

## Clean and Photograph Your Ancestor's Gravestones

Maintaining your ancestors' gravestones helps your family legacy to endure for future generations. Gravestones made from different materials have a host of environmental factors taking a toll on their survival, not to mention vandalism. Here we will discuss how best to clean them so others may enjoy these testimonials to their lives. Documenting an entire cemetery makes sure we leave behind the story of our town and the lives that came before us. The next step is to help build a resource for genealogists and historians to find all these gravestones we have preserved so they can be used by all for free from anywhere in the world. This is what we offer to the next generation.

### Cleaning a gravestone:

Most people focus on cleaning their ancestors' gravestones. Should you elect to clean other people's gravestones, too, it is best to obtain permission from the cemetery authorities for non-related people. D/2 Biological Solution Cleaner is the preferred product to clean gravestones because it will not damage the stone or its surroundings and is the only solution approved by the Federal government for use in all national cemeteries. Do not use bleach or other harsh chemicals ever! This is bad for all types of stones, especially white marble, and is not eco-friendly to the plants/grass. D/2 will continue to work with each additional rainfall.

To do the job, make sure you have the following items so you are prepared for anything you may encounter: plenty of water to keep the gravestone wet and for cleaning up afterwards (a spray bottle or small hand pump pressure sprayer); D/2 (best put in a sprayer bottle); a soft bristle brush (big one for the stone and toothbrush for the details – never anything harder than the stone like metal); and soft scrapper like a popsicle stick or paint stirrer). It is best to do this on a cool day because a hot stone will dry the solution and water too quickly. Start by brushing off and/or scrapping off all loose debris. Wet down the area you will clean and keep it wet throughout the cleaning process with a spray water bottle. Spray the D/2 solution onto the areas to clean. Let that set for 10 minutes or so. Make sure the stone is wet and then start to use your brush to clean and your scrapper to get the tough biologic off the stone. Use your popsicle stick (nothing hard like a screw driver) and toothbrush to get into the detail. This is not a race, so take your time to do it right and completely. You might need to rinse the stone and/or your brush during the process. When you have finished the cleaning, lightly rinse the entire gravestone. Do not drown the stone as the residual D/2 will stay active for a couple rainstorms.

### Photographing the stone:

Not all photographs are not equal. A picture of an illegible gravestone only has the value of showing a stone exists. It is a matter of the angle of the light. When the sun and at the correct angle, the lettering stands out clearly. However, if is cloudy, the gravestone is in the shade, or the sun is not at a good angle to the gravestone, things tend to blend together and the inscription is hard to read. You will have to provide a light source in these cases. In a covered cemetery when the sun is out, having a second person is essential. If you have a long mirror such as those on the back of a closet or bathroom door, use that to send sunlight across the gravestone at a 15° angle to the surface of the gravestone. This is by far the best way to make the most readable image. If overcast or undercover, you a strong LED bar light (like the one used for engine repair under a hood) or LED flood light of 1200 lumens or higher

(either should be rechargeable and hand-held costing less than \$100). Place the light source at a 15° angle to the surface of the gravestone and then take your photograph straight on.

“FindAGrave” website: [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com)

This is a free website for anyone to view its contents. To suggest edits or to upload photographs, you need to create a free account and then log in.

Before you even go to the cemetery, search FindAGrave to see if your subject has been included and has a good photograph already. You can search from the main page by name and year of death. If you do not find them but know the cemetery name, search for the cemetery and click on the list of entries which appear alphabetically to ensure there was not just a typo in the name. You can filter this list in many ways, including those with or without gravestone images. If your subject is not listed, go to the main page for the cemetery. You will find a link to add a new entry.

**Do It now.**

The ravages of time and environment are relentless and wait for no one. In this cemetery when I was young, there were two cement gravestones at the bottom entrance dated in the 1910s as I recall. These stones cracked and the weather eventually reduced these into two piles of debris. Look around you and see the signs of vandalism or neglect. How long before these gravestones are lost to our memory? This is a perfect volunteer project for Society members is to make sure all of Springfield’s gravestones are documented on FindAGrave for all to see.

*Example of better lighting versus none*

