

On The Road

[Mansfield, Ohio]

Saving a Family's History One Tombstone at a Time

Mark Morton has always been a history buff and enjoys looking into his family's genealogy. As he started researching where some of his ancestors were buried, he was bothered by what he saw in some of the cemeteries he visited – how some of the tombstones were leaning and not well kept. *Stan Goldstein reports*

That led Morton in 2012 to start Gravestone Guardians of Ohio, a company that deals in small and large commercial cemetery preservation. Its slogan is "Saving your family's history one tombstone at a time."

"Initially I thought, what could I do to preserve my ancestors' stones that I came across?" Morton, 55, said. "One grave was of a Civil War vet, it had faded quite a bit – and some others I found near my relatives had some form of damage."

"I had been working a factory type of job and done some middle management when everything fell apart in 2008," he continued. "I went back to college for a while and I was a history and English major. That kept my mind on what I really enjoyed. I had done some genealogical type of trips here and there."

Not working for someone else for the rest of his life was Morton's goal as he organized his new business. "One thing led to another and I found the opportunity to go to work for myself. I wanted to do something I really enjoyed. Most people don't work at something they truly enjoy, they work to make a living," he said. "Combine that with my love of history, and it seemed to be a good fit."

"It was really to preserve the history of these cemeteries," he added. "From a business aspect, I wondered if I could do this and make a living out of it?"

Now in his ninth year, Morton has



From left: Dave Nicols, Greg Drennen and Mark Morton use a 14-foot tripod to set one of four obelisks at Capitol Hill Cemetery in Cambridge City, Indiana. (Photo courtesy of Cynthia Nicols)

been able to make a living doing what he loves. It brings him to cemeteries all over Ohio. Visiting cemeteries is something he has always enjoyed.

"I have always had a fascination with cemeteries. It goes back to my grandparents who were in that age group when Memorial Day was called Decoration Day. Flags or flowers were put on the graves, and people tended to the graves of their family," Morton said. "Every family trip included a trip to the cemetery to pay respects to our relatives. That was a formative thing as a kid. It went hand in hand with all the

historic places I went to growing up, including trips to Washington, D.C. and battlefields and historical places. It all blends together."

Work Across Ohio

Morton is hired for much of his work by Ohio towns that have taken over a cemetery.

"The majority are basically closed cemeteries that don't allow more burials," Morton said. "It's usually some sort of safety concern, a 1,000-pound monument that is leaning to broken tablets that may weigh 60 to 80 pounds. I do work preserving

what is there, from cleaning to resets and repair, the whole gamut.

“Sometimes private individuals will contact me, but lately most of my work has been done on the commercial end,” he added. “Most of them are smaller cemeteries. One I worked in most of the graves dated back to the 1800s. That was the Deersville United Methodist Cemetery in Deersville, Ohio.”

His website points out that grave-marker preservation is always a case-by-case evaluation and procedure. The majority of his work falls under six categories: cleaning, tablet setting, tablet setting in a slotted base, multi-piece monument resetting, repairing broken stones and infilling after repairs.

When he’s contacted for a job, Morton first asks for photos of the damaged grave or area to be sent to him. “I have been pretty good in understanding what the job entails through the photos, but you don’t know until you actually examine it, like most everything else,” he said. “If I’m contracted to a cemetery, they have a rough idea of what they want to see done, and we first go over the repair and safety issues. I’m then given free rein in that section of the cemetery to put back together what they want.”

While he has to travel for much of the work, Morton has a chance to do something else he enjoys: camping. He has a 36-foot camper that he keeps at a campground on the east side of Ohio, and he tows an 18-foot camper.

“I could go broke staying in a hotel, and I have always liked to camp,” he said. “The 18-foot camper is a good size for one person, and I take it with me when I do work down along the Ohio River. When a job comes up, I find a good campground within a reasonable proximity to the cemetery. The 36-footer is a good base for when I have work in that area.”

One of the bigger jobs Morton worked on was two years ago when he was asked by Neville Township to repair a structure from 1853 on a plot for a wealthy steamboat captain at Neville Cemetery in Neville, Ohio.

“This plot contained the steamboat captain’s grave, his wife and a family friend. It had big limestone walls, two tons apiece, the front half had collapsed. This was an overwhelming project when I first approached it,” Morton said. “I knew we would have to get in heavy equipment – two tractors – and I worked with the township. They had two guys who were masters of the equipment.

“We reset the whole foundation and the job called for old school sweat and perseverance. There were 12- to 15- hour days in the heat and humidity, but it was well worth the results,” he added.

Conservators Group

Morton will usually do a job by himself, but on occasion he will need help. “I’m pretty much solo, I don’t have employees, I am a private contractor. The nice thing about running into others in a cemetery is you find people who are a good fit to network with,” he said.

That led to the website and Facebook group “Cemetery Conservators for United Standards,” which Morton started in 2017. According to its website, the CCUS is “a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization of cemetery conservators & preservationists from around the country. Our members have many different levels of work experience and different skill sets. We range from those who do this professionally for a living, to those who volunteer their services as a charitable contribution. We have gathered here to share our knowledge and the knowledge of those who have taught us.”

Its goal is to provide “education and awareness through knowledge, skill and training with proper historic materials and techniques for cemeteries and grave markers.”

“I started that group for two reasons,” Morton said. “First, it’s a place where those of us who did this for profit or not, can share information. Second, it was out of a frustration of arguing with people doing the wrong things over and over in regards to cleaning stones. The only way to stem that tide was to – you can’t make all the people listen – but if you have numbers, you can put out a united message to do our part in stopping bad practices and harmful methods that damage our cemeteries.”

Some of the bad practices in cleaning a stone, according to Morton, are using a wire brush instead of a nylon brush, not looking at the ingredients in the liquids that are used to clean (some may be harmful) and using power tools. “You never want to use household cleaners, bleach, metal tools, scouring pads, wire brushes, power tools, pressure washers or Nyalox brushes,” Morton said.

Morton, Scott Banker of New York, Elaine Hinton of Ohio, Kelly Jean of Michigan and Larry Betts of Ohio make up the CCUS board of directors. The Facebook group has more than 2,200 members where photos and posts of different cemetery restoration projects are shared.

“I feel very good about the cemetery conservators. We want it to be inclusive, not exclusive and give the best suggestions for what to use and do. The website is a reference point for questions people may have,” Morton said. “There’s a lot of information there. You never know what questions you may have until the shovel hits the dirt.”

Teaching in the Cemetery

Morton has also shared his knowl-

edge by teaching preservation classes and workshops in cemeteries. Many of the classes have been organized by local historical societies.

“I would normally do about six or seven a year, but with the pandemic, I’m not doing any now,” he said. “I have done them in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York and Virginia. I have been blessed with good organizers. When I’m contacted, I give them a price to what it will cost for me to teach. They then figure out how much they will charge the individuals who will be part of it. I can handle about 25 people. Anything more than that is too much.”

Morton had done workshops seven years in a row in Michigan. The first was in 2013 at the Greenwood Cemetery in Hadley. That

was followed in 2014 with a workshop at the Hadley Cemetery in Hadley, Goodland Township Cemetery in Imlay (2015), West Deerfield Cemetery in North Branch (2016), Attica Cemetery in Attica (2017), the Arcadia Township Cemetery in Lum (2018) and Stiles Cemetery in Lapeer (2019).

“These classes have helped produce further networking by creating new conservators that become part of the family for the CCUS,” Morton said.

At the workshops, which can be one day or two, Morton goes over six basics: cleaning, tablet sets, slotted bases, multipiece monuments, repair and infill.

“I prefer the two-day ones, it gives everyone more time to absorb everything,” he said.

Between the classes, his business and the CCUS, Morton has enjoyed sharing his experiences. Plus, he’s still learning himself.

“It’s been a fantastic way to run across more people who are interested in cemetery preservation. They have become some of our core members,” he said. “There’s the people who have an interest in going in and taking care of their ancestors’ stones plus the groups who work in specific cemeteries. I am always looking to cultivate people like that and that’s what we like to promote.”

More information on Gravestone Guardians of Ohio can be found at <https://gravestoneguardians.com>. More information on Cemetery Conservators for United Standards can be found at <https://cemeteryconservatorsunitedstandards.org> •



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Before (opposite page) and after (this page) photos of the restoration Mark Morton did of the family plot of steamship captain John McClain at Neville Cemetery in Neville, Ohio. (Photos courtesy of Washington Township, Ohio and Gravestone Guardians of Ohio)

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