

Old Family Gravestones

Beware of the "Well Intentioned" Ignorance
of Others

By Millie Chappelle

This is written not only to describe an unfortunate situation for my own family records but to encourage others to monitor their family heritage in the burial grounds of their ancestors.

It had been 10 years since my last visit when In October of 2006 I traveled across four states and visited the cemetery [Gassville Cemetery, Baxter Co., Arkansas] where many of my family are buried **only to discover that many older tombstones had been painted with a thick white material which I later learned was white Portland cement.** Five gravestones of my family were among those mutilated markers; that of my great aunt who died in 1896, my great uncle in 1906, my great grandfather in 1916, my grandmother in 1921 and my infant sister in 1934.

I don't know when this was done. In the case of the mutilation to my family gravestones, it happened after 1995 and before 2006, but I have been told by people at two local monument companies that this **painting of gravestones at this cemetery has been 'going on' for some time**, which alarmed me as that indicated it was an ongoing practice.

I was told that **a man 'helping' at the cemetery had decided they would 'look better' and the 'flowers would show up real pretty'**, and so proceeded to ruin many beautiful old marble monuments, those of my family among them.

These stones mark the graves of my family I know only thru memories passed on in stories I heard all my life, and are a large part of my family heritage --

- how my great uncle taught my father to read

- that my father's only sister was named for his aunt.
- My grandmother who died of cancer at age 46 and was loved by many in the community in addition to her devoted husband and children. I have seen my father weep on Mother's Day when she was remembered. My father idolized his grandfather who was a very strong influence forming his character.
- And my baby sister, born when I was less than 2 years old. I know of her primarily by the sadness in my mother's face and in her voice when she mentioned 'my baby who died'.

Therefore, this defacing of their graves is a personal insult to me and to my family!

When I discovered this desecration, I contacted the state's Historic Preservation Program and requested information as to what could remedy this horrid situation I was informed that nothing could be done to remove this white cement, and that it's desirable properties were that it was very white and long lasting and nothing could be done. This group supplied me with information regarding the state codes as to cemetery desecration (which is a felony).

The four marble markers had been in perfect condition, the exception being that of my great grandfather which was of a different type stone that had cracked and which I replaced with a Confederate veteran's marker

And after being told the damage could not be reversed, and unwilling to let these family gravestones remain in this desecrated condition, I began to search for suitable replacements although I hated the thought of replacing these lovely old monuments with new ones and the cost of replacing the tall upright markers would be extremely expensive, as they are of a 'vintage' design and not now a standard or common production size. One owner of a monument company

said he felt the stones could be salvaged although it would be necessary to grind away all of the surfaces erasing the beautiful patina of the old marble and the carving details on the original markers would be lost forever. We nevertheless agreed that he would remove the gravestones to his facility and make the attempt at salvage. His efforts were successful and the appropriate names and dates were re-cut and the gravestones were returned to the graves.

I felt that restoration was preferable to replacement with new tombstones. Those markers were placed there at the time of their death by my family and should have remained there until they turned to dust. **A gravestone is an enduring symbol; tangible evidence of our devotion and respect for our departed family members** and all tombstones should be treated with respect and should not be disturbed.

I believe that any gravestone, even a simple fieldstone with illegible marking, should not be disturbed. From my research, I believe that the only action a cemetery custodian can properly take with regard to a tombstone is to set it upright if it has fallen over. Any other actions relative to grave markers must be at the request, order and/or permission by the family of the deceased. The people who tried to “improve” the appearance of gravestones were, apparently, ignorant of the fact that they had no right to do this and that it is considered desecration.

Millie Chappelle
missmillie@knology.net

[Is there interest in an article about the proper care of gravestones? Please let the Editor know.]



Y. H. Barton
1995 original condition



After defacement
[Editor's note: shocking!]

(see next page for “After Restoration”)



After restoration



Alia Barton Johnson
1995 original condition



After defacement



After restoration

[These examples are just two of seven defaced family markers.]

Young Henry Barton is ID #I1349 at www.bartondatabase.info