

Basics of Cemetery Preservation



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Mobile Public Library Cemetery Preservation Workshop
November 3, 2018

Introduction



Historic Cemetery Research



Documentation

Restoration



Oak & Laurel
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Introduction

Historic cemeteries may appear timeless, but they actually change a lot over time.

Materials change: Lime mortar → Portland cement
Marble → Granite
Shell and gravel paving → Concrete

Geography changes: Folks move away, cemeteries fill up and get old, sometimes cemeteries even move

Sometimes, cemeteries become abandoned.



Introduction

In this lecture –

- Basic cemetery preservation ethics
- Alabama laws and rights
- Abandoned cemeteries and their issues
- Documentation and record keeping
- Basic techniques of cemetery preservation



Shadow Lawn Memorial Gardens, Birmingham

Cemetery Preservation Ethics

People have cared for their own cemeteries and their own loved ones' burial places for a long time. Historically, cemetery care was a community affair, associated with decoration days, holidays, etc.

Since the 1950s, the ownership and management of cemeteries has changed, from local to multi-national. Where once a local caretaker was on-site, this is less and less the case.



Old Sexton's Cottage, Shadow Lawn Memorial Gardens, Birmingham AL

Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation

The words “preservation” and “restoration” have specific meanings, and an accompanying standard of ethics.

The “Secretary’s Standards” are the Hippocratic Oath of preservationists, beginning first and foremost with

DO NO HARM

nps.gov/tps/standards

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties are common sense historic preservation principles in non-technical language. They promote historic preservation best practices that will help to protect our nation's irreplaceable cultural resources.

Standards for Preservation

Standards for Rehabilitation



The Treatment of Historic Properties

The Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties

Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation

"The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved"
(Don't remove, replace, or add what you don't have to)



Campground Church Cemetery, Northport, AL

Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation

“Where the severity of deterioration requires repair or limited replacement of a distinctive feature, the new material will match the old in composition, design, color, and texture”

(Replace with in-kind materials)



Ascension Catholic Cemetery, Donaldsonville LA

Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation

"Examples of craftsmanship will be preserved"



First Episcopal Church Cemetery, Napoleonville, LA



Oaklawn Cemetery, Mobile, AL

Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Historic Preservation

“Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, will be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that can cause damage to historic materials will not be used.”

(Treat historic materials gently, and do no harm)



Laurel Grove Cemetery, Savannah, GA



Oaklawn Cemetery, Shreveport, LA



Assumption Church, Plattenville, LA



St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, N.O.

Cemetery Preservation Ethics

We can apply these standards to cemetery markers and landscapes. Moreover, we can add to these standards the responsibility we as stewards have to the cemetery itself. With this in mind, some other ethics to consider are:

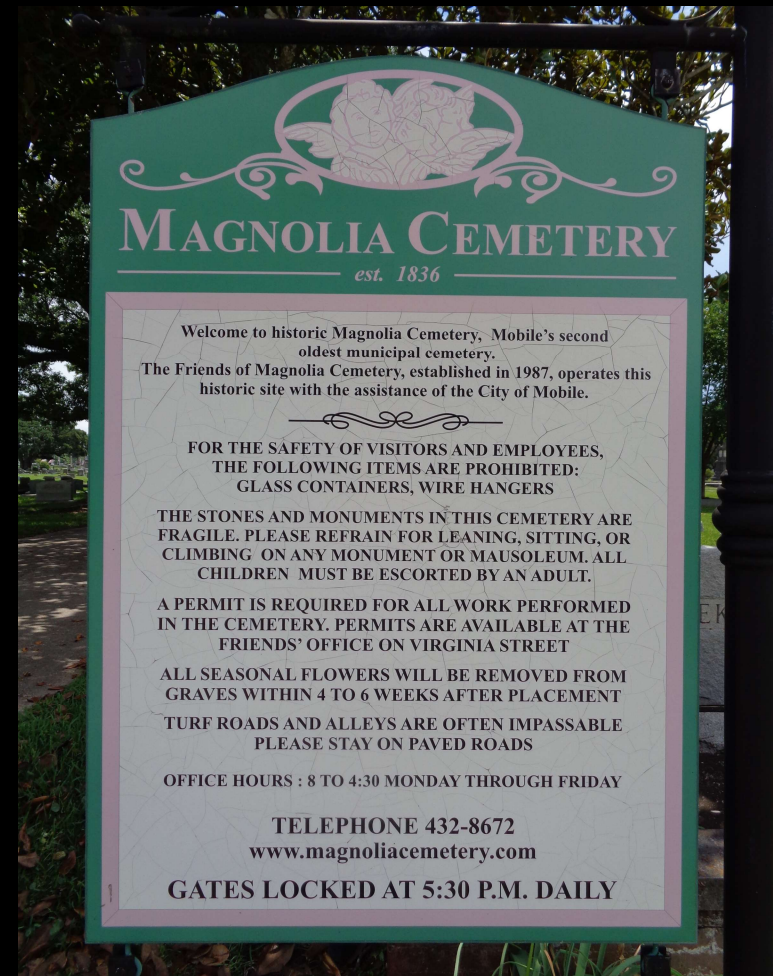
- Maintaining accessibility to those who have family members buried in a cemetery
- Maintaining communication with those who have family buried in the cemetery (i.e. notification of cleanups, restoration projects, staff on hand, security, and others)
- Keeping a respectful demeanor in the cemetery.
- Promoting an atmosphere in the cemetery that offers peace, reflection, and quiet for those visiting their family members (i.e. keeping distance from those who want privacy, having a respectful attitude, being responsible with tourism)

Laws and Rights

State-level cemetery laws are often written by the funeral and cemetery industry itself, so they tend to protect the cemetery owner.

In Alabama, cemetery laws are dispersed under a number of statutes, specifically Titles 9, 10, and 11. Title 41 covers the Alabama Historical Commission. Title 13 Chapters 7 and 11 cover criminal codes related to cemeteries.

The website [SavingGraves.net](https://www.savinggraves.net) has a fantastic breakdown of all Alabama cemetery-oriented laws:
<https://www.savinggraves.net/alabama/212-alabama-cemetery-preservation-law>



Magnolia Cemetery, Mobile, AL

Cemetery and Burial Law Misconceptions

Embalming of deceased bodies is NOT required by law in Alabama or any other state (except in rare instances – in Alabama, a body must be embalmed if it is to be transported out of state.)

Caskets for burials are NOT required by law in Alabama either. There are some caveats to this. Alabama code 34-13-1(a)(15) states that caskets must be purchased from a licensed funeral director. However, if someone is *given* or *makes their own* casket, this law doesn't apply. Specific cemeteries may have their own rules about this.

Scattering cremated ashes is not prohibited by Alabama state law anyplace. However, cities and counties may have their own rules about scattering ashes. Scattering ashes at sea must take place three nautical miles from shore (Federal Clean Water Act). Scattering ashes in National Parks must be done with permission.



Funeral of Army Captain Kyle Comfort, 2010, Jacksonville, AL (Wikimedia Commons)

Access to Cemeteries on Private Land

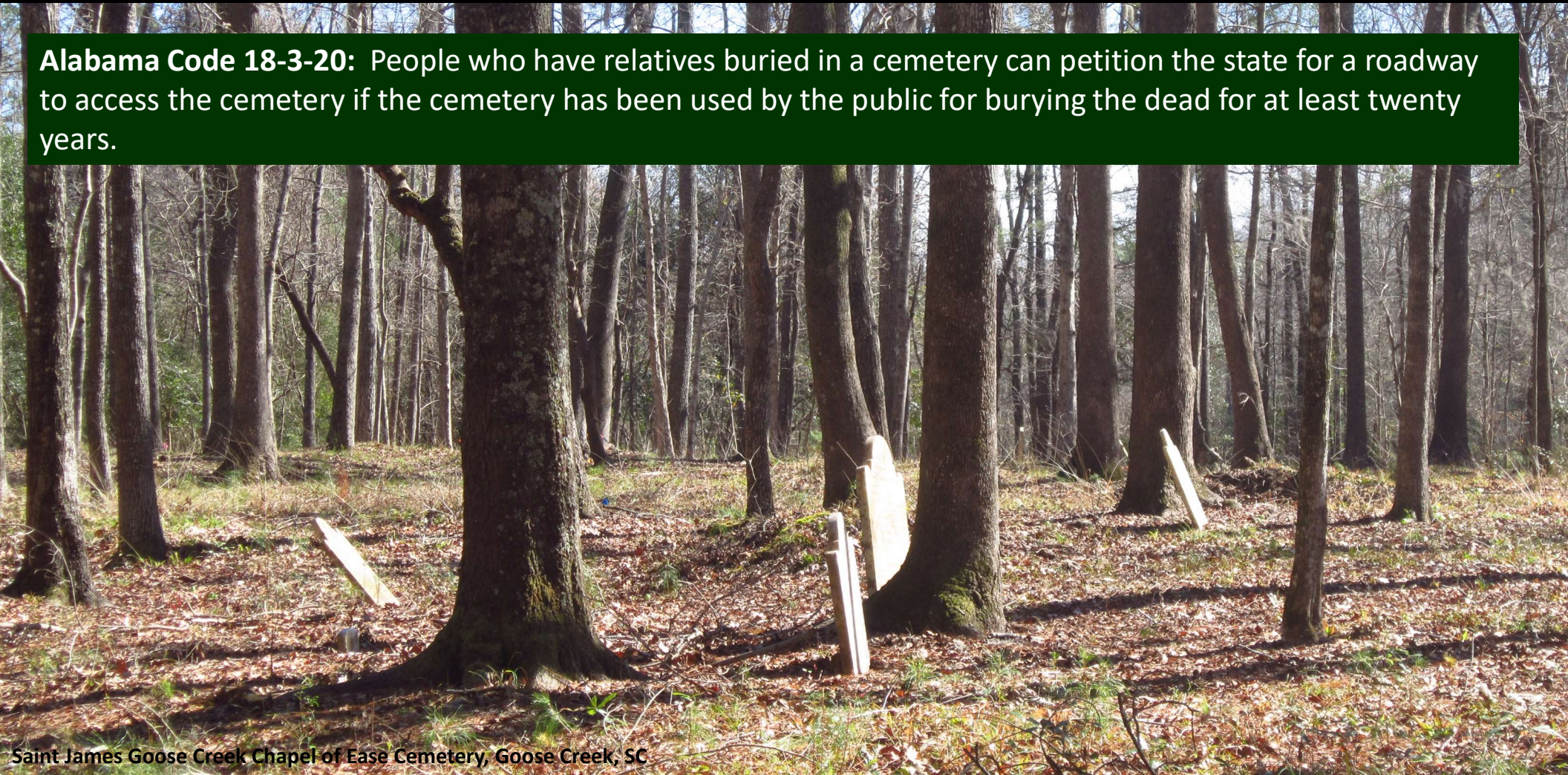
Alabama Code 35-1-4 states that private property owners who have cemeteries on their property *must grant access* to the families related to those buried in the cemetery. Families must give the property owner reasonable notice. This is a very important law, as Alabama has many cemeteries on private property.



Zion Travelers Baptist Church Cemetery, Laplace, LA (within Garyville Refinery)

Access to Cemeteries on Private Land

Alabama Code 18-3-20: People who have relatives buried in a cemetery can petition the state for a roadway to access the cemetery if the cemetery has been used by the public for burying the dead for at least twenty years.



Saint James Goose Creek Chapel of Ease Cemetery, Goose Creek, SC

Cemetery Criminal Codes

Alabama Code 13A-7-23: Cemetery vandalism as criminal mischief and desecration (Class B misdemeanor, up to 6 months in jail and fines up to \$3,000)

Alabama Code 13A-11-12: Desecration of a public monument, structure, or place of worship or burial (Class A misdemeanor, 1 year imprisonment and fines up to \$6,000)

Alabama Code 13A-11-13: Any offense that “would outrage family sensibilities” including desecration or abuse of a corpse (Class C felony, up to 1 year imprisonment and fines up to \$15,000)

In cases of theft, state prosecutors will often pursue suspects with larceny charges instead of cemetery-related crimes, as the penalty can be increased.





Laws and Rights

Preneed Funeral and Cemetery Act (Alabama Code 27-17A) pertains to the requirements for endowments (also known as perpetual care funds) for cemeteries.

This applies to nearly all cemeteries except those which do not charge any fees for burial, lot sales, monuments, etc.

This is a long law but is recommended reading as it includes the rights of the purchaser of pre-need contracts (27-17A-33), maintenance of records (27-17A-48), and how a cemetery must honor pre-need contracts.



Before YOU DIE
ADVANTAGES OF PRE-NEED

Advantages of Pre-Need Plans
With this plan, money to pay for a funeral and/or burial is held in a trust, in an escrow account or paid through an insurance policy on the life of the person desiring the plan. Parts of or all of the funeral service and burial are designed in advance and pre-funded in advance and the family has little to do but show up.

- ✔ You make your wishes known.
- ✔ You can determine your digital legacy.
- ✔ Your family has a peace of mind knowing these arrangements have been made in advance.
- ✔ Your family avoids the burden to make decisions when they are most vulnerable to manipulation.
- ✔ Your family can avoid taking loans, arranging finance plans, raiding savings or

Disadvantages

- ✘ FIND MONEY!
- ✘ YOU DIE
- ✘ FAMILY CAN'T MAKE EADS MEET

www.serenitymemorialchapel.com

Alabama Historical Commission

Under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), all states must have a designated **State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)**. Many SHPOs don't do much with cemeteries, but Alabama's does.

The Alabama Historical Commission (AHC) serves as the Alabama SHPO. They manage the Alabama Historic Cemetery Register (to which Oaklawn was recently listed).

The AHC also grants permits for cemetery work. These permits aren't meant to be red tape – they're more a method of offering advice and guidance to folks wanting to perform preservation work in historic Alabama Cemeteries.



Abandoned Cemeteries



Abandoned cemeteries are a national concern. As populations move, geographies change, and the culture surrounding death evolves, cemeteries are left behind. Despite the old adage, it isn't always true that "a cemetery is forever."

Factors that contribute to the abandonment of a cemetery include:

- It becomes full and no more space can be sold
- The cemetery ownership does not have a sufficient endowment (sometimes called a perpetual care fund). Sometimes the endowment has been misappropriated in conflict with state law.
- Cemetery maintenance slows or even stops, creating an unwelcoming space. This can begin a vicious cycle.

Abandoned Cemeteries

The state of Alabama defines abandoned cemeteries very specifically in relation to their endowments. Alabama code 11-47, Article 2, outlines this process, but with the specific intent of declaring cemeteries abandoned for the purpose of removal.

Alabama code 11-80-13, alternately, provides a process for reclaiming abandoned cemeteries for the purpose of preservation.



Union Cemetery in Brewton, AL, on Georgia Pacific Industrial Campus (moved 2014)

Abandoned Cemeteries

Abandoned and neglected cemeteries a problem in Birmingham

Updated Oct 26, 2016; Posted Oct 24, 2016



In AL 11-80-13, a city or county government can form a *rehabilitation authority* staffed by interested citizens, representatives of preservation societies, and other relevant parties.

A citizen can submit a request to a city or county governing body to form such an authority.

The authority has the power to work with cemetery owners and stakeholders, as well as raise funds for the care of the cemetery.

This approach has been utilized in the case of Oaklawn Cemetery in Mobile, and several cemeteries in Birmingham.

Cemetery Documentation

Documentation of a cemetery is important because:

- It helps create context for an historic cemetery by giving folks the ability to see what it once was versus what it is now.
- It helps people find their loved ones buried in a cemetery, and in this way preserves the function of the cemetery.
- It establishes a standard of work for preservation and shows stakeholders the progress of cleanup and preservation.
- In some contexts, it gets folks involved and interested in the care of the cemetery.
- In situations where a natural disaster has occurred, it can serve as a tool for restoration.



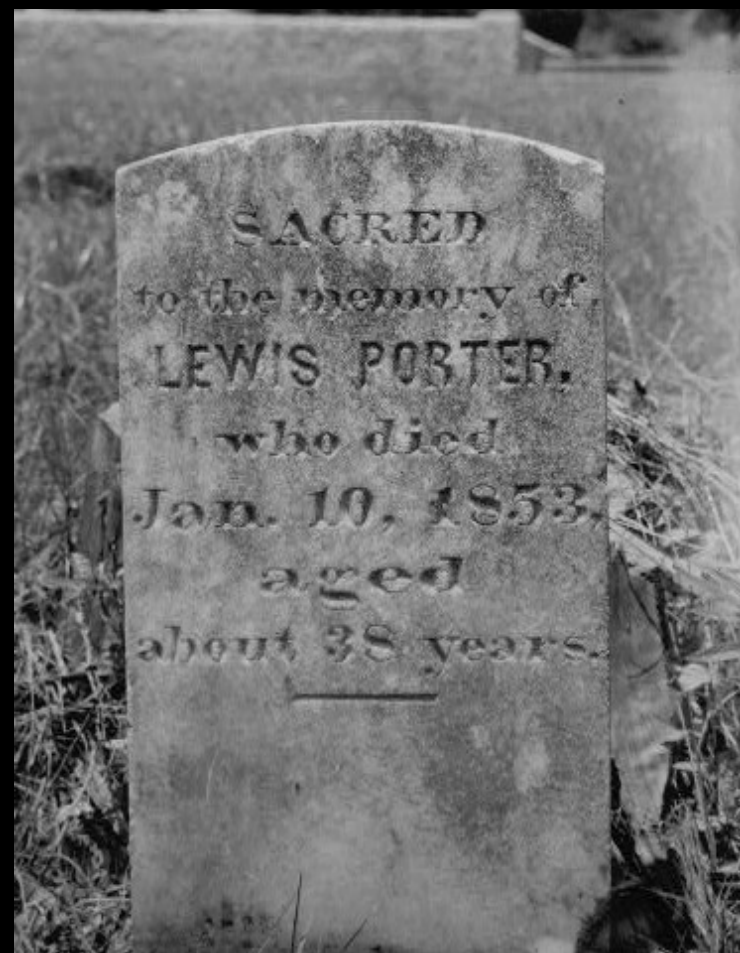
Kneseth-Israel Beth-El Cemetery, Birmingham, AL

Cemetery Documentation

Documentation can mean photographs, written records, transcribing burial records, researching historic images, collecting ownership documents, or spreadsheets of burial information.

Oaklawn Cemetery, for example, has documented all of the veteran's graves in the cemetery.

Families can perform their own documentation by taking regular photographs of their lot, tomb, or monuments and keeping them in a safe place with relevant documents.



Fairview Cemetery, Eufala AL, photo taken 1938
(Library of Congress)

Cemetery Documentation

The National Centers for Preservation Technology and Training (NCPTT) has developed several templates for documenting cemeteries which are available online.

Broad templates are helpful, but it's sometimes more effective to establish a cemetery-specific template that addresses the resources in the cemetery.



Africa Town, Mobile County, AL (Library of Congress)

Cemetery Documentation

Type of interment (circle one): tomb marker family name marker			
Type of tomb (circle one): mausoleum			
Type of marker (circle all that apply): headstone footstone ground tablet basal ruin cross pedestal obelisk Woodmen of the World pedestal column funeral home plaque bedstead			
Dimensions (primary stone)	Height:	Width:	Depth (or L):
Dimensions (base)	Height:	Width:	Depth (or L):
Dimensions (other):	Height:	Width:	Depth (or L):
Orientation (circle one): North South East West unknown			
Interment status (circle one): active inactive abandoned			
State of interment (circle all that apply): standing ruin fragment relocated altered replica tilted sunken			
Type of interment (circle one): individual family undeterminable			
Pedestal (circle one) : yes no		Base (circle one): yes no	
Ornament (circle all that apply): urn sculpture cross plaque relief decoration incised decoration ornamental vase none			
Furniture (circle all that apply): sculpture container/vase plaque immortelles none			

Preservation Methods

There are so many different ways families can care for their own cemetery monuments and tombs. Basic maintenance and care not only prolongs the life of a cemetery property, but also gets the whole family involved and invested in the care of their heritage.

There are lots of simple things we can do to care for cemeteries while still following rule number one: Do no harm!

And also remember to apply for a permit with the Alabama Historical Association – they're here to help.



St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, New Orleans (Photo by Jeffrey Holmes)

Preservation Methods: Safety



Cemetery preservation is important – but your safety is more important.

Headstones are heavy! Be sure to work with a buddy and be aware of monuments that are unsteady and might fall.

Be sure to bring all necessary personal protective equipment for the work you want to do, this can include:

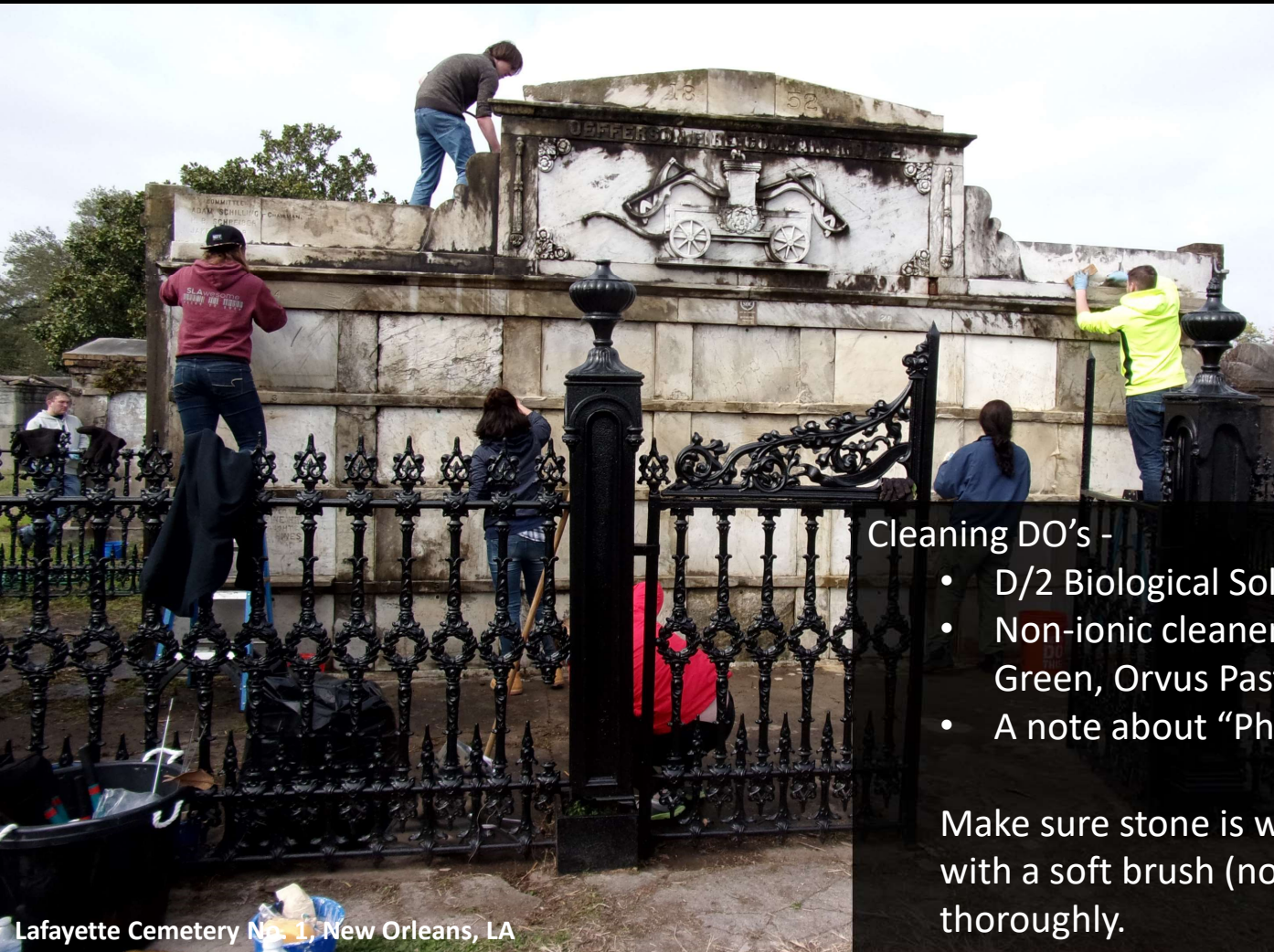
- Gloves → cloth and latex/nitrile to protect from hard stone and chemicals
- Eye protection (safety glasses and sunglasses!)
- Breathing protection → respirators for mixing concrete, cutting weeds
- Closed-toe, sturdy shoes for uneven ground and high grass
- Bug spray and tick protective measures
- Sunscreen

Preservation Methods: Cleaning

Cleaning DON'Ts –

- Bleach – chlorine can corrode and cause marble to “sugar”
- Ammonia – behaves similarly to chlorine bleach
- Muriatic acid
- Basically anything with an especially high or low pH
- Grinders
- Light pressure washing is okay for granite only

Preservation Methods: Cleaning



Cleaning DO's -

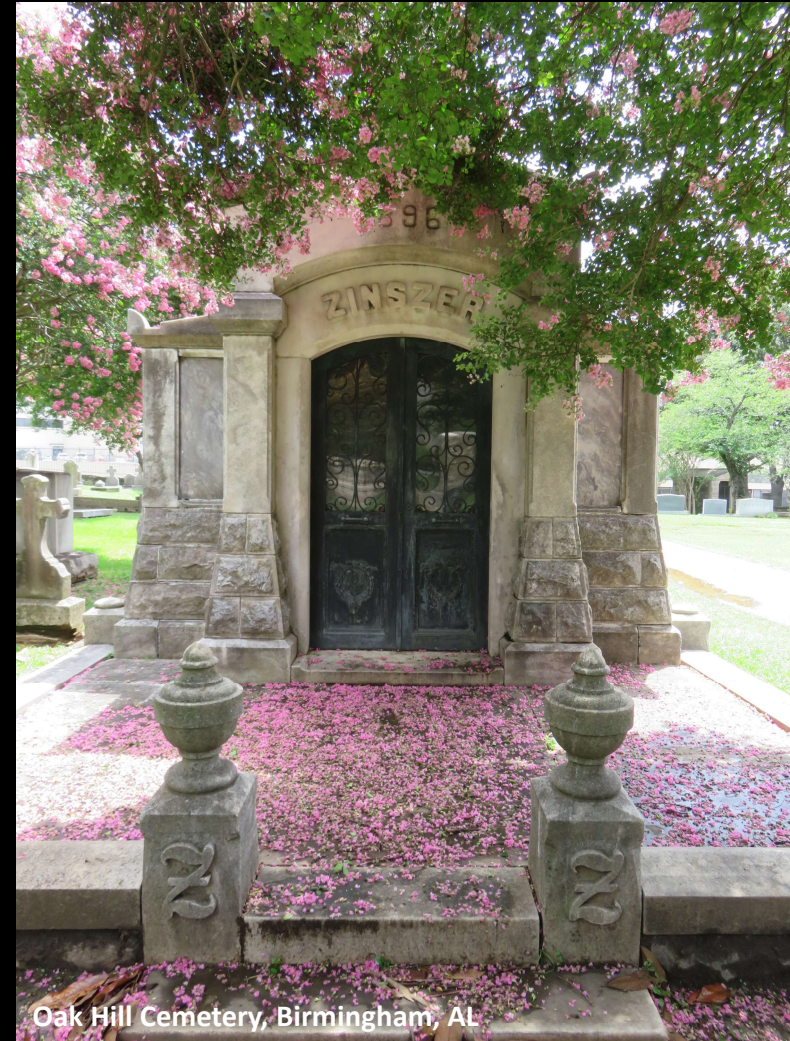
- D/2 Biological Solution
- Non-ionic cleaners (Ivory unscented dish soap, Simple Green, Orvus Paste)
- A note about "Photo-Flo"

Make sure stone is wet before applying any cleaner. Scrub with a soft brush (no hard plastic or metal) and rinse thoroughly.

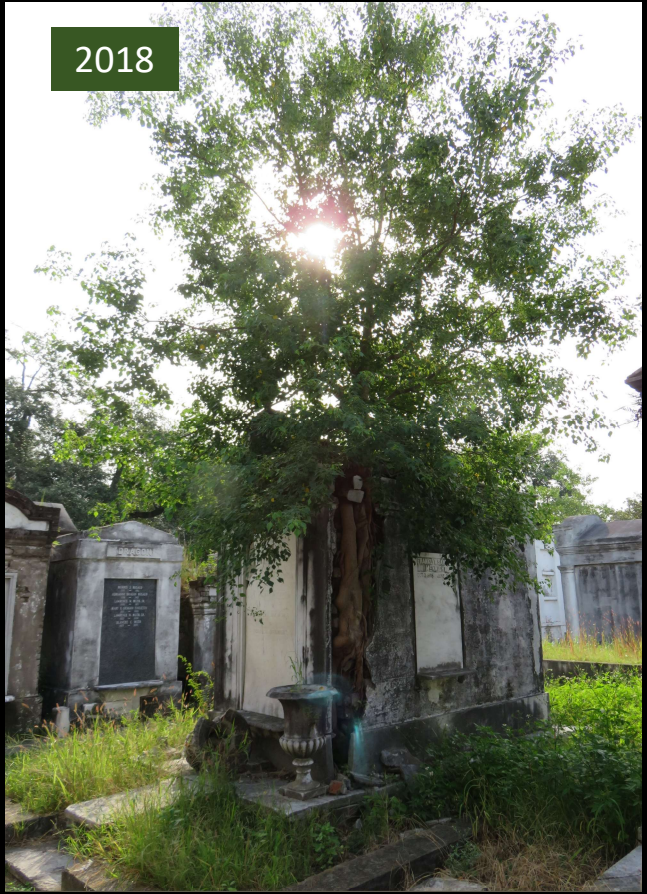
Preservation Methods: Landscaping

Removing vegetation from cemetery lots, tombs, and cemetery landscapes is critical to keeping the cemetery as an inviting, peaceful place to visit.

Catching shrubs and trees before they become too big to manage is very important.



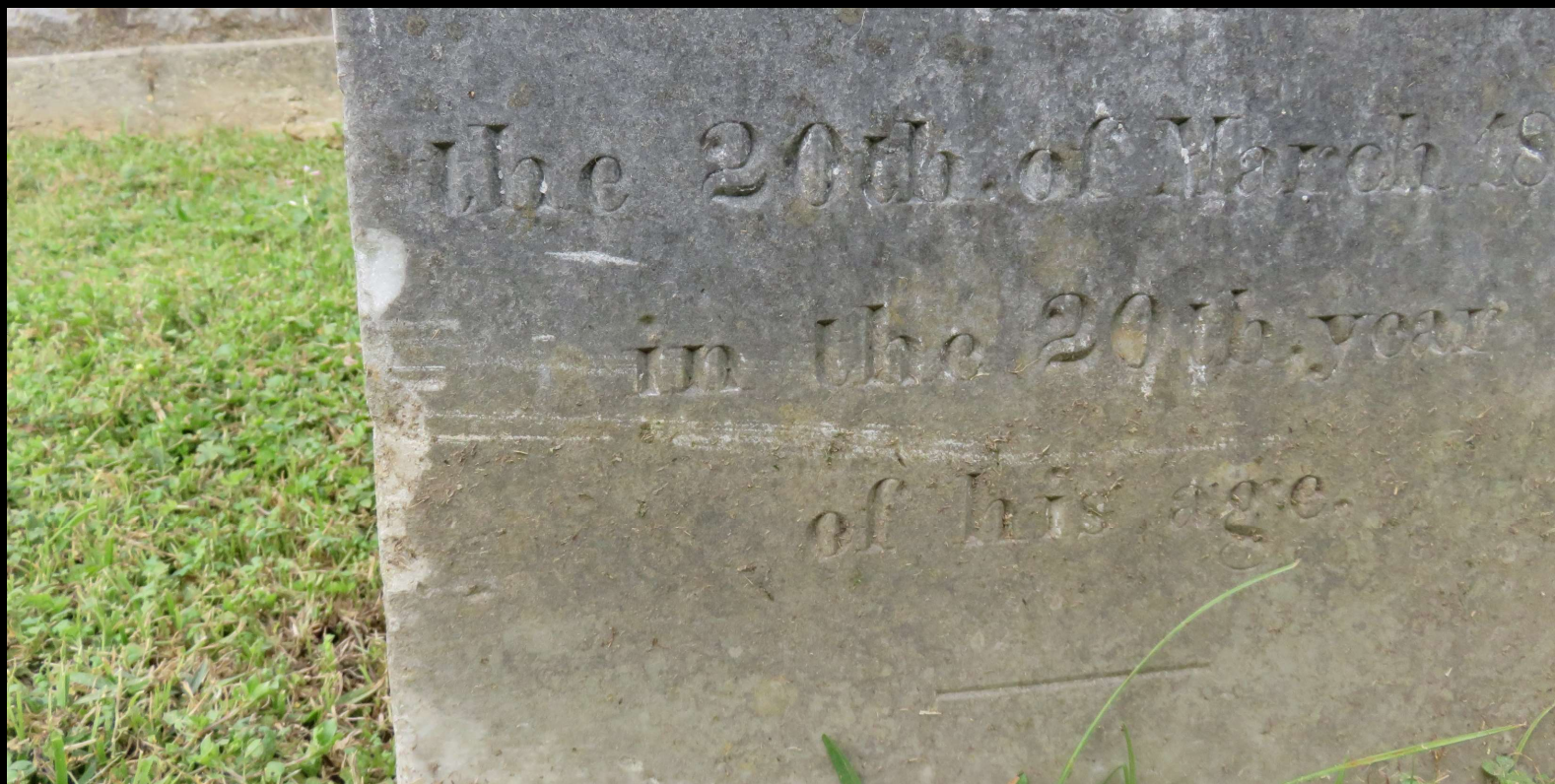
Preservation Methods: Landscaping



Preservation Methods: Landscaping

Landscape maintenance can often do more harm than good, however.

Line trimmer (weed whacker) and lawn motor impact can take a heavy toll on headstones and monuments. These tools must be used thoughtfully.



Preservation Methods: Landscaping

Herbicides are also tools that must be used responsibly.

The popular herbicide glyphosate (“Round-Up”) has been shown in studies to accelerate decay in masonry and stone structures. So use on historic stone or brick structures is not recommended.

Herbicides can also erode the root structures of lawns, causing ground erosion and, often, destabilization or sinking of monuments.



Preservation Methods: Painting or Limewashing

Modern headstone inscriptions are painted today with specialty stone paint, specifically the brand “Lithichrome.” The paint is usually applied at the time of inscription, when a vinyl stencil shields the paint from bleeding outside the lines.

Tombs built before the 1950s were painted with oil-based or lime-based paints. Usually, painting them with latex paint will eventually lead to peeling. Limewash is made with Type “S” hydrated lime mixed with water at a 1:10 ratio of lime to water. It is painted onto damp walls.

Tombs and vaults made after the 1950s are usually safe for latex painting.

Painting marble usually ends poorly and can cause moisture retention.



St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, New Orleans, LA

Preservation Methods: Resetting



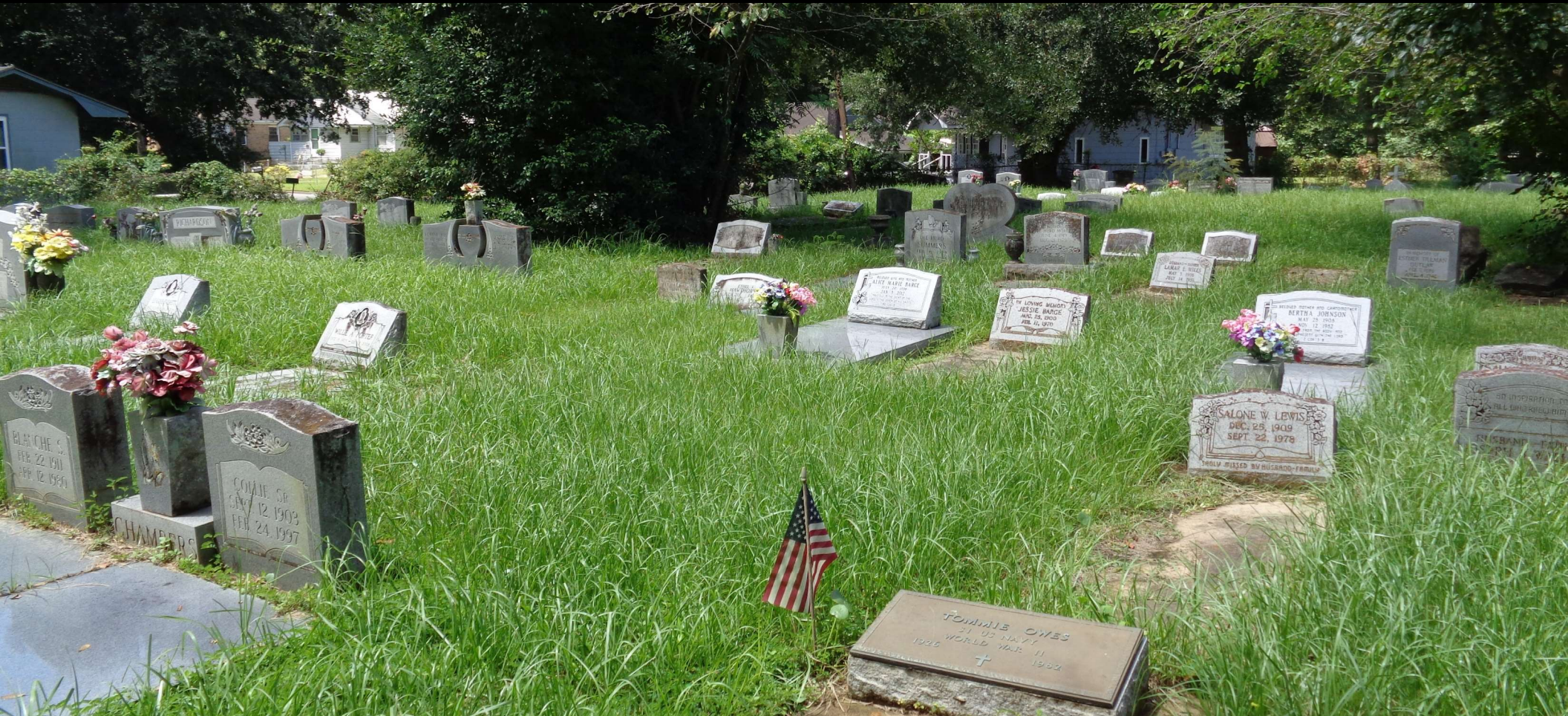
Laurel Grove Cemetery, Savannah, GA

Often headstones and monuments can begin to lean or sink over time. Modern monument setters can fix this problem by either using pry-bars or, more commonly, heavy hoists.

Headstone resetting should be approached very carefully, as someone can very easily crush a finger or a toe. Resetting shouldn't be done alone. Using levers and fulcrums, as well as leveling the ground with gravel and sand can aid in resetting a headstone.

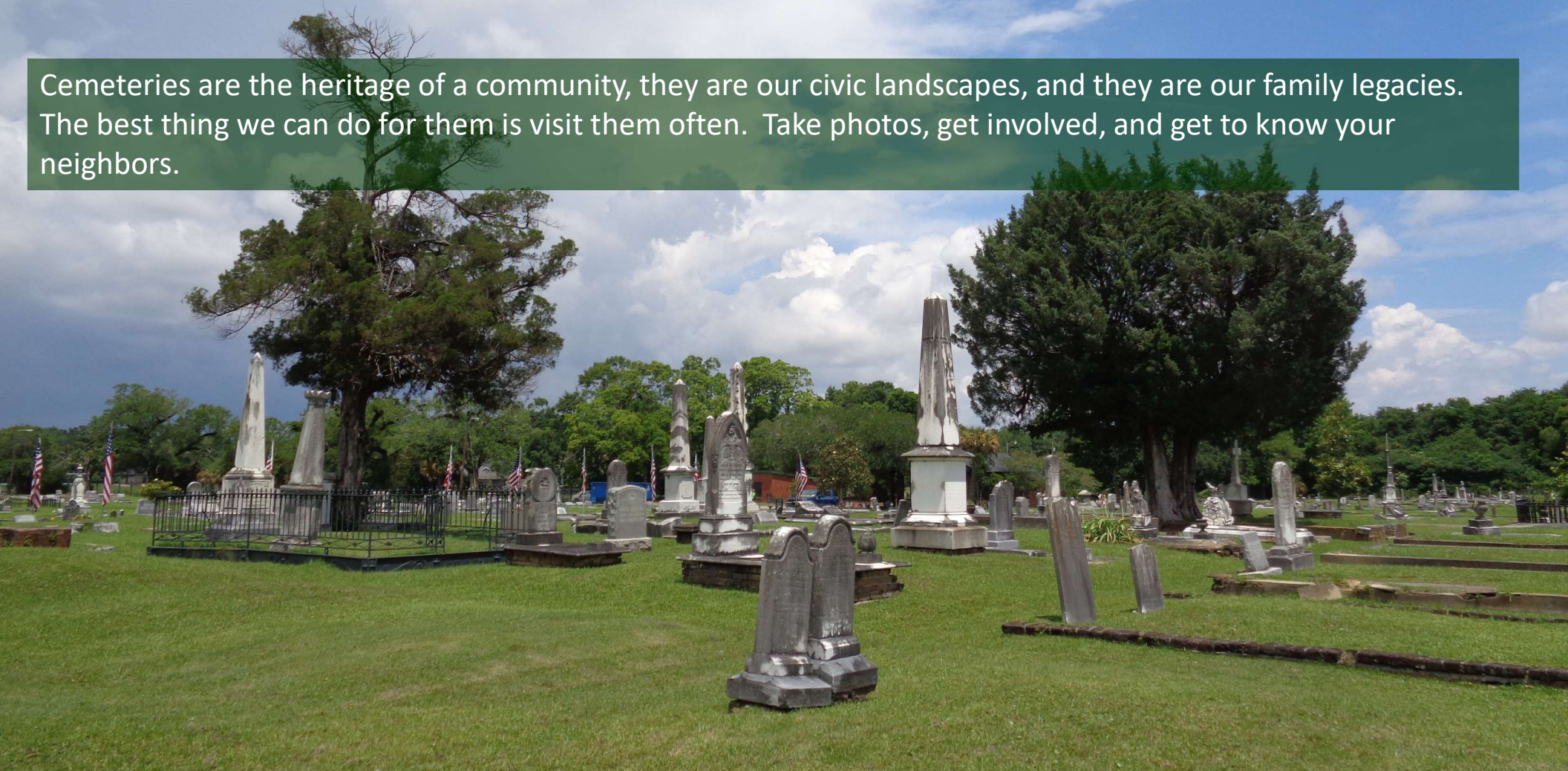
Preservation Methods: What We're Doing Today

Today in Oaklawn Cemetery, we will be learning the hands-on basics of monument cleaning and resetting.



Conclusion

Cemeteries are the heritage of a community, they are our civic landscapes, and they are our family legacies. The best thing we can do for them is visit them often. Take photos, get involved, and get to know your neighbors.





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