

GRAVESTONES: CLEANING AND READING

It seems like a good idea - that stone is so hard to read, I'll just clean it up a little bit or make a rubbing of it - what harm is in that? Well, more than you may think if you don't know what you're doing. Older stones can be more fragile than they look and if you aren't careful, you can cause irreparable damage.

GRAVESTONE RUBBINGS

Be very careful of gravestones made of sandstone. These are often the oldest stones, and although there are relatively few of these in Fountain County, you may find them elsewhere (especially on the east coast). The outside of this type of stone will harden from environmental exposure, but inside they can deteriorate - making a seemingly stable face implode from the pressure of hard cleaning or rubbing.

PATINA

Patina is the film that develops on the stone from the natural weathering process (wet and dry cycles). Be careful not to remove it - loss of patina will actually accelerate decay.

NO WIRE BRUSHES!

This is from the [Connecticut Gravestone Network](#):
"Enough with the wire brushes! Do you clean your teeth with a wire brush? Bleach? No! Stones are composed of minerals and salts. Adding chemicals to them can often cause chemical reactions that will erode the stone faster than if you just left it alone. This damage is not immediately evident, as in the case with bleach being used on marble. The stone is exposed on all sides to the elements. Using bleach will not only give you instant brightness but will cause the stone to change in pallor and most often become rough to the touch. This is because the sodium chloride in the bleach has dissolved the binding minerals and caused the quartz crystals to start to exfoliate. When this process is used on particularly soft marble and limestone, the lettering is the first to disappear. Something that is over 100 years old shouldn't look bright and new...!"

Another concern is that bleach and other chemicals may contain phosphates that are nutrients for and will encourage bacterial growth. Household soaps and detergents can stain and remove patina as well.

WHAT CAN I DO?

Plain water and a soft brush or plastic scraping tool can do a lot (of course, DO NOT scrub a stone that leaves crumbs on your fingers when you rub it - it's obviously not strong enough to take it!). Before you start, be sure that larger monuments such as obelisks are stable. We don't want accidents - either broken stones or broken heads! (You just want to visit your ancestors, not join them!). If there are cracks with vines or growths, be very careful - it may be best not to remove them at all. You don't want to make the crack bigger. Moss is always a good thing to remove - it can be pretty corrosive. Use a pump-action spray bottle and an old plastic milk jug or watering can with a straight spout to wash down the stone. And this may be common sense, but do this when the weather is warm. Remember that water freezes! It gets colder at night, so don't be caught by surprise in colder times of the year. It takes awhile for the stone to dry and ice in a cracked gravestone is not a good thing! If you decide you do need to brush the surface of a stone, pour water on it continuously as you brush to limit friction and keep the patina intact. When removing dirt, work from the bottom up. It's easier to wash off areas that are already clean and starting from the top will wash everything down into the unworked sections and cause extra and unnecessary scrubbing. Always brush softly - it's better to take more time than to be in a hurry and take off more than you planned. When all else fails, other more friendly chemicals such as ammonia or something called PhotoFlo can be used but try to find an expert to show you how before you try it yourself.

READING THE GRAVESTONE

Here are some ideas:

SUN REFLECTION

Use a mirror or a strip of aluminum over cardboard to reflect light onto the inscription. It must be a sunny day, of course.

FLASHLIGHT AND PAPER BAG

Here's something that may work with a small stone. Pull a paper bag over the stone and then stick your head in underneath it. Then light up the inscription with the flashlight, trying different angles to create shadows that should bring the lettering out. The same principle can be done at night without the paper bag if you're brave enough!

THE TUBE

Take a cardboard or plastic tube about 2 feet in length and place one end directly on the letter you wish to read and look through the other end, blocking

any light from entering the tube. Slowly roll to one side, letting a little light shine through at an angle, casting shadows from one direction only.

WATER

Flat stones that are now on the ground facing up can be read by filling the inscriptions with water and while standing over them, move slowly left to right and watch the changing reflection of the sun, some of the lettering may become more readable.

FOIL RUBBING

Rubbings of various kinds are fine for newer stones, but older, rougher and hard to read ones may be more of a challenge. Try using a square of aluminum foil. Gently press into the inscription with a damp sponge.

COMPUTER IMAGES

Use the computer to enhance a photo of the inscription, even turning it into a negative image.

SEE ALSO:

www.savinggraves.com

www.gravestonestudios.org

www.ctgravestones.com/conservation/cleaning/

www.rootsweb.com/~ipcrp

Indiana Historical Bureau