



MANL Note

Care of Collections

A Publication of the Museum Association of Newfoundland and Labrador

The Conservation of Cemeteries

The Importance of Cemeteries

A cemetery may be regarded essentially as a museum and archives in itself. Each gravestone is an irreplaceable and unique artifact that provides historical cultural information inherent to an individual and their community. Unlike most documented histories, graveyards recognize one commonality amongst everyone, and signify the past lives and the existence of all.



The durability of the materials used to create these monuments indicates the importance placed upon preserving the memory of loved ones; as a result a wealth of accurate and informative personal information is available for study/ the gravestone serves as a primary resource material for genealogy, demography, social history, and stone craftsmanship itself. Valuable insight can be derived from the artwork and design which reflects the philosophy and values of the times through distinctive styles and symbolism. Much can also be learned about the carvers themselves.

Some monuments provide some of the earliest art and written history in Canada today. These early stones are archaeological artifacts. Unlike most such artifacts, they are readily

available and in the same location as they were originally placed.

Graveyards may be of local, regional or national importance, and quite often, are the only existing record of these people that we have. It is therefore not just desirable but imperative that these valuable outdoor museums be preserved.

Developing A Conservation Plan For Cemeteries

The success of every project depends on the foundation of research and planning that is laid down in the preliminary stages of development. Planning can only begin after a committee has assessed the situation, determined the feasibility of the project, and researched it's options and determined the most appropriate; after it has established the 'Terms of Reference', in the current parlance. The Canadian Heritage Group Foundation suggests that any group taking on the task of cemetery conservation must begin by addressing four issues.

1. What is the nature of the care required to conserve cemeteries and gravestones?
2. How will the program of care be managed with the human and material resources available?
3. How will this be funded?
4. How will this be continued?

In answering these questions, a committee is forced to familiarized themselves with all aspects of the conservation project and seek the necessary guidance for developing an organized and practical plan. Further, the establishment of clearly set goals, the clarification of priorities, and the delegation of responsibilities, will ensure the success of the project. An evaluation of each step of the project, is essential for providing a sound planning base for the next phase of the project.

Choosing A Professional

It is recommended that the planning committee seek the advice of a qualified professional, in order to clearly define and outline the task at hand. To begin, compile a list of professionals whose work is as closely related to stone conservation as possible. Your list should include the names of consultants, conservators, contractors, and scientists.

In doing this, think of who in your immediate and larger community can help advise and direct you. The Newfoundland Museum, Museum Association, Canadian Conservation Institute and Newfoundland and Labrador Genealogical Society (addresses included) are obvious resources in the heritage community, but there are less obvious resources outside this sphere. For instance, if the local church or school or Public Works people are responsible for the upkeep of stone buildings, where did they find their resource people, who are they, and how have they worked out? Bear in mind of course that their goals may not be conservation as we know it, but perhaps the people who could help solve their problems have skills that can be harnessed to solve yours. Given that your funding is likely limited and every community won't have a bona fide stone conservator, the only realistic hands-on solution may be one that combines the skills s of a good craftsman or

tradesman with the guidance, ethics, theoretical gackground and judgement contributed by a conservator. If using non-conservators, a conservator should be involved in an advisory and/or supervisory capacity. Conservation of in situ artifacts and sites presents great challenges and often requires compromise. But there is no shame in compromise as long as it is arrived at conscientiously based on all the resources at hand, and not just because it is an easier course.

It is important to choose a candidate or team members who are highly recommended with verified references, whose work you have seen, who understands the characteristics of stone, and has had experience working with the material. The individual should also be sensitive to the ethical implications of the project, and be willing to take the time necessary for the nature of the work. Particular attention should be given to those individuals who recognize the importance of preparing a preliminary condition report concerning the graveyard and who offer to produce a final report upon completion of the project.

The success of this project will depend on the amount of time and work invested in planning and organization. It will also require a high level of dedication and a longterm commitment to ensure that it will remain ongoing..

What the Volunteer Can Do

Before making any changes to an old cemetery, the time must be taken to determine what conservation work is needed, and how it can best be accomplished. Conservation is defined as: "Any action taken to preserve or prolong the life of an artifact, without undermining it's integrity." Preventive Conservation is defined as: "All action taken to limit deterioration by controlling its causes. This excludes any restoration or conservation treatments."

It is very important that a realistic view be taken with regard to what conservation tasks should be carried out by volunteers. An attempt a full scale conservation of a graveyard site, by well-meaning, yet untrained volunteers, could lead to disaster. The first step in a progressive conservation program is to realize that LESS IS MORE!

By adopting a minimum intervention policy, the cemetery it will assure that the cemetery will be more protected. In order to ensure the preservation of the site, it must be acknowledged that a long term commitment is required to see that the project is ongoing.

Deterioration of Cemetery Sites

The deterioration on monumental gravestones is likely the result of a number of processes. The type and extent of the damage will vary with regard to the type of stone, it's structural design, and the degree of environmental and physical stress placed upon it. The types of damage to a stone may be classified into three categories:

Mechanical: Damages to the fabric of the stone caused by physical stress. Causes include freeze-thaw cycles and vandalism. Effect is breakage, wear, and/or surface spalling.

Chemical: Deals with all phenomena conducted by chemical agents, resulting in the dissolution and/or loss of the structural integrity of stone. An example of a cause is acid rain.

Biological: Involves all the damage to stone caused by the invasion of organic matter including trees roots, lichen, fungus and even microorganisms.

While the diagnosis of the problem is best made by a conservator, it is important for the concerned party to be able to identify the result and extent of damage.

Observations may include: cracking, blistering, delamination, exfoliation, erosion, staining, and damage caused by acts of vandalism, carelessness, or poor manufacture or repair.

Documentation

When dealing with the conservation of cemeteries, the importance of accurate documentation cannot be stressed enough. This is the essential, primary stage, that if carried out thoroughly and properly, will ensure the preservation of valuable information for years to come. In relation to time and money spent on other various aspects of conservation, this phase requires the least amount of funding and physical effort. It can be carried out very effectively by volunteers. Not only will the information serve as a permanent record of an individual graveyard should physical preservation efforts falter, it will also act as a monitoring device which provide a clear record of the changes in physical conditions at recorded points in time. This process will also help define the scope of your problems and help define the scope of your problems and help you to establish priorities and strategies.

The design of a standardized form will help make the documentation process fast, efficient, and consistent. The form should be cross referenced with a photograph of each stone, and a detailed location map of the site. Inventorying and reviewing early and recent related documents such as maps, church and city records, can focus your cemetery documentation on information that is not available elsewhere.

Cemetery Care & Maintenance

Proper care and maintenance is the fundamental procedure to ensure site preservation. By taking several simple preventative measures, the risks of damage to a site will be significantly lowered.

Cemeteries always attract the attention of vandals and sometimes even robbers. Usually the damage is extensive and irreversible. Action must be taken to control such attacks.

Securing the Site

A simple clean-up of a neglected site is a good start. It must be stressed however, that not a fragment be moved prior to documentation. Additional action is no doubt required to discourage trespass and protect against vandalism. The installation of a fence or a thorn hedge with locking gates, will serve to direct and control human traffic as well as prohibit entrance by vehicular traffic. Using signs to identify visitor regulations, and providing benches and trash receptacles, will encourage the public to respect the grounds. Some sort of lighting might also be considered, since the typical darkness and abundance of informal seating combined often with alcoholic encouragement, will no doubt foster acts of vandalism. Cooperation with law enforcement agencies, and the establishment of a patrol system will also discourage such cowardly and mindless acts.

Maintenance of the Monuments

Good maintenance of a site depends on proper and consistent procedure and responsible action. The maintenance personnel should be trained in the procedures for historic graveyard care, and be willing to ensure that the program is ongoing. Several preventive measures must be taken to protect the stones from damage caused by the environment and careless maintenance procedures.

1) although a neatly manicured appearance is not always the rule, special attention must be given to the potentially hazardous growth of foliage near the stones. Those trees and shrubs that present a danger to the stones, as well as those collecting snow, directing water towards the stone, and preventing drainage should be removed. Grass around the stones should be clipped by hand, or by using a nylon whip grasscutter (weedeater) to prevent chipping them. Lawnmowers should be fitted with a rubber bumper to protect against flying rocks and sticks. It is recommended that close lying clover and ground covers replace grass near stones and other hard to mow areas.

2) The use of commercial herbicides and

pesticides should be avoided, as virtually all contain harmful acids and salts that rapidly increase the rate of stone deterioration.

3) Cut grass should be removed from all object surfaces immediately by flushing with water. In addition, it is advisable to move dead leaves, bird droppings, and melting snow, from the area near the stones, as acidic organic matter and freeze-thaw cycles are extremely harmful to stone.

A good maintenance program should include regular monitoring of the site. It is imperative that any changes be accurately documented and reported. This will ensure that fragments are not lost, and any serious problem will receive immediate attention

Dawn McQuade

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2. Stranstad, Lynette. "A Graveyard Preservation Primer." American Association For State & Local History in cooperation with the Association For Gravestone Studies, Nashville, 1988.
3. Zielinski, A.K. "Conservation of Canadian Heritage Cemeteries. The Treatment, Repair & Maintenance Of Cemetery Objects In Their Environment." Heritage Network Press 1991.

RESOURCES

1. Newfoundland and Labrador Genealogical Society, Inc. Colonial Building, Military Rd. St. John's, NF A1C 2C9 (709) 754-9525
2. Canadian Heritage
Canadian Conservation Institute
1030 Innes Road
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0C8 (613) 998-3721
3. Newfoundland Museum
Department of Tourism and Culture
Historic Resources Division PO Box 8700
St. John's, NF A1B 4G6 (709) 729-2329

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(709) 729-4719

