When I tell people that I enjoy spending time in cemeteries, I generally get one of three reactions:

- The kindred spirit will bubble with agreement, spilling over with descriptions of their favorite cemeteries, favorite types of stones, and favorite epitaphs (these dear souls are very rare);
- A certain incredulous subset will assume an expression of abject horror, or perhaps simply respond, “Ew.”
- Lastly, the response of the vast majority: a confused squint, perhaps a tilt the head, and a baffled “… huh.” Because who, for either fun or fascination, would want to spend time with a bunch of dead people?

Me, that’s who. And any local historian or genealogist worth their salt. What can we learn about ourselves and our communities from cemeteries? More than you would probably guess.

Roots to Excavate

I’m certainly not the only person interested in unearthing family history. Genealogy is one of the most popular hobbies in the United States, second only to gardening. Television shows like TLC’s *Who Do You Think You Are?* and PBS’s *Finding Your Roots* portray the hunt for family history in an intriguing and glamorous light. Among genealogists, the value of cemeteries as sources of genealogical information has long been obvious. It’s no accident that Ancestry.com purchased the website Find A Grave to augment its genealogical records in 2013.

Find A Grave, available freely on the open web without subscription, relies on thousands of global volunteers to create, photograph, and maintain burial and final disposition records. These records aren’t simply for the famous and influential—I was surprised, when I first visited the site, to find records and gravestone photos for my grandparents and other loved ones who had passed away. These photos seemed strange at first—perhaps even intrusive—until I realized that this documentation was created with the best of intentions to help others trace their roots. Users can submit a photo request for an ancestor’s grave, which triggers a notification email sent to nearby photo volunteers (like me!) who will
locate and photograph the requested stone. The website even has an app, allowing volunteers to upload photos easily and add GPS coordinates for the grave’s exact location.

There are, of course, those who hunt for famous graves, to take photos, collect gravestone rubbings, and honor their memories. I will always remember the thrill of visiting the renowned Zentralfriedhof Cemetery in Vienna, the final resting place of three of my favorite composers—Johannes Brahms, Franz Schubert, and Hugo Wolf—as well as numerous other luminaries in the artistic, scientific, and political fields. However, I personally find the stories of that I can uncover at the quiet, unassuming cemetery right down the road in my corner of Iowa just as captivating.

“Everything Is Online?” Nope.

One challenge that we librarians confront daily is the belief that All Information Is Now Online. Particularly in the case of local history, this is woefully inaccurate. It’s true that local libraries, museums, and historical societies have recently made great strides in digitizing historic newspapers, family records, and local histories, thanks in large part to grants offered by national and local historical and cultural organizations. However, the collections available now represent a mere fraction of the immense amount of information currently waiting, untapped, on shelves and in storage units at local institutions. Consider your own town or city’s local newspaper, and all of the titles that preceded it over the decades or centuries. How many obituaries, marriage and birth notices, or charming descriptions of ladies’ teas and veterans’ gatherings could offer glimpses of the fascinating people who have come before us?

Often, what we can learn about ancestors or historical figures is only what has been captured in official documentation: decennial censuses, wills and probate records, military and veterans’ records, voter registrations, passport applications, tax assessments. If you’re lucky, you can gain access to historic newspapers, but as noted above, digitized coverage is hugely incomplete and perusing them in person can be difficult and time-consuming. If one’s life happened to fall outside of the bounds of official documentation—which was frequently the case, particularly for women or children—a gravestone may be the only accessible physical evidence of one’s existence.

My favorite cemetery in town. With over 15,000 interments dating back to 1860s, it’s one of the largest and oldest in the part of Iowa.
For example, let’s consider a child born in 1881, the year after the decennial United States census. The majority of the 1890 decennial census was destroyed by a 1921 fire in the Washington, D.C. Commerce Building—fragments of the census from ten U.S. states are all that remain. Social security numbers were not issued until the 1930s, and many locations did not issue birth or death certificates until well into the 20th century. If a child born in 1881 died before 1900 (as was, sadly, often the case during this period), she could appear in no form of official documentation at all. Outside of church records or family lore, finding a gravestone with a date of birth and death (and perhaps a relationship, such as “daughter of X and Y”) might be the only clue of a life lived.

Standing before the stones

Besides the simple fact of existence, what more can you learn from a grave? First, consider the style of the stone itself. A grave marker can be remarkably simple, perhaps just a first name with no dates at all. Or it can offer a more complete portrait (sometimes, it includes a literal portrait!) with information on military service, place of birth or death, maiden name, date of marriage, relationships, organizational membership, even hobbies. As is the case with fashion and art, stone style has changed dramatically over the centuries, and stone or vault style may differ depending on the age and status of the deceased, and whether the stone marks an individual who was buried or cremated.

How graves are positioned can reveal a great deal. Certain religious and cultural traditions may orient burials and stones toward a particular cardinal direction that holds significance. How burials are situated in relation to each other is also important, and can help solve mysteries that might have seemed lost to the ages. As an example, one of the biggest challenges (and frustrations) that genealogists encounter is the fact that for centuries women, upon marriage, have lost their maiden names—and, as a result, often their family of origin. Unless a researcher has access to marriage records or other documentation—via birth certificates, family trees, family Bibles, etc.—determining a married woman’s parents can be tricky. In some cases a woman’s first name is lost to time as well, with even her newspaper obituary stating her name as simply, for example, “Mrs. Howard Miller.”

While visiting a cemetery, I frequently encounter a woman or couple buried in a family plot with a different surname, their stone style similar to those that surround it. This is a helpful clue that the individual may be a family member who changed her name at marriage—a daughter, niece, or sister. The different surname could also indicate a mother-in-law, which could help a researcher track down the lineage of the family’s matriarch.

Of course, the cemetery itself can provide important information. Many cemeteries are affiliated with church membership, including specific Catholic cemeteries. Depending on area of the country, you may find separate cemeteries for Jewish, Muslim, and other faith traditions as well. Older cemeteries may have specific areas set aside for certain immigrant, religious, or ethnic groups. In the antebellum North, for example, African Americans were often interred in separated sections of cemeteries; in the South, there were specific cemeteries for enslaved people and free people of color.

All of this said, one cannot assume that solely because something is carved in stone, it’s infallible. I’ve happened across stones that, after researching further, included clearly misspelled names, inaccurate
birth or death dates as corroborated by official records, and incorrect military regiments. I’ve been surprised to find divorce records for couples buried under the same stone as husband and wife. Mistakes happen, and it’s always possible that loved ones wanted their particular version of family history on public display. However, as a rule of thumb, headstones are generally trustworthy historical documents.

It’s interesting to note that the information cemeteries provide isn’t simply genealogical. Researchers have long known the value of cemeteries as primary sources. The APUS Library’s holdings include several books and articles featuring historical, archaeological, sociocultural, aesthetic, and even biological research completed in cemeteries (a short sampling of the breadth of this work is included below).

The Glorious Dead

Having a particular interest in Civil War-era American history, I jumped at the opportunity to join a Find A Grave project seeking to document all Civil War veterans buried here in the state of Iowa. It’s been my honor to personally photograph the final resting places of well over a hundred of these veterans in the past months, as well as complete further research to detail their military service and family relationships. I locate these veterans either by their official military headstone, or by an iron star that marks their grave, indicating affiliation with the Civil War veterans’ fraternal group Grand Army of the Republic. This project has documented over five hundred Civil War veterans here in my county alone, and thousands more across the state.

I feel a measure of tranquility when I visit the sacred spaces where we meet our final rest. I also feel the persistent pull of responsibility: a stone rendered nearly illegible by weather, lichen, or the inevitable crumbling of time always urges me to pull out my camera and preserve its contents before they’re permanently lost. One of my favorite quotes comes from the German poet Heinrich Heine, from his description of a visit to a historic battlefield: “Unter jedem Grabstein liegt eine Weltgeschichte”—“Under every gravestone lies a world-history.” I am continuously captivated by the stories of those that have come before me, and the richness of the histories that might be unearthed. For history isn’t only written
by those who fought glorious battles, whose voices rang in the halls of Congress, who were renowned for talent or genius or wit. History is created by all of us, everywhere, every single day.

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