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From the Selected Works of Sue Lynn McDaniel

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Preserving Our Cemeteries _ Action Steps To Making It Happen.jpg

Sue Lynn McDaniel



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Preserving Our Cemeteries: Action Steps To Making It Happen

by Sue Lynn McDaniel, Warren County Cemetery Board Member



Pioneer Cemetery probably after a cleanup in the 1930s spearheaded by John B. Rodes. Although it appears that these stones have been cleaned, they were actually painted white. This is not a preservation method and is strongly discouraged. Photo courtesy of Special Collections Library, WKU.

Many of Warren county residents' last landmarks are vanishing from our cultural landscape. Tonya Colley of the City-County Planning Commission estimates that our county has over 500 cemeteries. In the summers of 2004 and 2005, Phase I of a Warren County Cemetery Documentation Project surveyed 36 cemeteries within our county. By the end of Phase II, a total of 218 cemeteries were surveyed. Several publications on Warren County cemeteries have attempted to provide comprehensive listings, but much work remains. In more recent years, local real estate surveyors have informally joined in our efforts to preserve information about small family cemeteries by calling Colley to report graves located in their daily work. The Warren County Cemetery Board meets regularly to discuss issues relevant to our cemeteries and serve as a community resource.

In September of this year, Historic Preservation Planner

Miranda Clements and I attended Preservation Kentucky's workshop: "Our History Rests here: Preservation and Restoration of Historic Cemeteries." During the two-day event, professionals discussed basic strategies and methods for concerned citizens to contribute volunteer labor. Jason Church, Materials Conservator from the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training, delivered the majority of the lectures and hands-on training. From Jason Church and the other speakers, I learned the following:

Do NOTHING to the cemetery until you have learned the basics so that you do not lose information while trying to improve the site. Many well-meaning individuals have excluded graves when fencing a cemetery, disrupted a grave while removing trees, damaged monuments by cleaning them improperly, mended a stone with materials that

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caused greater long-term harm, or destroyed information by re-setting tombstones where they no longer marked the grave. When visiting isolated cemeteries, take flowers, pull weeds, & make photographs. By locating, visiting and making photographs with date stamps of small cemeteries, volunteers can document that their cemeteries have not been abandoned. Representing Kentucky's Cemetery Preservation Program, Ann Johnson stated: "Once a cemetery, always a cemetery....If all stones are taken away, it is still considered a cemetery." Johnson stressed that, although Kentucky Revised Statutes as they relate to cemeteries have no enforcement piece, concerned citizens should call their sheriff if they are denied access to family cemeteries on private property. Land owners are not required to maintain, but cannot damage, add a deer stand or alter the cemetery. If graves are tended and visited during the previous 10 years, property holders cannot move grave markers and they must give 60-day notice in the local newspaper of their intent. Other actions items could include: Watch local newspapers for notifications of intent to move tombstones. Report any notifications or information you might have observed about changes to Warren County cemeteries to our cemetery board via Sue.Lynn.McDaniel@wku.edu Locate all existing documentation including plot maps and previous listings of the graves Use family collections & the Special Collections Library (formerly known as the "Kentucky Library") in the Kentucky Building at WKU [9-4 Monday-Saturday when WKU classes are in session]. Ask family genealogists and local historians to share information in their research files with you and WKU's Special Collections Library. Search FindAGrave.com and other genealogical & cemetery websites. Conduct oral history interviews with local residents and family members who have knowledge of the burial ground. Surveying the cemetery by forming a grid pattern & chart what you see Include plants, trees, current tombstones, and noticeably indentations in the ground. Donate copies of all research and listings/surveys you complete to WKU's Special Collections Library. If you have knowledge of a cemetery on private lands, contact me by phone (270-745-3246) or e-mail (sue.lynn.mcdaniel@wku.edu). If you are interested in volunteering with the Warren County Cemetery Board's efforts to create a comprehensive file of known information about our local cemeteries, contact me by phone (270-745-3246) or e-mail (sue.lynn.mcdaniel@wku.edu). If you are a member of a local volunteer organization interested in donating funds or in assisting in plant identification, research, removal of trees & undergrowth, monument cleaning and/or repair, or fence repairs and/or installation, contact me by phone (270-745-3246) or e-mail (sue.lynn.

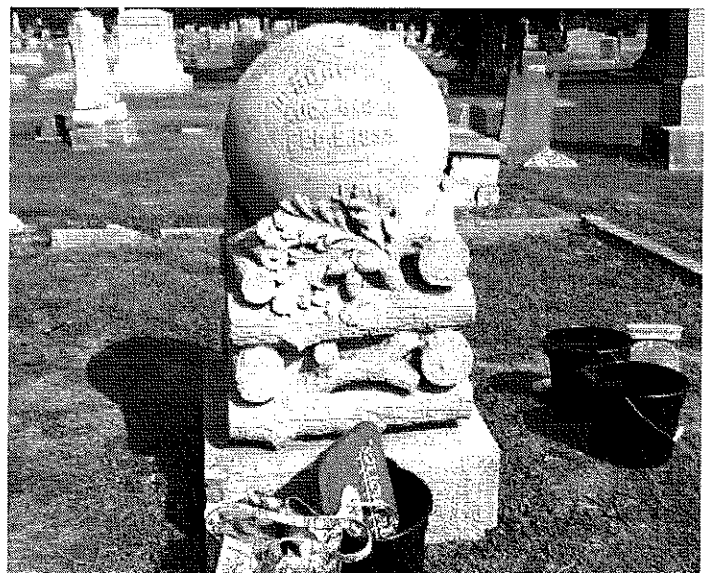
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Complete a Kentucky's Cemetery Census Survey Form (available at http://history.ky.gov/pdf/CommunityServices/Cemetery_Census_Form_rev11-08.pdf) to help build the Commonwealth's database of cemeteries and burial sites. Beginning next year, apply for cemeteries to be designated "Kentucky Pioneer Cemeteries" Based on successful programs in Texas and other states, Kentucky plans to begin an "Adopt a Cemetery" program and will designate cemeteries as "Kentucky Pioneer Cemeteries" if the markers indicate they accepted burials by 1842. Consider attending the next historic cemetery restoration workshop offered by Preservation Kentucky at their annual meeting.

Together we can preserve these historic cemetery landmarks. ▲



Members of the workshop gently cleaning an unusual limestone marker. Limestone markers are quite common in south central Kentucky, particularly in Warren County. Photo courtesy of the author.



The limestone marker after its cleaning. Photo courtesy of the author.