

Historic Cemetery Recording Exercise Guide for Instructors

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These exercises are appropriate for grade school through high school students. Tips and suggestions for more advanced groups are included at the end of the worksheet guide.

Purpose:

This exercise is designed to introduce students to historic cemeteries – what they are, what we can learn from them, and how they are valuable resources of local history. It is also a way to show students that archaeologists can study historic as well as prehistoric material, and that we don't always have to dig in order to do archaeological research. It is also an opportunity for students to apply their skills and information from different subject areas, including mathematics, English, art, and history. The exercise has a very "open" format, and should be tailored to each group. Older students, for example, may be able to collect data and conduct basic statistical analysis of the gravestones or cemetery population (example ideas are given below), while younger students may be limited to the more basic questions or to drawing gravestones and symbols.

Location:

This exercise can be conducted at any local cemetery. A medium-sized cemetery (500 - 1000 graves), with both old and new interments may work best. Be sure to contact the cemetery board, church, or other organization with jurisdiction over the cemetery for permission. Many cemeteries have strict rules, and note that most don't allow rubbings, as even this can be damaging to older monuments.

Time:

The basic exercise (answering most of the questions) seems to take 4th to 5th grade students about one hour, but this will probably be highly variable. There are several "extras" below that could easily extend the session also. Be sure to allow time at the end of the session to go over the answers and take questions from students.

Structure:

The structure of the session is very flexible, but this format seems to work fairly well:

- 1) Have all students sit during the introduction (helps keep them under control). There are foxes, deer, and other wildlife that you may see in the cemeteries. It may help to tell the students this, and that you are more likely to see the wildlife if you approach the cemeteries quietly (again, helps keep them under control).

2) Brief introduction to the exercise:

- Very short explanation of the town and the cemetery.
- Students may work together or in small groups, but each student should fill out a form.
- Cemetery safety and etiquette: Don't go into the woods or other areas of the cemetery (lots of poison ivy and ticks there). Don't stand or sit on the monuments, don't scratch at them or try to clean them.
- Stress that it's okay if they run out of time and can't address all of the questions, they can begin with the questions that look the most interesting if they like.
- Particularly for the younger students, you may have them use the first page of the worksheet (showing gravestone styles) as a "check-off" form – can they find at least one example of each?
- Don't give them the sheets to fill out until the end of the introduction, or they will spend their time looking at the questions.

3) Hand out the worksheets and begin the exercise. Walk around and help students. If one or more students finishes early, see "extras" below for ideas to keep them busy.

4) Wrap-up: have all students sit down again, go over the worksheets and take questions. In the sessions I have led so far, students have had lots of questions about cemeteries in general. The wrap-up is best to do in the cemetery if possible, to have the Q&A in a cemetery context. You will be able to point to gravestones for examples, and visit a few with the whole group if you like. Be aware that once the students stand up and start moving again, through, it may be difficult to keep their attention! The Q&A session is a great time to introduce ideas about both historic and prehistoric cemeteries and burials, and other archaeological/anthropological ideas. Death is a rich and fascinating topic!

The worksheet questions:

Here are a few ideas/talking points when going through the questions during the wrap-up session:

Questions 1 through 5 are basic "exploration" questions to get the students looking at the gravestones, and may lead to quite a few general questions about gravestones, cemeteries, and even death in general. Don't feel that you have to stick directly to the worksheet questions for the discussion – if the students are interested and asking questions, keep the ball rolling!

Question 6 (any years when an unusually high number of people seem to have died?): there were several waves of influenza and other epidemics that killed large numbers of people in the U.S. and throughout the world in the 1800s and early 1900s. Sometimes these are apparent at cemeteries through the number of deaths each year, especially the deaths of children and the elderly.

Question 7: You can sometimes learn about family relationships, social status or wealth (large gravestones are very expensive), what their hobbies or interests were, etc.

Question 8: The gravestones of children are often smaller than those of adults, although there are of course exceptions. Lamb motifs are common on the gravestones of children. The gravestones of children usually don't have as much information on them as the gravestones of adults. Often very young children receive gravestones which simply state "infant", "infant son", or "infant daughter".

Questions 9 through 12 are great points of departure to get students to think about cemeteries and related topics. Most historic cemeteries, even small ones, have lots of symbols on the gravestones, including symbols/emblems from the Masons, Shriners, and other fraternal organizations, religious symbols, purely decorative elements, etc. If the students are wearing clothing with symbols (the Nike swosh, sports emblems, etc.), point these out and ask how they may be interpreted 200 years from now by someone who doesn't know what they mean.

Question 13: Historical research, census records, talking to relatives, etc.

Extras:

The following could be incorporated for more advanced students, or could be given to students who finish early.

-- A reflector may be used to sweep sunlight across weathered writing to read it more easily (this will sometimes work even if it is cloudy). A very bright flashlight will work too, but usually not as well. This is a nice technique to show students (and the instructors/chaperones!), as an alternative to gravestone rubbings, which is destructive to weathered marble and other old stoness. The pop-up style of reflectors that are used to keeping sunlight out of cars work as well for this as professional photographic reflectors, which are much more expensive.

-- Older, weathered stones. There are several older gravestones that are highly weathered and very difficult to read. Several have elaborate epitaphs. Pick one that is weathered but still readable or partly readable, and have students write out all of the text they can decipher. You may need to bring a reflector to sweep sunlight across the surface to read the writing.

-- Genealogies. Students can pick one family and draw a family tree using information from the gravestones.

-- Missing stones. Most older cemeteries have "empty" areas with no gravestones, but which still contain burials (the stones often are damaged, moved, or fall over and get buried by natural soil processes). Have students determine the average distance between burials in the cemetery by pacing, then estimate the number of burials in the "empty" areas.

Advanced:

Here are a few ideas for more advanced groups. These could be done in conjunction with the regular worksheet, or separately. The data may be collected in the cemetery and brought back to the classroom or elsewhere for analysis. In this case, you may want to have a slightly longer introduction to the cemetery, with an explanation of the analyses they are going to perform, examples showing how the graphs will look in final form, etc. The seriations, in particular, are difficult to imagine if you haven't seen them before. Depending on the size of the cemetery, the data collected, and how the session is organized, this could take from one hour to a whole day in the cemetery, and as long in the classroom.

You can see examples of these kinds of analyses here.

-- Demographics and a "Death Curve". Have students collect death dates and ages for individuals from gravestones, and plot the information as a histogram. The X (horizontal) axis should be age of death (5- to 10- year increments usually work well), and the Y axis should be number of individuals. A typical death curve is U-shaped, because most deaths occur when people are very old or very young. Often the lower ages are underrepresented in populations drawn from gravestones, because infants don't get marker stones, or the age of death information is not supplied. The students could also make a simple year of death histogram, to show the use of the cemetery through time.

-- Age differences. Have students plot the heights of individual gravestones, noting the age of each individual. In many cemeteries, the gravestones of children are smaller, on average, than the gravestones of adults.

-- Time differences. Have students plot the heights of individual gravestones, noting the death date of each individual. At many cemeteries, older gravestones are larger, on average, than newer ones.

-- Seriations. Have students pick one attribute (gravestone type, material, etc.), and note the number of occurrences per 5-year increment (using the death date as the construction date for the gravestone – not always the case, but you can talk about this too), and construct a seriation. The students can also use motifs or other features of gravestones (e.g. have one student or group construct seriations of floral and faunal motifs, another student or group construct a seriation of religious motifs, etc.).

-- Gender differences. Have students note and plot differences between the gravestones of men and women – size, style of gravestone, etc.

-- Kinship terminology. Have students note death dates and occurrences of kinship terms: son, daughter, husband, wife, father, mother. Plot the occurrences – which are more common? The main pattern, in most cases, is that there are about equal occurrences (give or take) of son and daughter, and equal occurrences (give or take)

of father and mother, but very few occurrences of husband in comparison to wife. Plot these through time – is "wife" or "wife of" more common in certain decades?