

MONUMENT MAINTENANCE --

Our first recommendation is that you attend a workshop in the process of cleaning gravestones or contact your local monument company for the proper way to clean gravestones. There are various opinions on how to clean grave markers. Most recommend that every ten years is the most often grave markers should be cleaned.

While it is best to hire a professional, some families prefer to clean the stones themselves. The safest way to clean stones is to use good old fashioned elbow grease, which includes a mild soap, water and a stiff scrub brush. Avoid wire brushes as they may cause chipping or other damage. Do not use metal tools, as those items can cause damage to the gravestone. Wooden or plastic scrapers are good to use to remove lichens and moss. Using natural-bristled, wooden handled brushes of various sizes. Toothbrushes are a good tool to use as well as the scrub brushes. Wooden picks, such as toothpicks or shish kabob skewers are also useful.

Do not clean slate stones that have begun to peel or chip. Do not clean limestone or sandstone more than once every 18 months. Every cleaning removes some of the face of the stone. However, occasionally rinsing with clean water to remove bird droppings and other accretions is acceptable.

Pressure washers should NOT be used to clean any gravestone/marker. Pressure washers, even the smaller household types, can etch stone over time and can lead to cracking. Many of the newer stones have darkened lettering (paint) and pressure washing may remove it.

It is best to use a non-ionic cleaner to clean headstones. These cleaners are available at various locations that sell photography, janitorial and conservations supplies. They do not produce the salts that can be harmful and leave additional staining. They also aid in the wetting of masonry so that the soil and dirt can be removed more effectively. Choose your cleaning product carefully and always test a small, hidden area first to ensure it creates the desired results. At Russellville Oakland Cemetery, we now use a product called D2 cleaner. We have found it to be the most effective and yet a gentle cleaner.

Though the specialized cleaners may be more expensive, they are more effective and better designed for cleaning these stones than regular household granite cleaners. Wet the entire stone to remove any loose dirt, then keep the stone as wet as possible throughout the entire washing process. When cleaning marble or limestone, one tablespoon of household ammonia can be added to help remove some greases and oils.

Do not use ammonia on or near any bronze or other metal elements. Lichens and algae can be removed by first thoroughly soaking the stone and then using a wooden or plastic scraper to gently remove the biological growth. This process may need to be repeated several times.

Remember, not all stains can be removed by nonprofessionals, so the stone may not look like new after cleaning.