

Reading Old Cemetery Stones

I've heard of several methods for reading information on old grave stones such as rubbing charcoal on cloth, or dusting the stone with flour, but I'm convinced that these won't hold a candle to a method that we recently discovered by accident. Last summer my wife and I were visiting several small cemeteries in Ohio looking for ancestors from her family. One day it was nearly dark when we arrived at a small, well kept cemetery near Zanesville. As the evening light faded, we had just enough time to find the family plots that we wanted to see, but when we found them it was too dark to read any of the stones. Unwilling to give up, I got a flash light from the car and we were very pleased to discover that many of the oldest grave stones are much easier to read in the dark! All you need is a good strong flashlight held very nearly parallel to the face of the stone. This allows the relief of the lettering to be nicely cast into shadows. As you move the light up and down and from side to side, many old stones that are practically illegible during the day become wonderfully clear and easy to read.

Later that same trip I decided that I would try this same method in the day time. At a different cemetery in Illinois, my daughter and I found a family grave site with another very old stone of importance to our research. I went to the car and got the flash light, but this time I also brought a large heavy quilt. I covered the stone and myself with the quilt, and my daughter worked as a scribe. Again, I was able to read the stone with wonderful clarity using the shadows cast by the flash light in the darkness under the quilt. I have to admit that it was not very comfortable under that quilt in the middle of the summer, but the result was well worth the effort. This method also leaves the lettering on fragile old stones untouched and completely undamaged. For this reason it is highly preferable to many other methods.

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