

AGS Field Guide No. 5: Gravestone Rubbing for Beginners



*Documentation Series—designed to complement the
AGS Graveyard Preservation Primer*



Including:

- **Information on materials needed**
- **Choosing a stone**
- **Rubbing “do’s and don’ts”**
- **Resources**

Gravestone Rubbing for Beginners
Jessie Lie Farber

What is a gravestone rubbing?

Rubbing is what you did as a child when you placed a scrap of paper over a coin and brought up the coin's design by covering the paper with pencil strokes. Using different materials, this technique can be used to reproduce the relief design of any surface. It is an ancient technique which originated in the Orient and which, like etching and other printing techniques, is employed by artists today to make original prints. Using this technique to make a print of the carving in a gravestone is *gravestone rubbing*.

Why make a rubbing?

A gravestone rubbing is an excellent document, accurately reproducing, life-size, the design and surface condition of the stone. Rubbings are, therefore, useful as records. Some rubbings are works of art in their own right and are in the collections of galleries and museums. Unfortunately, most rubbings are ephemeral novelties, souvenirs, which find their way to dorm and den walls on their way to the waste basket—hardly a justification for encouraging the novice rubber, armed with coloring materials, to try his hand on handsome and vulnerable old gravestones.

The Association for Gravestone Studies offers this introduction to gravestone rubbing because the increasing popularity of the activity without guidance is a threat to the stones. In addition, it is our hope that getting to know the stones through rubbing will encourage respectful interest in them and result in strong community support for their care.

Materials Needed

Kits containing rubbing supplies are sold at stationery and art shops in areas where stone rubbing is popular. However, all you really need for a good start are the following items:

- Masking tape.

- Scissors for cutting your paper.
- A bottle of water and soft brush for gently cleaning dust and bird droppings from the stone.
- Paper. For the beginner, an average weight wrapping paper works well and is cheap. Later, you may want to try a rice paper, vellum tissue or even a thin pellon (interfacing material).
- Rubbing wax or lumberman's chalk. Rubbing wax is available in many art supply stores. I prefer the inexpensive lumberman's chalk found in most hardware stores. If you use chalk, you may want to spray your finished rubbing to prevent smearing. Art stores carry fixing spray.

Choosing a Stone

Beginners often choose stones from which a good rubbing cannot be made. If you choose a "good" stone, you have an excellent chance of producing a satisfying and encouraging print on your first try. Avoid rough stones, stones that are eroded or otherwise damaged, stones on which there is lichen. To get a good, clean-line print, the stone carving must be sharply but not deeply cut. Rounded, high relief carving will cause you to tear the paper as you rub, and you will risk defacing the stone with color. Note any hollowness or separation or flaking on the surface of the stone. Any pressure or friction on the face of an unsound stone can seriously damage it.

Procedure

- Cut a piece of paper considerably larger than the stone or the part of the stone that you plan to rub. Be generous with the paper; it protects the stone from your chalk or wax.
- Tape the paper tightly and securely to the clean stone. It is best to fold the paper over the sides and top of the stone and tape its edges to the back of the stone.
- Using the broad, flat area of your chalk or wax, lightly stroke the paper and watch the design appear. When you can see the design rather well, use the end of your chalk stick or wax bar to fill in and darken your print. You will decide when your rubbing satisfies you and is finished.

- Remove your print and put it where it will be protected from sudden showers or gusts of wind while you are in the graveyard.

You will want to record the name of the deceased, death date, location of the graveyard, and the date on which the rubbing was taken. If you rub only the ornamental carving rather than the whole stone, you may want to copy the stone's full inscription for your record.

Caution and Responsibility

As you practice and improve your skills, you will probably try other techniques and materials, eventually choosing for yourself those which best suit your rubbing style and your taste. A first and vital consideration as you experiment with materials and techniques is the protection of the stones. Some papers and coloring materials allow color to penetrate onto the stone. Experiment elsewhere. Do not use questionable methods on the gravestones.

Because old gravestones are an important part of our national heritage, you should be as careful with them as you are when handling other ancient folk art treasures. Many rubbers are not careful. For this reason, some cemetery associations do not allow stone rubbing. Some require the rubber to register. You will want to respect the graveyard's requirements and leave the stones and the area as you found them.

SOME GRAVESTONE RUBBING DO'S AND DON'TS

Please **DO**—

- Check to see if rubbing is allowed in the cemetery.
- Get permission and/or a permit, as required.
- Rub only solid stones in good condition.
- Become educated; learn how to rub responsibly before rubbing a gravestone.

- Use a soft brush and plain water to do any necessary stone cleaning.
- Make certain your rubbing paper covers a larger area than where you will be rubbing.
- Avoid magic marker-type pens or other permanent color materials that could bleed through your paper.
- Test paper before working on a stone to be certain that no color bleeds through.
- Rub gently, carefully.
- Leave the stone and graveyard in better condition than you found it.
- Take all trash with you.

Please DON'T—

- Don't attempt to rub deteriorating marble or sandstone, or any unsound or weakened stone (for example, a stone that sounds hollow when gently tapped or a stone that is flaking, splitting, blistered, cracked, or unstable on its base).
- Don't use detergents, soaps, vinegar, bleach, or any other cleaning solutions on the stone, no matter how mild!
- Don't use shaving cream, chalk, graphite, dirt, or other concoctions in an attempt to read worn inscriptions. Using a large mirror to direct bright sunlight diagonally across the face of a gravemarker casts shadows in indentations and makes inscriptions more visible.
- Don't use stiff-bristled or wire brushes, putty knives, nail files, or any metal object to clean or to remove lichen from the stone; soft natural bristled brushes, whisk brooms, or wooden sticks are usually fine if used carefully.
- Don't attempt to remove stubborn lichen. Soft lichen may be thoroughly soaked with plain water and then loosened with a gum eraser or a wooden Popsicle stick. Be gentle. Stop if lichen does not come off easily.

- Don't use spray adhesives, scotch tape, or duct tape. Use masking tape.
- Don't leave masking tape, wastepaper, colors, etc., at the grave site.

Resources for rubbing materials and kits:

The Center for Thanatology Research
 391 Atlantic Ave
 Brooklyn, NY 11217-1701
 (718) 858-3026 e-mail: rhalporn@pipeline.com

Gravestone Artwear
 P.O. Box 141
 York Harbor, ME 03911-0141
 (800) 564-4310 www.gravestoneartwear.com



From the Sophia Nurse stone,
 Bolton, Mass..
 Illustration by Gary Smith

Cover photo by John O'Brien

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1. Analyzing Cemetery Data
2. Cemeteries Listed in the National Register of Historic Places
3. Guide to Forming a Cemetery Friends Organization
4. Cleaning Masonry Burial Monuments
5. Gravestone Rubbing for Beginners
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7. Photographing Gravestones
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14. Instructions for Creating a New Base
15. Recommendations for the Care of Gravestones
16. What to Do When you Find a “Lost” Gravestone
17. Recording Cemetery Data
18. Discussion and Research Topics

A complete listing of publications and more information about the Association are available from:

The Association for Gravestone Studies
278 Main St., Ste 207, Greenfield, MA 01301, 413/772-0836
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