

**A Grave Situation:  
Burial Records & Practices**  
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**BURIAL/DEATH RESEARCH (not all online) or HOW DID MY ANCESTOR DIE?**

Death certificates often give specific causes of death, but also may provide “contributory cause(s)” or a doctor might identify for what his/her patient was being treated (would this possibly lead to death or a contributory cause?). Sometimes just a code is provided. To understand more about the “Death Codes” or ICD Codes, check the following website:  
<https://familyhistorydaily.com/free-genealogy-resources/icd-codes-death-certificates-genealogy/>  
For most up-to-date code list: <https://www.icd10data.com/> (with specifics for 2023-24) and  
<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/icd/icd10.htm>

- I. WHERE CAN I LOCATE DEATH INFORMATION?
  - A. Death certificate or registration
  - B. Burial information from cemetery or church
  - C. Obituary or other newspaper article/announcement
  - D. Letters, journals, “funeral sign-in” book, funeral cards/programs
  - E. Military documents & pension records (and applications for them)
  
- II. WHY CAN'T I FIND THE ANCESTOR'S GRAVE?
  - A. During epidemic or pandemic, there may have been . . .
    - 1. No funerals
    - 2. Mass graves/burials
    - 3. Bodies abandoned in homes without identification
    - 4. Coffins piled up in graveyards; buried without information available
    - 5. Bodies hastily buried to prevent contamination; no information
    - 6. No one available to create a record
  - B. Buried in paupers' field due to . . .
    - 1. Lack of funds
    - 2. No one knowing who the person was
  - C. No body (cremated, destroyed in a disaster, never located, etc.)
  - D. Died overseas (e.g., war, travel, disaster, etc.)
  - E. Unclaimed/unidentified
  - F. No one knew who the deceased was (e.g., died & buried crossing the plains, etc.)

# BUT IF THERE MIGHT BE A GRAVE, HERE ARE SUGGESTIONS FOR WHAT TO TAKE, WHAT TO DO (before, during, and after), AND WHAT TO PLAN FOR

## I. BEFORE THE TRIP

- A. Things to consider
  - 1. The dates & length of time for the trip
  - 2. The places you plan to visit (then reduce your expectations significantly!)
  - 3. Weather probabilities and possibilities

- B. People to contact
  - 1. Genealogy & public libraries/librarians
  - 2. Historical society personnel
  - 3. Cemetery sextons
  - 4. Church officials
  - 6. Local Family History Centers

- C. Things to pack
  - 1. Papers and records
    - a. pedigree charts & family group sheets
    - b. copies (not originals) of death records
    - c. Letters (esp. copies of correspondence with on-site personnel, etc.)
    - d. lots of paper, pens/pencils, highlighters
  - 2. Technological equipment



- a. cameras (digital/cell phone & a backup)
- b. audio recorder (cell phone)
- c. video/digital recorder (cell phone)
- d. walkie-talkies (cell phone?)
- e. tablet or laptop computer (cell phone?) & extra memory storage
- f. GPS (cell phone)
- g. cell/smart phone (yeah, got that!)
- 3. Additional equipment for graveyard excursions
  - a. long sleeved shirt(s) & trousers
  - b. boots, high socks
  - c. garden & rubber gloves
  - d. insect repellent & sunscreen
  - e. old towels
  - f. small scissors (don't put in your carry-on!)
  - g. umbrella
  - h. bottled water (with sprayer attachment)
  - i. D2 (see <https://www.gravestonecleaner.com/>)
  - j. soft brush (ideal material: Tampico)
  - k. small reflective mirror or cookie sheet
  - l. corn starch or powder (without additives) to bring out hard-to-read engraving
  - m. spiral notebook & pencils to diagram stone placement
  - n. copy of genealogy on handheld device
  - o. cheap foil and stiff brush

Expect ground to be uneven and perhaps to have "sunken spots" - walk carefully, take a walking stick (good for moving snakes out of your path), and avoid searching at dusk or after dark (best idea: search with a buddy, a cell phone, and a first aid kit - thorns can cause nasty scratches)

When taking photos, make your first shot of the Cemetery entrance and sign with its name and established date

- II. ON-SITE VISITS (be sure to find out in advance about any restrictions & closures)
- A. Check the rules in advance (and FOLLOW THEM)
    1. No dogs (I like to take my pup with me)
    2. No photographs (yup, some cemeteries have restrictions)
    3. No tombstone rubbing
    4. No flowers to be left on graves (or only in approved containers; purchase in office)
    5. ???
  - B. Recognize that some cemeteries are on private property & require permission to enter and/or take photographs
  - C. Locate (in advance) the graveyards you wish to visit (contact organizations listed above for assistance)
  - D. BE RESPECTFUL!
    1. If a funeral is in process, postpone your wanderings in its vicinity
    2. If a bereaved is visiting a grave, avoid interfering; wait to access the area
  - E. Do not expect on-site cemetery personnel to be available to help you (you aren't their main concern), but do ask for grave locations in advance of walking all over a mile-square cemetery (note: not all graves have markers and it's nice to know that in advance!)
    1. Some will open their files to you, draw you maps, or even escort you to the gravesite
    2. Some will not allow you access to more than one grave in a single visit
    3. Some will restrict all records from you
- III. AFTER THE TRIP (or intermittently during the trip)
- A. Organize/transcribe notes
  - B. File findings
  - C. Develop film and/or catalog photos or transfer photos to your computer
  - D. Send thank you notes and promised reports to the contacts you made
  - E. Make a list of the things you want to accomplish on your next visit to the area

#### Hints & lessons engraven in stone

- Plan to purchase whatever you can when you get to the location, this will minimize things brought on your travel, which make suitcases heavy! And consider donating things you do not wish to take back home
- Make appointments & arrange stops in an order that culminates in cemetery visits
- Clean up after yourself, wherever you spend time (there may not be disposal locations so you might have to take your trash out with you)
- Spelling doesn't count (the way a name is spelled on a tombstone may not be the way the deceased spelled it)
- Stones are worth a second look (sometimes the information you want is hidden just under the grass at the bottom of the stone or is on a separate plaque or the back-side of the marker)
- Headstones reveal more than names and dates (DAR, Masons, GAR, and other affiliations are often noted on the stones or separate markers - these give hints for other places to look for ancestral information)
- Flowers or mementoes left behind by others may indicate a living relative (a cousin, perhaps) who is interested in your family research

- Check the local history plaques that may be in the cemetery - often they are at the entrance, but sometimes they can be found throughout the grounds (they tell about the history of the area; this was probably your ancestors' history as well)
- Some markers are memorials and do not indicate the location of a grave
- Not all graves have headstones
- Stones can be placed (or replaced) long after death - consider putting up memorials for ancestors whose graves are unmarked (still record the location of the grave, if you can)
- People are not always buried near where they lived (or died)
- Headstones are often pre-engraved (1912 - 19?? for someone who died in 2000 or later) - check with cemetery officials to learn if the body is there but the stone hasn't been updated
- Relationships can be revealed by studying headstones and the people nearby . . . but
- A body in your ancestor's plot may have no relationship - sometimes plots were shared (with or without exchange of money)
- Do not assume ANYTHING based on a headstone
- Be courteous! DO NOT argue about restrictions, but DO engage in conversation with docents, sextons, & others in charge (learn about the area, historical events, etc.)

Cemetery and death research can bring our deceased ancestors "to life" in our minds and hearts - your family signed those documents and stood in those same places for the celebration of the life of your relative. **You are reading priceless records and standing on hallowed ground!**

### VERY SHORT LIST FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

When/how did they suffer?

<http://www.joycetice.com/articles/epidemics.htm>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_epidemics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_epidemics)

Forms to help in your quest:  
<http://chicora.org/cemetery-forms.html>

Cemetery research suggestions

*Hard copy helps:*

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. *Your Guide to Cemetery Research*. Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books, 2002.

Keister, Douglas. *Stories in Stone: A Field Guide to Cemetery Symbolism and Iconography*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, Publisher, 2004.

*Legacy Quick Guide: Cemetery Research*. <https://legacy.familytreewebinars.com/legacy-quickguide-cemetery-research-pdf-edition-p266.php>

*Online cemetery education:*

[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main\\_Page](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page)  
[https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php?title=Cemetery\\_Records](https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php?title=Cemetery_Records)

Gravestone cleaning (ideas & service): <http://gravestonetransformations.com/>

*Online searching:*

<https://billiongraves.com/>  
<https://www.findagrave.com/>  
<https://www.interment.net/>

For cemetery "walks":  
 Search safely, with respect,  
 but with a sense of "family" -  
 spend a moment in  
 reflection - you may never  
 be able to return

Use a walker's "mapping"  
 FREE software on your smart  
 phone to determine where  
 you have been (and need to  
 go). Examples: *My Tracks*,  
*Run Keeper*, or *Map My Walk*

*Other helps:*

American Automobile Association (AAA; in Calif.: Auto Club of So. Calif.)

Books on the history of the states, counties, and cities you are interested in.

Chamber of Commerce in the cities you will be visiting.