

The Texas Historical Commission's (THC) Cemetery Preservation Program recommends that every county historical commission (CHC) maintain an inventory of all cemeteries ever known to exist in the county. Ideally, each cemetery is documented with photographs, mapping, 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 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.

Getting Started

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 obituaries, deed records, 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, 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 2 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 database (or other information format).

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. 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 should be collected and verified or updated regularly. As technology improves, this data becomes more and more accurate. Coordinates collected just a few years ago can be inaccurate by dozens of feet or more.

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 the contact person/organization for the cemetery, alternate names, date of establishment, date range of active use, physical size, number of burials, deeds, and notes about its condition. Some CHCs may have the capacity to carry out a comprehensive, feature-level survey of each cemetery.

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 especially 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 if they have any 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 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.

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