Clean My Family

The Complete Guide to Finding, Cleaning & Preserving Family Graves

A premium step-by-step system to reconnect with your family history and restore memorials with care, confidence, and lasting results.

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cleanmyfamily.com • cleanmyfamily@gmail.com

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01 Why Memorial Care Matters

Every headstone represents an irreplaceable life — a story, a name, a legacy. Yet across the United States, hundreds of thousands of grave markers sit forgotten, eroded by decades of weather, blanketed in biological growth, and rendered unreadable. Restoring them is not simply maintenance — it is an act of dignity.

The Problem Is More Common Than You Think

- Biological growth (lichen, moss, algae) can begin forming on stone within 2–3 years of exposure.
- Unchecked growth produces acids that etch into stone, causing permanent surface loss over decades.
- Many older cemeteries lack maintenance budgets, leaving families solely responsible for upkeep.
- Approximately 1 in 4 Americans has a family grave marker they have never visited.
- Readable inscriptions can fade to near-invisibility within 50–100 years without intervention.

Our Founder's Story

While researching her own ancestry, our founder discovered family graves in a rural cemetery — covered in years of biological buildup, the names barely legible. That moment of standing before a forgotten relative's stone, unsure whether to touch it or how to help, sparked everything. Clean My Family was built from that experience: to give every family the knowledge, tools, and professional support to reclaim those connections.

02 Understanding Headstone Materials

The single most important thing to know before cleaning any memorial is what it's made of. Different materials require completely different approaches — and using the wrong method on the wrong stone can cause irreversible damage.

Material	Common Era	Durability	Special Considerations
Granite	1950s–Present	Very High	Easiest to clean; tolerates most approved cleaners
Marble	1800s–1950s	Moderate	Highly reactive to acids; softens with age; must use pH-neutral only
Limestone	1700s–1900s	Low–Moderate	Extremely porous; absorbs moisture; prone to flaking
Sandstone	1600s–1800s	Low	Very fragile; even soft brushing can remove surface; expert only
Slate	1650s–1850s	Moderate	Flakes in layers; do not scrub edges; use gentle rinse only
Bronze/Metal	1900s–Present	High (varies)	Tarnishes naturally; avoid abrasives; use metal-specific cleaner
Zinc ("White Bronze")	1870s–1930s	High	Actually zinc alloy; no acids; gentle soap and soft cloth only
Wood	1600s–1800s	Very Low	Extremely rare survivors; consult conservator before any cleaning

How to Identify Stone Type

- **Color & texture:** Granite typically has a speckled, crystalline surface. Marble is smooth and usually white or gray. Limestone is rough and chalky. Sandstone shows distinct horizontal grain layers.
- **Age of cemetery:** Older sections (pre-1900) are almost always marble, limestone, sandstone, or slate. Post-1950 markers are usually granite.
- **Sound test:** Gently tap the surface with a knuckle. Granite rings clearly. Softer stones produce a dull thud.
- **Cemetery office:** Many cemeteries keep records of stone types, especially for historic sections.
- **When in doubt, treat as the most fragile possibility** and consult a professional.

03 What You'll Need: Tools & Supplies

■ SAFE TO USE

- Soft-bristle nylon brush (natural or synthetic)
- Wooden or plastic scrapers (never metal)
- Low-pressure garden sprayer or spray bottle
- Clean buckets — one for wash, one for rinse
- D/2 Biological Solution (industry standard)
- Orvus WA Paste (pH-neutral, professional grade)
- Distilled or clean water (avoid chlorinated tap where possible)
- Nitrile gloves and eye protection
- Soft microfiber cloths for bronze/metal
- Kneeling pad (protect yourself during long cleaning sessions)

■ NEVER USE

- Pressure washers (even on granite)
- Wire or metal-bristle brushes
- Bleach or chlorine-based products
- Vinegar or any acidic cleaner
- Dish soap or household detergents
- Salt-based de-icers near stones
- Grinder or sanding tools
- Duct tape or adhesive products
- DIY mixes from online videos (unverified)
- Shaving cream (popular myth — leaves residue)

About D/2 Biological Solution: D/2 is the only cleaner formally endorsed by the U.S. National Park Service and the Association for Gravestone Studies for use on historic memorials. It works by killing biological growth at the root level. Applied correctly, cleaning continues even after you leave — organisms continue dying over the following weeks as rainfall rinses the surface. It is safe for all stone types when used as directed.

04 Step-by-Step: Locating Your Family Graves

Before you can clean or visit a memorial, you need to find it. This process — often called "grave indexing" — involves combining multiple genealogy databases with cemetery records.

1

Start with Family Knowledge

Ask relatives — especially older generations — what cemetery family members were buried in. Even vague information like a county or town name narrows your search dramatically. Old obituaries from newspaper archives (available free at many public libraries) often name the cemetery.

2

Search Find A Grave (findagrave.com)

The largest free online grave database, with over 230 million memorial records. Search by name, birth/death year, and location. Many entries include photos taken by volunteers. If your relative's grave isn't listed, you can add it yourself after your visit.

3

Search BillionGraves (billiongraves.com)

GPS-tagged headstone photos linked to family trees. Particularly strong for LDS-related genealogy and rural cemeteries. Works well combined with Find A Grave, as coverage varies by region.

4

Cross-Reference with FamilySearch & Ancestry

FamilySearch.org is completely free and contains billions of records including death certificates, obituaries, and church burial records. Ancestry.com (paid) provides access to U.S. Social Security Death Index, cemetery transcriptions, and digitized local records.

5

Confirm with DNA Tools

Services like 23andMe or AncestryDNA can reveal relatives you didn't know existed who may have already located and photographed family graves. DNA matches often share family trees — reach out respectfully.

6

Contact the Cemetery Directly

Once you have a cemetery name, call or email their office. Most cemeteries maintain plot records and can provide the exact section, row, and plot number. Ask whether they have historical maps — some cemeteries have records dating back 150+ years.

7

Verify On-Site

GPS coordinates from databases may be approximate. Walk the section with the plot number and photograph surrounding stones for orientation. Cemetery offices can often provide a paper map.

05 Step-by-Step: Safe Cleaning Techniques

Approach every cleaning session with patience. Rushing causes damage. A thorough, gentle cleaning done correctly will last far longer than an aggressive one done wrong.

Before You Begin

- Check weather: Do not clean on a day with temperatures below 40°F or above 90°F. Freeze-thaw cycles can force moisture into newly opened stone pores.
- Assess the stone: Look for existing cracks, chips, or leaning. Do not clean structurally compromised stones — contact a professional first.
- Photograph everything: Take clear "before" photos from multiple angles in good lighting. These are valuable for comparison and documentation.
- Wet the stone first: Always pre-wet with clean water before applying any cleaner. This prevents the stone from absorbing the cleaning solution too quickly.

The Cleaning Process

Step 1

Pre-Wet the Stone

Using a low-pressure sprayer or large sponge, saturate the entire surface and base of the memorial with clean water. Allow it to soak for 5–10 minutes. For very porous stones (limestone, sandstone), repeat twice.

Step 2

Apply Biological Solution

Apply D/2 or approved cleaner according to label directions. Work from the bottom of the stone upward — this prevents streaking from cleaner running down dry stone. Do not let solution dry on the surface.

Step 3

Soft Brush Application

Using a soft nylon brush, work in small circular sections. Apply gentle, even pressure — let the cleaner do the work, not your arm strength. For inscriptions, use a smaller detail brush.

Step 4

Rinse Thoroughly

Rinse with clean water, again working from bottom to top and then top to bottom. Ensure all cleaner is fully removed. Residue left behind can attract new biological growth faster.

Step 5

Let D/2 Continue Working

If using D/2 Biological Solution, do not rinse it completely off the last pass — a thin residue continues killing biological matter over the following days and weeks as rain hits the stone.

Step 6

Document Results

Take clear "after" photos. Note the date, products used, and any observations about the stone's condition in a simple journal or phone note. This helps track deterioration over time and is valuable for professionals.

Special Considerations for Bronze Markers

Bronze markers (flush with the ground or mounted on granite bases) require a different approach. Use a bronze-specific cleaner or mild soap with soft cloths — never abrasive pads. A bronze protectant wax (like Johnson Paste Wax) applied after cleaning helps slow tarnishing. Green patina is natural and considered by conservators to be protective; removing it entirely is not recommended.

06 What Never to Do — Damage You Can't Undo

Well-meaning people damage memorials every year using methods they believed were safe or had "seen online." Some damage is cosmetic. Some is permanent. Knowing what not to do is just as important as knowing the right technique.

■ Pressure Washing

Even at low settings, pressurized water drives moisture into pores, dislodges loose stone, accelerates erosion, and can shatter fragile corners. No headstone — including granite — should ever be cleaned with a pressure washer.

■ Bleach & Chlorine Cleaners

Bleach kills visible surface algae temporarily but damages stone crystals, accelerates long-term biological regrowth, and is harmful to surrounding soil and plant life. It is explicitly banned by the Association for Gravestone Studies.

■ Vinegar & Acidic Cleaners

Acids dissolve calcium-based stones (marble, limestone, sandstone) at the molecular level. Even diluted vinegar causes measurable surface loss. There is no safe acid-based cleaner for stone memorials.

■ Wire Brushes

Wire bristles scratch deep grooves into stone, destroying the polished or carved surface, making the stone more susceptible to future biological growth in those grooves.

■ Shaving Cream for Rubbings

A popular social media trend — applying shaving cream and wiping to reveal inscriptions — leaves chemical residue in stone pores, encourages biological growth, and can mask fine surface details permanently.

■ Chalk or Wax Rubbings on Soft Stone

Rubbing wax or chalk on marble, limestone, or sandstone causes micro-abrasion and removes thin surface layers. For fragile stones, photographic enhancement is always preferable.

■ Attempting to Reset a Leaning Stone

Headstones lean because their foundation has shifted. Pushing or propping them without addressing the foundation causes cracking and can cause the stone to topple. Only trained conservators should reset stones.

■ Applying Sealers Without Expert Guidance

Many commercial stone sealers trap moisture inside the stone, causing accelerated spalling (flaking) in freeze-thaw climates. Only vapor-permeable sealers applied by professionals are appropriate for memorials.

07 Stain & Growth Identification Guide

Identifying what type of staining or growth you're dealing with determines your cleaning approach. Not all discoloration is the same — and treating them differently yields far better results.

What You See	Likely Cause	Risk Level	Recommended Action
Green film or coating	Algae	Low	D/2 solution + soft brush; rinses cleanly
Fuzzy gray/green patches	Lichen	Moderate	D/2 applied and left to work over weeks; may need repeat treatment
Black crust or streaks	Cyanobacteria or sooty mold	Moderate	D/2 solution; may need multiple applications
Orange or rust-colored stains	Iron oxidation or tannin from nearby trees	Low–Moderate	Iron Out (stone-safe formula) or professional poultice
White powdery deposits	Efflorescence (salt migration)	Moderate	Dry brush first; distilled water rinse; do not seal over it
Pink or reddish blotching	Pink algae / biofilm	Low	D/2 solution; check surrounding soil drainage
Dark gray general soiling	Atmospheric pollution / soot	**Low**	Gentle wash with D/2 or pH-neutral cleaner
Flaking or spalling surface	Moisture damage / freeze-thaw	**HIGH**	Do not clean — consult a conservator immediately
Pitting or dissolved surface	Acid rain or prior chemical damage	HIGH	Document and consult professional; do not attempt DIY

08 Weather, Seasons & Long-Term Preservation

Preservation isn't a single event — it's an ongoing relationship with the memorial. Understanding how seasons affect stone helps you time your visits and protect against cumulative damage.

■ **Spring**	Best time for a deep clean. Biological growth is active and responds well to treatment. Check for any frost heave damage from winter. Apply D/2 before growth peaks. Note any new cracks that may have formed during freeze-thaw cycles.
■■ **Summer**	Avoid cleaning in direct midday sun — cleaners dry too fast. Clean in early morning or overcast conditions. Growth slows in dry heat but algae thrives in humid climates. Trim overhanging vegetation to reduce shade that accelerates biological growth.
■ **Autumn**	Remove fallen leaves promptly — decaying leaves produce tannins that stain light stone and retain moisture. A light maintenance cleaning in early fall prepares the stone for winter. Avoid cleaning after October in freeze-prone regions.
❄■ **Winter**	Do not clean when temperatures are or will be below 40°F. Water trapped in stone pores expands when frozen, causing cracking and spalling. Visit to assess condition but defer any cleaning until spring.

Long-Term Preservation Tips

- **Maintain drainage:** Ensure the area around the base is sloped away from the stone. Standing water accelerates deterioration from below.
- **Manage vegetation:** Tree roots can shift foundations; overhanging branches accelerate biological growth. Work with the cemetery before removing established plants.
- **Photograph annually:** A yearly photo from the same angle and distance creates a deterioration timeline that is invaluable for insurance, historical records, and planning conservation work.
- **Record all maintenance:** Keep a simple log of dates, products used, and observations. Share it with the cemetery office if possible.
- **Consider the base:** The base and foundation deteriorate separately from the visible stone. Check for cracks, settling, or separation at the joint annually.

09 When to Call a Professional

Knowing your limits is not weakness — it is respect for the memorial. Some situations require professional conservators or specialized equipment. Attempting these tasks without proper training nearly always makes the situation worse.

The stone is leaning or tilting	Foundation resetting requires excavation and proper support. Improper resetting causes cracking or toppling.
There are visible cracks or breaks	Professional conservators use specialized repair mortars that are reversible and stone-compatible. DIY epoxies trap moisture.
The stone is severely spalling or flaking	Structural stabilization is needed before any cleaning. Cleaning a deteriorating stone accelerates destruction.
Inscriptions are barely or no longer readable	Professionals use photographic enhancement, raking light, and 3D scanning to recover inscriptions non-invasively.
The stone has historical significance	Any stone in a historic cemetery or listed on heritage registers may require special permits and certified conservators.
The memorial is bronze or metal and severely corroded	Electrochemical corrosion requires controlled stripping — DIY products cause uneven damage.
You are unsure of the stone type	When in doubt, protect it. A professional assessment costs far less than repairing DIY damage.
The cemetery has specific rules	Some cemeteries require approved vendors or prior authorization for any cleaning. Always confirm policies before visiting.

10 Clean My Family Service Plans

Whether you live nearby or across the country, Clean My Family offers professional, respectful care for your family memorials. Every service includes before-and-after photo documentation sent directly to you.

Service	What's Included	Best For
One-Time Deep Clean	• Full biological growth removal • Safe cleaning with D/2 solution • Hand-brush detail of inscriptions • Base cleaning • Before & after photo report	First-time restoration; graves you've never visited; special
Monthly Maintenance Plan	• Monthly inspection visits • Light cleaning as needed • Vegetation management • Condition monitoring report • Priority scheduling	Older, more fragile memorials; families who want consiste
Annual Restoration Plan	• Deep clean each year • Seasonal assessment report • Annual photo documentation • Condition trend tracking • Scheduling reminder service	Most families; balanced care without the cost of monthly vi
Remote Consultation	• Video walkthrough with you • Personalized cleaning plan • Product recommendations • Step-by-step guidance • Follow-up support	Families who want to clean themselves but need expert gu

11 Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Can I clean a grave without permission from the cemetery?

In most cases, immediate family members are permitted to clean a relative's grave. However, some cemeteries — particularly historic or privately managed ones — require prior authorization or restrict which products can be used. Always contact the cemetery office before your first visit to confirm their policies.

Q: How long does a professional cleaning last?

A properly performed cleaning using D/2 Biological Solution typically keeps a stone clean and growth-free for 1–3 years depending on climate, shade, and stone type. Humid, shaded environments see regrowth faster than dry, sunny ones. Annual or biannual maintenance is recommended for most memorials.

Q: Is it safe to do a gravestone rubbing?

Rubbings using rice paper and wax are acceptable on hard, sound granite stones only. They are not appropriate for marble, limestone, sandstone, or any stone showing wear or deterioration. For fragile stones, photographic techniques using raking light are far preferable and completely non-invasive.

Q: My family member's grave is in another state. Can you still help?

Yes. Clean My Family works with a network of trained local professionals across the country. Contact us with the cemetery name and location and we'll coordinate care on your behalf, sending you photo documentation after every visit.

Q: What if I find a grave in very poor condition — cracked or fallen?

Do not attempt to repair or reset it yourself. Document the damage with photographs and contact the cemetery office immediately — they may have a responsibility to address it. Then contact us for a professional assessment. Structural damage requires specialized repair materials.

Q: Can cleaning remove old graffiti or paint from a headstone?

In many cases, yes — but it depends on how long the paint has been there and the stone type. Recent paint on granite often responds to careful solvent application. Old paint deeply set into porous stone may require professional poultice treatment. Never attempt to sand or scrape paint.

Q: What is the white powder/crust on my ancestor's stone?

This is called efflorescence — salts migrating from inside the stone to the surface as moisture moves through it. It signals moisture infiltration. Dry-brush the surface gently and rinse with distilled water. Do not seal over it. Persistent efflorescence indicates a drainage or moisture problem that needs professional evaluation.

Q: How do I read an inscription I can't make out?

Try photographing in raking light — position your phone's flashlight at a very low angle to the stone surface and photograph in a darkened environment. This reveals inscriptions invisible in direct light. Free apps like FindAGrave and Billion Graves also have historical transcriptions that may have captured the text when it was more legible.

12 Resources & Next Steps

Recommended Free Resources

FindAGrave.com	Largest free headstone database; 230M+ memorials; volunteer photo requests
BillionGraves.com	GPS-tagged headstone photos; strong rural and LDS coverage
FamilySearch.org	Free genealogy records, death certificates, historical newspapers
Ancestry.com	Paid service; SSDI, cemetery transcriptions, digitized local records
23andMe / AncestryDNA	DNA matching for discovering unknown relatives and family trees
Association for Gravestone Studies (gravestonestudies.org)	Professional standards, workshops, and conservator directory
National Park Service Heritage Preservation	Published guidelines for safe cleaning of historic stone
State Historical Societies	Local records, cemetery surveys, historic designation databases

Get Help from Clean My Family

You don't have to navigate this alone. Whether you need a one-time deep clean, ongoing care for a family plot, or simply guidance on where to start — we're here to help. Every inquiry is handled personally and every service is performed with care and respect.

■ **Email Us**	cleanmyfamily@gmail.com
■ **Website**	cleanmyfamily.com
■ **Response Time**	We respond to all inquiries within 1 business day.

Thank you for taking the time to learn how to honor and preserve your family's legacy. These stones are more than markers — they are the last visible connection to those who came before us. With the right knowledge and care, they can remain legible, dignified, and beautiful for generations to come.