone that had been "lost" under the gradual build-up soil in a cemetery.

It is also an excellent idea to carry a small camera to record unusual stones or unusual inscriptions. Although far less permanent than black and white film, color film frequently provides better contrast, making stones easier to read. The decision of what type of film to use will depend on its purpose. Either way, a film with a high speed, although somewhat more grainy, is usually better, especially for heavily overgrown cemeteries, where light is reduced. Try to take your photographs with raking light that creates shadows in the stone carving, making the inscription more legible. If you take photographs, be sure to record them in your notes, so you can match the stone, your notes, and the photograph once the film is processed (maybe two or three weeks later). It might even be a good idea to begin the roll with a photograph of a page out of your notebook, on which you have written the name of the cemetery and the date. That first photograph might help jog your memory.

A flashlight is also a good tool to carry, since it provides artificial raking light you can use when trying to decipher a worn inscription. Even a small pocket light may be enough to help you read a few missing words.

Insect repellent, a hat, sun screen, and gloves are also critical items, depending on the season of the year and the nature of the cemetery. To these items you

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<sup>5</sup> These, too, are available from companies like Forestry Suppliers (800/647-5368).

may also want to add some poison plant cleanser for those times you discover the poison ivy too late.<sup>6</sup>

Wooden popsicle sticks, plastic coffee stirrers, and plastic (not metal) putty knives are also frequently useful to remove soil and lichen growth from stones. Although these wooden or plastic tools are much less likely to cause damage, be aware that the stone may already be weakened, so that any cleaning or vegetation removal must be done with extreme care. Cleaning is usually best done when the stone and the adhering vegetation are wet, such as immediately after rainfall.

A small hand whisk broom (avoid those with hard bristles) will also be useful for removing soil and light debris from stones.

A small tape measure is essential to record the dimensions of the stone. Although many use steel tape measures, such as those used by carpenters, an even better approach is the use of a cloth tape measure, available in fabric stores. Although these may not be as accurate, or wear as long, they cause far less damage to the stone and are much easier to use since they aren't rigid.

If you need to map the cemetery, at least two 100 foot, or even two 200 foot, tapes are essential. You may also want to have a handful of short wood stakes and a small hammer — just be considerate of where you drive the stakes.

Finally, you will need a good, but not necessarily expensive, hand compass. This will help you draw your sketch map of the cemetery, as well as orient the different graves. These are almost always available in the hunting and camping goods sections of discount stores.

### *The First Thing to Record is the Location*

Too many recorders jump into the middle of the cemetery, taking copious notes, but then only vaguely indicating where the cemetery was. "Turn left off US 1 at the Tastee Freeze sign on the way out of Smithville," leaves open a whole range of possible questions. Which way were you heading "out" of Smithville? Will the sign still be there five years from now? Twenty years from now? And how far out of town is this?

A much better approach is to use actual mileage and permanent (or reconstructible) landmarks. For example: "From the corner of Main and Elm in downtown Smithville, drive north on Main for 1.2 miles. Turn left (west) on a dirt road and continue for 0.3 mile. The cemetery is on the right (north), with stones immediately at the road edge." This leaves almost no doubt of the location. But it still requires someone to know the names of the roads — and for those road names not to change. A

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<sup>6</sup> An effective brand is Tecnu® Oak-n-Ivy® Cleanser, available from Forestry Suppliers (800/647-5368).



good supplemental approach is to draw a map, which combined with the verbal description takes away almost all doubt.

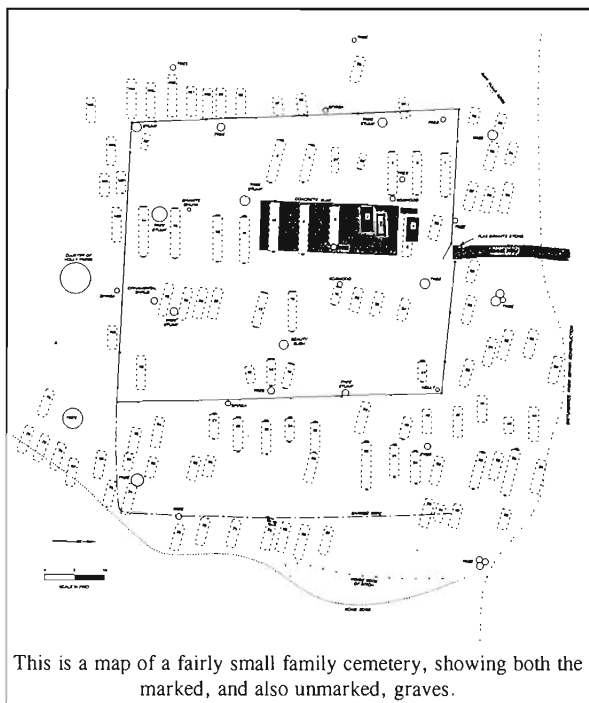
In urban areas, city maps may provide yet additional information, while in rural areas USGS topographic maps may be helpful. Often libraries will have copies of local topographic maps, so you don't actually have to purchase maps. However, don't allow a poor map location replace a thorough, and accurate, verbal location and sketch map.

Some researchers have also begun using GPS, or global positioning systems, to record sites like cemeteries. Today there are many inexpensive GPS units. Just be aware of the limitations of such devices — selective availability, heavy foliage, satellites low on the horizon, and different map datums will all affect the quality of your data. Consider such devices as supplements to verbal descriptions and carefully drawn sketch maps, not replacements.

## Mapping the Graveyard

There are several excellent publications that explain how to create simple maps. Perhaps one of the best, which also provides a wealth of cemetery preservation assistance is Lynette Strangstad's *A Graveyard Preservation Primer* published by the American Association for State and Local History.<sup>7</sup>

Mapping can be accomplished by either gridding the graveyard out in manageable units — perhaps 20 foot squares — and within each square locating the markers, or by using two known points — perhaps



This is a map of a fairly small family cemetery, showing both the marked, and also unmarked, graves.

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<sup>7</sup> Strangstad, Lynette. 1988. *A Graveyard Preservation Primer*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, pages 36-39.



Example of a tablet marker.

Example of a box tomb.



Example of a table marker.



Example of a die on a base, illustrating the different parts of the monument.

Obelisk, illustrating several different parts that may be typically found.



the corner of a nearby church or the corners of an enclosing wall — and triangulating the location of stones. In smaller cemeteries using graph paper, pacing off distances between stones, and indicating the relative positions of each stone may be sufficient.

Assign a number to each stone and use this as a means to key your notes to the stones. Be sure to include paths, plantings (where you can), roads, and other landmarks. Future researchers will find these maps indispensable to determine if gravestones have been added (or have disappeared) and to explore how the cemetery landscaping may have changed. Although mapping takes a little more time and effort, you'll be making a significant contribution to future researchers.

## *What Should You Record?*

For many genealogists, the inscription is the whole point of recording graveyards. But there are other things that may be just as important — at least to future researchers. So, consider recording these additional features:

- the type of monument
- the shape and dimensions of the stone or monument
- the type of stone used
- the face, or faces, upon which the inscriptions occur, and
- any symbols or decorations which are found on the memorial

There are a number of different types of monuments or memorials: tablets, above ground box tombs, table tombs, dies on bases, and columns or obelisks. There are others, of course, but these are probably the most generally common forms.

Sometimes the shape of the monument can be quite complex; for example, an obelisk may consist of several stacked bases, the central monument or die, a cap, and then perhaps an urn or other decorative motif. The more description you provide, the better; but this will always depend on how much time you have. Often a photograph or quick sketch will provide the information future researchers need to make repairs or reset monuments that have been damaged. While you are at it, indicate on which face of these complex monuments the inscriptions occur. This information may help ensure that the original appearance of the monument is retained if, in the future, the monument has to be reset.

Depending on what part of the country you're in, there can be any number of different stone types, such as limestone, marble, slate, brownstone, and granite. How good you are at identifying these stones probably depends on your background and experience in geology. But perhaps even more important than the name is the consistency of your descriptions. Even if you get the name wrong, as long as you are consistent in your use of terms, chances are that future researchers will be able to figure out what you meant.

There are many symbols on gravestones and often these provide almost as

much information as the inscriptions. They may document fraternal, social, or religious organizations, or they may help you understand how the person was viewed by friends and relatives, or the symbols on the stone may provide a clue about the beliefs of the decedent. Chicora Foundation is working on a publication which illustrates many of the most typical symbols — ask about its availability.

## *What about the Inscription?*

While there is much more than *just* the inscription, as we have just discussed, certainly the inscription is a major point in the whole process — and it deserves considerable care and consistency.

Perhaps the most significant issue in recordation is accuracy. Everything on every stone must be transcribed exactly as it is written — with all of its potential ambiguity, errors, punctuation, and spellings. Once you start “cleaning up” inscriptions you begin changing the historical record. Avoid abbreviations, since it is difficult to make them consistent and even more difficult to identify those that were original to the stone and those which you adopted.

Always underline the surname. This avoids possible errors when surnames could be confused with given names. For example, what is the surname in the notation, “Davis John Armstrong”? You probably knew in the field, but will you remember five years later — and will other researchers be able to figure it out?

Always write all information exactly as it appears on the stone and never attempt to shorten or modify the information. It is best not to try to save space by combining lines — instead, write the inscription as you see it, with each line on the stone being a separate line in your notes. If you must compress the inscription, then do so consistently, always using a forward slash (/) between lines on the stone. For example:

In  
Loving Memory of  
John L. Smith  
Born October 1, 1804  
Died January 20, 1860

would become, “In / Loving Memory of / John L. Smith / Born October 1, 1804 / Died January 20, 1860.” Although this certainly saves space, how was it arranged on the original stone? And future researchers will also wonder if the original inscription had a period at the end, or if that is just a result of the text layout? Saving a little space now almost always results in confusion and errors later.

You may also be tempted to use abbreviations for verbiage that is common in the graveyard (for example, IMO for “In Memory of”). This seems innocuous enough at first, but when you use IMO, was the original stone written, “IN MEMORY OF,” or “In Memory Of,” or “In Memory of”? There are just too many possibilities.



If you cannot read a part of the inscription, make that clear. For example, insert brackets with an explanation. For example, “John [cannot make out last name, may be Smith or Smile].” Although a cryptic note like “John [?]” may make sense to you at the time, weeks later will you be able to remember that there was a last name, but you aren’t sure what it was, or will you think that there was no last name?

Always double check your efforts — read the stone, write the stone, then recheck the recording against the stone. This will seem to take more time in the field, but it will save you time from having to return to the graveyard and relocate a stone with a transcription problem.

Record all sides of a stone and be sure to indicate the order. Avoid numbering the sides, since it really doesn’t provide much locational information. Instead, indicate the sides as “east side,” “north side,” and so forth. Even on tablet stones, be sure to check the back — there may be family name or some other small inscription. Also be sure to check at or slightly below the turf line — sometimes the stonecutter signed the stone at the base.

Be sure to clearly indicate the end of one stone and the beginning of another. Often a number is adequate, but it may help to adopt a common symbol as an extra precaution that stones don’t run together, garbling transcriptions. For example, many researchers use the symbol ----/---- to indicate a break between stones.

## *For More Information*

If you would like more information about cemetery preservation, check out these sources:

- Jones, Mary-Ellen. 1977. *Photographing Tombstones: Equipment and Techniques*. AASLH Technical Leaflet 92. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History.
- Krontz, Marian. 1979. Leaving No Stone Unturned: Procedures for Cleaning and Restoring A Graveyard. *Pioneer America Society Transactions* 2: 81-95.
- McGahee, Susan H. and Mary W. Edmonds. *South Carolina’s Historic Cemeteries: A Preservation Handbook*. Columbia: South Carolina Department of Archives and History.
- Newman, John J. 1971. *Cemetery Transcribing: Preparations and Procedures*. AASLH Technical Leaflet 9 Nashville: American Association for State and Local History.
- Thompson, Sharyn. 1989. *Florida’s Historic Cemeteries*. Tallahassee: Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board.
- Strangstad, Lynette. 1988. *A Graveyard Preservation Primer*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History.

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