

# *Rescuing A Neglected Cemetery*



GETTING STARTED



RESEARCHING CEMETERY RECORDS



CONDUCTING A CEMETERY SURVEY



DESIGNATING A HISTORIC CEMETERY



USING PRESERVATION STANDARDS



TAKING ACTION

## **Cemetery Preservation Program**

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### **Texas Historical Commission**

P.O. Box 12276

Austin, Texas 78711-2276

Phone 512.463.5853

Fax 512.463.5750

[www.thc.state.tx.us](http://www.thc.state.tx.us)

### **Physical address:**

105 West 16th St.

Austin, Texas 78701

## GETTING STARTED

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Your time, energy and effort are important to the survival of neglected cemeteries. Before starting a cemetery preservation project, please refer to the two documents, “Standards for Preserving Historic Cemeteries” and “Preserving Historic Cemeteries: Texas Preservation Guidelines.” The standards are included in this brochure on page 7, and the guidelines are available online at [www.thc.state.tx.us](http://www.thc.state.tx.us) (select “cemeteries,” then “preserving cemeteries”).

### USE CAUTION WITH CEMETERY LANDSCAPES

When you start working with a neglected cemetery, avoid removing any materials at first. There are many different ways graves are marked, and disturbing the landscape could eliminate evidence of burial sites. Leave mounds of rocks, field stones, gravestone fragments and temporary funeral markers where they are and refrain from trimming trees or removing any plant material. Use hand clippers first, not chainsaws.

Rescuing a neglected cemetery involves three important steps:

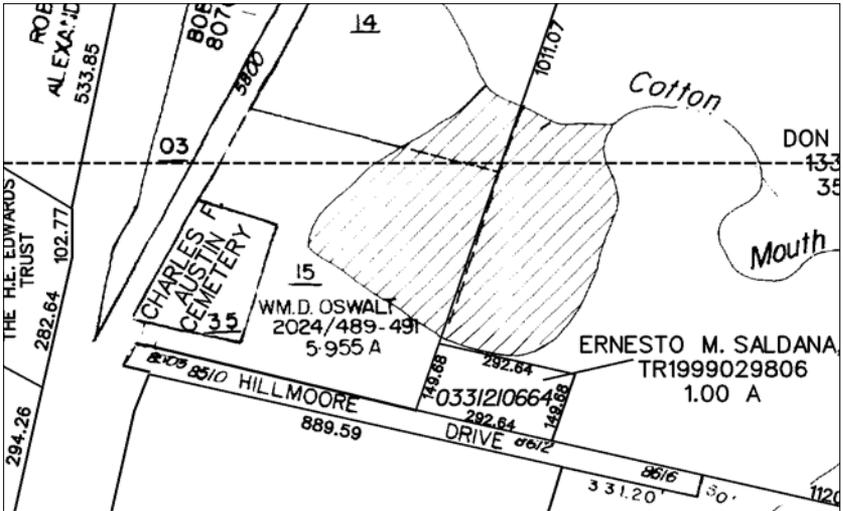
- **Research**—discovering and interpreting facts about the cemetery
- **Survey**—identifying, gathering data, mapping and photographing a cemetery
- **Designate**—working with the local county historical commission and the Texas Historical Commission (THC) to secure the Historic Texas Cemetery (HTC) designation, which involves recording the cemetery in county deed records

## RESEARCHING CEMETERY RECORDS

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- A good way to begin your research is to check with county historical commissions, local genealogical groups, libraries and museums for information, such as early surveys, newspaper archives, vertical files, books and other publications, maps and photographs.
- Other good local records include those of county commissioners courts, city councils, funeral homes and churches.
- Identify the names and contact information for surrounding landowners through the county or district appraisal office records, which include property maps.

- A typical map from an appraisal office looks like this:



- For cemeteries accessed through private land, you will need to familiarize yourself with the relevant laws. Section 711.041 of the Health and Safety Code notes anyone who wants to visit a cemetery that has no public ingress or egress has the right to do so during reasonable hours and for purposes associated with cemetery visits. The owner of the lands surrounding the cemetery, however, may designate the preferred routes. Be sure to contact the landowner first to arrange your visit.
- If the cemetery is on land owned by a public entity, contact the appropriate governmental office.
- A search of county deed records is recommended, although cemeteries may not always be recorded. If they are, remember that existing fences may not accurately define the cemetery boundaries; unmarked graves may exist outside the fence line.
- Note the last names on the grave markers and contact family members, if known. Look in the phone book for possible relatives still living in the area and invite them to join the project.
- Start a volunteer opportunity list and ask interested individuals how they would like to contribute. Some opportunities include maintenance, historical and genealogical research, grave marker conservation, public outreach, education and fundraising.
- Try to determine the number of unmarked burials by looking for depressions in the ground and historic or non-native plant material. Note these depressions and plant material on a hand-drawn map. (See page 8 for an example.)

## CONDUCTING A CEMETERY SURVEY

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- There are two types of surveys associated with historic cemeteries:
  - A metes and bounds survey will determine actual boundaries of the cemetery and require a professional surveyor. Such surveys may be expensive, but check with surveyors to see if they might do pro bono work.
  - An overall cemetery survey records important cemetery data such as materials and features, and includes photographs and a site map. If the boundaries are clearly marked in the deed records, move forward with the HTC designation.
- Contact the THC's Cemetery Preservation Program to determine if a cemetery survey has been filed with the state. The state program also has limited archives related to specific cemeteries.
- Map the cemetery and include boundary and internal fencing, all grave markers, fragments, memorials, any paths, landscaping and possible grave depressions (see sample map on page 8). Be sure to indicate north with a directional arrow on the map.
- Photograph key elements of the cemetery such as historic fencing, urns and original statuary, as well as several overall views. Also photograph significant or broken markers prior to any cleaning or clearing of the site.
- Invite a master gardener or local garden group to help identify historic vegetation and develop a list of existing plants. Remember that some vegetation may be more easily identified in particular seasons.

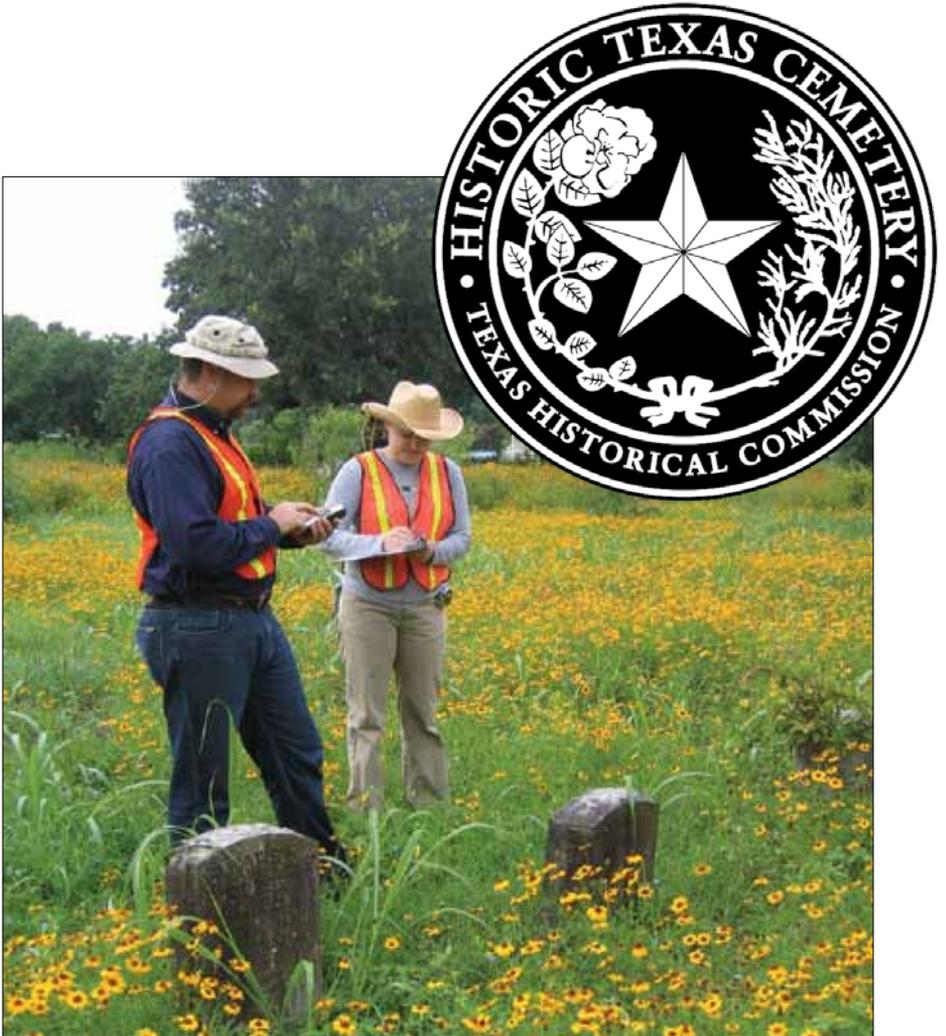
### CEMETERY SURVEY EQUIPMENT

- |  |                           |
|--|---------------------------|
| • HTC application                      | • Long-sleeved shirt      |
| • THC Marker and Monument Styles flyer | • Long jeans or pants     |
| • 50 –100 foot tape measure            | • Sturdy outdoor footwear |
| • Compass                              | • Hat with a brim         |
| • Graph paper                          | • Sunglasses              |
| • Pencils                              | • Bug spray               |
| • Clipboard                            | • Drinking water          |
|  | • First aid kit           |

## DESIGNATING A HISTORIC CEMETERY

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- If the cemetery is not already designated a HTC, check with your county historical commission or the THC web site for information on how to begin the process. The state designation provides an important layer of protection for a cemetery and is vital to its long-term preservation. The application and guidelines can be downloaded at [www.thc.state.tx.us](http://www.thc.state.tx.us) (select “cemeteries,” then “Historic Texas Cemetery Program”) or contact the THC’s cemetery preservation office for a copy of these documents.



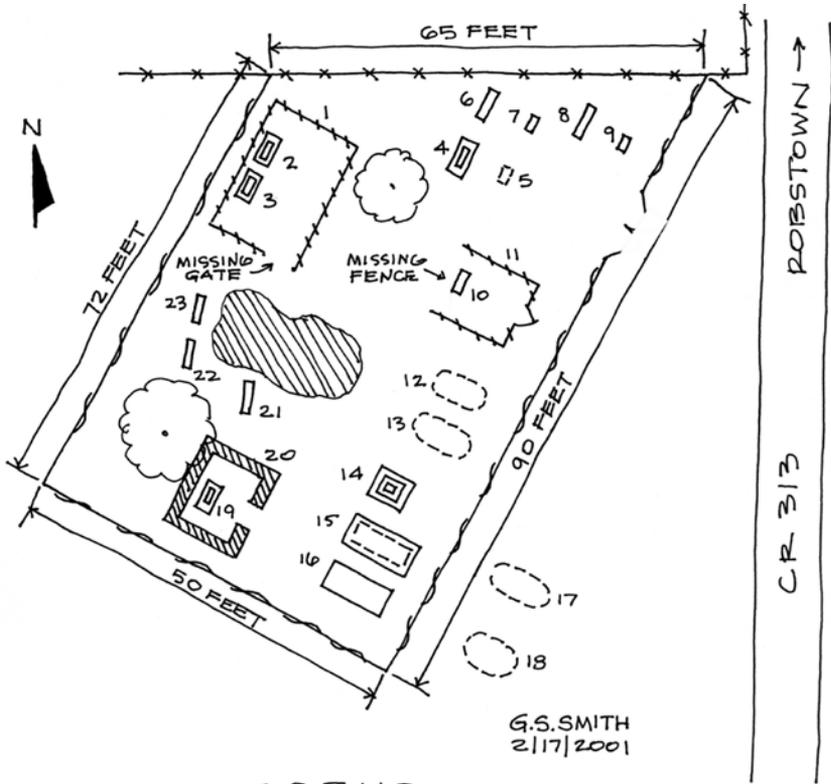
*Volunteers record a cemetery in Travis County.*

## USING PRESERVATION STANDARDS

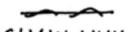
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1. Identify and inventory all features, materials, spaces and spatial relationships that are important in defining the historic character of the cemetery. Features can include gravemarkers, sculpture, grave decorations, curbing, fences, walks, roads, lights, benches, fountains, pools, land forms (terracing, berms, grading) and vegetation (trees, shrubs, other historic plant material).
2. Preserve distinguishing original qualities that reflect the integrity of the cemetery. Avoid removing or altering any historic material or distinctive landscape features.
3. Recognize that landscape features are products of their own time. Alterations, which have no historic basis and which seek to create an earlier appearance, should be discouraged.
4. Recognize that changes over time are evidence of the history and development of the cemetery. These changes may have acquired significance in their own right, and this significance should be respected.
5. Repair, rather than replace, deteriorated cemetery features when feasible. If replacement is necessary, match the material being replaced with similar composition, design, color, texture and other visual qualities. Replacement of missing features should be substantiated by historical, physical or pictorial evidence rather than by relying on conjectural designs or on elements copied from other cemeteries.
6. Use the gentlest means possible to clean the surfaces of features in the cemetery. Avoid sandblasting and harsh chemicals that will damage historic materials.
7. Plan new construction so it will not destroy the historic character of the site. Differentiate new elements from the old, but ensure they are compatible with the general massing, size and scale in order to protect the historic integrity.
8. Make every reasonable effort to protect and preserve cemetery features, including unmarked graves, affected by or adjacent to any proposed work. Contact the THC's History Programs Division at 512.463.5853 if you have concerns about the likelihood of unmarked graves or encounter evidence of disturbed graves during the course of your cemetery preservation project.

# SAMPLE SITE MAP



## LEGEND

- |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |
| 1745 BED  | TABLET  | MISSING TABLET  | SLAB  | CRYPT   |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| STONE WALL  | FOOTSTONE   | MISSING FOOTSTONE   | DEPRESSION  | TREE  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| MONUMENT<br>(OBELISK,<br>COLUMN OR<br>PEDESTAL)                                     | TABLET W/<br>SLOTTED BASE   | CHAIN-LINK<br>FENCE   | WOVEN<br>WIRE<br>FENCE  | BARBED<br>WIRE<br>FENCE   |

**NOTES**

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*Record and photograph  
all broken markers and  
cemetery features.  
Above: Hays County  
Right: Henderson County*

## TAKING ACTION

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Continue caring for historic cemeteries by becoming an RIP Guardian. The letters RIP are commonly found carved on gravestones, bidding the deceased an earthly wish for eternal rest in peace. RIP is also the THC's cemetery preservation initiative: Record, Investigate, Protect. The THC's RIP Guardian Program helps local volunteers take charge of neglected historic cemeteries across Texas by providing

educational materials, training and assistance to preserve these important cultural resources.

Circumstances can change quickly—a cemetery considered maintained and safe can soon become neglected and endangered. The best course of action is to foster a strong sense of stewardship for historic burial places.

The statewide RIP Guardian Program empowers local groups with proper cemetery restoration and preservation techniques they can share with others. Local RIP Guardians have the opportunity to participate in and to help preserve Texas history in a unique way that will directly enhance the role of historic preservation in their communities.

To be included in the RIP Guardian Program, a historic cemetery must either be designated a Historic Texas Cemetery or be determined by the THC to qualify as an eligible property under the criteria for designation. RIP Guardians develop local support. Volunteer groups and associations, civic leaders, business owners, families, individuals and local elected officials should be included for a united group effort. Participants learn appropriate cleaning techniques and practice sensitive maintenance.

We urge you to become an RIP Guardian. Fill out the form on the next page and return it to the THC to join and receive further assistance and recognition.



**TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION**  
*real places telling real stories*

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P.O. BOX 12276 • AUSTIN, TX 78711-2276  
PHONE 512.463.6100 • FAX 512.475.8222

[www.thc.state.tx.us](http://www.thc.state.tx.us)

# BECOME AN RIP GUARDIAN

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Complete the information below to receive help and recognition for your cemetery preservation project. Mail or fax to:

Texas Historical Commission  
RIP Guardian Program  
P.O. Box 12276  
Austin TX 78711-2276.  
Fax: 512.463.5750



Primary cemetery name \_\_\_\_\_

Additional cemetery names \_\_\_\_\_

Cemetery address or nearest crossroads \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Date of first burial \_\_\_\_\_

County \_\_\_\_\_

Approximate number of RIP Guardian group members \_\_\_\_\_

RIP Guardian group coordinator \_\_\_\_\_

RIP Guardian group coordinator mailing address, city and zip code

\_\_\_\_\_

Daytime phone number \_\_\_\_\_

Email address \_\_\_\_\_

Affiliation with cemetery \_\_\_\_\_





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