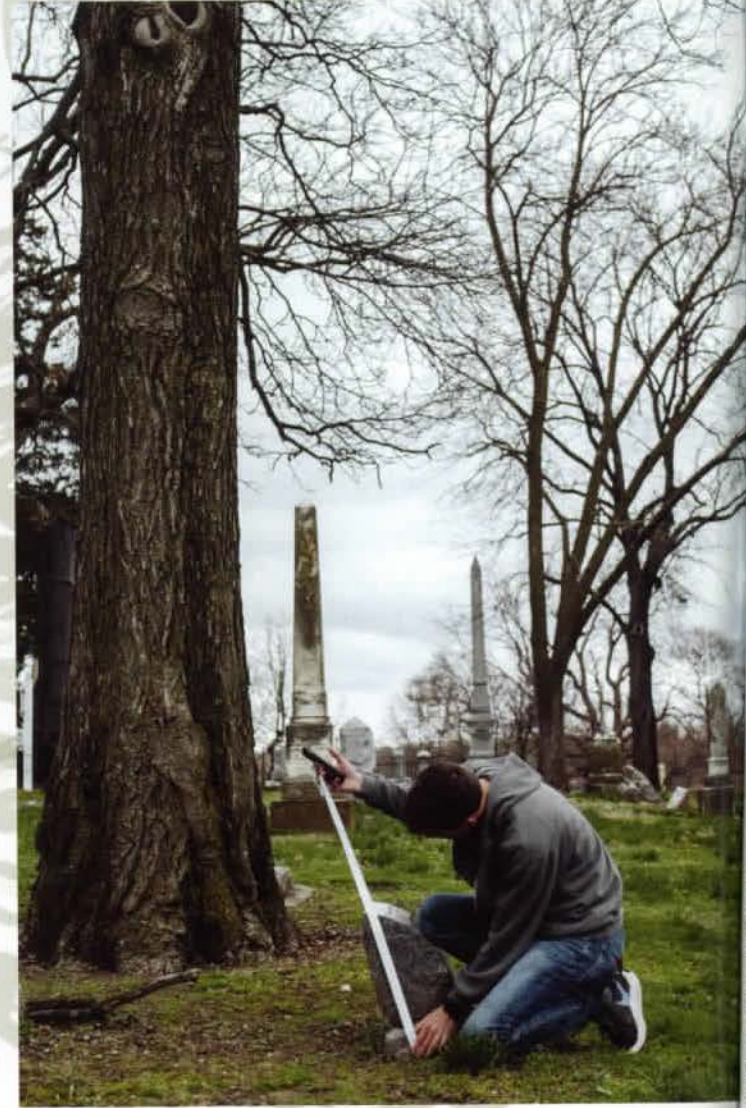
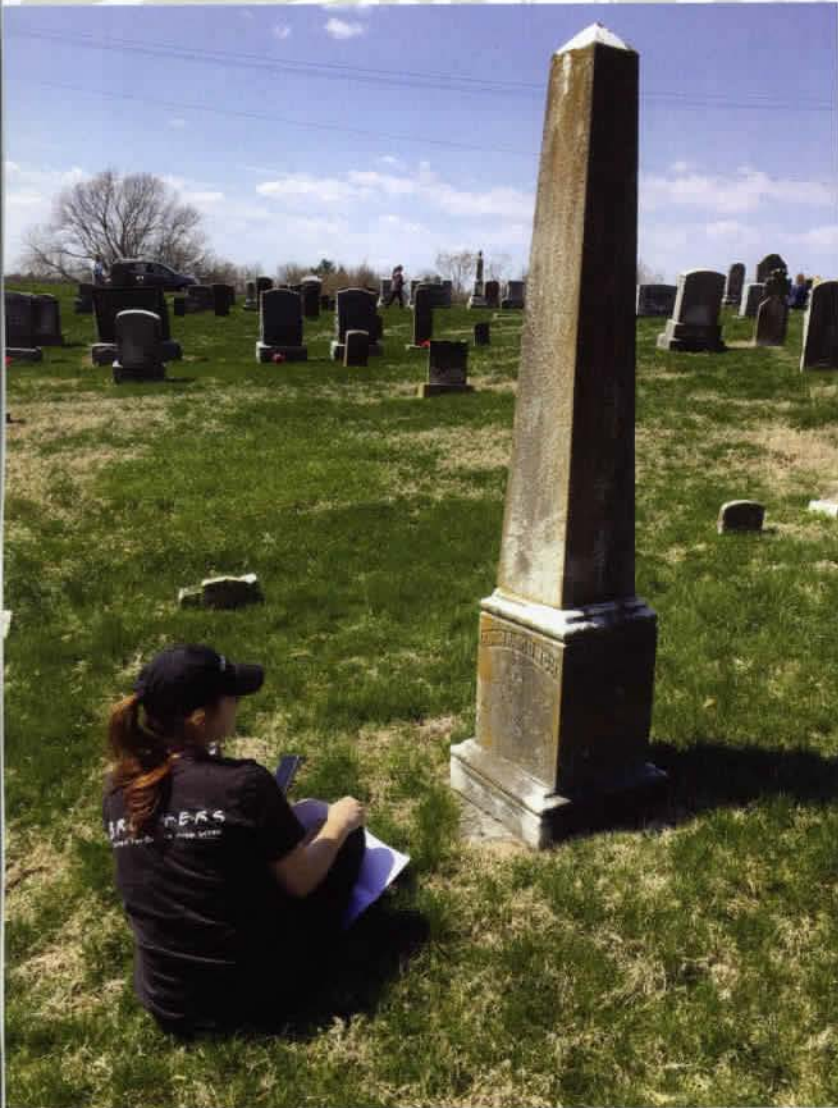


Teaching Buried History:



BY JEFFREY SMITH

At Rest. Beloved. Mother. Father. Here Lies the Body of.

They're all inscriptions found in cemeteries in almost any town or city in the United States. You've seen them before, even in the cemetery in your own town. They're more than just remembrances, though. Those gravestones and that cemetery document part of the history of our communities. When I started my career in history as Director of the Summit County Historical Society in Ohio, my latent interest in cemeteries came forward with an exhibit that included tours of one of these cemeteries founded in Akron, Ohio, in 1839. We ran these walking tours often, and the staff continued to do so after I left; in fact, when researching my book on such cemeteries and the Rural Cemetery Movement almost three decades later, I found my old notes for the tours in the archives!

To view an introductory video for this project, visit https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/buried_history_video/1.

Connecting Teachers and Cemeteries

What struck me was that those tours tended to focus on the more notable people buried there (many from the Gilded Age and early twentieth century), as many cemetery tours do. You know the group—first settlers and their families, businessmen some might call “robber barons,” Civil War officers and figures, people prominent for being “characters,” and combinations of those categories. Mostly (but not always), they were white, male, and prominent. At the time, I remember thinking that it would have been great to have other historical voices on the tours. We learned about the lives of industrialists in the cereal, tire and rubber, brewing, and law businesses but grain handlers, tire builders, brewmasters, everyday people, women, and people of color were largely absent in the tours. It’s not that the information wasn’t there; it just wasn’t readily available without a significant amount of time and energy to research—both of which are in limited supply for people running historical agencies.

A new program created by Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri, called “Teaching Buried History” seeks to address this erasure of everyday histories in cemeteries as well as connect local classroom teachers to the historic resources found in them. In this program, students survey cemeteries, collect data, and integrate their research into a variety of curriculum subjects, guided by teachers and local public history organizations. Many historical agencies strive to connect their sites and collections with the classroom. Your collections, resources, and sites offer students unique learning experiences, connecting local stories with the broad national narrative they study in school. There’s another benefit, too: connecting students to their local history and its people, sites, and events creates a sense of community and inclusion in their community as well. In the past year, we’ve created a way to address these needs—to offer a way for teachers to use local collections and bring their students into institutions, to build a sense of community among students, and to accumulate data and research to build a more inclusive type of public programming. It uses the one resource that every community has: a cemetery. We’re sharing the template with you here so you can easily customize it to your organization and start offering it to teachers as soon as possible.

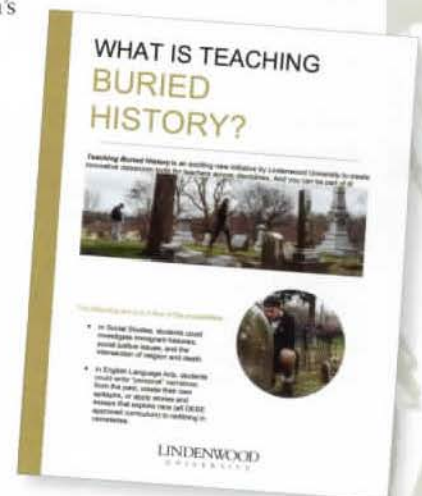
Perhaps you’re already working with teachers in your area, or perhaps you want to be. Either way, “Teaching Buried History” provides the tools for you to connect with local teachers in the areas of social studies, English, and even STEM. It offers teaching tools, lesson plans, background information, and instructions to set up everything. It’s also expandable, so teachers with a curricular time crunch can complete it in a day or two, or they can expand it to span sev-

eral days or become something they can revisit periodically over months. It teaches history and writing and geography and math. And it builds a sense of community and heritage—which is where you come in. “Teaching Buried History” is tied to state education standards so teachers can integrate it into the structure of their existing curriculum. This program offers a way for historical organizations to reach out to teachers with a specific program that’s classroom ready. It offers busy teachers—and every teacher is a busy teacher—a lesson plan that requires very little advance preparation for them. And it gives teachers a new tool to teach their subjects by using local resources to give students a greater understanding of broader historical issues through the prism of their own community.

“Teaching Buried History” is designed for middle and high school classes. All of these materials are easily edited, so you can insert your organization’s information and materials.

You can insert links to your collections, information on visiting and using your materials, and even your institution’s logo and contact information. Here’s what is included in the TBH template:

- **Lesson plans:** There are lessons for social studies, English, and STEM for high school students that designed to be easily adapted to middle school classes as well. Teachers can simply print out the material and use or adapt them to fit their situation. Teachers themselves wrote these lesson plans and used them in their own classes before we published them, so they’re road-tested.
- **Background information for teachers:** There’s a short history of cemeteries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to help teachers get a better idea of ways to interpret the landscape they’ll be taking students to. You can also send them to books like Rachel Wolgemuth’s *Cemetery Tours and Programming: A Guide* or *The Rural Cemetery Movement: Places of Paradox in Nineteenth-Century America* by Jeffrey Smith (author of this article). Additionally, there are links and materials so students can learn about the iconography on gravestones and the meanings of epitaphs and decorative motifs to gain a greater understanding of not only American cultural history, but also of the ways people in their community thought about and understood their world.



- **Classroom materials:** “Teaching Buried History” provides background materials for students to be used in the classroom, including PowerPoint presentations and illustrated guides.
- **Mapping tools:** The program includes a tool so students can collect data at the cemetery to create GIS maps, using a program that’s available to every school in the United States.

Real Students, Real History

Our university class used this program in three settings with different classes to chart the ways students reacted in high school English and statistics classes, as well as in a college history course. In my most recent class, we partnered with local organizations to have area volunteers work with us collecting data as well. It was a great way to involve the community in a class project. High school students from Affton (Missouri) High School visited two local cemeteries to contrast the experiences of sites founded within a decade or so of each other but for different constituencies. Father Moses Dickson Cemetery was founded by and for African Americans in 1903; its southern boundary borders on a popular bicycle and running trail, so it’s easy to access and explore. Our Redeemer Cemetery (across the street from the high school, conveniently enough) was founded by white Lutherans in 1915. Since it’s still an active cemetery, its history spans more than a century, giving students more contemporary information to work with.

The mapping component uses Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology to collect, analyze, and present geographically based data. We’ve all seen GIS-generated maps before, even if we don’t realize it—the maps in the news of COVID deaths or infections in different areas use GIS technology, for example. In this project, you and teachers will create a series of data fields to be surveyed, so students can just fill in the blanks. Some can be text boxes, others can be pull-down menus. Students (and others) will create a point on a map that corresponds to a gravestone and fill in the form to create data that is connected to it—with the cemetery, it might be name, birth and death dates, gravestone materials, and so on—on a map. They can add a photo to complete the record.

Users looking at the map can click on any one of the orange dots and see the data associated with it. These work through a GIS provider called Esri, who provides the licensing for this online tool and site free to every school. The students (and volunteers) can download one of the two GIS apps on their phones (estimates are that some 94 percent of



Cemetery sculpture can be used to discuss historic culture, religion, and art.

high school students have an Apple iPhone, although it works well with Android devices too) so they could survey each one to compare them. Every time someone hits “save” on their phone, the data and the photo are stored on a cloud-based map that people can watch being populated in real time.

For students, it was a way for them to see the spaces as providing what Affton English teacher Brian Jennings called “understanding the historical truth” of what was there—and what was missing

as well. Our Redeemer Cemetery has more gravestones and newer ones than Dickson Cemetery—Jennings asked his students to consider why that was. Almost all the markers in Redeemer are granite, but in Dickson there are a number of different materials ranging from commercially produced granite markers to older marble ones and even handmade cement commemorations. “What might we gather from that?” Jennings wondered aloud to a group of students at Dickson. Even in just one morning, “It was great for students to see that history is a physical presence around them,” Jennings said. “They saw the stories and narratives of these places.”

While the students I take to cemeteries for this exercise are in college, their experiences are very similar. Sometimes they’re history majors, but usually I use it in a “general education” U.S. history class (the ones each state requires everyone to take), so the students really vary in majors and interests. Starting in 2019, we began working with the City of St. Charles to create a GIS map of the city-owned Oak Grove Cemetery, so my students participated in the first installment of that project. In fall 2021, my class set out to survey every gravestone in Father Dickson Cemetery. There are more than 900 of them, so we needed help. My class joined forces with the Friends of Dickson Cemetery, St. Louis County Library, and the St. Louis Genealogical Society to recruit volunteers to help us with the project.

Involving community volunteers steered our decisions about technology. Esri has two phone-based applications for projects like this. We used “Collector” because it doesn’t require an institutional sign-in, so anyone could participate. We con-



nected the Dickson Cemetery map with our fillable categories to a QR code (we made ours from an online source for free), so volunteers who attended just downloaded the free app, scanned the QR code to navigate to the map, and started measuring gravestones (by the way, disposable paper tape measures are available from Amazon for under \$10 for a box of 100) and

entering data. My students presented their research based on the survey in an online public program for the library, which had more than fifty attendees, and the survey will soon be available publicly through websites at the university, the library, and the genealogical society. Besides the benefits of the program for my class, they made a real contribution to the scholarship about the region and built connections across both the area and generations—a real win-win for us!

Building Public Programming with Students

“Teaching Buried History” can be much more than a classroom exercise. Your expertise in designing public programs can greatly enhance both their learning experience and your programmatic offerings. By working with your local teachers, you can create ways for students to engage with the historical record to execute programs for your community audiences. Once students have conducted their surveys at the cemetery and researched people, written papers, and the like, you can work with them to create programs that tell those stories to broader audi-

ences. Here are some ways to harness the research already done to reach even more people:

- **Cemetery tours:** Devote a Saturday or Sunday afternoon to students leading cemetery tours for people in the community. These could be walking tours in which students take groups around, or self-guided ones in which people visit stations where students talk about their work. A great way to involve a school’s English/Language Arts program would be having students create scripts for their presentations or stories based on their findings. Your organization can help provide research—and audiences!
- **Living history tours:** They’re often relegated to Halloween as “ghost tours,” but don’t be restricted by the calendar. Students can create a “living museum” of your community in which each one creates a short first-person portrayal of a local figure and performs them at their gravesites. They could work with English teachers to



Community volunteers and students work together to preserve history.



Connecting students with the history in their own town is a powerful learning experience.

create scripts and with theater teachers to transform them into short presentations and help with costumes. This can be a great way to combine your archives with the school program.

- **Our Town is your town:** Even if you don’t live in Grover’s Corners, this is a great way for you and teachers to work together in several disciplines to bring local history to life. They might start with Thornton Wilder’s 1938 play *Our Town*, then create their own version of it with the figures they researched in this project. It could be performed at the school theater, your museum, or a community setting. If the cemetery has a chapel, it could be the perfect venue for this.

“Teaching Buried History” reaches beyond the educational experiences. By working with students and teachers you will create a valuable resource that can contribute to the understanding of your community’s history that can be made publicly available. The cemetery maps these classes create connect the genealogical information with the built environment and with the visual record of the cemetery. Teachers can make their maps public so your organization, your supporters, and researchers can have access to the data they accumulate. It’s a way for you and your teachers to contribute to both a local and national database of information tying burial records to built environments.



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