

Saving Your Family Cemetery

By William Lee Anderson III

The Plonk Family Cemetery was in danger of destruction. Here's how one family preserved its family burial site.

Too often, family cemeteries are neglected and consequently damaged or worse, even though they are protected by law. Consider the fate of one such burial ground in Orange County, North Carolina.

William Whitted, Jr. (1760–1821), was Mayor of Hillsborough, North Carolina, until a few weeks before his death. His nephew, Henry Whitted (1805–1883), owned one of the most prosperous farms in Orange County. Henry's wife, Anna Davis Faucette (1810–1849), came from a family that since 1768 had owned the Faucette Mill on Eno River. They and 49 other individuals were buried in the William Whitted, Jr., cemetery.¹

The cemetery was large for a family cemetery and old; nonetheless the honorable lives of those buried there did not ensure respect for their graves.

After 1976, their gravestones were dug up and discarded because they were a "hazard to children," as if no other solution were possible. One person with any rationale can destroy a family cemetery in a few hours before law enforcement can react. Thousands of other old family cemeteries across the country risk similar damage.

The Plonk Family History

My family's hereditary burial ground in Lincoln County, North Carolina, was headed for a similar fate. Although several surveys had been made of the cemetery,² it was not until March 2001 that I first saw the cemetery. My mother, Margaret Louise Plonk Anderson, and I were escorted to the site by Darrell Harkey, Lincoln County Historical Coordinator.

The Plunk/Plonk family were German-speaking immigrants who first settled in Pennsylvania. About 1766, along with the Carpenters and many others, the Plonks migrated to the South Fork Valley of Catawba River in Mecklenburg County, later Tryon County and then Lincoln County. The patriarch, Jacob Plunk I (1720–c. 1790), settled along a small tributary of Indian Creek.

¹ Allen Dew, "Orange County North Carolina Cemeteries, 214, William Whitted Jr. Family Cemetery," <http://cemeterycensus.com/nc/orng/cem214.htm>

² The first recorded cemetery census was made during the 1960s by Lincoln County Historical Association (LCHA) members, Ann Keener, Richard Goodson, and Frances Goodson. In 1980, Ann Moore Dellinger, LCHA Historian, made a second census (Ann Moore Dellinger, "Plonk Cemetery Census," 1980).

His sons, Jacob Plunk II (1747–1845) and Peter Plunk (1756–1824), lived close by. Jacob Plunk II served three tours during the American Revolution (1775–1781) and later received a pension.³

Patriarch Jacob Plunk is believed to have been among the first buried in the cemetery about 1790. This site is on a knoll overlooking Indian Creek about 0.3 mile south of his home place. His son, Jacob Plunk II, and his wife, Christina Jane Kiser (1755–1823), were buried there. Their son, Joseph Plunk (1788–1888), and his wife, Barbara Rudisill (1795–1864), were also buried there. In total, about 30 graves are recognizable.

The cemetery remained in use for about 100 years. Centenarian Joseph Plunk was the last person buried there in 1888.

Beginning in the mid-1800s, the younger generation spelled their name Plonk. The land became Chapman family property after Sallie Belle Plonk, born in 1891, married Peter Columbus Chapman (1873-1957).

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After 200 years of ownership by a family member, the site was lost in foreclosure and purchased by a land speculator, who posted a “For Sale” sign within 100 yards of the cemetery. A prospective buyer planned to cut down most of the trees and build a dam with one end resting on the hillside at the cemetery.

Family members were alerted by e-mail to the situation, and that triggered a sequence of events during 2006-2008, some well-directed and some misguided, that was ultimately successful in protecting the Plonk Cemetery.

Repair vs Restoration

In hindsight, we learned key lessons that may help others who face the demise of their family burial grounds.

The major problems of old cemeteries are protection and repair. These actions are not exactly the same as restoring or preserving.

Restoration implies returning the cemetery to some exact previous state. Money for that expensive task might be better spent buying land. Preservation implies maintaining status quo, which is acceptable only if the cemetery is already protected and in good condition.

The keys to protecting old cemeteries, we learned, are ownership and local Historic Properties Commission participation. Therefore, the first considerations should be the following:

- Focus on issues that impact long-term cemetery protection. That means 100 years into the future. In most cases, this can be solved only by land-ownership. Avoid being distracted by less pressing issues like gravestone repair, which can be postponed, or cosmetic options like an ornamental fence.
- Ask the local county Historic Properties Commission to take ownership of the cemetery. That will institutionalize the cemetery within a government agency dedicated to historical preservation. It will protect the cemetery from land uses that are inconsistent with a solemn cemetery.

Cemetery Protection and Repair Guidelines

Based on lessons learned from the Plonk Family Cemetery experience, the following guidelines can be applied to other cemeteries currently on private property, because they have the greatest long-term risk. Of course, not every guideline item is applicable to every cemetery.

1. Using a digital camera, survey the entire cemetery. Photograph every detail. If the cemetery is subsequently disturbed, this record will aid restoration. Look carefully for fieldstone pairs, headstone and

³ Jacob Plunk, Revolutionary War pension application, 1832, <http://southerncampaign.org/pen/s7321.pdf>.



Fieldstone pairs may be more evident after very carefully raking away leaves.

footstone. They can be easily taken for ordinary rocks and thus moved by mistake.

2. Establish an e-mail distribution list of family members. Inform every one of the cemetery's condition and long-term risk.
3. Every cemetery is protected by law, but that does not prevent inappropriate land use up to the cemetery boundary. An easement may work if the surrounding land is already developed. The landowner may donate an easement as an appeasement, only to develop all surrounding land. Only landownership assures long-term control.
4. Ask the local county Historic Properties Commission to take ownership of the cemetery and whatever surrounding land is needed to ensure a dignified setting.

Such an arrangement can provide additional revenue through donations. Ask the board of directors to vote to acquire this property on the basis that family members pay the purchase cost by making tax-deductible donations. Ownership by the Historic Properties

Commission frees family members from land property taxes. Another advantage is that the Historic Properties Commission becomes the professional decisionmaker for all improvements and activities. That will deter unsupervised actions by self-appointed experts, even if well-intentioned.

5. The Historic Properties Commission probably has a relationship with a professional historical assessor firm. Hire it to assess the cemetery. That will generate a report of grave conditions, regulations, and professional advice.

For example, the Plonk Cemetery was assessed by the Chicora Foundation from Columbia, South Carolina.⁴ Such a professional assessment is a starting point for planning. Do not be deterred by every detail recommendation, because many can be adopted months after acquiring the land.

6. With the endorsement of a government agency and a professional assessment, negotiate a sale price with the landowner.
7. Ask for pledges from extended family members and friends. The pool of potential donors is large, because an ancestor who was born in the mid-1700s could today have more than a 1,000 descendants.

Nonetheless, fundraising is never easy. Ask other family members to help. When the total asking price is pledged, direct pledges to send tax-

⁴ Michael Trinkley, "Reconnaissance Assessment of Plonk Family Cemetery, 2007," http://home.earthlink.net/~plonkcemetery/PlonkFamily_Assessment.pdf.

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deductible donations directly to the Historic Properties Commission.

8. Concurrent with the above, write a *Visitor's Guide*⁵ for the cemetery and post it on the Internet. This document can include the following:
 - Cemetery location and driving instructions. GPS coordinates.
 - Do's and Don'ts. For example, no rubbings and no shaving cream.
 - Census of graves
 - Gravestone inscriptions
 - Personal histories and stories about buried individuals
 - Short family history appropriate to a field guide. Link to longer documents, such as
 - Family history timeline
 - Outline descendant tree based on oldest ancestor
 - List of donors
 - Link to a virtual tour or slideshow of the cemetery
9. Erect a black mailbox on a post at the cemetery to hold printed copies of the *Visitor's Guide* like the one below.



10. After ownership is established, repair broken gravestones (typically caused by falling tree limbs, cattle, or vandalism). Locate large, missing pieces in the soil with a metal probe.

Each gravestone must be evaluated

separately. Professional repair advice varies from how to repair a priceless marble statue to a quick fix.

Estimates to repair gravestones at the Plonk Cemetery ranged from \$100 to more than \$1,000 per gravestone. Most family members probably do not regard a gravestone as a work of art but rather a commemorative marker that could be replaced by a modern one. If a gravestone is badly shattered or large parts are missing, then replacement is the only option. So, replacement cost sets an upper limit on the cost to repair the original gravestone.

Another reason not to invest in expensive restoration is that most inscribed gravestones from the 1800s were relatively soft like marble or soapstone. Many of these stones, after 150 years, have already weathered about half their useful lives and are becoming illegible. The long-term fix is replacement. But in the short term, it is often desirable to repair the original.

The two main repair choices are epoxy or pins with high-lime mortar. Portland cement used in the construction industry is too hard and should never be used. Plonk Cemetery



Michael Columbus Plonk, 1853–1880
Example of tombstone repair with new granite base

⁵ William Lee Anderson, "Plonk Family Cemetery Visitor's Guide, 2006–2010," <http://home.earthlink.net/~plonkcemetery/PlonkFamilyCemeteryGuide.pdf>.



James Anderson, 1768–1850

Example of tombstone repair: original marble attached to granite.

gravestones were repaired at Riverhill Monuments⁶ in Shelby, North Carolina. Old gravestones too weak to stand can be mounted on a granite base or attached to a granite base.

11. Post a security sign with a warning like “Property of Lincoln County Historical Properties Commission. Protected by Law.”
12. After having secured the cemetery’s long-term protection by ownership, take time to deliberate, consult, and plan optional improvements like the following:
 - Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), Sons of the American Revolution (SAR), and Civil War grave markers
 - Ornamental fence. If the cemetery never had a fence, a new fence changes the “historical context.” Professionals advised the Plonk Cemetery to maintain historical context without a fence. At another cemetery where cattle are a potential problem, a fence would be effective.

⁶ Ledbetter, Ronald, Riverhill Monuments, Shelby, NC, <http://www.riverhillmonuments.com/>.

- Large roadside historical marker. Costs are about \$2,000.
13. Modern smart-phone technology offers a new capability. An embedded global positioning system (GPS) can pinpoint locations within a six foot square to locate an individual grave. So in the near future, it will be practical to position a smart-phone over a grave and link to a webpage description of the person buried there.
 14. Periodically publish updates about the cemetery. Encourage the next generation to cultivate a relationship with the official county historical association. The Lincoln County Historical Association, for example, has a Cultural Center and Museum.⁷
 15. Plan how to integrate the cemetery into the goals and mission of the Historic Properties Commission. For example, land surrounding the Plonk Cemetery might showcase the lives of German-speaking immigrants who settled along the South Fork of the Catawba River during the 1700s. German culture has been very significant in the United States.⁸

Conclusion

Some cemeteries are fortunate to be on church property, while small family cemeteries on private property are subject to greater risk.

The above guidelines address how such a private cemetery might be protected and repaired. It is hoped that many old cemeteries can be saved using these ideas.

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⁷ Jason Harpe, Executive Director, Lincoln County Historical Association, <http://www.lincolncountyhistory.com/>.

⁸ Patricia Nesbit, “German Settlers in the Carolinas,” presentation to Olde Mecklenburg Genealogical Society, 13 June 2007.