CHCs and Historic Cemeteries: A Framework for Preservation

Part 3: Assess

A Suggested Framework for County-Wide Cemetery Preservation

www.thc.texas.gov/chc-cemeteries

ASSESS: Suggested Activities

CHCs know how to identify endangerment factors and assess needs of a cemetery.

- Assess physical and programmatic needs of each cemetery or solicit this info from the cemetery trustees.
- Keep a master list of needs and threats and assign priorities.
- Prioritize urgent needs not being addressed by others.
- Maintain awareness of changing nature of threats.
- Stay up-to-date on current cemetery laws and preservation guidelines.
Common threats to historic cemeteries include:

- Development pressure/encroachment
- No caretaker organization
- Theft and vandalism
- Animal activity
- Vegetation
- Extreme weather events
- Environmental factors
- Poor maintenance practices
- And much more!

Endangerment Factors = Characteristics that may indicate a cemetery is vulnerable or under active threat

- Undefined property boundary
- Lack of effective fencing
- Adjacent construction
- Inaccessible by public road
- Hostile private landowner
- Poor drainage
- Frequent flooding
- Erosion

- No obvious maintenance
- Harmful maintenance practices
- Dead or unhealthy large trees
- Broken or fallen gravemarkers
- Many unmarked graves
- Trash/dumping ground
- No indication of recent visitation
ASSESS: Identify Threats & Endangerment Factors

Less Obvious Endangerment Factors

- No on-site signage
- No rules
- No bylaws
- Poor records
- No plat map
- Extent of burials unknown
- History is unknown
- No legal owner of record
- Not shown on local planning maps

ASSESS: Keep a master list and assign priorities

- Not all threats are created equal
- The nature or urgency of a threat can change over time
- Prioritize needs that address seriously destructive activity

Prioritize needs that address the most destructive or imminent threats

- Is the threat likely to be catastrophic?
- How imminent is the threat?
- How quickly could things escalate?
ASSESS: Stay up-to-date - Laws

Texas Health and Safety Code
- Definitions
- Effect of Dedication
- Notices
- Access

Texas Penal Code
- Desecration
- Criminal Mischief
- Graffiti
- Theft

Enforcement!

Accessing Cemeteries on Private Property
- Know what the law says (711.041, 711.0521)
- Identify and contact the property owner
- Explain the reason for your visit. Be specific!
- Be respectful and cooperative
- Be patient (unless there’s real urgency)
- During your visit, stick to the plan
ASSESS: Stay up-to-date – Preservation Guidelines

#1 Rule = DO NO HARM

- Good preservation is based on good research and good documentation
- Good preservation takes time
- Good preservation means recognizing cemeteries as cultural landscapes (more than just gravestones)
- Sometimes it’s better to do nothing

www.nps.gov/subjects/ncptt/cemetery-conservation.htm

FREE online, self-paced Cemetery Preservation Course

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A Suggested Framework for County-Wide Cemetery Preservation

Identify all cemeteries in county.

Determine who is working with each cemetery.

Determine what each cemetery needs.

Determine how the THC can help preserve the cemetery itself or help others preserve the cemetery. Take action accordingly.

www.thc.texas.gov/chc-cemeteries

Cemetery Preservation Program

www.thc.texas.gov/cemetery

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