PRESERVING HISTORIC CEMETERIES: SECURE

Securing a cemetery is a proactive process. Too often cemetery caretakers are forced into reactionary situations after vandalism, theft or natural disaster. While the steps below can't guarantee against devastating events, they can establish a safety net for historic cemeteries. Make a few improvements and communicate with community members to help raise awareness and secure the cemetery.

Fencing

Adequate fencing for the site is one of the most important safety measures for a cemetery and careful consideration must be made regarding the placement or replacement of fencing.

If the cemetery is not fenced and the location of unmarked burials is unclear call the THC's Cemetery Preservation Program at 512.463.5853 for advice. Before erecting a fence, it's important to know what has been deeded for use as cemetery *and* where all the burials are located. All burials should be inside the cemetery fence, regardless of what's been formally deeded. It is also important to fence the entire cemetery, even if it is more economical to only partially fence it. This helps mark the boundaries and prevent later confusion with surrounding landowners about what is and what is not cemetery property.

If the cemetery is already fenced, determine if there are any unmarked burials outside of the boundary and take the necessary steps to document them and include them within the cemetery's fenced perimeter. If the existing fence is historic, efforts should be made to repair and keep the fence, rather than remove it and replace with a new one. Historic fencing helps tell the story of the site, as well as secure it.

Appropriate fencing for a cemetery varies by the location and surrounding land use. A cemetery in a rural area with livestock considerations will need a stronger fence, such as post and wire or pipe. Standard chain link or decorative iron fencing might be adequate for a historic cemetery in a suburban or urban area. Entry gates should be secured, yet allow for pedestrian visitation during appropriate hours. Lock the gate at night, if possible.

Law enforcement

Surveillance by local law enforcement makes a statement to would-be vandals. When officers drive by the cemetery on their routes, it is clear that the site is being monitored for activity, and by the people with the authority to give fines and make arrests. If inappropriate activity is observed in a historic cemetery within the city limits, contact your municipal police department. If inappropriate activity is observed in a historic cemetery outside the city limits, contact the sheriff's office. A partnership between law enforcement officials and citizens can have a long-term positive impact. But the responsibilities are not one-sided; caretakers should monitor the cemetery and report any vandalism or theft immediately

Community awareness

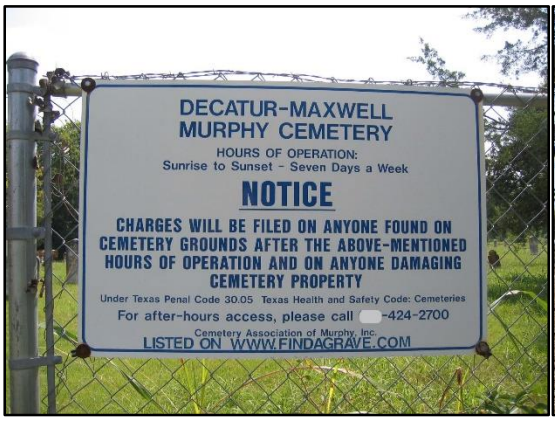
The community's awareness of a cemetery plays a key role in keeping the site safe. Frequent pedestrian traffic and continued use of the site for educational events sends the message that this site is important and illegal activity will not be tolerated.

Start a cemetery watch group comprised of surrounding homeowners and neighborhood groups. Invite law enforcement representatives to community meetings and include everyone in the process. The cemetery watch group should be on the lookout for suspicious activity on a regular basis. Provide everyone with local emergency contact numbers if they become aware of unwanted activity.

Signage

Signage at the cemetery is essential for raising the community's awareness of local preservation and protection efforts, as well as for and promoting the significance of a historic cemetery. A simple sign should include at least the name of the cemetery and a phone number for requesting additional information or for reporting suspicious activity. Posting visitation hours gives warning to vandals that inappropriate nighttime activity will not be tolerated and gives law enforcement officials an opportunity to enforce cemetery policies.

Signs should be easy to read with a clear message, but do not have to be fancy. A neat hand painted sign can contain the needed information and help raise awareness of cemetery preservation efforts, as well as alert vandals to the fact that the cemetery is looked after. Make sure to regularly maintain any signage; faded or damaged signs give the signal that caretakers do not visit regularly.



Lighting

In some situations, appropriate lighting can discourage illegal activities. Sensitive lighting can work in urban environments but is not typically a solution for rural historic cemeteries. Additionally, most cemeteries were not lit historically, and the introduction of lighting can diminish the site's historic integrity.

Plan ahead

A theft recovery plan allows cemetery caretakers to act quickly and reclaim historic cemetery features. Share emergency contact information with everyone involved and thoroughly document any cemetery feature that might be desirable to vandals or thieves. Photograph or inconspicuously mark pieces so they can be identified if recovered. You cannot protect what you do not know is there. That's why an individual gravemarker survey is so important for historic cemeteries. Special attention should be paid to any ornate or unusual markers, those that are located in more remote areas of the cemetery, and any and all iron fencing.

For more information about preserving historic cemeteries, contact the THC's Cemetery Preservation Program staff at 512.463.5853 or visit www.thc.texas.gov/cemetery.

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