

## Gravestone Rubbings

Gravestone and monument rubbings were once a very popular way for people to collect beautiful artwork that could be framed and displayed in their home. A stone carver's skill can be preserved, or an ancestor's stone recorded and appreciated through this craft. Historians have used rubbings for generations to preserve



ancient writings. In July, 2005 the University of Washington discovered rubbings from a Chinese temple in boxes in their storage area. The rubbings were made in the 20's and depicts a "Thousand Character Text" which students used to learn the 1,000 most used Chinese characters from 965 AD. Many of these temples no longer exist and these rubbings may be the only record that these writings ever existed.

In some cemeteries where a restoration project is in progress, rubbing may be banned to enable the restorers to preserve the stones. Even if a restoration project is not in progress, if those who care for the cemetery have determined there are fragile stones which may be damaged by pressure applied to the surface of the stones there may be prohibitions against rubbing put in place.

### Pre-site work Preparation

Choose your rubbing subject and select a stone that is sturdy with sharply inscribed areas. If the stone feels loose or has obvious cracks in it, do not rub on it so that you do not damage it. Glossy granite and slate usually produce the clearest images. Select supplies according to the result that you'd like to achieve. Pastels tend to be more murky, and smudge easily so they will need spray fixative before moving the rubbing. Crayon and pencil are more crisp and less likely to smudge, but can abrade the original image. Check (with cemetery superintendent, whoever is in charge) to see if rubbing is allowed in the cemetery and get permission or a permit.

Heavy clothing, high leather shoes or boots, and insect repellent are advisable. Rain gear and a plastic tarp to protect you and your project can come in handy

**Gather Supplies-** Place the following items in a bag or box to take with you to the site.

- A few gallons of water in old milk jugs to clean the tombstone.
- Paper - thin is better than thick, a roll of white newsprint can be purchased at art shops. A carrying tube to keep your finished rubbing from getting folded.
- Crayons or pencils to make your rubbing with. There are wax crayons made specifically for this purpose, but you can use pencil, crayon, pastels, oil pastels, or kindergarten crayons. If you use pencil, you'll also want a kneaded rubber eraser.
- Masking tape to keep the paper from moving.
- Paper towels to dry the surface and a trash bag to put your debris in.
- A spray fixative to protect your rubbing when you are done so that it does not smudge on the way home. Available at art stores.
- Scissors or a pen knife to cut the paper with.
- A small stiff brush to remove dirt or moss that may be clinging to the stone.

### **Clean the tombstone**

You may have to deal with weeds, thorny vines, poison oak or ivy, or trees, as well as ants, spiders, bees, and possibly snakes. Feel the outer edges of the stone and design and begin by defining the edges and prominent designs.

Don't use shaving cream, chalk, graphite, dirt, or other concoctions in an attempt to read worn inscriptions. Using a large mirror to direct bright sunlight diagonally across the face of a grave marker casts shadows in indentations and makes inscriptions more visible.

Check for any cracks, evidence of previous breaks and adhesive repairs or defoliating stone with air pockets behind the face of the stone that may collapse. Use a soft brush and plain water to clean the stone.

Rub only solid stones in good condition. Don't attempt to rub deteriorating marble or sandstone, or any unsound or weakened stone. If a stone sounds hollow when tapped or is flaking, splitting, blistered, cracked, or unstable on its base you probably want to select a different stone. Stay away from detergents, soaps, vinegar, bleach, or other cleaning solutions when cleaning the stone. Brush gently. Don't attempt to remove stubborn lichen. Soft lichen may be thoroughly soaked with plain water and then loosened with a gum eraser or a popsicle stick. Clean the stone and dry it with the towel.

### **Rub**

Cut a piece of paper approximately six inches higher and wider than the face of the marker. Leave enough paper around the edge to form a border so you can mat and frame the rubbing when you are done. The paper will keep your waxes from rubbing off onto the stone itself. Stretch the paper tightly over the stone and make certain that your paper covers the entire face of the stone. Hold it in place with masking tape, don't use duct tape, spray adhesives or scotch tape

Start your rubbing at the top of the stone. Rub from side to side with even pressure using large strokes. Use the rounded side of the heel ball or a wax crayon on its side and rub gently. If using a pencil or crayon hold it flat against the paper. Press gently and rub over the entire image until an outline begins to appear. As long as your paper doesn't move you will be able to darken the areas by rubbing over them repeatedly. Brace your free hand against the back of the stone to counter the pressure. You may have to stretch out flat on the ground to complete the rubbing. If you can't rub the bottom markings of the stone, brush away the grass and earth at the very base of the stone.

As the lines and features become more clear, continue to rub, emphasizing the areas where the lines are already visible. Continue to darken in those areas which are most pronounced. Then the image is visible on your paper, you have completed your rubbing. The image normally is not as sharp as the original stone. Remove the rubbing and tape from the stone discard it in an appropriate receptacle.



### **Document and finalize the rubbing**

Identify your rubbing on the back with the following:

- Name and location of cemetery
- Location of stone in cemetery
- Date of rubbing and Your name and address

Roll your rubbing and place in tube for transport home.

### **Gravestone Rubbing kits are available from:**

[www.gravestoneartwear.com](http://www.gravestoneartwear.com) 800-564-4310

The Gravestone Rubbing Kit comes complete with instructions and:

- two cupcake-shaped waxes (black and blue)
- 5 sheets of Aqaba brand gravestone rubbing paper (24 x 36 in.)
- natural bristle brush
- special masking tape
- information on becoming a member of the Association for Gravestone Studies