

## Cemeteries Commission Meeting Summary

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Steve Rankin  
Advocacy Planner  
steve@jcci.org



**What:** Fact-finding meeting of the Abandoned and Neglected Cemeteries Commission.

**In attendance:** Commission Members: Jerry Spinks, Chair. Jon Ferguson, Marion Graham, Emily Lisska, Hazel Mack, Joel McEachin, Richard Mueller, Louise Warren. Concerned Citizens: David Bramhitt, Ethel Bramhitt, Wreatha Jean Clapp, Laura Lee Corbett, Ed Craven, Clarence Craven, Claude Davis, Rod Dixon, Lester Hartley, Daryl Joseph, Len Loving, Shannon Palmer, Kenneth Peele, Jr., John Pittman, Eleanor Price, Joe Price, Vance Price, Shorty Robbins, Linda Rosenblatt, Leon Ross, Dwight Sayles, Ann Staley, Thomas Waters, Martha Weeks, Bill Yarbrough. JCCI Staff: Ben Warner.

**Meeting Time:** 9:00 – 10:30 a.m.

**Discussion:** Mr. Spinks welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted that R.C. Nasworthy, due to conflicts in scheduling, needed to be rescheduled as a speaker until the following week. Today's meeting will focus on issues related to burials in abandoned cemeteries, with presentations from Kenneth Peele (Jacksonville Association of Funeral Directors) and Rod Dixon (Corey-Kerlin Funeral Home); elements of a preservation plan, Laura Lee Corbett (Preservation Planner); and the oral history of caring for Gravelly Hill Cemetery, from Ed Craven, caretaker at Gravelly Hill for 56 years.

**Kenneth Peele and Rod Dixon Presentation:** The highlights of the combined presentation were as follows:

Kenneth Peele, of the Carthage Chapel Funeral Home, began by describing the difficulties of providing burial services for someone whose plot lies in a cemetery that does not appear to have a current caretaker. For some of the cemeteries, they have had to hire a company to clear a path in to where the plot is located. They sometimes need to have the family sign a statement that they are certain that this is where the family plot is located, in absence of someone in charge of the cemetery with the necessary records. Sometimes, if the difficulties in finding the plot and clearing a path to the plot are too onerous or expensive, the family will be referred to a lower-cost option at another cemetery.

Rod Dixon added that in most rural cemeteries, one can find a contact person. When the cemetery has markers, it is easier to find the plot; without markers, much more difficult. When the family thinks they know where the plot is located, probes are used to ensure that this is a vacant plot; however, sometimes the probes will not resolve the issue, and human remains can surface while digging the grave. Getting volunteers to go out and plot existing graves is a great service, and one cemetery has an annual outing and candlelight ceremony each Christmas to do so.

- Records of graves are kept by funeral homes and vault companies. Funeral home records have private information on them, including the names and contact information of the living and the cause of death, and so the files cannot be shared as is. However, the records in storage are of critical importance, and the gravesite information (who is buried where) needs to be recorded, because most of the paper files have no backups.
- Vault companies have less sensitive information, and that information of who is buried where can also be gathered and digitized for safe-keeping.



- There is a need for a central record-keeping place that identifies locations of cemeteries, contact information for caretakers (including who has the key to the lock at the gate), and a map of the plots. Currently, funeral homes keep their own notebooks, which often are out of date.
- At one time, the Bureau of Vital Statistics also had contact information for cemeteries. The Genealogical Society is another source for information. Local churches often have information as well.
- Some cemeteries now have a “marker fee” and record-keeping fee assessed when you use the cemetery. When someone is buried, the family has one year to install a marker. If they do, the marker fee is refunded; if not, the cemetery will mark the grave. Kenneth Peele shared that he used to provide small, inexpensive concrete markers as temporary markers for the graves as a service to his customers. However, he found that when they got a new marker, they would sometimes toss the concrete marker to the back of the cemetery, creating future problems in grave identification.
- The previous generation of funeral-home operators were very proprietary with their information. With the current generation, there’s more of a chance to create a central records clearinghouse/storage.

### **Laura Lee Corbett Presentation:**

Laura Lee Corbett discussed developing the Bradford-Eppes Cemetery Plan in response to a private developer working at a historic cemetery site. Key elements of a cemetery preservation plan include:

- A review of the statutes and rules related to historic and abandoned cemeteries, and to unmarked human remains;
- A plan for ongoing cemetery maintenance;
- Development of a plan for cemetery security; and
- Cemetery access plans.

In addition, cemetery preservation planning should include historical markers, when appropriate, and a background of the cemetery, including photos of representative monuments and markers, records of who is buried there, and photos of those buried there if available. The Florida photographic archives project is a good source for historical photographs.

### **Ed Craven Presentation:**

Ed Craven married into the Miles Price family and was asked to take over caretaking duties at Gravely Hill cemetery 56 years ago. The Commission should be careful about labeling cemeteries as “abandoned,” as Gravely Hill was never abandoned, though the new group of volunteers has been able to do much more for the preservation and maintenance of the cemetery than one man could do alone.

Ed Craven shared the history of the cemetery, and noted that over 1,000 people in Jacksonville qualify to be buried in the cemetery some day. The cemetery is, and should remain, a family cemetery.

### **What We Heard Today:**

- The commission identified the need for centralized record storage.
- Many of those with critical knowledge will not be with us much longer. The commission should consider recommending a project to capture as much detailed oral and written history that we can.
- We have an opportunity to use GPS technology to map graves, and to consider training volunteers to use handheld GPS to plot current gravesites as well as require through Florida statute that GPS locations of graves be included on death certificates so no more graves will be lost.
- The commission should consider planning cemetery refurbishments, one at a time, perhaps beginning with the Old City Cemetery.
- A central database of all cemeteries, not just those abandoned or unlicensed, should be developed.

- We should investigate where the contact person/information for a cemetery should be required to be placed on the gate of a cemetery.
- With the development of a website map of all cemeteries, the contact information for each cemetery could be included in the centralized mapping project and available online.
- Record-keeping will never be complete and will need to be continuously updated. This suggests both using lots of volunteers as well as having a coordinator of the process.

Jon Ferguson added that he had visited the Florida Wilbert Vault Company and had obtained their records that he was putting on CD. Vault records include a three-part warranty on the vault, and include the date purchased, the funeral home, the cemetery used, and the name of the deceased.

The meeting adjourned at 10:30 a.m.