



# Society Strategies

Federation of Genealogical Societies

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Series Set I Number 27

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Set I Strategies for Societies  
GPS Locating Cemeteries  
Making Cemeteries Easy to Find

by Duane V. Kniebes

## Supplemental Page

This strategy paper, written some years ago, is an FGS *Classic* that contains ideas and strategies still relevant today in society management.

This paper describes a genealogy society's work GPS locating cemeteries, an example of a project that can unify a genealogy society while providing a real service to the genealogical community.

The information on page 4 which directs the interested person on how to obtain copies of this paper is incorrect. The FGS office no longer reprints the SSS papers, and has phased out paper copies of the SSS papers altogether.

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## Set I Strategies for Societies

### GPS Locating Cemeteries Making Cemeteries Easy to Find

by Duane V. Kniebes

It's a thrilling moment when a genealogist discovers an ancestor's grave.

Genealogical societies have been instrumental in the dissemination of cemetery information. Society volunteers have compiled innumerable gravestone inscriptions, tracked the locations of gravesites and documented their inscriptions, and published cemetery locations and gravesites within the societies' geographic areas. Without the widespread publication of cemetery information underwritten by society funds, provided by the work of society volunteers, and propelled by the enthusiasm of project leaders, the opportunity to visit our ancestors' final resting places would be a more complicated endeavor.

Computers and high-tech tools make our searches easier. On the Internet, there are numerous websites that list cemeteries, along with their locations, driving directions, and other pertinent information. Using GPS technology, a society can publish cemetery locations in even more precise terms.

#### WHAT IS GPS?

GPS stands for *Global Positioning System*. GPS receivers, which calculate geographic locations by triangulating timed signals from earth-orbiting satellites, are commonly available, easy to use, and relatively inexpensive. They display the longitude and latitude coordinates of a geographic location. These coordinates are a common feature of many maps, including the U.S. Geological Survey's topographic maps, and are easy to interpret.

Handheld GPS instruments allow volunteers to pinpoint a location within a hundred feet. With this latitude/longitude information, anyone can plot a location on a map that displays such data, or, by using the "Go To" command on a GPS instrument, be directed to the spot. This takes the frustration out of finding an old cemetery and lets the genealogist do what he or she really came to do.

#### THE PROJECT

The problem remains of first finding isolated cemeteries or remote burials for which we want to determine GPS readings. Dedicated volunteers

who are willing to travel and search for cemeteries the hard way are the key to success of such grave-locating projects. The best candidates are people who are sincerely interested in the goals in the project and who understand that accomplishing those goals may require a considerable amount of time. Genealogical and historical societies are frequently the best places to find such volunteers.

To spearhead the project, select a project coordinator and then create a steering committee. The first task for the committee is to set the project's objectives. These can include determining the total geographic area that will be covered by the project—such as “the state of Colorado”—and then determining the details that will be recorded for each cemetery. If a directory of burials has already been published, then volunteers can use this as a method of locating previously identified tombstones and cemeteries. In addition to verifying—and possibly correcting—these previously transcribed stones, volunteers can add newer burials and include GPS information on every tombstone that is canvassed.

The area to be covered can be as small as a single county or as large as an entire state—though any project should not be so large as to cause volunteers to fear that completion is an impossible task. Particular interests of the sponsoring group also will help determine the area to be surveyed. Volunteers will need to gain experience in using the GPS receivers and in collating the GPS data. This is best done on a smaller scale—perhaps having any new volunteers canvas a well-known cemetery in the local area.

Information collected for each cemetery should include:

- ◆ The name of the cemetery, plus any alternate names.
- ◆ The name of the owner of the cemetery.
- ◆ The name of the sexton or managing organization, or indications that there is no one

maintaining the cemetery.

- ◆ The address of the cemetery and directions on how to get there.
- ◆ Notes on the cemetery size, especially if there are only a few burials.
- ◆ The status of the cemetery: active, inactive, or abandoned.
- ◆ The latitude and longitude in degrees, minutes, and seconds at the center of the cemetery. (See below for more information about the GNIS database.)
- ◆ Note any published materials available about the cemetery.
- ◆ Record the legal description: section, township, range, and principal meridian, as determined from the applicable USGS topographic map.

A nice touch is to include a photograph of each cemetery entrance to aid in its identification for future researchers. Another useful effort is to record the headstone inscriptions in small cemeteries. This is especially valuable in the case of abandoned, difficult-to-access burial sites, but recording tombstone inscriptions may not be the primary objective of the project, especially if transcriptions have been recently accomplished.

A single 8½ by 11 inch form, designed by the project coordinator and the committee, should be provided to the volunteers who will visit the cemeteries. After visiting the cemetery and recording the required information, the volunteers will then return the completed forms to the coordinator, who will maintain a master list of completed cemeteries. It's important to keep the list of complete cemeteries updated in order to avoid duplication in cemetery visits.

The volunteers doing the legwork are the heart of the project. The number of volunteers required depends upon the size of the area to be covered. Some volunteers will stay the course, but others will become inactive after visiting the first few

cemeteries. Some difficulties that may arise include: the amount of time required (it can easily take all day to drive a route of cemeteries); the need to knock on the doors of private owners to receive permission to visit the cemeteries on their properties; the cost of gas and lodging for extended trips; and the cost of acquiring GPS instruments. To mitigate the personal expense of buying GPS equipment, the sponsoring society could purchase at low cost a number of GPS receivers to loan to the volunteers.

When beginning a project such as this, a primary resource is a published list of cemeteries available for the area; most likely, the local genealogical or historical society has already prepared such a list. Even if they exist, these lists are not always current or accurate, but they make an excellent starting point. Genealogy and history buffs are good at this kind of research and compilation effort, and volunteers will be comfortable referring to such a list.

Typically, after an effort of many months and, in some instances, years, many more burial sites will be discovered and recorded, as volunteers who are enthusiastic and committed carry the project forward with eagerness and keen interest. The result of the project would be a new, updated list of cemeteries, which could be produced as either a printed document and/or published on the society's website.

A final donation of the cemetery data should be the submission of the cemeteries' GPS coordinates on the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) website, where a Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) database is maintained. The GNIS is the federal standard for the geographic naming of domestic geographic features, including cemeteries. The database includes the federally recognized name of each feature (such as Riverdale Cemetery), the state and county location, the name of the USGS topographic map that includes the feature, and the geographic coordinates (latitude and longitude as determined by a GPS device). Other attributes include the names or spellings other than the official name, feature designations, and historical

and description information. The GNIS collects data from federal, state, and local government agencies as well as authorized contributors. The data published on the GNIS website is available to the public.

Query the GNIS database at <<http://geonames.usgs.gov>>, and query the cemetery in question. This query exercise has two purposes: if the cemetery in question is already listed, record its geographic coordinates, which a volunteer might choose to verify if he or she is in the neighborhood. If the cemetery is not listed on the GNIS site, then a designated society volunteer (most likely the project's coordinator) can become an authorized GNIS user and contribute the coordinates that the society's volunteers have recorded on their research trips. This would provide a valuable service to genealogists as well as add to the government list.

Once the project coordinator knows what cemeteries need to be visited, the volunteers can start getting data. Even though volunteers are usually assigned areas based on counties, they should not be restricted to those boundaries. They should visit any cemetery on the "to do" list that minimizes their travel. A quick check with the coordinator will avoid duplication.

The completed compilations would be an important contribution to the genealogical community. Publishing a hardcopy compilation and donating copies of it to libraries and other genealogical societies would add significant information to their collections. Internet opportunities for posting your work include RootsWeb, the GNIS database, and your society's website.

The electronic age brings opportunities to ease the publication and compilation of information on cemeteries, which are one of our most important links to the past and indispensable sources of genealogical information.

*About the author: Duane V. Kniebes is coordinator for the Cemetery Location Project for the Colorado Council of Genealogical Societies. A resident of Colorado, he is an active volunteer for the Council where he has guided the project,*

*resulting in over half of Colorado's counties' cemeteries being GPS documented. He is a popular lecturer for Colorado societies.*

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