

Compiling a Cemetery Guide

Karen Dustman details how small groups can leave a legacy for their communities by creating guidebooks for local cemeteries



Got a fascinating local cemetery? Creating a guidebook can be a great activity for a genealogy group, historical society, or group of local researchers!

For us, it was a small group of like-minded friends who got together and decided to make it happen. And we've now produced *three* cemetery "walking tour" guidebooks over the last few years! They're a big undertaking, no doubt about it. But creating a guidebook for your local cemetery is rewardable and doable, with the right skills and commitment. You'll truly leave a legacy, and you'll learn so much in the process.

Here's how we did it:

Eager to Go? Start Small

It's helpful to cut your teeth on

a small cemetery; the data from a giant cemetery can quickly get overwhelming. And the fact that "pocket" local cemeteries are often overlooked or forgotten makes them especially precious resources to document.

If you do decide to tackle a larger cemetery, consider including only the oldest pioneers buried there. We tried to limit our entries to only those born before 1900, for example (although, of course, you can always be flexible).

For a larger cemetery, you can also break it up into geographic sections, creating a separate guidebook for each one. For the much larger Genoa Cemetery, for example, we used natural divisions within the cemetery to provide doable chunks. Many cemeteries separate graves into

*Old cemeteries have great stories to tell.
(Photo courtesy of Judy Wickwire)*

Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish sections, for example, or have areas reserved for Odd Fellows or Masons. When those divisions didn't prove helpful in our case (they were too small), we decided instead to use the rough grid of unpaved roads or "avenues" in the cemetery as natural divisions. We've now finished separate guidebooks for the first two sections, and plan to finish the last two in the years to come.

Gathering a Team

Our first cemetery guidebook was the work of just two people: one avid writer (that's me), and a talented photographer-friend. We were joined in our second

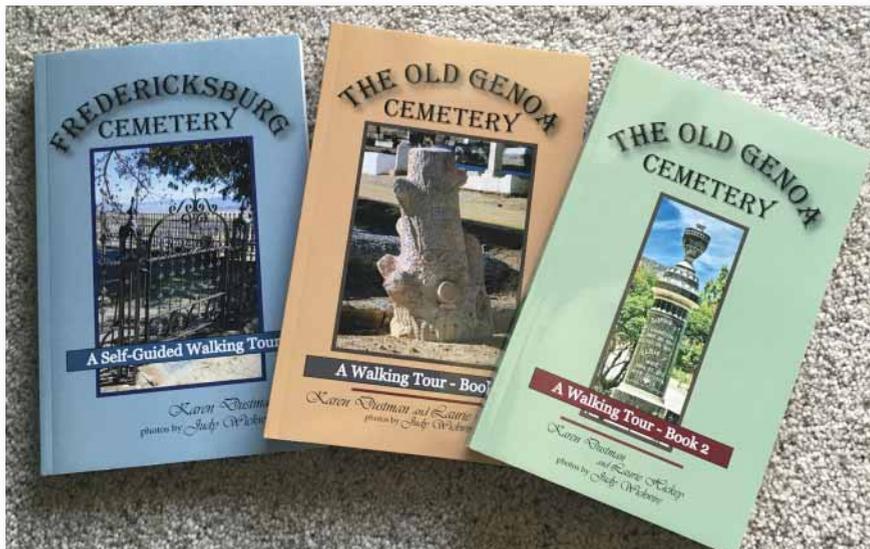
and third guidebooks by a fellow local history buff.

It's helpful to be able to share the research with others, and heartwarming to share your most recent finds together! But as you assemble your team, make sure they're willing to commit to a long process. To ensure consistency, you'll probably want to put a single person in charge of assembling the final written text. And make sure you're all on the same page at the outset about how you'll share expenses and any income.

Set reasonable expectations: in most cases, a cemetery guidebook probably won't be a giant money-maker. Nevertheless, it can become an "evergreen" seller, and may help support your local cemetery association or bring in added revenue for your local museum. Best of all, the information you're compiling will be pure gold for future researchers and historians!

Organizing the Guide

We organized our guidebooks as self-guided "walking tours". We wanted visitors to be able to stroll the cemetery with



Examples of how your finished guidebook might look. (Author's photo)

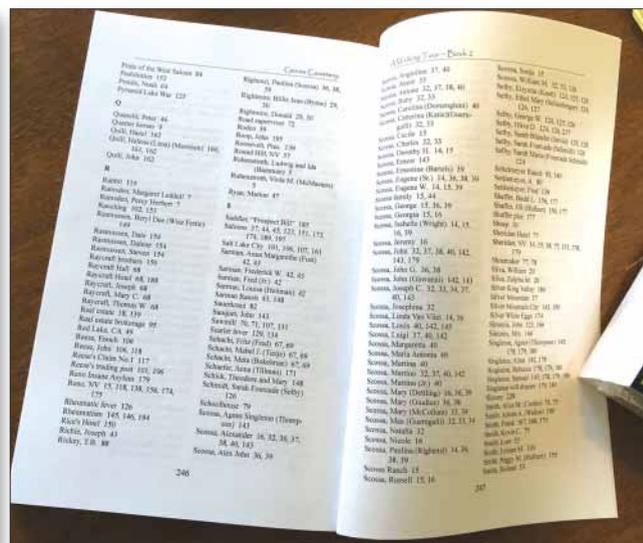
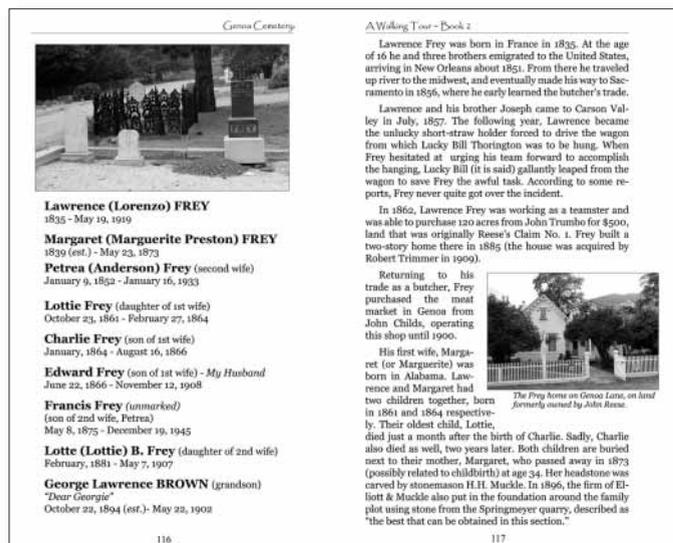
guidebook in hand, following simple directions to reach all (or nearly all) of the graves and allowing them to read a bit about the life of the person buried there.

Surprisingly, we found that creating a logical walking pattern was often a larger challenge than we thought! Graves aren't always laid out in perfect lines or grids, especially in older cemeteries. So it can be challenging to find a walking pattern that is clear and easy to

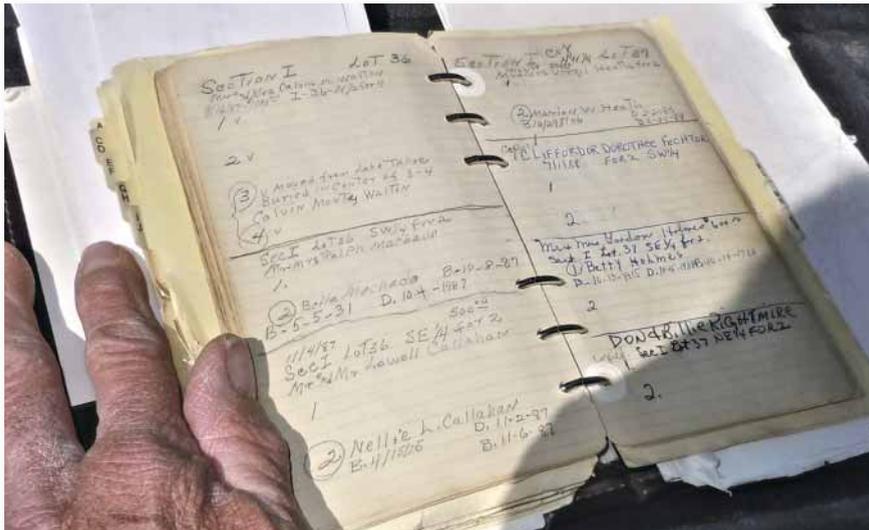
follow. In one case, it took us several tries to get the walking pattern right. So don't rush! Ask a handful of volunteers to try out your proposed walking pattern before you get too far along, to make sure they can follow it easily.

Gathering Data For Your Guidebook

The most common places to find data for a guidebook, of course, include *Ancestry* and *Find-a-Grave*. Newspaper obituaries



Aim for a clean page layout, and include an index to help the reader locate specific names. (Author's photo)



Informal burial records, like this tattered book, can be an invaluable supplement to official cemetery records. (Photo courtesy of Judy Wickwire)

and burial permits should be high on your list, too. And if by some miracle the cemetery association has good records, you're definitely in luck!

Other potential sources may be harder to find, but can provide a wealth of details you might not get elsewhere. We were extremely fortunate to find a man who handles interments for the cemetery. And his father before him had performed the same duties. Amazingly enough, his father kept a "little black book," recording each and every burial he assisted in through the years, with notes on the cause of death. That tattered book has been handed down through the family, and what a wealth of

information is recorded there!

You may or may not be quite so lucky, but take the time to ask. Is there a sexton who keeps burial records? A long-time mortuary company in the area? Someone with a backhoe who frequently digs graves? You never know what unofficial records might exist unless you ask.

One more unexpected place to turn up information: old photographs of headstones. We were able to identify one long-forgotten burial site thanks to an old family photograph in our museum's photo collection. This amazing black-and-white photo showed the freshly-dug grave with its original wooden

marker. Thanks to a fence, mountains, and other objects in the background, we were able to find the exact site, and the photo confirmed the person's name. So keep your eyes peeled for old photographs that might include the cemetery in days gone by.

Family Input

We made it a point to reach out to descendants whenever we could, and were pleased to find family members eager to contribute photos and information for our guidebook project. Many shared personal recollections and great stories of their relatives that we never would have heard simply by combing the written records.

We learned, for example, that one gentleman always walked with a limp after an unfortunate ranching accident as a child. We



Marker dates and spellings might be literally written in stone, but they are sometimes wrong! There's no "P" on this "Thompson" memorial. (Photo courtesy of Judy Wickwire)

Guidebook Do's and Don'ts

DO include an index – it's time-consuming and tedious to create one, but future researchers will thank you for it!

DO include a request for corrections and additional information in your preface. Books with so much data are always a "work in progress"!

DON'T forget to donate a copy of your finished cemetery guide to your local historical society, museum, and, of course, the cemetery association.

heard details about the lady who brought her favorite peony bulbs all the way from Germany, and the ranching wife who baked the best pies in the valley. And we learned how haying always took twice as long when Mr. So-and-So used to show up and start talking!

Capturing Images

Anyone can snap a photo, but there's an art to making headstones look good in pictures. So find the best photographer you can. Consider taking shots from different angles to add interest to your guidebook, rather than taking all the photos straight-on.

Heavily weathered markers and light-colored stones can be especially difficult to capture well, especially in black-and-white. Brilliant light washes out the details, and shadow can make images difficult to read. Try going back at different times of day to catch the best lighting

conditions. We found mid-morning light seemed to work best with our east-facing graveyards, for example.

Don't feel you have to capture all your images at the same time of year. Our three cemetery books include photos that show winter snow on the ground, spring flowers, summer deer herds, and fall leaves.

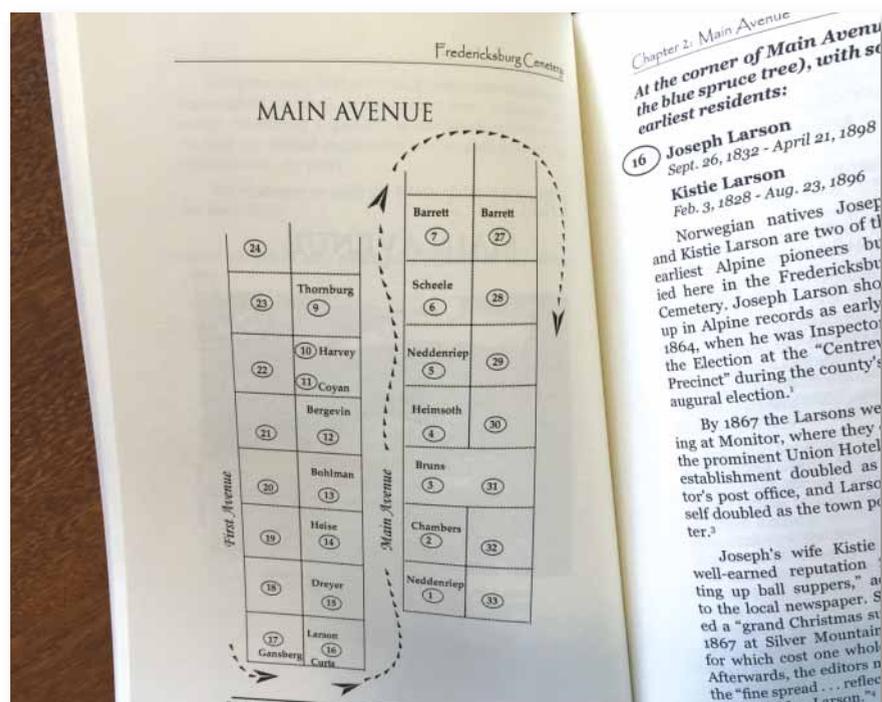
Maps are a different kind of image that can be a great addition to a guidebook to help readers find their way. But they take special graphic skills to do well. If you do use maps, try to include landmarks that will be easy for your reader to find. Plot numbers can be especially helpful if those are well-marked in your cemetery, or reference prominent monuments.

Entry Format

We included photos of a headstone with each guidebook entry, allowing users to visually confirm they were at the right



Great photos help bring the written record to life. One of the most beautiful headstones in the Genoa Cemetery is that of Gesine Frevert. (Photo by Karen Dustman)



Maps can be helpful to show a walking pattern and reference points like plot numbers. (Photo by Karen Dustman)

spot. We followed with basic identifying data (names; birth/death dates; military service or other affiliation; relationships), and a biographical sketch. Where possible, we added family or historic photos as well.

We made liberal use of footnotes to document our sources – a resource we've found useful ourselves! We collected those at the back of the book to preserve readability.

Creating a layout is an art in itself. We were fortunate enough to be adept in *Adobe InDesign*, today's gold standard for book layout. If you're lacking that skill, don't despair:

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Microsoft Word can also work in a pinch, though it isn't as flexible and the finished result won't look quite as polished. Sharp images are important. And, of course, solid research skills are essential to the success of the project. If you don't already have all the necessary technical skills when you begin, consider inviting other folks to join in who can help round out your team.

If you hope to publish your guidebook in paperback form, as we did, online digital printers can assist with many steps in the process, from layout templates to cover design. Two self-publishing printers we've found especially helpful are www.DiggyPod.com and www.BookBaby.com.

But a guidebook really doesn't have to be fancy. Choose any format you're comfortable producing, even if it's just a nicely-photocopied booklet, held together by staples! More-polished formatting can always come later if you choose. But information slips away every day. So capture it now, the best way you can.

Creating a cemetery guidebook is definitely a labor of love – but so rewarding! What a great feeling to know that these lives and stories won't be forgotten. ☞☞

Three Helpful Ways to Share Your Cemetery Guidebook

1 Give a talk at your local museum about the fascinating stories you've learned and the surprises you discovered while compiling the guide. You'll increase awareness of your book and may hear more stories about the families from those who attend!

2 Use the guide as a fundraiser for your local museum or cemetery association by offering a free copy to donors above a certain threshold.

3 Share the information in a Chautauqua event! Our museum, for example, hosts annual cemetery walks using costumed volunteers telling the stories of the pioneers buried there.



KAREN DUSTMAN is the author of three cemetery guidebooks (and a dozen other books), and writes frequently about local and family history. Find her books and history blog at www.CLAIRITAGE.com.