



With Reverance and Respect

RELOCATING A CEMETERY

BY MELODY CARVAJAL AND SUSAN GRZYBOWSKI

Cemeteries are special places that serve as a bridge to the past. They memorialize our loved ones who have passed on, and help serve as a sacred place to remember and celebrate their lives.

But with continuing improvements to our infrastructure and the addition of new public/private development projects, the past must be able to pave the way for the future. This means that the need for new highways and other infrastructure projects have led to considering cemetery relocations as a viable option.

Acquiring and relocating a cemetery provokes intensive concerns that require a high degree of sensitivity and understanding. Typically immersed in controversy, this kind of relocation necessitates an experienced team committed to ensuring that the needs of the client, the family and the deceased are all taken into consideration.

Why Relocate a Cemetery?

Although avoidance or redesign is commonly applied when a cemetery falls within the right of way or project boundaries, the taking of a cemetery and its relocation should not be viewed as insurmountable or a desecration. In many cases, when overwhelming demands of expansion and infrastructure improvement are combined with a cost analysis comparing the alternatives, the acquisition and relocation of a cemetery may provide the best option. Ideally, a win-win can be achieved if the client is able to acquire the property needed for their proposed project, while affording the deceased the proper respect they deserve.

Cemetery relocation is not easy, and it's not for the faint of heart. Achieving a balance between the client's needs, respect for the deceased, family directives, and compliance with local, state, and federal agencies and applicable laws, requires a very specific level of expertise. It's not simply the act of moving a body, contracting with a backhoe operator and laborers or scientifically recording the excavations. It's about having

compassion and empathy for the family, while applying various skills and procedures in the most dignified and careful manner.

While relocating a cemetery is a monumental undertaking, it is feasible and it has been done in the past. In fact, there have been several large, successful and award-winning cemetery relocations in the last decade. One is the Potter's Field Cemetery in Secaucus, New Jersey, which required 4,571 reinterments (re-burying the deceased). Another is the Knights of Pythias Greenwood Cemetery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with 2,427 reinterments. And for the St. Johannes Cemetery relocation near O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, 1,494 reinterments were required.

As difficult as it is to confront and inform a family that their home will be taken as part of an upcoming project, the Uniform Relocation Act provides the framework and guidelines for normal business and residential relocations. However, the URA does not include parameters for relocating a cemetery, nor is there any kind of textbook available for this purpose.



Chartered in 1869, the Knights of Pythias Greenwood Cemetery in Philadelphia had fallen into disrepair. To accommodate a proposed hospital expansion, an initiative to revitalize the 45-acre cemetery was approved as part of the relocation, thus benefiting the entire community.

The Many Components

Relocating a cemetery is similar to assembling a complex puzzle. When each piece is strategically and carefully interlocked, it begins to reveal the overall image. However, its successful completion requires not only the right pieces, but the right skill set. After all, when you think about assembling a puzzle, consider what happens if there is a single defect in one of the pieces or if a piece is missing altogether.

The major components that make up a cemetery relocation include records and genealogy, history and land use, mapping, markers and monuments, archaeology, next of kin and families, compliance, as well as the many unknowns and elements of surprise. Not all of the pieces in this puzzle are the same size nor does each piece need to be utilized for each relocation. However, it is critical to know which pieces to use and how they will ultimately fit together.

Records and Genealogy

The first step in performing this type of relocation involves determining how much information is available about the deceased and their family or next of kin. In an ideal situation, we work with the cemetery office and their records to identify the deceased, their original interment date and location of burial. However, cemetery records are not always available. Even when they are, they might be incomplete or inaccurate. It's not unusual to find them handwritten, illegible, disorganized, deteriorating, or even in another language and script, thus requiring time and effort just to decipher and transcribe.

Genealogical research is conducted so that we can identify any living descendants of the deceased. For a forensic genealogist, establishing the history of a family is oftentimes a complicated process. Not every family tree you track down online is correct, nor is every record available. Our work requires a creative array of research that extends outside the box, and involves listening to family stories and lore. While this may sound laborious, some of the most satisfying results occur when we learn heritage details about a family's unknown relatives that we can share with them.

History and Land Use

Another piece of the puzzle involves an understanding of the history and former land use of the property or cemetery, which is not always obvious. Some graves have had their above ground features altered, such as a headstone removal, while others may have been backfilled and reused for other purposes. It is important to understand the evolution of the cemetery and to



Potter's Field Cemetery Relocation

Precipitated by the proposed construction of a New Jersey Turnpike interchange, disinterment and reinterment activities were required at the Potter's Field burial ground in Secaucus, NJ. The cemetery had been established in 1880.

A multidisciplinary team was assembled to conduct extensive public outreach, coordinate with state and private interests and implement measures to address environmental and logistical concerns. Using modern and traditional survey technologies, the team removed more than 78,000 cubic yards of soil and exhumed the remains of 4,571 individuals from 2,693 grave shafts. By using archival and historical research, along with osteological analyses, the team recovered, cataloged and photographed more than 113,000 artifacts prior to reburial.

In 2004, a granite memorial monument with bronze plaques listing more than 7,000 individuals was erected at the new cemetery. To memorialize the former site, a monument was also erected along the newly-constructed Secaucus Interchange.

This relocation program has been heralded as the industry's largest single disinterment undertaken under a single contract in the United States. It has received awards for excellence, including the 2005 American Cultural Resource Association Industry Award, the 2006 American Council for Engineering Companies, New Jersey Grand Honor Award for Engineering Excellence, and American Road and Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA) 2006 PRIDE Award, First Place for Public-Media Relations/Education.



One of the most challenging relocations involved a 30-foot tall obelisk valued at \$175,000. Weighing 13 tons, relocating it required three cranes, a rigger, a monument specialist and an 18-wheel semi.

know whether the property once contained any buildings or landscape modifications such as tiling, irrigation, wells or the like. For instance, if you didn't know that a schoolhouse was once located on the property, how would you interpret a cache of ink wells? In general, the more you understand about the property, the better you will be able to relate to the families and put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Another cautionary note is in regards to cemetery boundary delineations. One might perceive that a fence line indicates that the burials are all contained within the fenced area. But that is not always the case. Over time, cemetery fence lines can often shift, migrate and reconfigure. As such, encroachment to a cemetery boundary should always be handled with due diligence.

Mapping

An essential component to any cemetery relocation involves mapping, which includes both historical maps and current mapping of cemetery sections, lots and graves. The objective is to establish spatial relations of the graves and various other cemetery features and to confirm and/or reconcile the interments. Depending on the cemetery and situation, mapping may entail applying digital overlays of historic design layouts onto modern aeriels.

This will assist in discerning locations on the ground. The use of GPS or total station surveying to record locations of interments works to create a detailed map of each marker and monument within the cemetery.

Mapping is essential for all cemeteries, even for those that are not being relocated. In Illinois, the recent passage of the Cemetery Oversight Act requires cemeteries to have a certified cemetery map and an index. If the cemetery does not have a readily available map, it will be necessary to create one.

Markers and Monuments

Cemeteries take many different forms. Some of the more typical types include a memorial park with markers and monuments arranged on a formal landscape, a mausoleum, a columbarium where urns may be stored, an area of fieldstones marking the location of interments or an institutional burial site.

As part of a cemetery relocation program, markers and monuments should be treated with the same respect and care as the deceased, and they should be reutilized and reinstalled properly. They contain symbolism, epitaphs and other information that are key to genealogy, and they provide links to the family heritage. As such, they serve as a visual legacy of those who have died and form a bridge for communicating with the living.

Though our respective teams have relocated and reinstalled over a thousand markers and monuments, one of the most challenging monument relocations was a 13-ton, 30-foot tall obelisk erected in the early 20th century that is currently estimated to have a replacement value of \$175,000. The dismantling, transport and reinstallation was accomplished over a three-day period utilizing a rigger, a monument specialist crew, three cranes and an 18-wheel semi. The obelisk currently sits on an estate lot as a prominent feature and a visual legacy for the family and their visitors.

Archaeologists

Although most states require that a funeral director be involved with the cemetery relocation, they do not have the expertise, staff or equipment to perform multiple disinterments. As such, cemetery relocations typically require the assistance of archaeologists to conduct the meticulous disinterment activities, record evidence associated with the interments, and assist with the proper identification of the deceased.

The application of specialized techniques employed by archaeologists works to ensure the preservation and proper treatment of human remains. Certainly, information can be gleaned from a cemetery relocation program, but it shouldn't be at the emotional expense, mercy, or grief of the deceased and their family.

Families and Next of Kin

Cemetery relocations require notification of and the solicitation of input from the next of kin, families and stakeholders. This requires clear and constant communication from the team, as well as a thorough understanding of any specific guidelines requested. The guidelines need to be established in advance, which means multiple informational interfaces need to be coordinated with a range of groups. Every effort must be made to uphold any family traditions and to assist the next of kin by offering support and comfort. In this way, relocating a

cemetery is more similar to a funeral than a relocation. Since you are dealing with raw emotions, older generations, anger, fear and memories of the past, this can be the most challenging part of the program.

Compliance

Whether you are facing a single disinterment or an entire cemetery, it is critical to review, understand and ensure compliance with the laws that pertain to the cemetery and funeral industry. There also may be additional requirements imposed by the county, state and/or federal agencies.

The key is to employ experienced professionals who can interpret and advise the client of the rules, regulations and laws associated with the dispositions of remains, disinterment, reinterment and transport of human remains. It is essential that these experts are consulted early in the planning process. Experience has demonstrated the importance of having all of our paperwork completed and executed before we do anything that is not reversible.

The Unknown and Surprises

With any cemetery relocation, we have learned to expect the unexpected. Regardless of what kind of surprise may be uncovered, it's essential that we conduct ourselves with uncompromising integrity and uphold the code of professionalism.



As part of the O'Hare International Airport Modernization Program in Chicago, the St. Johannes Cemetery required professional cemetery relocation services and family assistance coordination for disinterment and relocation of this 1849 German church cemetery.



“The human contribution is the essential ingredient. It is only in giving of one’s self to others that we truly live.”

Ethel Percy Andrus

An experienced team understands the importance of having empathy and compassion when speaking with family members impacted by the relocation.

One might recall the horror movie *Poltergeist*, where an improperly relocated cemetery wreaked havoc on an unsuspecting new housing development. Well, during one of our cemetery relocation projects, all of the grave markers had been removed, and historical tradition suggested that all of the deceased had also been relocated. The team had no idea what to expect. Fortunately, the removal of markers from this cemetery did not result in *Poltergeist*-like situation, but the team did discover thousands of unmarked interments encompassing an area of about four acres. In addition, a total of 53 tons of scrap metal was recovered, as well as large quantities of asphalt, wood, concrete slabs, brick, fencing, razor wire and even old tires.

Summary

Unlike compliance-directed work, cemetery relocation is more about the family than about a scientific analysis or reporting of land size and numbers. Holding the tangible remains of someone’s ancestor or an innocent child evokes feelings of awe and humanity. We believe it is a privilege to touch and hold these remains.

Cemetery relocations require a highly specialized skill set and an experienced team that is sensitive and empathetic to the needs of the family and the deceased. A day in the life of a cemetery relocation team is never predictable. Each day presents a surprise or twist, no matter how well you’ve planned. Yet once you have coordinated with hundreds of family members, listened to a multitude of their stories, and stood side by side with the families throughout the relocation process, you will be forever changed.

Our approach to cemetery relocation provides clients with a feasible and prudent approach to acquisition, while rekindling the connection to a family’s heritage. In taking care and preserving history, we are able to comfort the family with observations from the disinterment process and revive the bonds of kinship.



Melody Carvajal

Melody is a Cemetery Consulting Specialist with McKissack & McKissack and is a licensed Cemetery Manager in Illinois. She currently serves as the Cemetery Administrator overseeing the St. Johannes Cemetery relocation, including over 1,400 deceased and 700 historic memorials. Previously, as Director of Family Care Services, she interfaced with families, coordinated with state and local officials, established cemetery relocation guidelines and participated in litigation activities. As a forensic genealogist, Melody also compiled descendant-based genealogies to locate unknown heirs as part of a court order.



Susan Grzybowski

Susan is the Director of Cemetery Services for The Louis Berger Group, Inc. She is a professional Archaeologist with over 20 years of experience, and over the past 10 years has devoted her career to cemetery delineation, protection, restoration, relocation and documentation. She has directed the relocation of more than 9,000 deceased through large relocation programs, actively participated in the protection and/or restoration of small cemeteries, conducted cemetery inventories and assessments, and assisted in the identification of unanticipated human remains at proposed development sites.