

Headstone Photo Volunteers

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Volunteering your time to photograph cemetery headstones is a valuable service. Headstones preserve the names and spelling used by the next of kin. They also document birth and death dates. Many modern headstones also include a marriage date, spouse's name, children's names, or give indication of hobbies. Unfortunately, these stones deteriorate over time and information can be lost. Families move away and don't have the ability to travel to old family gravesites. This is where photo volunteers step in.

Residents local to the cemetery in question can accept a photo request, take the photo, and upload it to the Find a Grave website to share it with researchers. Anyone can make or fill a photo request. There are no minimum obligations to be a photo volunteer. You can take one photo or one thousand, and entirely on your own timetable. Headstones are a reliable, original source of family history information. Be someone else's family history mystery-buster by volunteering your time to photograph headstones near you.

This is a great activity for families, youth groups, or individuals. Requests are made all throughout the year and all over the country, from all over the world. When you submit photos, it's not unusual to get messages from the person who requested the photo. If you request a photo yourself, sending a note of thanks is a nice gesture.

Once photos are posted to an individual memorial on findagrave.com, researchers can copy and repost the pictures on other genealogy websites.

How to contribute to Find A Grave as a Photo Volunteer:

1. Create an account online at findagrave.com.
2. Click on “Contribute” in the top header.
3. Select the camera icon labeled “Photo Requests.”
4. Sort the data as it is helpful to you. Try narrowing it down to a single cemetery.
5. Claim the graves you intend to find by selecting the green button next to the name.
6. Download the list of your claims. This will reveal any comments from the people making the photo requests. You have 14 days to complete the request or your claim expires.
7. Find the headstones and take a good photo. Finding the stones may require contacting the cemetery office for plot numbers.
8. Go back to your account at findagrave.com and select Profile. This will bring up a list of your claims. Alternatively, you can get to your claims through the Contribute tab, then Photo Requests; look for “Requests I Claimed.”
9. Upload your photos one at a time and fulfill the requests. Uploading a photo will automatically notify the requester that the photo is available to view.

If you can't find a grave:

It might be unmarked, the wrong plot number, the wrong cemetery, or a different name. Instead of uploading a photo, report a problem by clicking on the little flag icon next to the name. You can choose a statement like “Cemetery office verified the grave is unmarked” or “I searched the stated plot and couldn't find the grave.” You can also add comments; be specific! Include the date you searched. Marking a problem also notifies the requester. If the person died within a year of your searching, there is a likely chance a stone hasn't been placed yet. Cemetery offices can assist in further solving the mystery, but you are not obligated to solve these problems as a photo volunteer.

Helpful tips:

- Check the profile of the person first to see if a photograph of the stone has already been added. Sometimes people make requests, hoping for images of the person alive, when headstone photos are already posted. Obviously, photo volunteers can't unearth baby and wedding photos. If this is so, flag the name and report that a gravestone photo is already posted.
- Make your first visit to the cemetery during business hours (if it has them) to get maps from the office. Also, some cemeteries get locked up at dusk. Inquire!
- Pets are not welcome guests at the cemetery. Leave them home while you volunteer. Human children, however, are very welcome and useful companions in searching!
- Take along a few tools: a hand broom to brush away grass and dirt, an old sheet or umbrella to create even shade across the stone, and hand clippers to trip away overgrown grass. Of course, a good quality camera is also required. Most smartphone cameras are sufficient.
- Photograph the whole stone, and then zoom in for detail work. You can add additional photos to a memorial with closeups of any details that are harder to read.
- If you don't claim the photo request and just upload a photo to the memorial, the person who made the request will not be notified and the request will not be cleared out.
- Avoid the cemetery mid-day when most graveside services are being held and light is harshest on the stone.
- Check the orientation of your photo before you upload it. Some camera phones rotate the image, and the grave will appear upside down on the website.