
CONSERVATION TALK

Michael Trinkley
Chicora Foundation, Inc.
trinkley@chicora.org

This month I'd like to focus on something I haven't spent enough time talking about—the landscape. Everyone interested in cemetery preservation needs to understand that preservation is multi-dimensional. The preservation of cemeteries requires more than simple repair of broken stones, just as the conservation of artwork requires more than repair of stretchers or infill of lost paint. The artwork must be stored and cared for properly. The same is true of cemeteries. Without educating owners and without improving the care given to these properties, we will never be able to repair stones quickly enough to ensure the preservation of the resource into the next century.

I see the failure to adequately maintain the landscape in virtually every cemetery I visit. Let's briefly look at the top 10 problems.

Mowing that is too aggressive. The wrong equipment is used, the equipment is used carelessly and there is little effort to clean up after mowing. These problems can be traced back to inadequate training, poor supervision and using equipment meant for parks and recreation spaces, not tightly packed urban cemeteries. Using large deck mowers in a historic cemetery is a recipe for disaster. The equipment can't be navigated among fragile stones and over the frequent coping. Needless damage to historic monuments that is expensive to repair results. Large mowers also scalp the grass, opening the turf to weeds. And while mulching is typically good, stones must be kept clean out of respect to the deceased and their families. This means removing grass clippings and picking up mowed plastic flowers.



Mowing too close, improper type of mower, or mowing improperly can result in scalping the grass. This leads to the grass dying and opens ground up to erosion and weeds.



The use of large deck mowers results in staff jumping coping and will ultimately lead to disaster.



Rather than mow around this footstone the staff is simply mowing over it—and taking part of the stone off with each mowing.

The use of nylon trimmers is also too aggressive. The trimmer line is too heavy and crews are too heavy handed. Technicians like heavy line because of its cutting ability and longevity, but the heavier lines can damage soft, friable historic stones. Inattentive employees can exacerbate this damage. While trimming will always be necessary in historic cemeteries where mowers can't operate easily, the work must be precise.



This stone shows the damage caused by improper use of nylon trimmers. The line is so heavy and the trimmer is use so close to the stone, that the marble is being cut away.

The use of herbicides rather than trimming is an attempt to find a simple solution to a complex problem. Chemicals may be quicker, but herbicides include salts that are disastrous to stone. The chemicals gradually wick into the stone and cause spalling and deterioration, especially of marble and sandstone (although even granite can be affected over time). The destruction of groundcover also results in additional rain-generated erosion, creating saucers around stones that collect water and cause even greater damage.



Here an herbicide has been applied along the fence rather than using a nylon trimmer; the dead grass distracts from the beauty of the landscape.



The use of herbicide around stones creates “dead zones” that erode, creating depressions. The stone is affected by not only the salts in the herbicide, but also by additional rain erosion.

Shrubs are ignored. This results in overgrown, weedy specimens that detract from rather than enhance the cemetery landscape. Often it becomes difficult to determine what is shrub and what is junk.

When shrubs aren't ignored they are typically **butchered by untrained technicians** or volunteers. The overuse of shears—or even improper use of nylon trimmers—results in fanciful shapes that are entirely inappropriate for the historic landscape. Or the plants are carved to allow stones to be read, entirely destroying the plant's shape and form.



Is it a planting or a weed? The shrubbery in this plot has been ignored for so long it is impossible to tell.



Arbor vitae is a classic cemetery tree, but it is often inappropriately pruned, resulting in the beautiful shape being ruined.

Not everyone is sufficiently skilled to correctly prune—as this sad example illustrates.



Caregivers fail to deal with erosion and other lawn problems. Mowing dirt is not only unproductive, but it devalues service and skill. Erosion detracts from the beauty and dignity of the cemetery and never resolves itself. It requires intervention by skilled professionals. Similarly, turf areas that are compacted, weedy or moss covered all evidence problems that require attention before they spread.



This erosion is not only unsightly, but is beginning to undermine a ledger, causing a hazard to pedestrians and increasing the chance that the cemetery will need a costly stone repair.

Incorrect plantings—often promoted by garden clubs and even landscape architects. Some plants are just wrong for the cemetery, growing too tall, spreading out too much or requiring care they will never receive. Other plants are not necessarily wrong, but their locations were poorly thought out. A 1-gallon shrub planted a foot from a stone may look good when initially planted, but will cause problems for years to come as it continues to grow into and around the monument.



This crepe myrtle was beautiful when planted in the cradle grave. Now, years later, it is destroying the monument.

Everywhere there is a **failure to deal with volunteer growth**. Many historic cemeteries are plagued by trees tearing apart fences and toppling stones. Most of these problems could have been handled with a pair of hand clippers during routine mowing or trimming.



This tree has not yet caused irreparable damage and could be easily removed.



This cedar could have been relocated or removed before it grew into this stone. Now either the stone or the landscape must suffer.

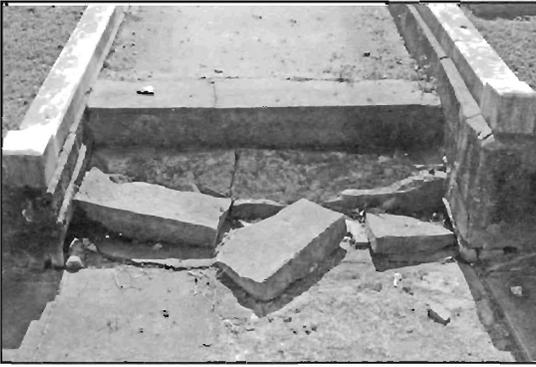
The **hardscape is ignored** or poorly maintained. We find benches that are collapsing, hose bibs that are leaking and walkways deteriorating to the point of being a liability. A cemetery's hardscape requires just as much care and maintenance as grass and shrubs. Weekly walkabouts are critical to allow careful inspection of features that may not be noticed otherwise. These also provide an opportunity to carefully inspect overall landscape conditions and evaluate possible problems.



This sand filled plot is not only an eye sore, but it will quickly grow up in weeds. Sand and gravel plots require even more maintenance than grassed plots.



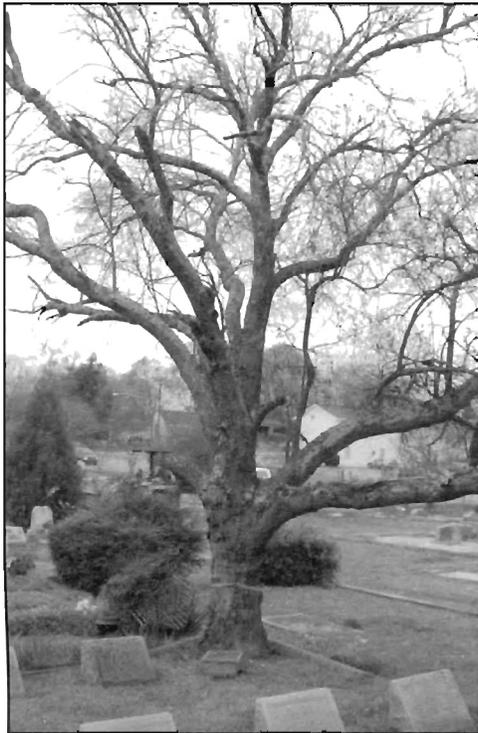
Sinking new grave.
The failure of the staff to immediately notice and correct this problem reflects poorly on the cemetery and poses a significant public hazard.



Damaged concrete steps.

The hardscape also requires maintenance and steps should never be allowed to deteriorate to this point.

There is also a **fixation on horizontal landscaping**, with no attention devoted to the vertical components. Cemeteries engage only in reactive pruning of trees. There is no attention paid to trees that are covered in poison ivy. Issues such as crossed limbs, deadwood and obvious disease are ignored. Rarely are ISA Certified Arborists used.



This tree has been dead for so long that much of its bark has been lost. It poses a significant threat to the public as well as to the monuments in the cemetery.

This tree has been nearly taken over by poison ivy. It poses a hazard to cemetery visitors and will eventually kill the tree.



The problem can be attributed to a lack of adequate funding—but this is an oversimplification. The problem also involves a lack of training, a lack of supervision and a lack of care.

We need to combine a broader appreciation of the Secretary of Interior Standards for Preservation (http://www.nps.gov/hps/tps/standguide/preserve/preserve_standards.htm) with a better understanding of good landscaping practices. As those concerned with the long-term preservation of cemeteries, we need to begin focusing on preventative actions that incorporate good landscape maintenance rather than reactive approaches that emphasize costly repair techniques.

Certainly part of education is also to seek out alternative approaches—the use of trained volunteers, for example, to supplement scarce governmental or contract workers. We need to refocus attention on what is important, encouraging more attention to landscape maintenance by volunteers, and less attention on how the public can clean stones in the local cemetery.

We also need to educate staff, caregivers and the public to reject high maintenance options. Not every cemetery requires paved roads, not every graveyard must be mowed weekly during the growing season and not every burial ground demands the same level of weed control. Plot owners should be either educated, or if that fails, restrained from planting on their plot. Where landscape plans are developed, we should require that they be reviewed in terms of weekly, seasonal and yearly maintenance costs—by individuals capable of providing realistic estimates.

Caring for the landscape correctly is an integral part of a preventative conservation program. So let's begin to focus on the plantings that affect the monuments in our cemeteries. ♦