

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS ANYWAY??

Why should we clean gravestones? To preserve the past.

We want not only to honor our ancestors but also to remove lichen and dirt from the stones so the information on them can be read and preserved.

Gravestones and monuments are irreplaceable historic artifacts bequeathed to us by our ancestors to be cared for in perpetuity.

If we're going to take on this noble mission, we need to know how to do it correctly. The National Parks Service recommends this cleaning solution, D/2, and uses it in Arlington National Cemetery. In addition, it's used by the Association for Gravestone Studies for the Basic and Advanced Conservation Workshops at the annual conference.

I'm on a personal mission to stop the use of bleach and other dangerous products used on gravestones. There's a product sold as a masonry cleaner available at BJ's called Wet and Forget. It's not a good product and is very harmful to the environment. D/2 is biodegradable and nontoxic. There are other masonry cleaners but D/2 is the best. That's not just my opinion but the view shared by professional conservators.

ALWAYS DETERMINE THAT THE STONE IS STABLE AND HAS NOT BEEN REPAIRED BEFORE STARTING TO CLEAN. Remember to be gentle.

You may wish to get a photo of the stone you're about to clean to compare it with the finished stone when you're done or to send to relatives.

1. Don't clean gravestones until the danger of frost is past. The temperature shouldn't fall below 32 degrees within 48 hours after cleaning. There's a natural freeze/thaw cycle and the stones get wet from rain and snow. Water inside the stones will freeze and expand thus causing damage to the stones as it expands. This happens naturally but our mantra is "Do No Harm". We need to leave the stones and the cemetery in better condition than we found them.
2. Completely saturate the stone with water. This is important because stone is porous and will absorb the first thing applied to it deeply into the interior. We want that to be water to prevent the D/2 from penetrating too deeply and affect the crystals inside the stone. The dirt is on the surface.

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3. Next, spray the diluted (50/50) solution of D/2 on all aspects - top, bottom, sides - of the stone and let it sit for 15 minutes. That allows the D/2 to begin to dissolve the dirt and lichen. Always dilute the D/2 50/50 with water to reduce the insoluble salts and reduce the potential damage to the stones. Use the flat side of a craft or popsickle stick to scrap the lichen off. A wide craft stick can be split in half and the pointed ends used to clean out the lettering and decoration.

4. Use containers for water and D/2 that haven't been contaminated by any other solution. You can use gallon water jugs for cleaning but juice and milk jugs shouldn't be used. Keep the stone wet as long as you're working on it. Spray again with water as often as you need to keep it wet.

5. Use a clean pail and a clean plastic or natural bristle brush that haven't been used for any other purpose to scrub the stone.

6. The method used by professional conservators is to clean from the bottom up, therefore I feel obligated to tell you that. The rationale is so the drips won't run down the dirty stone. I disagree with that. I don't want drips to run down my clean stone and would prefer they run down the dirty part so I can clean it when I get to it. I clean from the top down. It's the way my mother washed walls and it makes sense to me. Keep that in mind should you ever take another workshop and the instructor tells you to clean from the bottom up. Scrub gently and frequently wet your brush in a pail of water, changing the water when it gets very dirty.

7. Thoroughly rinse the stone after it's clean. You may not be able to remove stains from the biota (lichen, moss and bacteria). Remember to let the D/2 work in your behalf. It will continue to clean the stone for several months. D/2 has a bacteriostatic ingredient that will continue to inhibit the growth of biota for at least 1 year after cleaning. Try to minimize cleaning old stones to reduce the amount of chemicals applied to the stone. We think we're doing something wonderful now but in 20 years there may be something even better. A tenet of archeology is to do nothing that can't be undone. Cleaning can't be undone but it can be minimized.

8. Take a photograph and also write down the information you can now read on the gravestone, just as it is on the stone, mistakes and all. Pat yourself on the back. You've just done something wonderful

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