



**MA Department of Conservation and Recreation  
Office of Cultural Resources  
Best Management Practices**

## Cemeteries and Burial Grounds

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**Goal:** Stabilize resource to prevent loss; monitor for vandalism and illegal activity; preserve public access



## Guidelines

### General

- For more information see DCR's *Terra Firma #10 Mourning Glory: Preserving Historic Cemeteries* (<http://www.mass.gov/dcr/stewardship/histland/publications.htm>) or upon request to the Office of Cultural Resources (OCR).
- DCR cannot deny public access to its cemeteries; public access includes family visitation, genealogical research, and other public benefit.
- Cemeteries are protected under state laws that prohibit defacement, vandalism, removal of grave markers and damage to graves. On DCR lands these laws are enforced by the State Police.
- Use of heavy equipment should be restricted to existing roads and trails outside of the cemetery, with a buffer of at least 25'.
- No digging of any kind is allowed without consultation with DCR Archaeologist.
- Metal detectors are never allowed.
- If human remains are exposed, stop all work and contact the DCR Archaeologist.
- Prohibit stone rubbing, which can leave trace oils and wax on historic stone; instead direct a raking light across the stone's surface to illuminate inscriptions (use a strong flashlight or a large mirror) and photograph.

### Landscape

- Prune or remove, if necessary, hazard trees surrounding cemetery every 5 years.
- Remove volunteer growth including all trees inside most pre-1860 cemeteries (consult with OCR).
- Tree removal – cut stumps to grade and promote natural decay; do not stump grind.

- Remove invasive species by cutting to grade (do not pull roots or grind stumps); concentrate in areas where historic plants, trees and ground cover are threatened; licensed applicators may apply herbicides, if needed.
- Maintain significant historic plantings – contact OCR to determine whether plants could be historic.
- Mow lawn to a height of 3” keeping equipment 12” away from markers; finish last 12” with nylon line trimmers (not around marble).
- Use only organic fertilizers and Integrated Pest Management, avoid chemical treatment which can damage stones or create “dead zones” from high salt content.
- For pre-1831 burial grounds consider mowing less frequently; formal lawn is not characteristic of cemeteries before that time.
- If erosion or compaction is impacting graves or other features, contact the DCR Archaeologist to explore grading treatment to redirect water flows.

### **Stonework and Markers**

- Reset toppled stones from walls.
- Remove limbs, branches and other debris from stone walls, steps and monuments immediately after major storm events and seasonally each spring.
- Record major structural collapse of walls, steps and monuments, report to OCR.
- Markers are private property, but DCR may choose to undertake marker repairs as part of a preservation plan and with adequate public outreach; contact OCR.
- Markers are typically slate, marble and granite but may also be zinc or other metal.
- Do not attempt to clean, right or reset markers without consultation with DCR Archaeologist.
- Do not remove markers even if they are damaged.
- Prune sap and berry producing trees and shrubs away from stones.

### **Metals**

- Maintain painted surfaces on iron fences and gates; keep bolts tight and intact (replace missing).
- Contact OCR for more extensive conservation needs.

### **Monitoring**

- Identify, record areas of erosion or collapse and report to OCR, DCR Archaeologist.
- Identify and record unstable markers or stones which pose a threat to public safety.
- Identify, record and report areas of digging, vandalism or other defacement of graves to the DCR Archaeologist and State Police (find a Troop in your area at <http://www.mass.gov/eopss/law-enforce-and-cj/law-enforce/msp-troops/>).
- Develop policies to control, restrict, remove or replace memorial plantings, garden ephemera and seasonal decorations.