

# Finding Clues to Ancestors from Headstones, Family Plots and Burial Records

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(excerpts from American Ancestors webinar)

Things you can find on gravestone: Birth, death, relationships, military service, religion, etc.

## 1. How to Find the Burial Place:

Use burial records, vital records, online cemetery registries, obituaries, funeral home records, collective memory and family stories, published genealogies, probate records.

- **Family Stories/memory:** Sometimes remember going to a cemetery.
- Funerals were often done at home. Starting in about 19<sup>th</sup> century there are **funeral home** records. (Furniture makers often became funeral homes). Embalming didn't happen until time of the Civil War.
- **Published genealogies:** sometimes include burial site.
- **Probate records and wills** sometimes note in the estate where there is a burial plot or payment for funeral home or headstone.
- **Church burials-** church often keeps records. They often had more information in 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century than the town vital records. Some churches have **multiple burial** sites.

### *Tips:*

- *Check where family last resided and find nearby cemeteries.*
- *Double check records – sometimes there are transcription errors (and note that because headstone has a birth and death date that doesn't means they were actually born or died in that town).*
- *Place of death isn't always place of burial*
- *Some tombs have multiple, unrelated people buried there. Families members may be in multiple cemeteries*

## 2. Vital Records may have abbreviations:

Some can be confusing (see #1) – Gravestone record (GR) or Grave Stone record (GR)

Abbreviations on records and gravestones #1, #2

### **3. Finding the Grave:**

- **Proprietor Lists** – lot owners #3
  
- **Lot/Plot Cards #4**  
Different plots may contain different # of people – depends on the size  
Sometimes may be buried **double deep** – one on top of the other
  
- **Cemetery Maps**
  - #5- **hand drawn** map – probably doesn't have an office
  - #6- larger **suburban cemetery** – **often have an office**. Call in advance to visit.
  
- **Poor farm cemeteries** often not marked – try calling **public library** and asking about who knows about cemeteries in the town.
  - Sometimes a pauper section is set aside in back of regular cemetery – graves are often unmarked, or maybe originally had a wooden marker (or fieldstone whitewashed with initials)
  - May find information in Pauper Records or Almshouse Cemetery Records
  
- Some smaller cemeteries are actually **family plots or community plots** – can be 20-30 cemeteries in a small town. Always check with landowner before visiting.

### **4. Gravestone Transcriptions** – #7 (alphabetically), #8 (in order of date of burial), #9 (handwritten by location)

- Organized by when people were buried, alphabetical and sometimes by location in the cemetery
- Check other and multiple sources because there can be errors in transcriptions. Sometimes people add their own notations in the transcriptions or aren't actually "what is written on the grave". Go out and see the grave – take photos (if allowed).

*Tip: Sometimes there is a transcription on the back of the stone (husband on front, wife on back)*

### **5. Town and County Local Histories #10**

Sometimes have burial transcriptions/epitaphs

### **6. Verbatim Transcriptions #11**

Hand written, don't know when it was done.

**7. Online Cemetery Registries** – these are run by volunteers, local genealogists. May not include everything. If it's not there (or no photo of gravestone) it doesn't mean there is no gravestone.

- a. **Find-a-Grave** (free – run by Ancestry.com)  
Can create “virtual cemeteries” of things you grouped together or easily accessible
- b. **Billion Graves** (also free)

## **8. Published gravestones/cemeteries #12**

Contain a lot of information

## **9. Before your visit**

- **Location** of the cemetery in the **21<sup>st</sup> cemetery** – look for current maps and compare with old town maps
- **Cemetery office** – always check with them first – for records/hours/rules
  - Also, ask if they can put a **flag** on the approximate location of grave (saves a lot of time finding the grave)
- Check with **Parks and Rec** in community for location of cemeteries

### **Notes:**

- *Dates on record can be the date of burial or the date of death*
- *If a person is in their 33<sup>rd</sup> year – means they are 32 approaching 33*
- *Not everyone has a gravestone*

## **10. Visiting Cemetery - etiquette:**

- If there is an **office** – **call first**. Hours, rules.
- Don't have cemetery office try to look up lots of people. Start with **one**.
- Some cemeteries **may prohibit visitation** – especially if there is an active funeral. If you are allowed to visit when funeral is ongoing – respect their privacy
- **Is photography allowed? Are pets allowed?** Watch children.
- Ask cemetery what you may **place on grave** (flowers, flag, etc).
- **Drive only on roads** or paths that are obviously for cars.
- **Walk around and between** graves/headstones when possible
- **Don't touch headstones** – some people view as disrespectful – may cause damage.
- **Private cemeteries** – **get permission to go onto the land**
- **Grave rubbings** – can cause too much **pressure on stone** – may loosen it – but may also remove the face of grave (**sugaring**) especially on sandstone. It is not suggested any more. Check with cemetery.

## **Four Personal Examples**

## **Cemeteries and Records in Juneau**