Headstones Needing a Facelift?

By: Kaitlin Hall, OTA Director of Public Relations

There are 3,550 active cemeteries in the State of Ohio, approximately 2,450 of which are township owned. This staggering number equates to a growing trend in local governments taking on headstone restoration projects.

Chapter 517 of the Ohio Revised Code outlines the responsibilities of townships with respect to cemeteries. A board of township trustees is charged with the care and maintenance of cemeteries under its control. Care and maintenance includes making of rules and regulations concerning the cemetery, setting cemetery hours, cutting the grass, killing weeds, maintaining the fences, and righting fallen tombstones or headstones. For such expenses, the board may levy a tax not to exceed one-half mill in any one year, upon all taxable real property in the township.

The big question - how to go about resetting and restoring? Windsor Township (Morgan County) recently restored more than 100 headstones within their 12 township-owned cemeteries. Steve Hanson, trustee, said the township advertised for bids for stone repair twice with no response before taking matters into their own hands. Hanson contacted the Morgan County Historical and Genealogical Societies for suggestions. He finally learned of a class being offered by the Ohio Genealogical Society, for which his local chapter paid for in return for a report on what he had learned. This was all the motivation Hanson needed. He and his wife began by practicing on their ancestor's stones, and were later joined by fellow trustee Mark Murphy.

This three-step process made the cemetery fresh and new again.

1. Produce cleaning solution that is one part ammonia to four parts water.
2. Use a soft nylon bristle brush to scrub headstone (a rotary nylon brush on a drill or plastic scraper can be used prior to the scrub for heavily soiled areas).
3. After scrubbing, rinse with clean water.

The bigger struggle was repairing those stones that were broken. To reset the stones, the trustees used a mixture of pea gravel and sand to level them. To mend broken stones, they used a Tenax apoxy, then a mix of lime and mortar to fill any voids. The Tenax was about $40 and repaired approximately 30 stones. At slightly more than $1 per headstone, that is a good return on investment! Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration, Inc. said their updates to grave markers, which utilize similar products as Windsor Township's project, last 75-100 years.

Canaan Township (Madison County) Trustee Monroe Harbage worked with Stonehugger several years ago. He recommended doing your research before hiring a company to restore headstones. "Some companies use inferior

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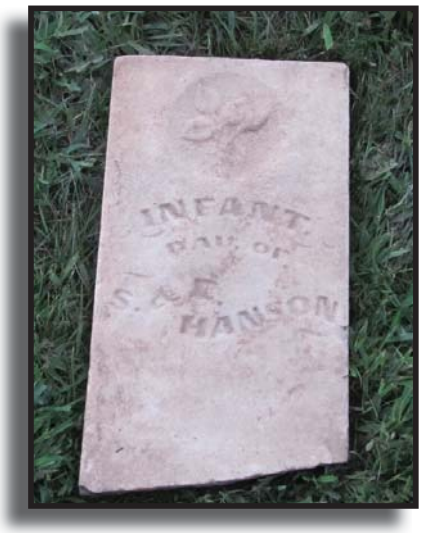
The oldest known stone in Windsor Township is that of Polly Sampson, who died in 1805. The stone is currently on display at the Morgan County Historical Society, where it details that the stone was rescued from the brush, mud and weeds along a township road and is from scattered remains of the Nott Cemetery which was destroyed years ago when the township put a road through it. There is also a single mass grave related to an Indian massacre from 1792.

products, which cause the old sandstone slabs to deteriorate further."

"The area in which the stone is located dictates how often the stones need repaired more than the age," said Hanson. "The lichen or mold growth depends on moisture and sunlight. Newer stones are harder and more resistant to growth."



Perry Brock, Fayette Township (Lawrence County) trustee and owner of Brock Burial Vault Co., said technology has come a long way since most township cemeteries were established. Headstones today are typically made of granite or marble as opposed to sandstone, which is a softer material.

Plot maps also become an issue when grave markers deteriorate. Windsor Township probed the ground near where the stones were to ensure they were being reset in the correct location. There are companies who specialize in cemetery mapping as well. Burrowes Consulting & Cemetery Mapping uses CAD drawings to lay out plats, match deeds with who is buried where, and provide software for the township to keep files up to date.

Jan Burrowes, owner of Burrowes Consulting & Cemetery Mapping, recognizes that deteriorating headstones, at a time when townships are being hit hard with budget cuts, is a growing problem. "I suggest using volunteers from your local Historical Society to help with restoration projects. They have a vested interest because their relatives are often buried in these cemeteries, and it's free to townships."

If you have further questions about what is permitted with respect to restoring gravestones, visit the Ohio Cemetery Dispute Resolution Commission's website at www.com.ohio.gov/real/cemain.aspx, where Minimum Maintenance Guidelines are published, or reference Chapter 517 of the Ohio Revised Code (www.codes.ohio.gov). The Commission also assists in resolving cemetery complaints through the use of informal techniques of mediation, conciliation and persuasion. Political subdivisions are required to register their cemeteries through the division as well. It's a *free*, one-time registration.

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