(+) The Cheap and Easy Way to Find an Ancestor's Grave

The following article is from Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter

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If you own a smartphone (Android or iPhone), you already have all the hardware needed to easily locate cemeteries and, in many cases, even go quickly to specific tombstones within each cemetery. You will need a bit of software, but that is available free of charge from several vendors. You will also need to spend a bit of time online, preparing for the trip.

To find a tombstone, first look on these two great genealogy resources: Find-A-Grave and BillionGraves. Not all tombstones have been catalogued on those two sites yet; but there are millions of tombstones listed so far, and more are being added daily. If you do not find what you want on either of those two web sites, there are other available resources as well.

Find-A-Grave

Find-A-Grave at http://www.findagrave.com is the original and, so far, the largest catalog of indexed tombstone locations. It was started by one individual but later purchased by Ancestry.com and now operates as a division of that company. In fact, when you mentioned a "tombstone database," Find-A-Grave is usually the one that most genealogists think of first. To find a tombstone, use the search capability in http://www.findagrave.com.

Find-A-Grave started out as a text database containing only words. However, the capability to upload pictures was later added, and now a mobile app for iPhones and Android phones has added the capability to snap a picture of a tombstone and immediately upload it (or upload later if a network connection is not available in the cemetery). The picture and text even include the exact latitude and longitude where the picture was taken, a boon for future genealogists using GPS tools as described later in this article.

The same mobile app can also be used to search for existing entries within the Find-A-Grave database, including latitude and longitude when available. Once the desired grave is located in the database, the user can then copy the latitude and longitude to a GPS app (described later in this article) to guide the user directly to the tombstone location. All you need is a GPS device or a GPS app installed in your iPhone or Android phone. This is a big help in large cemeteries!

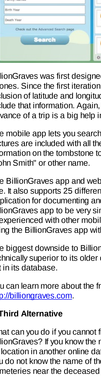
The Find-A-Grave mobile app has many other features as well and is available free of charge. An Ancestry.com subscription is not required to use it. You can learn more about the Find-A-Grave mobile apps for Apple iOS and for Android at http://www.findagrave.com/mobileapp/?ref=banner1.

The downside of Find-A-Grave is that many of the database entries were created years ago, before the availability of adding pictures and before the automatic inclusion of latitude and longitude in a mobile app. Even today, some users of Find-A-Grave are adding new entries in the old manner, without latitude and longitude and occasionally without pictures. As a result, not all entries provide full information.

You can learn more about Find-A-Grave at http://www.findagrave.com.

BillionGraves

BillionGraves is a newer online database of tombstone locations. The goal of the company is to document and geo-locate every headstone in the world. That goal has not yet been completed, but millions of tombstones are listed within the database, including pictures and geographic coordinates of each one.



BillionGraves was first designed around a mobile app for iPhones and Android phones. Since the first iteration of BillionGraves supported photographs and the inclusion of latitude and longitude information, all entries on BillionGraves.com include that information. Again, knowing the precise location of a tombstone in advance of a trip is a big help in large cemeteries!

The mobile app lets you search for your ancestors' tombstone locations. Since pictures are included with all the entries, you can look for other identifying information on the tombstone to see if the image you are looking at is the correct "John Smith" or other name.

The BillionGraves app and website are available free of charge and are simple to use. It also supports 25 different languages, so it is the best international application for documenting and preserving headstone information. I found the BillionGraves app to be very simple to use. Any experienced genealogist who also is experienced with other mobile apps on a cell phone can download and start using the BillionGraves app within a couple of minutes.

The biggest downside to BillionGraves is that it is a newer service and, while technically superior to its older competitor, it doesn't have nearly as many entries yet in its database.

You can learn more about the free BillionGraves service and its mobile apps at http://billiongraves.com.

A Third Alternative

What can you do if you cannot find the desired tombstone in either Find-A-Grave or BillionGraves? If you know the name of the cemetery, you can almost always find its location in another online database. That will at least get you to the cemetery. If you do not know the name of the cemetery, you still can probably find all the cemeteries near the deceased person's home.

The **Geographic Names Information System (GNIS)** database can be very helpful here. It was developed by the U.S. Geological Survey in cooperation with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN). It contains information about almost 2 million physical and cultural geographic features in the United States. The GNIS identifies the federally recognized name of each feature described in the database and provides references to each feature's state and county, as well as its exact latitude and longitude. It lists villages, towns, cities, rivers, mountains, airports, beaches and, best of all for us genealogists, cemeteries.

You can find a location in the GNIS database and then click on an icon to display a map of that area on your computer screen. There is still one more interesting feature: clicking on another icon will allow you to view a spy satellite photograph of the area.

All is not perfect, however. While nearly every named village, every city and airport is listed in the U.S. government's database, not every cemetery is listed. For instance, it does not list the small, rural cemetery where my father, mother, son, and several of my aunts, uncles, and cousins are buried. In fact, I also plan to spend eternity in this same unlisted cemetery. (I can add the cemetery's location and other information to the GNIS database, however.)

The more common experience is that you will find your target. For instance, I know that my great-grandparents are buried in Pine Grove Cemetery in Bangor, Maine. The GNIS describes Pine Grove Cemetery as being in Penobscot County at 44 degrees, 47 minutes, and 54 seconds North, and 68 degrees, 49 minutes, 40 seconds West. If you know the name of the desired cemetery but not the town, the GNIS database will find all cemeteries of that name in the state. If you wish, the database will also list all the cemeteries in the county.

Even though a number of cemeteries are not listed., I noted that those that are listed often include even the tiniest of cemeteries that contain only two or three tombstones located on someone's farm. For instance, I found a database listing for a cemetery that I found by accident years ago. It is a handful of tombstones now covered with brush, located deep in the woods, two or three miles from any modern-day road. It was once the location of an active farm, but the farm, the fields, and even the road leading to the farm have since disappeared as brush and trees took over. If I were to view the spy satellite photograph of this location, the distance to a current road would be clear. However, the tombstones in the brush probably would not be visible in the satellite photo.

In short, you won't know if the cemetery you seek is listed or not until you search the database.

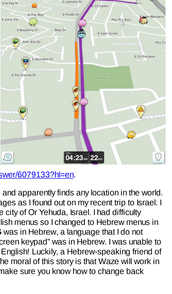
The Geographic Names Information System is available online at: http://geonames.usgs.gov/.

How to Travel to the Cemetery

GPS (Global Positioning System) receivers were once rare and expensive devices. Like many other items in technology, prices have plummeted. You may have a GPS receiver built into the dashboard of your automobile. You also may already own a handheld GPS device.

Even better, all iPhones and most Android phones also include GPS receivers. If you have such a cell phone, you will have to download an app to add GPS capabilities. Some of them cost money, but others are available free of charge. My current favorite is **Waze**, a free app available for both iPhones and Android phones.

Waze has many uses. It was designed primarily as a community-based traffic and navigation app. It provides turn-by-turn driving instructions as you travel to any location you wish.It works well for finding street addresses, named buildings, parks, hospitals, ATMs, and more. However, it also works well for finding cemeteries, tombstones, or any other location where you can first identify a latitude and longitude.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