

# Tips for Finding and Visiting Your Ancestors in the Cemetery

## What You Can Find

Information on tombstones can include maiden names, birth and death dates, relationships, towns of origin, military service, and religious affiliation—all of which can lead breakthroughs in your research. Be sure to check with the cemetery office to see if other family members are in the plot who are not listed on the tombstone, or are perhaps in a grave nearby. The cemetery office often has additional details not found on the tombstone.



*Tombstone of a Civil War soldier and GAR member at Oak Hill Cemetery, Hammond, Indiana*

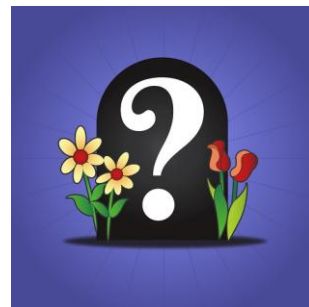
You may discover siblings who died in infancy or at a very young age and who are buried with your ancestors. These siblings may have previously been unknown to you and their death records could provide valuable information not included in the record of your direct ancestor.

## Locating the Cemetery

**Death certificates** frequently contain the name of the cemetery, as will obituaries. Mass cards or prayer cards handed down or kept in family scrapbooks are another good resource for those fortunate enough to have them.

**Online collections** that contain death-related records are another good resource. You can search for cemetery and other death-related records on Ancestry.com through the category page for [Death, Burial, Cemetery, & Obituaries](#).

[Find A Grave](#) is a fantastic resource for locating your ancestor's final resting place, with more than 115 million memorials currently online. Even if your ancestor's memorial isn't currently available, you may be able to find the cemetery via the [Cemetery Search](#). Download the [free app for iOS](#) and you can search for graves and cemeteries from your iPhone, iPod, or iPad. You can even create memorials while you're visiting your ancestor's gravesite. You can learn more about Find A Grave on the [Ancestry.com blog](#) and via the [Find A Grave Facebook page](#).





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**Check resources on the local level.** Many genealogical societies have compiled cemetery indexes and some have been posted online, so check local libraries and organizations to see what's been done. The Cemeteries and Funeral Homes page on [Cyndi's List](#) is another good place to check for online cemetery records. Or do a search, using your favorite search engine, for [the city, town, or county of interest] and "cemetery."

**Look for cemeteries in the vicinity.** If you're not lucky enough to have the name of the cemetery on a death certificate or through some other record you have collected, map out the cemeteries that are near where the individual lived. Again, check with the local genealogical society in the area. They typically know a lot about the cemeteries in the area and may have compiled a list. Local libraries may also have this type of information.

An internet search for the city, town, or township and the term cemeteries will also bring up a list of cemeteries in the area, although older cemeteries may require a little more digging. Mapping tools like Google Maps, allow you to "search nearby." Use that function to search for *cemetery* and you should turn up some of the cemeteries in the area. Once you know the names of cemeteries, check for an online presence and look to see if the cemetery's website tells what year it was established.

Although not all-inclusive, the U.S. Geological Survey's Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) can be useful. By entering the county name and state and selecting "cemetery" from the "Feature Class" drop-down menu, you can see a list of cemeteries for a particular county. From the list of results, you can click on each cemetery name for more information and to map the location. GPS coordinates are available through the GNIS, which can be very helpful with smaller rural cemeteries.

If you know your ancestor's religious affiliation, check ecclesiastical websites. For example, the Archdiocese of Chicago has a website with the locations [Chicago Catholic cemeteries](#). The site also has a section listing Genealogical Sources with additional information.

Once you have a list of potential cemeteries, you can reach out by phone, mail, or ideally in person.



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## Planning a Trip to the Cemetery

### Go Prepared

When it comes to cemetery visits, the Boy Scout motto “Be prepared” really comes in handy. While you might feel like you’re packing for a trip to the top of Mt. Everest, the supplies you bring may well determine the success of your trip. Here are some items to consider: A spray bottle with water. Wetting tombstones can make them more readable.

- **A mirror.** Use the mirror to reflect sunshine and throw shadows off inscriptions. Foil-covered flat surfaces are less breakable and can also help when mirrors aren’t available.
- **Camera.** Digital cameras are great for capturing photos of tombstones because you can see in real time whether you’ve captured the image you want. Take high-resolution photographs because you’ll be able to enhance them with your photo editing software. Be sure to also bring plenty of memory and extra batteries.
- **Grass clippers.** You’ll need these to trim away grass that has grown over the gravestone.
- **Soft brush.** Paint brushes work well to brush loose dirt off without harming fragile stones.
- **Foam gardening kneeling pad.** You may want to kneel or even lay down while taking eye-level shots of smaller stones.
- **Rubbing supplies.** You may also want to bring wax, paper, and masking tape if you plan on doing any tombstone rubbings. However, be sure to check with the cemetery office first. Some cemeteries prohibit rubbings because they can harm fragile stones.



Remember to use non-invasive methods when it comes to reading tombstones. Shaving cream and chemical solvents are a no-no because they can harm the stone. The Association of Gravestone Studies has an [FAQ page](#) with more information.

### Be Safe

While we might think of cemeteries as a peaceful refuge, they can also be dangerous, so grab a friend or gather a group from a local society—the more the merrier. Criminals sometimes target cars in cemetery parking lots, so don’t leave purses and other valuables in the car and never wander a seemingly empty cemetery alone.

In addition, cemeteries are home to biting insects, snakes, ticks, and other not-so-nice residents, so dress appropriately with sensible shoes and long pants, and bring a first aid kit to take care of minor injuries. Fully charged cellphones are also a must.