

The Texas Historical Commission's (THC) Cemetery Preservation Program recommends that every county historical commission (CHC) maintain an inventory of all the known and historically referenced cemeteries in the county. The inventory is not a listing of individual graves. Ideally, each cemetery is documented with photographs, mapping, and a written physical description on a form, and a database or spreadsheet entry.

There is a wide variety of information that can be collected for each cemetery. This tip sheet focuses primarily on creating a baseline locational inventory for a county's cemeteries—essentially, making a record of each cemetery's existence and marking its location on a map. However, the scope can expand exponentially, depending on a CHC's goals and capacity.

Why Create an Inventory?

- Produces information useful to share with local, state and federal governments and planning agencies.
- Helps identify historic cemeteries in anticipation of projects that may involve land disturbance or other threats.
- Supplies information that can help plan for preservation efforts.
- Stimulates public awareness of a community's historic cemeteries, especially if community members participate in the project.

There are many ways to create a county cemetery inventory and the way that works for your cemetery committee may depend on what information has already been gathered, the number of cemeteries within your county, and the skillsets of the committee members.

Getting Started

There is no reason to start fresh. Instead, build on the steps that have been already taken (and add what may have been missed previously). Start by gathering any existing inventories. There's no need to start from scratch. Many counties have an existing inventory that was compiled at some point in the past by the CHC, historical society or genealogy club. Your inventory project will build on these previous efforts by verifying the accuracy of the collected data, as well as gathering new information. Any inventory project will likely involve some degree of archival research. Be prepared to consult historic obituaries, deed records and appraisal district entries, church records, historic-age maps, funeral home records, and other types of resources that might help identify cemetery locations. The THC maintains the [Texas Historic Sites Atlas' map](#), which contains thousands of cemetery locations, as well as other limited details. It can serve as a good starting point for your project, or as a point of comparison. (See page 4 for more info on how to utilize and update Atlas data.)

Managing the Project

Consider dividing the county into manageable geographical units, such as by precinct. A project like this works best as a team effort, but one person needs to be the director of the overall effort. This person will train all members of the team how to collect data in a consistent, uniform manner and will serve as the primary contact if someone in the field encounters a problem. Data can be collected on paper forms or electronically using tablets or other digital devices. Choose the method that all team members are comfortable using. The project director is responsible for collecting the data from each team, reviewing it for consistency, and entering the data into the spreadsheet or database (or other information format).

The following online resources can be helpful prior to heading out to look for cemeteries. Referring to these online resources is a necessary first-step. Additionally, they are a huge time-saver and should be searched prior to any field investigations. Online research is a good use of time during the heat of summer and during bad weather.

Online Resources for extant listings by county:

1. The THC's Historic Sites Atlas (contact THC for a download)
2. [TXGenWeb](#) provides listing of cemeteries as well as directions and sometimes histories.
3. Find A Grave can be a good resource but please, take this data with a grain of salt. You may want to use it as a secondary resource.
4. Appraisal District: When searching CAD records, spell cemetery as many incorrect ways as you can think of: spell it "cemetARY", "CemeNtary" "CemeNTERY or just CEMENT in case it's listed in Spanish as *Cementerio*. Also search the words "Grave," "Graveyard," and "Burial".

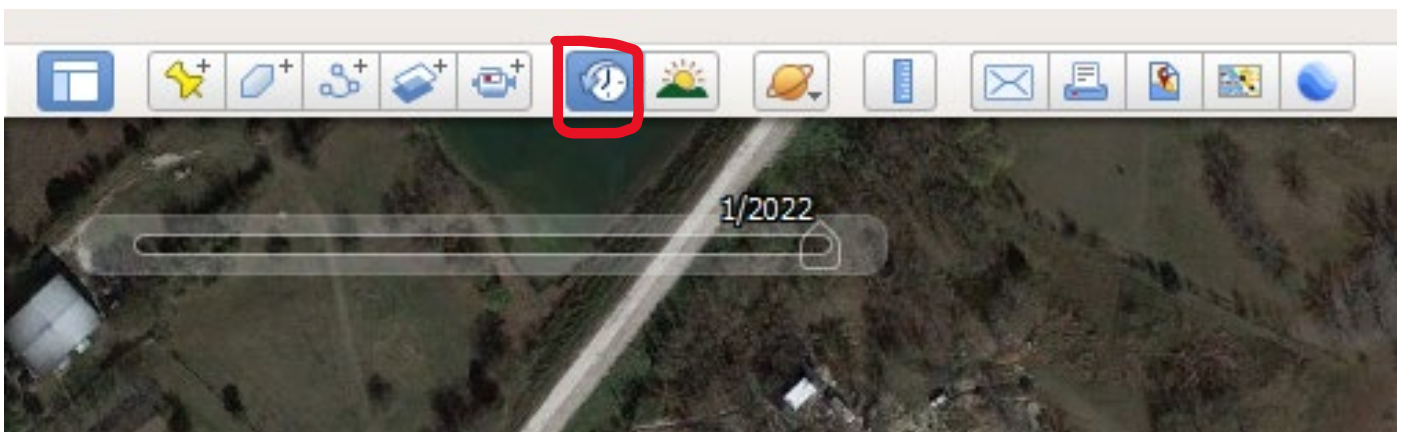
Online Resources for searching historic aerials and maps:

Google Earth Pro: provides aerials dating back to the 1990s and sometimes earlier. These aerials can be especially helpful when searching for images taken at different times of year so that you can see views with no foliage (in the winter) and patterns that might enhance fence lines, pasture roads, and even patterns of grave rows.

There's a couple of ways to download the app:

1. <https://www.google.com/earth/versions/>
2. <https://support.google.com/earth/answer/21955?hl=en>

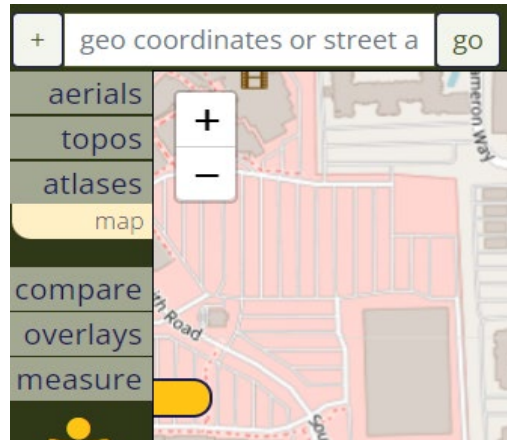
Once downloaded, use the clock icon found along the top of the page to go "back in time".



HistoricAerials.com provides both aerials and USGS maps at different years (called topos in the key at the left).

Look through all of the aerials to go back in time and look through *all of the topos* as cemeteries can disappear off the topo maps.

This website can be a little slow, it has a lot of advertisements, and there are many copyright protections across the image, but it's very handy for preliminary research.



What Data Should You Collect?

This is up to each CHC and will depend on many factors, including the number of cemeteries to be recorded, what information you already have, the size of your task force, the overall purpose of the documentation project, and what you plan to do with the information you collect. While some CHCs may prefer paper forms to be filled out by hand, others may be able to directly enter cemetery details into a spreadsheet, database, or even GIS-enabled database. You may want to include previously compiled information as well as blanks to be filled out as research is conducted (at the cemetery, in the county records, or wherever your resources are located).

At a bare minimum, take several overall photographs and collect locational information that can accurately pinpoint a cemetery's location on a map. Always collect primary GPS coordinates from a uniform position within each cemetery, such as the center. Coordinates that were collected many years ago should be verified or updated. As technology improves, this data becomes more and more accurate.

Beyond location, there is no limit to the data you can collect, as long as you have the ability to organize it, store it, and share it. Consider listing:

- Date of establishment and range of use
- Number of burials
- Physical size
- Deeds
- Ownership or association contact information
- Access, permissions contact
- Visitation dates and notes
- Active or closed for new burials
- Ethnicity
- Describe cemetery boundaries (fencing, gates)
- Conditions (maintained, partially maintained, abandoned)
- Endangerment level
- County district and/or City ETJ
- Describe previous repair, cleaning, or restoration efforts

Store the Information

Ideally, you'll store your information electronically in a spreadsheet, database or other information format located on a secure system. A duplicate should be saved in a different physical location. Consider saving a hard-copy version as well. Storage locations should be secure, but easily accessible to future CHC appointees so they can make corrections or updates. Consider county offices, library, archives, etc. Avoid storage on an appointee's personal home computer.

Share the Information

Locational data should be shared with all local planning offices to protect the cemetery from future development and to aid responders in case of an emergency. This might include county and municipal GIS departments, 9-1-1 offices, and appraisal districts. Check with them before you begin your project to see (1) which cemeteries they already have plotted and (2) if they have special requirements for how you should collect information. Consider publicizing your efforts online and in local newspapers. It's a great way to build community awareness and support for cemeteries in general, and it may lead to people coming forward with information about unknown cemeteries.

Update and Correct the Atlas

THC maintains a statewide inventory of cemeteries and makes it available to the public through the [Texas Historic Sites Atlas](#). The Atlas is a database of historic site records with integrated digital maps documenting Texas history, enabling the user to find a historic site's location and other select details. Preservationists and government land-use planners use the Atlas to identify historic or prehistoric site locations during the early stages of infrastructure and other development projects, and can modify their projects accordingly.

CHCs can help ensure the Atlas is the best tool possible by contributing their county-level data and verifying the accuracy of information already in the Atlas. When you're ready to get started, contact the Cemetery Preservation Program Coordinator, [Jenny McWilliams](#). She'll provide you with THC's data for cemeteries in your county and instructions for how to make additions and corrections.

Sample Inventory Forms

Ideally, each CHC will develop and use a form that is tailor-made for their use. THC provides a few sample forms that can easily be adapted to meet a CHC's needs. A basic, simple inventory form is provided on the following page. Some CHCs may have the capacity to carry out a comprehensive, feature-level survey of each cemetery. Examples of feature-level and general cemetery inventory forms can be found on the THC's Cemetery Preservation Page. Click on [Cemetery Disaster Training](#) and look under Webinar 2: Cemetery Survey and Data Collection.

For more information, please visit www.thc.texas.gov/cemetery.

Cemetery Name _____ THC Number _____

Additional Name(s) _____

Address, City and Directions _____

Latitude (ex. 29.714610) _____ Longitude (ex. -98.084870) _____

Where is the cemetery recorded and/or mapped (circle those that apply): HTC Legal Notices

THC Historic Sites Atlas County GIS maps Road and Bridge 911 map

CAD (parcel #, survey & abstract) _____

Deed(s) and description (acreage) _____

No. of Graves (include description of marked vs. unmarked, depressions, etc.) _____

Burial Date Range _____

Sources _____

Notes/Comments including previous research notes: _____

Recorded by _____ Date _____

Affiliation _____ Contact (phone, email) _____